



D'var Torah on April 6, 2023 (first day of Pesach)

By Sam Rosen

In this week, the Parsha Exodus 12:26 declares the question of the wicked child: *And it will come to pass if your children say to you, "What is this service to you?" You shall say, "It is a Passover sacrifice to the L-rd, for God passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when God smote the Egyptians, and God saved our houses."* Deuteronomy 6:20 declares the question of the wise child. *If your **child** asks you in time to come, saying, "What are the testimonies, the statutes, and the ordinances, which the L-rd our G-d has commanded you?" You shall say to your **child**, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the L-rd took us out of Egypt with a strong hand. And the L-rd gave signs and wonders, great and terrible, upon Egypt, upon Pharaoh, and upon God's entire household, before our eyes. And God brought us out of there, in order that God might bring us and give us the land which God swore to our **ancestors...**"*

I'm Sam Rosen, and I'm the Unique Child - Meyuchad.

I'd like to discuss the balance of tradition and modernism as it relates to Passover, through the lens of the four children.

In this Parsha we read the question of the Rasha - known as the wicked child - who asks "What is this service to you" - "Mah HaAvodah Hazot Lachem."

You shall say, "It is a Passover sacrifice to the L-rd, for God passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when God smote the Egyptians, and God saved our houses."

On this night, we discuss with every child the story of our people, the

difference between slavery and freedom, and how we can experience freedom more fully as a people and as humanity. In my study, I delved into a few themes relating to the four children. In brief:

Inclusion in the community versus separation from the community. The dialectic between parents and children in order to ensure that the message of tradition is received.

Finally, a discomfort with the reductive nature of the categorization of the four sons.

1. First, We value Inclusion and participation, as personified in the wise child) over separation from the people on behalf of the wicked child. The text here is based on an articulation of the wise son's question that predates the Masoretic text - the Torah as written in this scroll. In the Masoretic text The "wise" son asks

a. What are the testimonies, the statutes, and the ordinances, which the Lord our God has commanded you? - etchem, but the earlier version said Otanu - us.

b. The inclusion of an earlier version of the text is just one sign that in every generation, we are repeating the old questions and adding new ones - that the text is dynamic and we reinterpret it every year. The layered nature of the Haggadah - from Bible to Talmud to Modern commentary - is another hint that the tradition requires we continue to add.

2. A second theme comes from the explanations of the simple child and the one who does not know how to ask. These focus on the relaying of the message from parent to child. If a child isn't prepared with scholarly intent, then let them know our history includes a period of slavery, but that all people aspire to freedom. If a child isn't engaged, let them taste the marror and the charoset and learn about bitterness and sweetness - mixed together, as a metaphor for the good and bad in life

3. The third theme with respect to the four sons, and the most meaningful to me, was concern about the reductive categorization of children. I found solace when commentary, seeming to come from parents and educators among the Torah Scholars, defend the individuality of each child, and reject the categorization of children, much less into categories so judgemental as:

1. Haxham. - Wise
2. Rasha - Wicked
3. Tam - Simple
4. Sheaino Yodeh Lishol - Doesn't know how to ask.
5. More broadly, the ambivalence of these archetypes is reflected in the Haggadah itself, along with other moral ambiguity. For instance, our moral concerns about our escape from Egypt and suffering of the Egyptians is captured in the spilling out of wine with each plague on the Egyptians.

So, having bucked the categorization of four stereotypes to claim my own banner as Meyuchad, a Unique Child. What is my question today?

My question is, why do we come together to celebrate Passover every Spring, overcoming the barriers of other responsibilities in order to come to a Seder.

- Before Passover, we need to make sure we empty out every drawer in our house, ensuring that there are no crumbs, nor something forgotten or dangerous. Or whatever kashering looks like in your house. This represents a moral inventory, what have we left behind, what have we taken for granted.
- Before Passover, we go through a disaster preparedness drill to put aside those things we have - dishes, prepared foods, a loaf of bread - and start from scratch. We rush around frantically for everything needed for a journey to liberate our people. Or whatever seder prep looks like at your house. This is an acknowledgement of the impermanence of the world we live in, and the recognition that we are Wandering Jews - sometimes forced to flee for our safety.

- During Passover, we fit one more person than is comfortable at our tables. Let all who are hungry, come and eat. We have enough to share. This is a recognition of our need to care for others in our community.
- Or, we accept an invitation to be a guest, accepting our belonging to the people, accepting that we will join the journey of freedom, however long or crazy, for nostalgia or for familial bonds. This is a recognition of our legacy as Jews.
- During Passover, we tell the story of our people's collective history. We remember what it is like to be oppressed - slaves. We remember how we joined together and prayed to God to escape slavery. Yet we recognize that our freedom should not come at the cost of another's oppression. This is an aspirational vision of the world.
- During Passover, we struggle with our people's history and survival. Sometimes we do so from a position of slavery or oppression. Sometimes we are successful and thriving. But most of the time we find ourselves in between - aware of the great blessings we have and the great challenges ahead of us.

So, having answered that question - what is the meaning of Passover - how do we balance tradition with our values?

We join together at the seder - making sure that each of us has a chance to speak, and making sure that we all listen to each other's unique perspectives. The tradition is inclusive.

We repeat the story in its reductive format - HaCham, Rasha, Tam, V'Sheanu Yodeh Lishol, because this simple formula forces us to refine our values, which change every year.

But I hope at the end of the Seder you accept yourself as a Meyuchad child - unique or special. Even if you ask challenging questions. Even if you allow yourself to be disconnected from community. Even if you don't live up to the values you were taught.

I hope we take the time to see our children as all Meyuchad, as unique and special, labeling their persona with less judgmental terms - he's questioning authority, she has creative ideas, they lack the knowledge of the history of our people. I know we struggle with the best way to teach core values, and doing so in community is more effective than doing so individually.

So, in closing, I hope the act of sitting at a Seder - one or two or three times - helps you to connect with your community, clarify your values, and root your values in tradition.

And balancing tradition and the modern world is nothing new - just read the Haggadah. And keep adding to it. Even if that means adding the Unique Child.