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The Passover Seder as an Exercise in Piagetian Education Theory

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on two elements of the Passover Seder ritual and their connection to Piagetian education theory. After outlining Piaget's theory of genetic epistemology and its implications for education theory, it focuses on Sigel's distancing theory, which touts question asking as a tool for presenting information to students. This paper argues that the Jewish ritual of the Passover Seder was formulated with such pedagogical methods in mind, especially as it concerns the role of questioning. This paper also discusses storytelling's importance as an effective tool in pedagogical instruction, and how the Passover Seder also takes advantage of that modality to make the ritual more impactful for educational purposes.

KEYWORDS

Jewish Education;
distancing; questioning;
Passover Seder

Piaget's genetic epistemology

The French-Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896–1980) is best known for his work on child development and education. His contribution to epistemology—that is, the study of the nature of knowledge and its origins and limits—is known as genetic epistemology. Piaget's epistemological theory argues that the core means by which cognitive abilities develop is the active structuring and restructuring of stored units of mental information. These sets of data are known as schemata (Michalak 2011).

As a sort of synthesis between rationalist and empiricist theories of epistemology, Piaget believed that both sensory information and pure reasoning contribute to cognitive development. In his view, children use their reasoning to actively construct internal schemata that organize and store the sensory information they have newly encountered (Muller 2013, 316–317).

Specifically, cognitive development occurs when a child compares and contrasts newly-acquired information with previously established schemata. This can be achieved either by understanding new information in light of what one already knows (assimilation), or by reworking already extant schemata in light of new information (accommodation). By rewriting old schemata and adding new ones, children attain both a broader and more nuanced understanding of the world at large. Balancing these two modalities brings one to what Piaget terms cognitive equilibration/equilibrium, that is, clarity and the resolution of perceived discrepancies (Furth 2003, 318 and Murray

2010, 1247) and the psychological satisfaction that results (for more about the Piagetian and neo-Piagetian conceptions of equilibration and its related stages, see Bormanaki and Khoshhal 2017, 996–1005).

Modern scholars like Reimer point to the power of *surprise* (defined as the encountering of data that does not match one's preconceptions) as an educational tool. Essentially, the use of *surprise* spurs learners into calling into question their preexisting mental conceptions, and opens their mind to new possibilities (Kress and Elias 2008, 340–341).

Sigel's distancing theory

A later developmental psychologist named Irving Sigel (1922–2006) focused on the child's perturbation when faced with discrepancies caused by a mismatch between what she already knows and what she has now newly experienced, or between two pieces of newly presented data (see Kress and Lehman 2003, 61). Sigel helped apply Piaget's theory in practice through a process he calls *distancing* (Sigel and Kelly 1988, 105–107). Kress defines distancing as “the notion of moving away from preexisting understandings in order to form more complex representations of a concept or idea” (Kress 2018, 1). In other words, distancing essentially highlights a given discrepancy, and brings that contradiction to the forefront of a learner's thoughts. Distancing directs and focuses a student's cognitive energies toward certain mental operations. This, after a fashion, stimulates desired cognitive functions, forcing the learner to ponder the problem raised and whet their appetite for equilibration.

Taking this a step further, Sigel's theory suggests “the key role of an educator is to facilitate the learner's encounter of that which is discrepant with existing schema” (Sigel, Kress, and Elias 2007, 54–55). While this idea bears some similarities to the Vygotskian notion that the instructor herself can “awaken or spark child development” (Ben-Avie et al. 2011, 754), Sigel's theory differs from Vygotsky in its deemphasis of the socio-psychological aspect of learning, and its more exclusive focus on the constructive/epistemic nature of education.

One strategy for facilitating this sort of educational process is question asking. Indeed, Kress writes that an inquiry-based approach “is Sigel's most fundamental strategy for the promotion of schema growth” (Sigel, Kress, and Elias 2007, 55 and Kress 2018, 2). For this purpose, a question may be generally defined as “any sentence having either an interrogative form or an interrogative function” (Hill 2016, 660). In fact, the literature shows that asking appropriate questions under the proper conditions can significantly contribute to improvement in student learning and the development of critical thinking skills (Hill 2016, 662)—all important goals in schooling and education in general. In particular, Hill (2016, 663–665) shows how teachers can use questions to help students develop higher order thinking skills that will aid them in thinking beyond the text or information presented before them.

