

The Four Sons Revisited
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April 2, 2021

As we near the end of Passover, I wanted to reflect on a section of the Haggadah that we glance over, but scarcely give the attention it deserves and that is, what is called in a traditional Haggadah, the Four Sons. But before that, let's put Pesach into context. It is the most popular of all of our Jewish holidays, celebrated by 96% of Jews. So, what is it about this Festival that is so compelling? Certainly, the miraculous story of our people's redemption from Egypt, the birth of our nation, and our journey to freedom is worthy of commemorating. But it is more than that. During each seder we are to see ourselves as if we, ourselves, each of us sitting around the table (or this year in front of the zoom screen) went forth from Egypt. In other words, we literally re-enact our history – Pharaoh's enslavement of our people out of fear of our latent power manifesting against the Egyptians, Moses' call to "let my people go," the ten plagues meted out by God to convince him, the perilous crossing of the sea, and finally the celebration of our liberation with song and dance.

Since we are commanded to tell our story to our children, we use symbols to prompt questions: How is this night different from all others? Why do we eat unleavened bread and bitter herbs? Why do we dip parsley and eggs in salt water? Why are we allowed to suspend our manners and recline while eating rather than sitting up straight at the table? Each of these allows us to explain that we were slaves, embittered by our bondage, pained by our losses and the tears we shed, helpless and hopeless; but now, today, we are free. And we pray for the freedom of all of those who are enslaved so that "next year in Jerusalem" all of God's children everywhere will be redeemed from whatever or whoever binds them.

So why, with this very visual, tactile, and tasty retelling of our story, do we need the explanation of the four sons, or as we call them today, the four children?

The traditional Haggadah tells of the Wise son, who is interested in every detail of the holiday, every element and law, down to the minutia. For him, what matters are the rules and following them to the letter. God-forbid, he should transgress a commandment and eat a grain of rice! We might argue that this kid doesn't sound all that wise after all. He is a rule follower, but maybe he doesn't really get the essence of the holiday, its spirit and lessons, which as Reform Jews are most important to us? We might call him the "Good Boy" or the "Egbert" child. Is he smart? Probably. Is he wise? Probably not so much. Wouldn't we rather our wise child be a thinking one, a questioning one, a discerning one, rather than a rule follower who doesn't question what he is told?

Every year, our Confirmation families take part in an award-winning Honor Thy Father and Mother program written by our beloved Cantor Jennifer Bern-Vogel. Don't tell, but when the kids and parents are separated, we ask the parents to describe the qualities of an ideal child. And guess what? In 16 years of doing this, no parent has ever said, "an ideal child is a rule follower, someone who accepts what they are told without question, a person who doesn't think for him or herself." On the contrary, for parents, an ideal child is happy and content, an independent thinker, healthy, respectful of others, a contributor to society. I don't think any of them would want their son or daughter to be as the wise son in our Haggadah.

The second child mentioned, the wicked one, is even more problematic. What is this kid's crime? She asks what the story of the Exodus means to others, but not to herself? From this, the Haggadah assumes that she doesn't see herself as part of the story and so would not have been redeemed from Egypt had she been there. What a harsh judgement and even more cruel punishment!?! Rather than judge this child as sinful, what if we recognized that she is, as are so many Jews, is, estranged? That somehow the story does not speak to her or isn't reaching her? What if we tried to engage her in conversation about her concerns and tried to find out why she is feeling like an outsider? If we listened well and asked good questions, might we find a way to better include her in our story, which is her story too? Is characterizing her as "wicked" really accurate? What if we understood her as alienated from our tradition and tried to find ways to bring her back into the fold, rather than cutting her off as the Haggadah suggests?

