

# Tze Ulemad: Go Out and Learn

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**T**ze *ulemad*, often translated “Go and learn,” is used in the Passover Haggadah to introduce the verses from Deuteronomy 25:5–8 (“My father was a wandering Aramean”) and the lengthy midrashic section that follows. The process this section models is at least as important as the specific content of the texts. It is intended to be illustrative of how we go about reading and studying, how we go about telling and understanding our stories, and how we emerge transformed as a result.

The introductory phrase, unusual in rabbinic literature, is itself a key part of the lesson. The word *tze* actually means “go out” in the imperative. It comes from the same root used to refer to the Exodus from Egypt itself, *Yetziat Mitzrayim* (Exod. 12:41). Here, joined to *ulemad* (and learn), the complete phrase invites an extended meditation on the relationship between going out and learning.

On the one hand, the capacity and willingness to go out serves as the precondition for learning. Learning demands a kind of leaving—a letting go of what we believe we already know. It requires the courage to sit with uncertainty, ambiguity, beginner status, or feeling ignorant. It entails leaving the comfort zone of familiarity and expertise, the ego gratification of being right. More concretely, we learn when we go outside of ourselves and our current surroundings and relationships, going out into the world to meet new people, see new terrain, and have new experiences.

On the other hand, it is also true that learning is often the precondition for going out. Learning spurs our imagination, inspiring us to envision new ways of doing and being, even alternative societal structures. Learning about others’ experiences can take us out of ourselves, growing our empathy and spurring us to action. Learning new ideas, philosophies, and spiritual and religious teachings can clarify or shift our values and ethics, leading us out of old patterns and into new practices and new priorities. Our ability to change our present circumstances—or leave them altogether—often follows upon having learned that there are alternative ways of being. Learning opens up possibility and hope, and can nurture the very courage that going out demands. This is why enslavers generally forbid enslaved people from educating themselves.

Of course, it is not an “either/or” but a “both/and.” *Tze ulemad*—“Go out, then learn” and “Learn so you can go out”—describes an iterative process. Going out enables learning, which enables going out, which makes further learning possible. And on and on. Or perhaps they are simultaneous, parallel, interdependent processes. Going out *is* learning, and learning *is* a form of going out.

We see this in the Exodus narrative itself. One way to read the story is that change begins when Moses goes out from Pharaoh’s palace and sees his brothers (Exod. 2:11). This leads to revelation/learning at the Burning Bush. That

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learning begins the process of Moses leading the entire people out of slavery, which in turn makes possible a new level of revelation/learning at Mount Sinai. The result is the endless cycle of going out and learning that is Jewish culture, practice, and history—Torah study and secular education that (ideally) lead us step-by-step out of degradation, injustice, hatred, and violence toward ever greater dignity, justice, lovingkindness, and peace.

The contrast in the Exodus narrative is Pharaoh—the one character who will not or cannot learn or go out. “I do not know YHVH,” Pharaoh famously declares; then, despite plague after plague destroying his society, he refuses to learn. This inability or unwillingness to learn becomes manifest in his hardened heart; he stays stuck, immobilized, heavy (*kaved*)—unable to go out from his current path and choose a new way. When he finally wants to go out—chasing after the Israelites—he becomes stuck, immobilized, and heavy (*bikevedut*) again, this time in the mud and mire of the Sea of Reeds (Exod. 14:25, Exod. 15:4, and Rashi).

Writ large, the Exodus narrative (and its retelling at the Passover seder) is a story of an existing world order crumbling and a new, more just society emerging, built by those who *tze ulemad* (go out and learn, who learn, and can therefore go out). Strikingly, just before actually going out (*yatzo*) from Egypt, the Israelites are commanded to instruct future generations about the Passover story, thereby becoming teachers, as well as learners (Exod. 12:26-27).

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*Tze ulemad.* Freedom and learning are intertwined. Go out so you can learn. Leaving is the hallmark of those who have been freed—who are no longer stuck or enslaved by external or internal forces—and don’t wait to be freed in order to learn. Rather, they go out *through* learning. Learning is the pathway to freedom. The study, discussion, storytelling, and interpretation at our seder tables is more than a celebration and reminder of our journey to freedom; it is an actualization of the journey itself. By the end of the evening, having learned something, we are a little freer than we were when we first sat down at the table.