

### So the children should ask: a model of repair

כי פעמים הרבה זקוק הוא התירוץ לעזרתה של הקושיא הרבה יותר מאשר הקושיא זקוקה לעזרתה של התירוץ.

*Sometimes the answer needs the question far more than the question needs the answer.*

Pachad Yitzchak, Passover, Maamar 17

Jewish memory, they say, has decayed. We are anxious about losing ourselves, forgetting, losing (or having lost) our God. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi describes this decay as part of the modern “unraveling of that common network of belief and praxis through [which]... the past was once made present”.<sup>1</sup> How can we possibly repair this breach?

Although Yerushalmi roots this unraveling in modernity, this is not the first time that we have experienced a crisis of memory. The Jewish people have often experienced anxiety and upheaval. One such moment is the Exodus from Egypt. I shall attempt to draw upon our rabbis’ treatment of the Exodus, together with modern academic theory on social memory, in order to shed light on how we today can heal our communal memory—and with it, our relationship with God.

On the point of the first Passover, Moses says to the Israelites:

וְהָיָה כִּי־יֹאמְרוּ אֵלֵיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם מָה הָעִבְרָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם: : וְאָמַרְתֶּם זָבַח־פֶּסַח הוּא לָהּ' אֲשֶׁר־פָּסַח עַל־בְּתֵי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל  
בְּמִצְרַיִם בְּנִגְפוֹ אֶת־מִצְרַיִם וְאֶת־בְּתֵינֵנוּ הִצִּיל

<sup>1</sup> Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989), 94.

And when your children ask you, “What do you mean by this rite?”, you shall say, “It is the passover sacrifice to God, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt. God struck the Egyptians, but saved our houses.”<sup>2</sup>

The Mekhilta d’Rabbi Yishmael describes how Israel learnt two things at that moment:

“והיה כי יאמרו אליכם בניכם: בשורה רעה נתבשרו ישראל באותה שעה, שסוף התורה עתידה להשתכח. ויש אומרים בשורה טובה נתבשרו ישראל באותה שעה, שהן עתידין לראות בנים ובני בנים להם.

“And when your children ask you”: Israel received bad news at that time, that the Torah was destined to be forgotten. And some say that Israel received good news at that time, that they were destined to see their children and grandchildren.<sup>3</sup>

This midrash expresses the bittersweet nature of transition. Yes, the children will be alive to ask questions—but they may not remember that which we hold dear. These concerns of continuation are implicit in the Biblical verse. Will we remember? Will I live to see my grandchildren? And if they forget the Torah, what does that say about who we are?

Sharika Thiranagama conducted research on memory amongst Muslim refugees in Northern Sri Lanka during the Sri Lankan civil war.<sup>4</sup> She found that the types of conversation she had differed greatly between generations. People often expressed their anxieties around continuity and identity indirectly, by talking about their children. So too in Exodus. Our concerns about the questions the children will ask are not only about our children—they are also about ourselves.

<sup>2</sup> Shemot 12:26-7, JPS translation. All other translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup> Mekhilta d’Rabbi Yishmael, Parshat Bo 12:25.

<sup>4</sup> Sharika Thiranagama, “Moving On? Generating Homes in Sri Lanka”, in *Ghosts of Memory: Essays on Remembrance and Relatedness*, ed. Janet Carsten (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2007), 126–49.

This is only the first moment on the journey from Egypt where we worry about what the children will ask. Twice more are we told how the children will ask for meaning: once as they stand on the banks of the Jordan, ready to cross to the Promised Land, and once after they reach the other side.<sup>5</sup> Each of these transition points is what Stephan Feuchtwang in his research on reconstituted Jewish life in Berlin calls a “mythic moment”, or “caesura”:

A caesural event is a feature of histories of large-scale social groups where, because of its destructive or transformative impact, it is a point of reference for all those who by narrative knowledge of any kind and material trace themselves to the “before” that it demarcates.<sup>6</sup>

Feuchtwang describes how mythic moments divide the past irreparably into before and after. They become central to our national and familial narratives, which in turn shape who we are. It is not only those who experienced the caesura themselves who find it formative, but also their children. These three transition points during the journey of the Exodus are moments when families and nations decide how to shape themselves.

Abarbanel in his commentary on this passage describes the Israelites as *zerizin*, zealously keen to do the mitzvot of Passover.<sup>7</sup> They have been under Egyptian oppression their whole lives, they have watched plague after plague befall the Egyptians, and they have one way to avoid their children dying tonight. In future years, too, they will be zealous in the mitzvah: how could they not be, when at the first Passover they were present? But for their children, who have not seen *moftai Mitzrayim*, the wonders of Egypt, the question is open.

