

What the Passover Seder Taught Me About Diabetes Care

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We are each inseparable from our experiences, the lessons we have learned, and the people we meet. Our families, mentors, and communities influence our outlook and our chosen paths in life.

Every year at this time, with the holiday of Passover approaching, I reflect on my family traditions, my Jewish identity, and how lessons from my faith inform my personal and professional vision. The Passover Seder is celebrated by more Jewish families than any other holiday. It is a milepost in the calendar that binds me to the generations that have come before me. Every sound, taste, and smell on this night is enriched by memories of those I have loved and with whom I have shared this holiday.

On Passover, we are instructed to tell the story of the Exodus, the birth of freedom from slavery. We are not supposed to just tell the story as if it was someone else's experience. We are to internalize the events—to identify with the history as if we were the ones being freed. One passage in the Haggadah, the guidebook or script followed at the seder, has always fascinated me and has grown in meaning for me with each passing year. It is a passage known as the Four Sons, a story that reflects and informs us about human nature and the way we learn.

The story tells of four sons: one who is wise, one who is wicked/contrary, one who is simple, and one who cannot even ask a question. When children hear this passage, they are drawn to the characterization of the brothers in the most literal terms and compete to label each other wise, wicked, simple, or dumb. The lessons, how-

ever, are really for the adults and focus on how to engage children in the Passover story no matter where they are in their readiness to learn. We not only teach the wise, open, engaged students but also adapt to the intellectual level of a broader audience to create meaning and inspire learning.

Sound familiar? As a physician and sometimes student of educational theory (pedagogy), I have heard this lesson in many forms: Kolb's "Learning Styles," Prochaska's "Readiness to Change," identity formation, patient activation, patient empowerment, etc.

So, what does this have to do with diabetes? Everything! Let's see...

How do *you* feel when you hear:

- "John is here to follow up on his diabetes,"
- "Sally forgot her glucometer,"
- "His last A1C was 9%," or
- "Mary really doesn't try..."?

These are the patients I most want to see. Why? Because I know I can make a difference. Let's compare them to our "Four Sons" and see what we learn.

Everyone wants to see the "Wise Son." He is fully invested in his diabetes care. He has learned about diabetes management and internalized the lessons. He is adherent to medication. He tests his glucose and brings his meter to his medical appointments. He has his labs drawn in advance of the appointment. He arrives in the office ready to learn and to continue to make positive changes. As the Haggadah story tells us, for this son "you shall explain to him all the laws [of Passover], to the very last

detail..." To me this means continue to teach him and move him forward in his self-care and his understanding of his diabetes.

The "Contrary/Wicked Son" is also easy to spot. He arrives at the appointment without meds or meter. He is non-adherent to the care plan. He refuses to test and insists that, as his physician, his diabetes is your problem—not his. We are taught that, "by excluding himself...he denies a basic principle." The lesson here is that although I care about his health, the problem is his to fix. I am here to guide those who are willing to accept responsibility for their self-care but cannot do it myself. I tell him that I cannot improve his health until he is ready to change. (Sound familiar?)

The "Simple Son" asks, "What is this?" He is the patient who really has not had the opportunity to learn about diabetes. He is open to learning but naïve (i.e. has not been taught). The story teaches us to recognize this need for information. We should start from the beginning and teach him the basics. We should engage him in a process of diabetes education and allow him to grow at his own pace.

Many fail to recognize the son who "does not know how to ask." His A1C has hovered between 9% and 11% for years. There seems to be a lot of passive-aggressive behavior going on. He says nothing helps, so he has stopped trying. He often skips insulin doses and testing. He somehow keeps coming back to appointments, but nothing ever seems to change. This patient lacks an understanding of the big picture. I often ask these patients,

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“Do you know why it is important to me to treat diabetes?” “Do you know *why I care?*” Patients are often dumbfounded by this question. The big-picture answer is that I can *change the course of your future health* by treating your diabetes. It is not about me; it is about you. I have tools for reducing your rates of complications that I can share with you, but I can only coach you. You are the one who needs to do the hard job of self-care. Now I have his attention. I segue into the ABCs of diabetes,

negotiate short- and long-term goals, and plan a follow-up appointment to reinforce these behaviors.

Slavery is a fitting metaphor for the shackles of ill health and the burdens that chronic disease management imposes on my patients. I am here to stand by them, to empower them, to bear witness to their suffering, and to celebrate their successes. I will not give up because the stakes are too great.

The story of the Four Sons was written more than 2,000 years ago. I always think about the rabbis who

passed the story down through the ages: *How did they know?*

Wisdom and insight about human nature were not invented in our lifetime. They are a universal gift from generation to generation (*l’dor vador*) and withstand the test of time.

In this season of freedom, I encourage each of you—whether you are celebrating Passover, Easter, Nowruz, Holi, or American Independence Day—to take a moment, reflect on the lessons of your holiday, and share them with those you love. Happy holidays.

SGIM