5 Ways to Transmit Tradition to a Skeptical Generation



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The question that makes your stomach drop isn't "Can I stay up late?" It's the one that arrives without warning: "How do we know God is real?"

For some parents, this moment comes at bedtime, from a six-year-old who has just encountered death or infinity. For others, it arrives over winter break, when their college sophomore returns home having read Nietzsche and Dawkins, armed with objections that weren't part of the day school curriculum. Sometimes the question emerges decades later, from adults who drifted away and now find themselves wondering what, if anything, they still believe.

Every version of this moment shares a common feature: the old answers feel insufficient. "Because I said so" doesn't cut it anymore. Neither does "this is how we've always done it." The questioner wants reasons. They want honesty. They want to know if the tradition can actually hold their weight.

Parshat Bo understands this. Amidst the chaos of the final plagues, the death of Egypt's firstborn, and the hurried departure from slavery, the Torah does something unexpected: It pivots from narrative to pedagogy. Four separate times in the Exodus story, the text anticipates a future scene: someone asking a question. Why this? What does it mean? What happened to us?

The placement is striking. At the height of drama, the Torah is already thinking about transmission. The Exodus was designed as a teaching moment for every generation that would follow, including the generations most inclined to doubt.

For the modern Jew who wrestles with doubt, whether at 16 or 60, this is unexpectedly hopeful. Parshat Bo treats questions as the very mechanism through which tradition travels. The parsha offers a framework that invites curiosity, engages through shared action, and cultivates a distinct identity capable of weathering skepticism.

1. The Centrality of Curiosity

A child tugs at her father's sleeve during the Seder, where the lamb has been roasted and bitter herbs sit on the table. Everything is strange tonight. "What is this?" she asks.

The scene is encoded into Exodus 13:14: "And it shall be when your son asks you tomorrow, saying, 'What is this?' you shall say to him, 'With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out from Egypt.'" The verse positions the question as the necessary trigger for the parent's narration. Without the question, there is no story. Without curiosity, there is no transmission.

Rashi on Exodus 13:14 interprets "tomorrow" to mean a future time, not necessarily the next day. The Torah designs a pedagogy for generations who did not witness the miracles firsthand. It assumes that distance from the original event will create confusion, and it treats that confusion as valuable.

The question changes character as the questioner matures. A six-year-old asks from wonder. A college student asks from challenge, testing whether the tradition can withstand scrutiny. A returning adult asks from longing, wondering if the door is still open. Each version of "What is this?" carries different emotional weight, yet the Torah's response remains constant: Tell the story. The question, at any age, initiates the telling.

Paul Harris, in *Trusting What You're Told: How Children Learn from Others*, demonstrates that questions are primary tools for building epistemic trust. People don't passively absorb information. They actively interrogate sources to build accurate maps of reality. Skepticism, in this framing, functions as the mechanism by which we determine which sources of knowledge deserve our trust.

Previous *18Forty Podcast* guest Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter draws a useful distinction between "history" and "memory." History consists of facts about the past. Memory is identity woven from those facts. The questioner's inquiry initiates the transformation of history into memory. It personalizes the narrative. It invites ownership.

What if you don't know the answer? What if you harbor your own doubts? Harris's research offers comfort here. Trust builds through the process of engagement, not merely through the quality of information delivered. A parent, mentor, or friend who says "I don't know, but let's think about it together" earns more credibility than one who shuts down questions with false certainty.

The takeaway is counterintuitive: Welcome the question. The person asking "Why do we do this?" is asking to be let in.

2. Action as the Language of Belief

Before there are answers, the table is set. The lamb is prepared. The doorposts are marked. The family is gathered. The child observes all of this and then asks: "What is this service to you?" (Exodus 12:26-27)

Notice the sequence. The ritual action is visible before the intellectual explanation arrives. The child watches something happen and then inquires about its meaning. The design is intentional.

The *Sefer HaChinuch*, in Mitzvah 16, articulates a principle that captures this dynamic: "hearts are drawn after actions." Internal states of faith are generated by physical behaviors. We do not wait until we feel fully convinced before we act. We act, and conviction follows. This might sound like manipulation or conditioning. It is actually something more subtle.

Adam Seligman and his colleagues, in *Ritual and its Consequences*, offer a framework that helps make sense of this. They argue that ritual creates a "subjunctive" world, a space of "what could be." When we participate in ritual, we inhabit a shared space where belief can grow. It's closer to "let's play" than to "I hereby affirm." Ritual becomes a container where faith can develop safely through enactment.