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<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 6:20 and Joshua 4:6.

<sup>6</sup> Stephan Feuchtwang, “Mythical Moments in National and Other Family Histories,” *History Workshop Journal* 59, no. 1 (March 1, 2005): 179–93, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbi014>.

<sup>7</sup> Abarbanel on Exodus 12:21.

Academic study of memory has established that memory is not an object, or a virtual hard drive in one's brain. Rather, memory exists between us, made and sustained through our interactions with each other.<sup>8</sup> Social encounters do not only strengthen our memory — they actually create it. And social rituals, such as the Passover Seder, are most powerful of all. When writing on migrants' memories of a Jewish-Muslim household in Algeria, Joëlle Bahloul describes how social rituals produce a “performative structure of memory”.<sup>9</sup>

This Biblical verse, “when your children ask”, founds a rich rabbinic tradition. It leads to *Mah Nishtanah* and the Four Sons, some of the central components of the Seder. By asking their parents about the Passover, the children build our communal memory.

This tradition, though, is not limited to the Four Sons. Everywhere in the Seder, inciting questions is paramount: by giving the children nuts or grains, snatching the matzah, removing the table—anything that might prompt curiosity.<sup>10</sup> And this is not only for the children's sake. The Gemara instructs:

תנו רבנן חכם בנו שואלו ואם אינו חכם אשתו שואלתו ואם לאו הוא שואל לעצמו ואפילו שני תלמידי חכמים  
שיודעין בהלכות הפסח שואלין זה לזה.

The Sages taught: If his child is wise, his child asks him. And if he is not wise, his wife asks him. And otherwise he asks himself. And even two Torah scholars who know the laws of Passover ask each other.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Joëlle Bahloul, *The Architecture of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 103.

<sup>10</sup> See Rambam's Mishneh Torah, *Leavened and Unleavened Bread* 7:3, based on b. Pesachim 109a and 115b.

<sup>11</sup> b. Pesachim 116a.

Even if there are no children—even if one is all alone—we need questions. The telling of the Haggadah must be question-and-answer, no matter who is present. What is so important about asking questions?

Let us explore the answers from two different modern perspectives, one Litvish and one Chasidic.<sup>12</sup> First is that of Rabbi Chaim Shmuelewitz, former Rosh Yeshiva of the Mir:

מוצאים אנו במצות סיפור יציאת מצרים הלכה מיוחדת מתקנת חז"ל שמצוה זו תתקיים דוקא ע"י שאלה ותשובה, ואפילו מי שאין לו בן שואל לעצמו, וטעם הדבר כי אכן מצוה זו קשה לקיימה כראוי שענין סיפור הוא לספר סיפור חדש ולהגיד לבנו מה שאין הבן יודע אבל בשעה ש"כולנו חכמים כולנו נבונים כולנו יודעים את התורה" קשה הדבר לקיימה. לכן תקנו חז"ל תקנה זו של שאלה ותשובה, שהשאלה מעוררת ומגבירה את ההתענינות, את עירנות החושים והרצון לשמוע מה היה ואיך היה ואז יחוש בתשובה טעם של "חידוש" ואף כששואל אדם את עצמו הדבר מביא אותו ליתר ענין ב"תשובה".

We find a unique halakhah in the mitzvah of telling the Exodus: our sages decreed that this mitzvah be done specifically through question-and-answer, and even one who has no child must ask oneself. And the reason is that this mitzvah is difficult to fulfill properly, since the heart of telling is to tell a new story, to tell one's child what the child does not know. But when "all of us are sages, all wise, all know the whole Torah", it is difficult to fulfill. Therefore chazal decreed this question-and-answer, since the question awakens and strengthens the analysis, stirs the senses and desire to hear what happened, and how; and so in the answer one tastes new insight. And even when someone asks himself, it brings him to greater interest in the answer.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to Rabbi Dan Margulies for directing me to these sources.

<sup>13</sup> Sichot Mussar, Maamar 69.

Shmuelevitz emphasizes the pedagogical advantages of the question-and-answer approach. It is worth noting, though, that this is not only intellectual: Shmuelevitz's language stresses that question-and-answer discussions produce a bodily reaction too. The question "stirs the senses", creates desire to *hear* the answer, we *taste* insight. The awareness of new discoveries and new stories awakens our full self. In this, Shmuelevitz has an ally in the researcher of memory Paul Connerton, who also asserts the importance of the question. Questions, he says, presuppose that one doesn't know and that one desires to know.<sup>14</sup> Questions increase our desire and help us to care.