That said, Sigel identifies various drawbacks of overusing or misusing such verbal prompts. Students could sometimes become disturbed by the way a question is asked, or become stressed/frustrated with the interrogative process. For example,

tone of voice or time restraints might place undue pressure on a child and thereby inhibit the learning process (Sigel and Kelly 1988, 112–114; 117). For example, research has shown that a child's *feelings* about a given topic are incorporated into the cognitive schemas she develops to store information about that topic. Accordingly, schemas which were created through subjectively negative experiences will carry that negativity onwards. Therefore, Sigel warns that when engaging in distancing, a teacher must be especially attuned to the child's emotional state (Sigel, Kress, and Elias 2007, 55–56).

Creating a positive learning experience is of the utmost importance in Jewish Education, in which the goal is not merely to learn information, but to provide religious instruction and facilitate the student's development of her Jewish identity (Sigel, Kress, and Elias 2007, 57).

Sigel's work focuses on the onus placed upon teachers for providing questions, and, indeed, other researchers have found that, empirically speaking, in the contemporary education system, question asking falls within the realm of the teacher. The advantage of questions that originate on the part of teacher is that such prompts help keep learners on task and can be more useful for advancing the classroom goals of the teacher herself. Moreover, when the question is directed *at* the student(s), instead of originating *from* the student(s), it helps the student(s) test their knowledge by attempting to adduce a correct answer and can potentially convey to the teacher the need to reteach the relevant information, if the student(s) provides an incorrect answer (Hill 2016, 661).

Nonetheless, scholars note that those who should actually be seeking knowledge—the children themselves—generally seem to be excluded from the endeavor of question asking (Blonder et al. 2015, 705–706).

Educators have found that students asking questions is important in fostering comprehension, especially as it gives students the ability to gauge their own understanding and check for accuracy. Moreover, children being encouraged/allowed to ask their own questions significantly raises their motivation to learn and drives them to further fill other unfilled gaps in their knowledge (Blonder et al. 2015, 706).

Questions create a sense of urgency

Reuven Feuerstein (1921–2014), a student of Piaget, crystalized many of Piaget's principles into another epistemological theory called Structural Cognitive Modifiability. In his view, intelligence is comprised of various cognitive structures and processes which can be developed through learning.

Feuerstein also devised a method of educational development called Mediated Learning Experience, by which a mediator (e.g., a parent or teacher) actively interacts with the student and interprets the world to her. A central component of this theory is the mediator's role in linking disparate phenomena in the learner's mind. This helps the student connect what she experiences herself with historical or cultural meaning (Skuy 1997, 119–120).

Reuven Feuerstein's brother, Shmuel Feuerstein (1926–2018), also a notable educator, wrote about the significance of question asking according to that approach:

“Mediation modifies the world of stimuli to render the learner more permeable to the wider sense of reality. One of the best ways to turn stimuli into a source of learning and an intellectual challenge is through reciprocal questioning. The interrogative form in itself elicits sharper attention from the person being questioned to the features and facts that may lead to the search for an answer. There is probably no better way of turning stimuli into reciprocal cognitive involvement than through questions. Questions have been used worldwide as a mediation of cultural transmission, expressed throughout human experience as a cross-cultural phenomenon...

A question acts as a powerful mediator if it prompts the mediatee to search for an answer. A question creates a need in the individual as well as an orientation to focus on the world of data associated with the subject matter. Focusing on the question results in the selection of certain stimuli that can then be correlated and assessed in terms of their relevance. Thus, even the simplest question can trigger an orientation toward a specific search and the mobilization of specific mental processes.” (Feuerstein 2015, 183)

Although hermeneutical in nature, Klein comments about the epistemological/psychological need for an answer that is created by a question. He observes that the Hebrew word *sheilah* (“question”) and the Hebrew word *sheol* (“grave” or “pit”) are orthographically similar and explains,

“...*sheol* literally means ‘deep pit,’ which serves as a metaphor for one who asks a question. A question creates a burning need for an answer. Just as a deep pit serves as a portal to the empty abyss, a question leaves a gaping hole in the questioner’s mind that begs to be filled.” (Klein 2019a)

Per Klein, when a teacher presents information as a means of answering a question, the heightened anticipation of that information before it is revealed raises its importance in the eyes of the student. The tension created by asking a question before the answer is given makes the student desire that information, and thereby feel the urgency of the information transmitted. In line with the above, this is especially true when it is the student herself who has raised the question.