The insight speaks directly to the questioning adult or college student who feels like a hypocrite showing up to Shabbat dinner while harboring doubts.

Rabbi Dr. Samuel Lebens explores the tension between what he calls "propositional faith" and "experiential faith." Propositional faith means believing certain facts are true. Experiential faith means living a life oriented toward God, regardless of intellectual certainty. Often, experiential faith sustains propositional faith. The lived practice keeps us engaged long enough for the beliefs to solidify.

For the questioning person at any age, this is liberating. You do not need to have resolved every theological puzzle before lighting Shabbat candles or sitting at a Seder. The actions themselves are doing work.

This is not a claim that ritual alone dissolves intellectual objections—serious questions deserve serious engagement. But ritual creates continuity; it keeps the questioner inside the conversation long enough for that engagement to happen, rather than walking away before the dialogue begins.

3. Internalizing the Narrative

Moshe stands before Pharaoh, and God explains the purpose of the plagues: "That you may tell in the ears of your son, and your son's son, what I have done to Egypt" (Exodus 10:2). The phrasing is specific. God does not say "so that you may inform your descendants." The emphasis falls on "you." The transmitter must possess the story to pass it on.

Sforno on Exodus 10:2 reads the plagues as a teaching tool specifically for the Israelites. Their primary purpose was to equip the Jewish parent with a narrative powerful enough to carry across generations. The spectacle was designed for storytelling.

Here is the challenge: You cannot transmit what you do not possess. If the Exodus is merely a story recited from the Haggadah each year, without personal resonance, those listening will sense the disconnection. Dan McAdams, a psychologist at Northwestern, has studied what he calls "narrative identity," the internalized story we construct about our lives. In *The Stories We Live By*, he demonstrates that people transmit values they have successfully integrated into their own coherent life story. If the Exodus is not part of your personal narrative, it will not transfer.

For those who never received the story, or who received it and later rejected it, active recovery is one path forward: studying what was missed, sitting with communities that embody what you're seeking, allowing the narrative to enter through exposure and choice rather than inheritance. The story can be adopted, not only inherited. But this assumes a desire to recover. What about the person who finds the tradition completely disconnected from their current reality, who has built a coherent life without it? For them, the question is not how to internalize the story but whether to. The tradition cannot answer that question through argument alone. Yet the way back is often emotional before it is intellectual. Engaging with tradition means engaging with family, with community, with the people who carry the story in their lives. Sometimes the content of the tradition matters less, at first, than the connection it makes possible. The open door is not only to a set of ideas but to a web of relationships.

What about those whose own version of the story is complicated or painful? Perhaps you were raised in a community that wounded you, or your Jewish education left gaps you only discovered later. McAdams' research suggests that coherent stories matter, even complicated ones. Someone who says "I struggle with this, and here's why I still show up" offers something more powerful than a recitation of inherited facts. Authenticity beats a perfect script.

Previous *18Forty Podcast* guest Dara Horn highlights the necessity of Jews defining their own story proactively. When Jews allow external forces, whether antisemitism, persecution, or cultural pressure, to define Jewish identity, they lose agency. The next generation needs to hear a story that belongs to the teller, one spoken with ownership rather than borrowed from obligation or threat.

The tradition does not require you to pretend your journey has been smooth. It asks you to own the story you're actually living, including the distance, the doubts, the years away. Paradoxically, honest accounting often becomes the bridge back. The person who says "I struggled with this, and here's why I'm reconsidering" has already begun the return. Naming where you stand is the first step toward moving.

Some who walked away years ago believe they have resolved their doubts. They have built lives around those conclusions and see no reason to reopen questions that once caused pain. The tradition makes no demand of them. But transmission has a way of resurfacing in unexpected moments: a family member's funeral that stirs forgotten resonances, a crisis that strips away old certainties, a chance encounter with a text or a melody that lands differently than it did at twenty-five. The story you rejected at one stage of life can look different from where you stand decades later. The door doesn't lock from the outside.

4. Optimal Distinctiveness

The plague of darkness descends on Egypt, so thick it can be felt. The Egyptians cannot see one another. They cannot move. God tells Pharaoh: "that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel" (Exodus 11:7). The concept of *havdalah*, separation, emerges as a fundamental lesson of the Exodus experience.

