

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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HOW TO RESPOND WHEN SKILLS AREN'T TRANSFERRED FROM ONE GENERATION TO THE NEXT

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My husband and I were talking yesterday about a shift in the way doctors make diagnoses. The generation that taught Steve did "physical diagnosis" very well, i.e., they would ask you questions and look in your ear or your mouth or feel your stomach and come to a reasonable diagnosis and decide on a course of treatment. Steve's generation had those skills (although not to the same extent) but also relied on lab results to make a diagnosis. Steve's students, the new doctors, rely almost totally on lab results, MRIs, CAT scans and the like. The computers tell them the answers, too. As long as there is some continuity between the generations, both of doctors and of patients, it seems that both camps will cope with the changes.

But what if there's a total break in the transmission of knowledge, culture and norms? What happens then? Interestingly enough, a mishnah that relates to our Passover seders gives us guidance.

If some of the people at the seder fell asleep, they may still eat the very last part of the meal (the Passover offering). If all of them fell asleep, they may not continue eating when they awaken. Rabbi Yose says: if they just dozed off, they may continue eating when they awake but if they fell soundly asleep, they may not eat it. (M. Pesachim 10:7)

Let's look at this as a paradigm for dealing with disruption and continuity when transmitting norms and ideals. Our mishnah suggests that we can tack back and forth as we move from one stage to another (e.g., when doctors move from one mode of doing things to another). But if there is a total, prolonged break, the chain of transmission is broken and we must leave the old work unfinished.

Discussion Questions:

1. I'd be interested to know whether you've experienced this difference between older and younger doctors. Which sort do you prefer?
2. Are there other professions that change in similar ways? What are they? What happened?
3. Perhaps the most difficult question is, what happens when a whole group of people "falls soundly asleep" and loses their connection with, and ability to do, their task? How do they then go forward? Or is the chain of tradition utterly lost and the group cut adrift or disbanded?

4. How might you prevent people falling asleep at your seder? How can a group hold onto it's roots and its grasp at the same time?

As always, I look forward to your answers and insights!

[NOTE: Maqom is now a discussion group, [Maqom613](http://groups.google.com/group/maqom613), at Google groups. To leave a comment on the above passage, go to <http://groups.google.com/group/maqom613> and join the group. Also, you will need a gmail account to log in, so if you don't have one, then first go <https://mail.google.com/> to set up your email account.]