For more about the significance of question asking as an essential part of meaningful learning, see Dkeidek, Mamlok-Naaman, and Hofstein (2011, 1305–1307). Even though that study focuses on inquiry-based learning in the context of science, much of their findings could apply equally to almost all other subjects taught in schools, because, like the sciences, almost all subjects relate to critical thinking, active engagement, and accruing a deeper understanding of whatever materials are taught. Accordingly, just as that study shows that inquiry-based learning can benefit students’ ability to thrive in the sciences, it is cogent to argue that such an approach can likewise benefit their *overall* educational experiences, especially as it relates to fostering curiosity and developing problem-solving abilities.

Questioning in rabbinic tradition

Shmuel Feuerstein finds traces of the Jewish tradition of question asking in the Talmud and even in the Bible. He surveys the different sorts of questions found in the Talmud and categorizes them according to their didactic value (Feuerstein 2000, 134–144). In our brief study, we have found that rabbinic literature makes the connection between

questioning and true learning much stronger. The limited study below looks at how the rabbis valued questioning from a broader perspective, without distinguishing between different forms of questions (in terms of their goals, and underlying assumptions).

While these examples may be viewed as simply reflective of a rabbinic hermeneutics that values questioning as an integral part of the learning process, in traditional Jewish Education (e.g., in an Orthodox Jewish setting, or at a Passover Seder, which is typically modeled after traditional Halakha to varying degrees), such rabbinic attitudes are normative and not merely hermeneutical devices.

The Mishnah (*Avot* 2:5) famously asserts "...a bashful person cannot learn..." Traditional commentators including the medieval Tosafists (in *Hadar Zekenim* to Ex. 24:12) and the later commentator to the Mishnah, R. Obadiah of Bertinoro (1440–1500), explain that this means that a learner should not be too bashful as to withhold from asking the questions necessary to understand whatever materials she is studying. Rather, a student should be bold and daring enough to ask whatever questions she needs to understand the topic.

Similarly, when the Tannaic sage Yehuda ben Teima exhorts that one ought to "be bold like a leopard" (*Avot* 5:20), Bertinoro explains that this, too, refers to the requirement that a student be bold enough to ask her teacher about what she does not understand, because a bashful person is precluded from learning.

Maimonides, in his *Laws of Talmud Torah* (4:4–6), takes question asking in the educational context very seriously and collates various rules and regulations about that process. Maimonides' rules were codified almost verbatim by R. Yosef Karo in *Shulhan Arukh* (*Yoreh Deah* §246). Among these rules are:

- A student should not say "I understand" if they do not truly understand; rather, a student should continue asking multiple times until they have understood the materials at hand—even if this irks the teacher.
- A student may not ask a teacher questions immediately upon the teacher's arrival; the teacher should first be given time to settle themselves before having to answer questions.
- Conversely, students should not be quizzed immediately upon their arrival, but should be given some time to sit down and relax beforehand.
- Two people cannot ask questions at the same time.
- One may not ask a teacher a question related to something other than the topic at hand (in order to avoid embarrassing the teacher).
- The teacher should purposely "mislead" students with tricky questions in order to sharpen their intellectual acumen, and gauge whether they remember what they have been taught.
- One may not ask a question or answer a question while standing.
- One may not ask a question or answer a question if there is a significant spatial distance between the student and teacher (whether lateral or vertical).

Given the importance that the rabbis attached to question asking as a requisite to learning, it is therefore unsurprising that the rabbis would have done all they could in order to facilitate questioning asking at the Passover Seder. In the following subsection, we will consider several examples of such practices.

