Experiential Education, Learning Theory, and the Passover Seder

DR. JEFFREY KRESS, Provost and Dr. Bernard Heller Professor of Jewish Education, JTS

Tze ulemad—Go out and learn! As is often the case, the brevity of the text—two words and a conjunction—conceals deceptively rich ideas. In a sense, they encapsulate the theme of the holiday of Pesah, one that involves going out (of Egypt) and learning (about becoming the Jewish people). And *tze ulemad,* like much in the seder, invites questions: Who is going out? Where are they going? What are they learning?

Tze ulemad implies that learning involves action. It is easy to connect the phrase to approaches to experiential education, learning that involves hands-on participation accompanied by reflection. While one can learn about Israel, for example, from a book, experiencing Israel through time spent there deepens one's understanding. Similarly, one can learn about prayer, Shabbat, and holiday ritual, or one can experience them directly. In this framing, the seder itself is an educational activity, one which symbolically refers to a core experience in the evolution of the Jewish people, one we *cannot* directly experience—the Exodus from Egypt.

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Tze ulemad can also be seen as a shorthand for powerful educational theories that don't necessarily involve hopping on the next El Al flight. Think about the metaphors for learning that you may be familiar with. *Young children are like empty vessels waiting to be filled. She's so smart, she's like a sponge soaking up information*. These metaphors set the learner in a relatively passive role, as receptacles of whatever content is at hand.

Generally speaking, educators have come to reject such metaphors and instead frame learning as an active process. An alternate metaphor is that of a scientist who brings their current understandings of a phenomenon into the lab, collects data, and modifies or solidifies their initial understandings accordingly. The learner *constructs* new understandings from old. With the shifting metaphors of learning comes a reframing of the role of the educator from being, as a popular saying goes, "the sage of the stage" (spouting information for students to "soak up") to "the guide on the side," curating encounters with new information, perspectives, or information that are likely to prompt learners to adjust their understandings. This *could* happen through experiences such as a trip to Israel or participating in prayer, but it could also happen in a classroom and even at a dinner table.

As we "go out" to encounter new information and ideas, our frameworks for making sense of phenomena in the world, which psychologists refer to as "schemas," become more elaborate and complex. As a basic example, a very young child may form a schema for "dog": relatively small, furry, crawls around. They may develop positive and/or negative emotions related to dogs and establish a behavioral repertoire associated with them (approach and try to engage with; avoid at all

costs). With experience, the child learns that dogs can come in various shapes, sizes, and degrees of furriness. They also learn that not everything with four legs and fur is a dog.

From this perspective, all learning is a matter of *tze*, of going out, or incremental change to our schema. Psychologist Irv Sigel (1921–2006) emphasized that the role of an educator is to, in his terminology, "distance" learners from their existing schemas, to call on them to use new data to shape their understanding. Educators and parents achieve this, according to Sigel, through implementing "distancing strategies" that call upon learners to "go out" of their schema[1].

Active learning is all well and good, but you might be wondering, what does any of this have to do with Passover?

The structure of the seder itself stretches one's understanding. We're familiar with dinner. We may sit down with our family for dinner regularly or at least occasionally. We may even include some prayers and singing. But the seder is radically different from an everyday dinner or even a Shabbat meal. And we're familiar with Jewish ritual observances and prayer services. These often take place at a synagogue or, at the very least, not at a dinner table. A seder makes its uniqueness known through its very being. It is a dinner like no other and it is a liturgical event like no other. Our attention is drawn to elements of the ritual that represent the unique experience of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, while at the same time referencing the quotidian Jewish experiences of ritual, family, and of course, food.

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Relatedly, we take note that Sigel and others point to question-asking as a primary distancing strategy. To Sigel and others, a good question calls upon the learner to analyze their existing schema in light of new observations, inputs, or ideas. In case the distinctive qualities of the seder escape one's conscious notice, the seder liturgy directs our attention to these through the inclusion of the so-called Four Questions. Why "so-called"? Because structurally speaking, there is only one question (How is this night different from all other nights?) and four *answers* provided (On all other nights . . . while on this night . . .). Those answers serve as prompts for further exploration. Sure, we dip twice or lean while we eat, etc. But why? The answers raise questions, and the questions beget deeper understanding. Though framed as answers and not questions, this section functions as a distancing strategy, drawing attention to what makes this night special. The entire setup of the evening is an exercise in unpacking those different elements[2].

Toward the end of the *magid* section, we note that in every generation, everyone should see themselves as if they came out of Egypt. This passage calls upon us to raise new questions every year: timeless questions, those that are relevant specifically at this moment, and questions that spark further conversation among all the generations at our seder table. In this way, we continue to fulfill the imperative of *tze ulemad*.

[1] Sigel, I. E., Kress, J. S., & Elias, M. J. (2007). "Beyond Questioning: Inquiry Strategies and Cognitive and Affective Elements of Jewish Education." *Journal of Jewish Education,* 73(1), 51–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/15244110601175178

[2] Also see Klein, R. (2023). "The Passover Seder as an Exercise in Piagetian Education Theory." *Religious Education. 118*. 1–13.