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TORAH TIDBITS CONTRIBUTOR

In The Future

When tomorrow your son asks you: 'What are the... laws and ordinances that ... our G-d has commanded?'

You shall answer: 'We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and G-d took us out of Egypt with a strong hand... G-d commanded us to perform all these laws... to fear G-d, for our good, so that we may live... and He will treat us kindly, if we are careful to perform the commandments as He has instructed us' (6:20-25).

The question and answer appear to be mismatched. The son seeks detailed information on the Torah's demands. The words 'our G-d' indicate the son's commitment. But the father's answer does not appear to answer the son according to his question. He does not recount a single specific commandment. Instead, he explores the roots of the experiences of his people with the Creator, recounting the Exodus, and uses it to stress that the observance of the commandments is the key

to G-d's continued goodwill. Why not a direct answer: Shabbat, Kashrut, honoring parents, and so on?

The use of the second word above - 'tomorrow' - suggests an answer. Rashi, following the Mechilta, renders the Hebrew word '*machar*' to mean 'in the future' – not necessarily the same day. That may indicate the following:

In recounting the educational advancements of Joshua ben Gamla, the Talmud (Baba Bathra 21a), implies that the best age for child to start to receive his first intensive Torah education is at age six. If that is postponed for a decade, the young man may simply 'rebel and walk out'. That is probably because he has reached an age where he has become too critical and cynical to let the Divine-originated scheme of things flow into him without resistance.

But a youngster's lifelong commitment must never be taken for granted - even with a good basic Torah education acquired in childhood. If his further education 'tomorrow' - at age sixteen - is not correctly handled, he might still go back on his commitment and 'rebel and walk out'. It is therefore essential that the father/educator manages to get behind the son's question and think for himself: 'What is he really asking?'

That could be a meaning of the word '*machar*' – 'in the future' – when he is a mature teenager, and begins on his own account to reassess the body of information fed to him in his childhood. That is what the son is doing in asking: 'What are the... laws and ordinances that ... our G-d has commanded?' And the father/educator must read that question for what it is.

Thus the Torah is telling the father/educator

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to put it all into a perspective that the son will appreciate. G-d, who created the universe, has a special relationship with His People which he showed demonstrably in the Exodus and more subtly today. And it is on both the father (/educator) and the son to do their bit (as equals) in working with the Creator to ensure that this relationship will continue... And with that knowledge, his Torah studies will continue to further heights... ■

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