Passover oddities

Every year, Jews around the world hold a Passover Seder, which is a ritual meal/symposium that celebrates the liberation of the ancient Israelites from slavery in ancient Egypt. The Seder (literally, “order” in Hebrew) is always held on the first night of Passover, and follows a specific order of rituals and readings, guided by a liturgical book called the Haggadah. The Haggadah focuses on recounting the Exodus story, but also provides a framework for the evening’s proceedings. In many ways, the Haggadah serves as a pedagogical tool, engaging participants in an interactive and multi-sensory experience, fostering discussion, reflection, and the transmission of historical and cultural knowledge from one generation to the next (Volli 2017, 859–862).

A child raised in a traditional Jewish home has typically developed a mental schematic for understanding the Shabbat and Holiday meals. Those meals follow a familiar formula. For example, they begin with reciting *kiddush*, followed by drinking wine. Then, the family proceeds to ritual handwashing in anticipation of eating bread, then the bread is served, and finally the rest of the meal begins. Barring anything out of the ordinary, a child can begin anticipating the steps in such a meal from a very young age, and mentally map their expectations.

However, when it comes to the Passover Seder, this routine is purposely broken or interrupted in multiple ways. Case in point: At a typical Shabbat or Holiday meal, one cup of wine is customarily drunk before the meal actually commences. However, for Passover Eve, the rabbis instituted a *second* cup of wine to be drunk before the actual meal. In the words of the Mishnah (*Pesahim* 10:4), “They pour for him [the head of the household] a second cup and here the son asks... ‘why is this night different from all other nights...’” The implication of this prescriptive narrative is that one of the purposes of instituting a second cup of wine before the meal is to serve as a catalyst for the children in attendance to ask, “why is this night different from all other nights...?”

During the Passover Seder, various tonal pitches are traditionally employed, with some parts of the Haggadah often read or recited in a prosaic monotone and other parts sung according to various traditional melodies. These non-semantic verbal prompts might also serve to grab children’s attention in order to heighten their alertness and bring out their inquisitive nature.

At earlier points in Jewish history, the Passover Seder included eating the sacrificial meats of the Paschal Offering. The Hebrew Bible (Ex. 12:46) places a restriction on how those meats may be eaten by offering an injunction against breaking the bones of the Paschal Offering. According to Halakha (“Jewish Law”), similar restrictions do not apply to the consumption of any other sorts of meat, sacrificial or otherwise. This makes the procedure for eating meat of the Paschal Offering unique in the experience of a Jewish person. Gersonides explains that the purpose of this prohibition was to make eating that sacrifice a totally different experience than eating anything else, so that the children would be aroused and stirred into inquiring what this was all about (Levi 2000, 63).

More rabbinically-mandated anomalous behaviors performed at the Passover Seder are described in the Babylonian Talmud:

- The rabbis instituted that one ought to eat vegetables at the Passover Seder after the first cup of wine, but before the second cup. The explanation given is that these vegetables are served in addition to the Biblically required bitter herbs (eaten later in the night) in order to rouse the children to ask questions (BT *Pesahim* 114b).
- Similarly, at various points during the Passover Seder, the Seder Plate is lifted (see Rashi and Rashbam to BT *Pesahim* 109a) and is even removed from the table (BT *Pesahim* 115b)—all in the hopes of eliciting questions from the children in attendance.
- A custom has developed with Talmudic precedent (see BT *Pesahim* 109a) for children to “steal” the *afikomen* (Rabinowitz 1995, 242). This inversion of regular ethical norms surrounding other’s property rights has the potential, *inter alia*, to pique children’s curiosity and provoke questioning on their part.

The unfamiliarity and awkwardness of the Passover Seder may bring a child into a state of disequilibrium, which, in Piagetian terms, is “a disquieting but educationally useful psycho-social phenomenon which may open opportunities for consideration of new concepts or different ways of thinking” (Cohen and Bar Shalom 2010, 34). The child’s sense of urgency is exacerbated by the normative conditions surrounding the Passover Seder, which include time restrictions (as the Passover Seder must be completed by midnight, but cannot start until after night has begun) and food restrictions (as the crux of the Seder happens on an empty stomach, before the festive meal is served, and at a time when many foods are banned under the prohibition of leavened foodstuff and its ancillary strictures).