The Bnei Yissachar, Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech Spira, goes beyond this reasoned answer:

ועפ"י פשוטו טעם הדבר שביותר נקבע הענין בנפש הבן כאשר הסיפור בא לו ע"י מבוקשו כיון שהוקשה לו איזה דבר וביקש למצוא טעם. אך הוא לדעתי עפ"י הנודע מרז"ל [בראשית רבה מב:ג] דתיבת "והיה" מרמז לשמחה, והכוונה שמחה תהיה לפניו ית"ש כאשר ישאלך בנך והאב מודיע לו הטעם ומתפעל בנפשו כאשר השיג המבוקש ... על כן אפילו אין עמו חברים ותלמידים אשתו שואלתו, ובאם לאו הוא שואל לעצמו כדי שיבואו העניינים בדרך שאלה ותשובה מטעם הנ"ל.

In the plainest sense, the idea is fixed in the soul of the child when the story is told to him because he sought it, as he was troubled by something and sought to find the answer. Still I think, based on the knowledge of our rabbis, [Bereshit Rabba 42:3] that the word "*vehaya*" [Exodus 12:26] alludes to joy, and the intent is that you will be happy before God. As when your child asks you and the parent informs them the reason, and works his soul to achieve the request ... therefore, even if there are no

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Connerton, *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

friends or students with him his wife asks him, and if not he asks himself so that these matters come through question-and-answer for this reason.<sup>15</sup>

Spira draws out a new thread. Question-and-answer is different from a straightforward telling of a story because it involves spiritual work. To answer questions is to examine not just our memories, but also how those memories can be placed in relation to the asker. Combining the answers of Shmuelevitz and Spira, we see that asking, too, involves spiritual work: one must cultivate desire and shape that towards the answerer. And the result of this work? Joy before God. It is through the spiritual work of questions that we can throw off our anxieties and be in relationship with the Divine.

The anthropologist Michael Lambek has investigated the ties between memory and kinship. He describes remembering as a moral practice which takes place between one's embodied self and the story. On the subject of the question, he says:

Consider the simple question often posed by a family member or friend: "Do you remember?" To reply, "Yes, I remember..." is to affirm a social relationship in its deep temporality. Memory in this sense has a dialogical quality and it expresses an ethic of care. This again is not dissimilar to kinship...

Caring is the form of remembering generally characteristic of the ethos and practice of kinship everywhere.<sup>16</sup>

For Lambek, to remember is to care. The question strengthens the kinship bond between the asker and the asked. The child asking their parents at the Seder is not just learning

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<sup>15</sup> Derech Pekudikh, Mitzvot Aseh 21.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Lambek, "The Cares of Alice Adler: Recuperating Kinship and History in Switzerland," in *Ghosts of Memory: Essays on Remembrance and Relatedness*, ed. Janet Carsten (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2007), 220.

about the Passover, but is also tying themselves to their parents and to the Jewish people. Perhaps this is the reason why the Wicked Son's question, "what does this service mean to *you?*", is so hurtful. The Wicked Son has taken the bonding form of the question and perverted it to show that he is not part of the group, and that he will not try to join with them.

Now we can understand chazal's emphasis on the use of questions. But when there are no children present? If there is nobody at all, and one only asks oneself? Who is the questioner caring for then? Whose memories are they awakening?

However we may see ourselves, no participant at a Seder ever experienced the first Passover. When the Israelites hid in their houses with blood on the doors, we were not there. But there is one presence at even the smallest Seder who was at the first Passover. God was there, and God is here.

In the *Pachad Yitzchak*, Rav Yitzchak Hutner describes how the first Passover was a transition point for the world. God created the world with ten utterances that he describes as "soft" speech: speech that does not attempt to govern a person's behavior. In contrast, God gave the Torah with ten commandments, which he terms "hard" speech. Between these two was the Exodus from Egypt. He explains how the Exodus was the moment where the world shifted from "leaving-kindness", undeserved and unilateral grace, to "law-kindness", the mode of the ten commandments, where actions have consequences:



דהיינו באופן של והגדת לבנך, דרך שאלה ותשובה דוקא. עשרת המאמרות לא היו זקוקים למקבל, עשרת הדברות הוזקקו למקבל, וגאולה מצרים היא יצירת פרצוף המקבל שיהא ראוי לקבל הדיבור... ולא עוד אלא שבסיפור ההגדה עושים היכר כדי שישאלו, דזה הוא החידוש של חסד-משפט לעומת חסד-ויתור, שיש בו מאמץ לפעול הכנה במקבל, שיהא מוכשר לקבל כדת.

