

Why to ask is good.

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Hagadah that we read on Pesach was a response to the tragic loss of the Temple and Jewish political autonomy some two thousand years ago. Its composers wanted to pay tribute to the past, the Temple and all it stood for. And to find new ways of going forward that focused on study, prayer and education.

Its aim was to involve everyone rather than just the elite. Which is why family and children play such an important part in the ceremony of the Seder Nights. In addition to the broader issues of history, survival and freedom.

The Hagadah tells us that the Torah refers to four children. It does not. But it does repeat four times, three in Exodus and once in Deuteronomy, that if and when our children will ask what or why, in regard to the Pesach ceremony, we should respond and engage. Not shut them up. From this, developed the pedagogic idea we are familiar with, that there are four kinds of children, four different kinds of questions and four different kinds of responses.

The wise child is the epitome of Jewish commitment and observance. The bad one is negative, derisive. I often wondered why the first child was not called the good or righteous one which would have been a better counterpoint to the so called bad one. The simple one seems neutral or apathetic. The child who does not know how to ask has no position. Ambivalent either because of circumstances or apathy. And everyone nowadays seems to have a favorite "fifth son" who isn't even present whether through compulsion or assimilation.

The earliest text to mention the four, comes around the third century when Graeco-Roman culture was the dominant influence throughout the Western and Middle Eastern worlds of that era. At its cultural core was the symposium, first developed by the Greeks. The banquet was an opportunity to celebrate material comfort, relaxing on couches and cushions, drinking fine wines and eating gourmet foods, enjoying music and songs and above all discussing and debating the philosophical truths and goals of life. It was also a celebration of free citizens. No slaves or peasants allowed to participate, only to serve and only free men could recline.

It is obvious that the Seder was modelled on the symposium. The Talmud itself describes the scene in terms of servants bringing tables before the reclining guests. Bringing them in and out as the courses and wines changed. But with a Jewish spin. At its core was not philosophy, but Torah and historical as well as theological meaning; freedom from slavery and from other powers and ideologies.

In this context the wise one is the philosopher. The one who thinks creatively about the meaning of life and the value of tradition. Perhaps the stoic. But not necessarily a saint. The wicked person could not care less about disciplines or structures. His is the pursuit of pleasure and materialism and he will use rhetoric to justify his position. He is the Hedonist or the Epicurean. Which is why in Talmudic language the heretic came to be known as the *Apikorous*.

In the Jerusalem Talmud and in the earliest Midrashic sources, the third child is referred to as the *Tipesh*, the fool. At best the simple or neutral son is open to persuasion either way. He or she is the guest at the symposium who has limited capacity and is primarily there for the food and drink rather than intellectual argument. He might play the role of the fool. He is there to make fun and be made fun of. Like a courtier in Versailles under Louis 14th without wit or esprit.

The one who does not know how to ask is there either as an innocent or unspoilt child, present because of its parents, incidentally or without background or education.

All of this is confirmed by the responses to each child. The response to someone who shows interest and commitment is by going into detail about the various categories and degrees of religious observance and a positive analysis of the role and content of religious structures. The bad one negates Jewish identity whether it is historical, social or religious. Since there is no common ground there can be no constructive debate. As today, there is no room for dialogue if one's world view is simply the opposite. Which is why so much debate is futile

The third child can be persuaded. If there is no deep religious comitment he might at least feel some identification through family or society, which can be developed. A sort of prototype of the Baal Teshuva. Someone who comes to Jewish commitment at a later stage. The fourth one simply needs to be taught and engaged, gently, not by philosophical argument but by experience.

The Talmud says that there are two responses to the question "why." One is the historical national. We were slaves and we have been freed. Such freedom requires a sense of history. Reciprocal appreciation and gratitude which we express by continuing to uphold the specific practices and values of Jewish life.

The other response is that once we were idol worshippers. This is not a national, historical commitment but a spiritual one. The purpose of the Seder is to explore the options and alternatives. People being of different inclination and intellect will find their own way and respond in accordance with their temperaments. The Roman symposium is a limited model. For it is concerned more with abstractions and the challenge of debate.

That is why the Seder is full of ritual, strange customs, unusual sequences, children participating and playing a role. All of this is an antidote to the ancient symposium format. This is rather a family occasion, not cultural entertainment. And at its root is study and education. Teaching children as the path to survival.

I am reminded of a book by John Gray called "Seven Types of Atheism." In it he describes the different responses of secular, non-religious polemicists against religion. And there is a parallel in the debate over these four children.

On one side of the debate is religion. Positive, theoretically in its stated desire to make people and the world better. Yet guilty of coercion, obscurantism, power and arrogance. As against it there are different aspects of atheism. For some Science has replaced Religion. Religion is therefore superfluous to the modern mind even if human anxiety and insecurity have not been addressed. Religion, it is claimed, despairs of human agency and that is why it leans towards Messianism. Divine intervention relieves us of responsibility for destroying ourselves and the world. Non-religious humanism takes responsibility and is proactive. Whereas religion reminds us of sin, inadequacy and despair

The humanist claims inordinate faith, in the "Better Angels of Our Nature." But not everyone is capable of being an angel. Making Love not War has so far not proven a viable ideology, attractive as it sounds.

Then there is political atheism with a harsh ideology of compelled idealism. Fascist or Marxist answers to human alienation and suffering. Such ideologies, whether religious or secular automatically oppose religious

individualism and almost always end up with some kind of antisemitism. Precisely because no fanatic can abide Jews refusing to accept their false gods.

All sides cannot abide someone who refuses to see the light. Their light. But too often diminishing religion, disregards the benefits of the disciplined human who achieves more. Throwing out babies with the bathwater.

All of this is a struggle to understand, to solve and to find the "true" path. And yet the majority of humans simply do not care. Their concerns are mundane; food, sex, pleasure and perhaps work. And drugs and alcohol are the best ways to cope with pressure. The majority is simply not present, not interested.

I like the Jerusalem Talmud's preference for describing the third son, not as the *Tam*, the simple or neutral one, but rather as the fool, the *Tipesh*. And at this moment in time wherever I look, I see so many fools in charge of our affairs. Why Ukraine has just elected a comedian as president!

Thus Pesah ends with the Song of the Sea, the wish for redemption, a better world and better governance.

All this is something we need to talk about. Not push to the backs of our minds. The four children are us. What do we believe? Where are we going. And where we want the world to go. Will we be proactive in bringing about improvement and change? Or will we fall back on expecting God to do it for us? We have been asking these questions for thousands of years. Many of us are still searching for answers.