Different children will respond differently to these pedagogical stimuli, but if the Seder ritual performs its intended function, it will elicit questions and calls for further clarification on the part of the children who are participating or observing the ritual symposium. In fact, piquing children’s curiosity and inducing them to ask questions is one of the stated goals of the Passover Seder mentioned in traditional Jewish sources (Ives 2015, 191–192). These questions might not always be strictly information-based, or even directly related to the textual centerpiece of the Seder (the Haggadah), yet, as R. Manoaḥ Hendel of Prague (circa. 1540–1601) writes, the answers to all of these various questions invariably relate back to the story of the Jewish exodus from Egypt, according to each individual child’s understanding and abilities (Chaver 2003, 232).

Indeed, the Feuerstein brothers explicitly label the Passover Seder a prototypical Mediated Learning Experience meant to teach about the Jews’ experience in the exodus from Egypt. They point to the use of questioning in the structure of the Passover ritual as one powerful method by which this goal is advanced. While summarizing the Feuersteins’ findings, Skuy (1997, 124) writes: “This seder is constructed in such a way that it evokes appropriate questions from the children present regarding the rituals—their content, their method of performance, and the reasons for carrying out the elaborate set of rituals constituting the Passover night.”

In short, the various oddities associated with the Passover Seder serve to pester the children’s intellect and challenge their preexisting schemata. This, in turn, provokes their curiosity and inquisitiveness, leading the way to a positive educational experience. The very setting of the Passover Seder serves to artificially create a “teachable moment”

by which the Jewish traditions concerning the exodus from Egypt can be most effectively conveyed.

Storytelling

Educators have long extolled the use of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy. Stories are useful ways of introducing to students new and important ideas that help them shape their understanding of themselves and the world-at-large. As Schram puts it,

“A story is a beautiful means of teaching religion, values, history, traditions, and customs; a creative method of introducing characters and places; an imaginative way to instill hope and resourceful thinking. Stories help us understand who we are and show us what legacies to transmit to future generations.” (Coulter, Michael, and Poynor 2007, 104–105)

Storytelling has been an integral part of education since ancient times (see Anderson 2007, 3; 10–12). Aboriginal societies like Native Americans have long-standing traditions of storytelling that have always been used to inculcate the next generation (Coulter, Michael, and Poynor 2007, 105).

Given this depiction, it follows that storytelling can be quite helpful in cognitive development and as an educational tool in general. Presenting a child with a story is a non-threatening way to challenge their preconceived schemata and introduce to them new information. This sentiment is shared by a group of Brazilian educators who wrote: “[S]torytelling is the oldest of the arts... [it is a] means of creating new horizons for children by increasing their knowledge, imagination, and creativity in their habitat” (da Costa et al. 2016, 4665).

In fact, constructivists in the mold of Piaget have stressed the active role taken by children in attempting to find meaning in stories. In the words of Howard Deitcher (2013, 238–239):

“As a child hears, processes, and remembers the story, she attempts to create a coherent understanding of the text by integrating information with her prior knowledge of the world. Through active engagement, the child absorbs new information, assimilates it into new ideas, and thereby builds conceptual networks and schemas that allow her to navigate life in more constructive ways.”

This positive attitude toward the use of storytelling in education chiefly reflects a Piagetian view of education theory. By contrast, behaviorists like Skinner view storytelling as mainly a mode of entertainment with little to no educational value, per se (Anderson 2007, 8).

In light of this, it is not surprising that another important facet of the Passover Seder is the storytelling component, which is used to teach the story of the Jews’ exodus from Egypt. The Passover Seder and the Haggadah incorporate various elements of storytelling that play a crucial role in the transmission of traditional Jewish narratives and normative practices. As the principle-guiding text that organizes the Seder, the Haggadah tells the story of the Israelites’ liberation from slavery in Egypt. In doing so, it presents a narrative that engages participants by recounting historical events and inviting them to connect emotionally with the experience of their ancestors by personalizing the story. This storytelling aspect of the Passover Seder has already been

explicitly recognized by rabbis as an effective educational tool as early as the eighteenth century (Ives 2015, 191).