Sociologists, demographers and Jewish leaders always debate what to do about the significant segment of our community who identify as "nones," people of no religion. Do we try to engage them, creating outreach programs and assigning resources to bring them back into the fold? Or do we let them go, assuming them lost to Judaism forever, and resolve to focus only on those who express interest, determining that it is better to be "leaner and meaner" than to bother with these "wicked" Jews? In Reform Judaism, and particularly here at Ohef Sholom, we know our answer. Our House shall be called a House of Prayer for all Peoples. We do all that we can to include everyone we can, to lower the barriers to participation, to allow anyone with any inkling of interest to explore our faith and practice, and to meet people where they are.

One of the upsides of the Pandemic is that it has forced us to use technology in a way that has allowed us to reach so many more people and that many of our members who rarely participated in the past, now actively take part in Jewish life. So so many of you attended our zoom seder this past Sunday night, even more than last year. And you know what else? This is how younger people do life – online – and we are finding ways to engage them where they are. These folks are not wicked; they just need to be reached in different ways and it is our responsibility to figure out how to do that.

How about the simple child? We're supposed to tell him or her the meaning of the holiday through the symbols of the Seder. Some might call this Pediatric Judaism, dumbing things down so a simpleton can understand. But you know what? We've found that our adults must all be simpletons too because you love the symbols and stories and kids songs and all of the fun stuff.

The vast majority of you who posted photos of yourself pointing to the Afikomen in the “Where’s the Afikomen?” game were adults or adult children . . . almost all of whom were post B’nai Mitzvah. It is okay to have fun in Judaism, to find the joy in it, to celebrate lightheartedly, to laugh and sing and play. And that is exactly how we sneak in the very serious and important themes of the holiday – why freedom is so precious to us, how we must stand up for those who are oppressed, that we long for the day when all people will be free. I’m not even sure I would characterize this third child as simple, because that feels like a negative judgement. Why don’t we call him, the “fun loving” child, the one who loves stories, or the one who enjoys participating! We find that sometimes when we offer kids’ programs, many adults show up because they are kids at heart! Perhaps we should call our offerings, “For the Young and Young at Heart” program!?! Because that is who this simple son really is and is that actually so bad?

And finally, we have the child who does not know how to ask? Perhaps this child is too young to understand the story, as the traditional Haggadah implies. But might this child be anyone of us who cannot express ourselves intellectually at this moment? Perhaps we come to the seder brokenhearted or with a collapsed sense of self and just cannot figure out how to take part. Our tradition teaches us that to this person we must open our hearts, we must be compassionate and loving, we must let them in, and we must allow them the time and space they need to heal. The Kotzker Rebbe once was asked why it says in the Sh’ma, “these words which I command you on this day, shall be on your heart” rather than “shall be in your heart”? He answers: Because while the words might be right there, we must be open to them. We must let them in. And the words will only enter if we open the heart in a spirit of compassion.” The Rebbe continues, “the imperative to opening explains the presence of God. Where is God? God lives where we let God in.”

What if we treated everyone we encounter in this way, giving them the benefit of the doubt, showering them with love and compassion and believing that those words we share that now sit on their heart will pour in and fill their heart as soon as they are ready to open it. What a world we might live in then!?!

Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, the Chancellor Emeritus of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America shared a beautiful commentary about the Hagaddah that he learned from his father, Rabbi Emil Schorsch, of blessed memory. In his book “Canon Without Closure” he writes: He preferred to see in the four children of the Haggadah — the wise, the wicked, the simple, and the one who does not know how to ask — not as four different personality types or Jews, but the stages of our own individual development. We to pass from innocence to acceptance to rebellion to appreciation. Each of our personalities are a composite, with each part prevailing for a time.

And during Pesach, in the midst of an elaborate ritual devoted to socializing the young by reliving our history, we pause briefly to reflect on the complexity of human nature. What a wonderful insight! It’s not that there are four separate sons – the wise, wicked, the simple and the one who does not know how to ask. What we have, rather, is the portrayal of one human being who goes through various stages of development.

And that is what Passover is really all about, recognizing our common humanity, each of our God-given inherent worth, and all of our potential to live richer, more meaningful, more compassionate lives. Amen.