The Netziv, in his commentary *Ha'amek Davar* on Exodus 11:7, identifies a fundamental law of Jewish history: the distinctiveness of the Jewish People is not a social burden, but a vital protective mechanism for survival within foreign cultures. He argues that the Torah's emphasis on the "distinction" God made between Egypt and Israel serves as a permanent reminder that assimilation poses a recurring existential danger. By maintaining the boundaries that set them apart, Israel creates the conditions that allow them to persist.

Marilyn Brewer's research on optimal distinctiveness theory provides a psychological framework for why this works. Humans crave both belonging and uniqueness simultaneously. We want to fit in, and we want to stand out. Total assimilation creates anxiety because it erases the distinctiveness that satisfies a core psychological need. The Jewish insistence on maintaining cultural boundaries satisfies a real human requirement.

Contemporary data supports this. The Pew Research Center's 2020 study on Jewish Americans found that higher levels of distinct Jewish engagement, including ritual practice, community involvement, and Hebrew literacy, correlate with stronger intergenerational retention. The families and communities that transmit tradition are those who embrace distinctiveness.

Rabbi Meir Soloveichik addresses the modern discomfort with "chosenness" by reframing Jewish distinctiveness not as a claim of inherent superiority, but as a unique moral responsibility and a specific covenantal task. Being "chosen" does not imply that Jews are better than others; it means they have been drafted into a particular mission of service, a role that requires Israel to remain a distinct presence in the world.

The objection arises, especially among young Jews navigating secular universities: "I want to be a citizen of the world, not isolated in a tribal bubble." Brewer's theory offers a response. "Citizens of the world" with no particular identity often feel rootless and unmoored. Distinctiveness provides the foundation from which genuine engagement with the world becomes possible. Without a clear sense of who you are, encounters with difference become threatening rather than enriching; every new idea destabilizes rather than expands. A rooted identity allows curiosity without anxiety.

5. Generating Light in Darkness

Return to the plague of darkness. The Egyptians sat paralyzed, unable to see or move. "But all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings" (Exodus 10:23). The contrast is stark. Where did that light come from?

A Hasidic interpretive tradition, drawing on the *Sefat Emet* on Parshat Bo, reads this light not as a physical phenomenon but as an internal, spiritual illumination generated by the Jews themselves. This reading requires a mystical lens that sees beneath the surface of the text. Through that lens, the verse becomes a model for minority existence: while Egypt sat in darkness, the Israelites produced their own source of brightness. The implication is that you do not wait for the surrounding culture to brighten before you can see clearly. You become the source of illumination yourself.

Research on post-traumatic growth, developed by psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, demonstrates how individuals can reconstruct a stronger, more meaningful worldview after enduring crisis or hostile environments. The key is active reconstruction of meaning from adversity. The Israelites in Egypt model exactly this. Surrounded by darkness, they generated light.

Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, drawing on psychoanalytic theory, characterizes the Exodus as a profound movement toward "articulation," the recovery of the capacity to speak one's own reality against a dominant, silencing culture. In her analysis of the Egyptian exile, she argues that the true tragedy of the "slave mentality" was the loss of the Israelites' ability to represent their own internal lives. For Zornberg, the "light" mentioned in Parshat Bo represents a dawning self-consciousness; it is the ability to define oneself from within, rather than passively accepting the dehumanizing definitions imposed from without by the Egyptian "other" (as developed in her book *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus*).

An objection surfaces: Is this glorifying suffering? Are we claiming that Jews are better off persecuted? The focus here is on agency, the power required to generate light. The home, the community, the study hall: these become sites of meaning-making. Shabbat candles, stories told at the table, texts studied together: these are sources of illumination that do not depend on the surrounding culture's approval or support.

For the questioning teenager navigating a hostile social environment, or the college student encountering aggressive secularism for the first time, the tradition offers something beyond defensive apologetics. It offers a way of generating light from within, regardless of external conditions.

Questions for Reflection

1. **How do you handle your own moments of doubt or uncertainty when someone asks you a "big question" about faith, whether that someone is a child, a peer, or yourself?**
2. **Which specific rituals act as anchors for your identity, creating a shared language even when the words feel uncertain?**
3. **In what ways do you feel the tension between wanting to fit into modern society and the Torah's call to remain distinct?**

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