To that end, the Haggadah employs a blend of didactic and interactive techniques to convey the narrative more effectively. As mentioned above, it includes questions, discussions, and participatory rituals that encourage active engagement and dialogue among participants. There is, of course, a social element to the Passover Night experience as well, because through these educational elements, the Haggadah fosters a sense of communal identity and continuity by linking the past with the present and reinforcing the importance of preserving Jewish traditions (Volli 2017, 859–862).

The Haggadah employs a combination of legal, exegetical, and liturgical/poetic devices to achieve its storytelling objectives and reflect different approaches to storytelling. The legal readings and observances set the tone for the night, while the core of the Haggadah is an exercise in rabbinic exegesis that interprets and expands on the Biblical text, particularly the Exodus narrative as presented in Deuteronomy 26. A typical Passover Seder might include Midrashic interpretations, commentary, and discussions on various aspects of the story. These devices allow for a deeper exploration of the text, offering multiple perspectives, and encouraging participants to delve into the story's complexities. These exegetical elements thus foster engagement and encourage dialogue, while inviting participants to actively interpret, question, and reinterpret the narrative through the lens of Jewish tradition.

Alongside and somewhat interspersed within this are liturgical and poetic compositions, which create a sense of rhythm, beauty, and emotional resonance. Famous examples of this include the Dayenu song (which expresses thanksgiving) and the Hallel (excerpts from Psalms that praise God for His role in the Exodus). These poetic sections can evoke a range of emotions, from gratitude and joy to reflection and solemnity. In doing so, they enhance the storytelling experience by appealing to the senses, and creating a memorable and engaging atmosphere.

By incorporating all of these varied elements, the Haggadah creates a multi-layered storytelling experience that combines intellectual, spiritual, and emotional elements. It thereby enables participants—and particularly children—to connect to the Exodus story on different levels, and engages them in a dynamic and transformative encounter with their cultural and religious heritage (Schram 1984, 37).

The storytelling aspects of the Passover Seder and Haggadah can serve as powerful educational tools, as they ensure the continued transmission of time-honored Jewish values, customs, and beliefs across multiple generations. By sharing the story of the Exodus, the Haggadah not only imparts historical knowledge, but also conveys ethical lessons and teaches the importance of freedom, justice, and compassion. It provides for an interactive framework to discuss and interpret the story's moral and spiritual dimensions, exposing children to a deeper understanding of Jewish tradition and fostering a sense of shared responsibility for its preservation.

Moreover, by focusing on the story of the Exodus as a narrative, those leading the Passover Seder can capture the attention and imagination of the participants, leading them on a pedagogical journey to understanding how God took the Jews out of Egypt. In fact, the Bible itself asserts that the entire purpose of the miraculous events of the Exodus is “so that you will relate in the ears of your son, and your son’s son that which I [God] had played with Egypt, and My signs... and you will

know that I am the LORD” (Ex. 10:2). The most effective way of teaching about God is through storytelling. Mosher, as quoted by Yassif, writes, “When you speak of God, the audience slumbers, but when you tell a story, they instantly awaken” (Yassif 2016, 6).

At its core, the Passover Seder and the Haggadah utilize storytelling elements to transmit traditional Jewish narratives and normative practices. Through active engagement, dialogue, and reflection, participants are encouraged to connect with their cultural heritage, gain knowledge, and otherwise internalize the values/teachings embedded in the rabbinic rendition of the Exodus story.

Summation

To summarize, we opened with an outline of Piaget’s theory of genetic epistemology that views the mind as storing information in packets of knowledge known as schemata. We continued with presentations of Sigel’s distancing theory and Feuerstein’s Mediated Learning Experience, both of which serve to ripen the mind toward the acceptance of new ideas. In both frameworks, questioning is the foremost means of achieving this goal and facilitating learning.