And the way you should tell the Passover story to your children is specifically by question-and-answer. The ten utterances [that created the world] did not require consent, the ten commandments required consent, and redemption from Egypt was the creation of the way of consent, so that it would be appropriate to accept commandments... moreover, in telling the Haggadah they make signs so that they will ask, as this is the innovation of law-kindness in contrast to leaving-kindness, that there is an effort to prepare for acceptance, that they would be prepared to truly consent.<sup>17</sup>

In order to receive the ten commandments, we needed to become capable of consenting to an agreement. We had to show the maturity required as a partner in a covenant of law. The speech that bridges the gap between “soft speech” and “hard speech” is the speech of question-and-answer. For the Pachad Yitzchak, questions are how we transition from being childlike recipients of God's grace to active partners. Questions are how we become a holy people.

Hutner's terms *chesed-mishpat* and *chesed-vitur* bear examination. “*Vitur*” means cessation or concession, and so I have chosen to translate the somewhat oxymoronic *chesed-vitur* as “leaving-kindness”, by which Hutner means an unconditional and indiscriminate expression

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<sup>17</sup> Pachad Yitzchak, Passover, Maamar 47.

of grace. But it is clear that he prefers the mode of *chesed-mishpat*, law-kindness, in which actions have consequences. Another term for law-kindness would be relational kindness. In relationships, my actions affect you just as yours affect mine. The rules that govern our relationships are usually unwritten, but are no less present for that: who phones whom; when to offer a hug; what size of gift to give on what occasion. Relationships operate in the world of law-kindness. While one might make the same polite gestures indiscriminately to each stranger, it cannot compare to one's pleasure (or disappointment) in response to a loved one's acts. Questions are the path to a world of true relationship with God, where rules exist and actions have consequences.

What, then, is the answer to our modern crisis of memory? I believe that the answer is the question. To question is an act of care. To question is to undertake spiritual action that forces us to examine our beliefs, our memories, and our identities. It is a vulnerable act that creates kinship with the one who we ask, who in turn must do spiritual work in order to answer. By asking questions, we prepare ourselves for the challenges of relationships, where there are rules to follow and ties to strengthen or break.

But whom should we ask? Recalling the instructions of the Gemara, ideally one would ask the person who holds our memories, the one who was there. In this case, that "person" is God. Only God is able to transmit the memories that we have lost, and it is our relationship with God that most requires healing. And yet, for some of us the breach with a distant or doubted God is too great to be bridged with direct questions.

Thiranagama's work on memory in the Sri Lankan civil war holds an answer. In her article, Thiranagama reflects on the interviews and conversations she had in the refugee camp:

These conversations themselves always gestured beyond the immediate to a larger "super-addressee" who is not within the conversation... The promise of return is often addressed to larger entities, idealized listeners beyond the present, who are seen to perceive injustice outside the frames that are presently available: Allah, referred to as the only one who knows people's troubles; future generations of Northern Muslims; the Tamil community in the present and past; and always an idea of *ur* [home] which does not forget the people who remember it.<sup>18</sup>

In Thiranagama's research, her questions do not only open up the relationship between her and the interviewee. They also invite in a "super-addressee", a larger and more powerful entity. Through the medium of asking questions, Thiranagama creates a space for people to interact with larger ideas of continuity and other generations of their kin—and also, to speak with God.

For "one who does not have" the ability to ask God questions, they should ask another—or even ask oneself. For it is by asking each other deep questions that we are able to address the presence in the room who might have the answers. Through questions, we can try to create kinship with God.

Thiranagama's Northern Muslims describe Allah as the only one who knows people's troubles. I would go further. By asking deep questions, questions that require spiritual

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<sup>18</sup> Sharika Thiranagama, "Moving On? Generating Homes in Sri Lanka", in *Ghosts of Memory: Essays on Remembrance and Relatedness*, ed. Janet Carsten (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2007), 146-7.

work, we show a desire to be the one who knows God's troubles, while also admitting that we do not know. We become partners in the act of remembering between God and the Jewish people, despite our lack of understanding. The question repairs our relationships and rebuilds our collective memory. Only through this can we return to joy before God.