We bolstered the supposition that when information is presented as a means of answering a question its urgency and importance is more strongly felt by citing various rabbinic sources that serve to emphasize the importance of question asking in the learning process. We then transitioned to a brief listing of traditional Jewish sources concerning various rites associated with the Passover Seder, and argued how those rites were purposefully introduced as a means of facilitating the desired question-asking. In light of that, we argued that when instituting various practices that are uniquely characteristic of the Passover Seder, the Hebrew Bible and the rabbis took pedagogical concerns into consideration.

After discussing question asking and its major role in the Passover Seder, we turned to a review of the scholarly literature on the role of storytelling in education. We showed that from a Piagetian perspective, storytelling can have a powerful impact on the efficacy of educational instruction, and argued that this, too, is an intentionally integral part of the Passover Seder.

A sort of useful heuristic for representing these dual aspects of the educational policies inherent to the Passover Seder are the pair of Hebrew words used for describing the act of teaching the story of the Exodus on Passover: *haggadah* and *sippur*. Drawing from medieval grammarians and modern rabbinic scholars, Klein concludes that:

“the word *haggadah* implies the transmission of new, novel information. Its roots convey both challenge/opposition and connection. The *haggadah* confronts the participant with new, challenging information. It speaks forcefully and rubs the participants’ noses in questions. The participant is forced to engage with the material presented, and thus ultimately connect to it.” (Klein 2019b).

In fact, Klein cites R. Aryeh Pomeranchik (1908–1942) as explaining that the *annual* commandment of relating the Exodus story on Passover night “must assume a question-and-answer format,” thereby differentiating it from the *daily* requirement of

remembering/mentioning the Exodus (Klein 2019c). This, too, serves to highlight new information for learners, and helps them develop more sophisticated, nuanced schemata concerning that story.

On the other hand, the word *sippur* “denote[s] a structured storytelling, made up of several components joined together in a logical and coherent way. The different parts of the story must flow from each other in one smooth progression, like numbers that flow from each other when counted... the story follows one chronological/logical narrative...” (Klein 2019c). In this way, the word *sippur* focuses on the use of storytelling and the pedagogical advantages to that modality.

In summation, the word *haggadah* represents the use of distancing, questioning, and related strategies, while the word *sippur* connotes the use of storytelling. Both of these strategies are used in tandem and converge at the Passover Seder to create a most optimal educational experience.

Conclusion & future research

Reduced to its most basic premise, the present paper highlights how from a Piagetian constructivist standpoint, there is considerable significance attributable to exploring historical paradigms of education and learning—particularly those of a traditional or aboriginal nature—as a means of better identifying and articulating effective pedagogical approaches and ways of teaching.

While remaining cognizant of the type of “myopic triumphalism” prevalent in educational history criticized by Wagoner and Cremin (1978, 202), this paper shows how the rabbis of yesteryear anticipated and even sharpened some of the pedagogical methods that were ostensibly only “discovered” by modern education researchers centuries later. It thus underscores the rabbis’ prescience and advancement in understanding educational theory, as they anticipated and honed pedagogical techniques that were only recognized later by the academic establishment.

Thus, this investigation reasonably establishes that the genre of rabbinic literature is not an insubstantial genre to be deeply studied and analyzed for the betterment of liberal education, but rather a profound corpus warranting thorough examination and analysis to advance the cause of progressive education. Indeed, this paper shows that properly understanding rabbinic practices and the motives behind them can help refine learning/teaching methods in ways that can and do remain relevant even in contemporary times.

In light of all this, it proves worthwhile a pursuit to further delve into the rich tapestry of rabbinic literature in order to seek out additional insights into their methods and attitudes toward pedagogy, with the objective of better understanding their possible influences on contemporary educational practices. Through careful analysis of rabbinic teachings and pedagogical strategies, this study uncovers two examples of how rabbinic methodologies parallel those touted by contemporary educational theory and practice. Essentially, the meticulous comprehension of rabbinic practices and their underlying motives can potentially facilitate the enhancement of contemporary learning and teaching methodologies in a manner that preserves their pertinence and utility in the present era. Such a future line of research might seek to discern the timeless wisdom encapsulated within these pedagogical approaches, ultimately providing valuable

insights for the enhancement of educational endeavors in diverse cultural and historical contexts—even outside the realm of the rabbis.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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