

The Four Sons
By Rav Amnon Bazak

A. Four questions asked by one son

In four places the Torah addresses the need to explain to one's children the importance of observing the *mitzvot*. The *Haggada*, as we know, expresses the notion that the four questions refer to four different sons – חכם, רשע, תם ושאינו – a wise son, a wicked son, a simple son, and a son that is incapable of asking. However, a careful study of the verses themselves shows, that on the level of *peshat* (the literal interpretation of the text), the Torah speaks not of different sons, but rather of a single son who asks the same question, only in different situations. The question in all four cases is why one needs to fulfill the *mitzvot*. On one occasion the child asks in reference to all the Torah's commands, and in the other cases, he asks it regarding specific *mitzvot*. In all four cases, the Torah instructs the father to explain to the son why, in fact, we must observe the given mitzva or *mitzvot*.

In this שיעור we will first examine the verses and identify the various situations in which the son asks his question. Afterwards, we will discuss the question of why the *Haggada* chose to deviate from the פשוט reading of the text and explain instead that the Torah speaks of four different sons.

Let us begin with the question that the *Haggada* attributes to the wise son. In *Sefer Devarim*, Moshe recalls *Matan Torah* and the declaration of the Ten Commandments, and then proceeds to present many of the Torah's *mitzvot* in detail. It is in the introduction to this description of the מצוות, where the wise son's question appears (source No. 1):

"מָה הָעֵדוּת וְהַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶתְכֶם" "When your son asks you tomorrow, saying: What are the testimonies, statutes and laws that the Lord our

God commanded you..." (*Devarim* 6:20). The word "what" in this verse is not to be taken informatively, as though the son asks to learn which *mitzvot* God commanded, but rather in the sense of "why," meaning, the son questions why one must perform the *mitzvot* at all. This is evident from the response the Torah gives to this question, which lists three different reasons for observing the *מצוות*:

"You shall tell your son: We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord took us from Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord made great, harsh miracles and wonders in Egypt, against Pharaoh and his entire household, in front of our eyes. And He took us from there in order to bring us into [and] to give us the land that He had promised to our forefathers. The Lord commanded us to perform all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God..." (6:21-24).

The first reason is that because God released us from the Egyptian slavery, we are obligated to fulfill the *mitzvot* He commanded.

The second reason is that observing the *מצוות* is good for us, in that it constitutes the proper way to live one's life: "לְטוֹב לָנוּ כָּל הַיָּמִים לְחַיֵּינוּ" – "...that it shall be good for us all the days, to sustain us as on this day" (6:24).

The final reason given by the Torah for doing the *מצוות*, is that we will be rewarded for doing so: "וְצַדִּיקָה תִּהְיֶה לָנוּ כִּי נִשְׁמָר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל הַמִּצְוֹת" – "And it will be merit for us when we ensure to perform all these commands before the Lord our God, as He commanded us."

The question which the son asks here with regard to all the *mitzvot* is also asked more specifically with respect to the *mitzvot* that are connected to the Exodus. The question that the *Haggada* attributes to the wicked son inquires as to the reason for the *נוֹס* offering (source No. 2): "When your sons say to you,

'What is this service for you?' you shall say: It is a *nos* offering to the Lord who passed over the homes of the Israelites in Egypt when He brought a plague upon Egypt, saving our homes" (*Shemot* 12:26-27). The son asks why one must observe the mitzva of the *korban pesach*, and the answer is simple, explaining the historical concept of this sacrifice.

This is similar to the question attributed in the *Haggada* to the simple son (תם). In the Torah this question appears in the context of the mitzva of *pidyon bekhoret* (the symbolic "redemption" of firstborn sons), and here, too, the answer explains the historical reason for this commandment (source No. 3):

When the Lord brings you to the land of the Canaanites which He promised to you and to your forefathers, and He gives it to you, you shall transfer the first of every womb (ויו) to the Lord... and you shall redeem every human firstborn among your sons. When your son tomorrow asks you, "What is this?" you shall say to him: The Lord took us from Egypt, from the house of bondage, with a mighty hand. When Pharaoh was too stubborn to let us out, the Lord killed every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human firstborns to animal firstborns. Therefore, I sacrifice to the Lord the first of every womb among the males, and all the firstborns among my sons I shall redeem. (*Shemot* 13:11-15).

Several verses earlier in the same chapter, we find the pasuk which appears in the *Haggada* as the answer of the parent to the son that is incapable of asking (שאינו יודע לשאול). While the Torah here makes no explicit mention of a son inquiring, we can see clearly from the response that these comments are a response to the question of why a certain mitzva must be performed. In this case, the subject is the command to eat *matza* on Pesach (source No. 4): "*Matzot* shall be eaten during the seven days [of Pesach], and neither leaven nor yeast shall be seen with you anywhere within your borders. You shall tell your son on that day, saying: It is because of what the Lord did for me when I left

Egypt" (*Shemot* 13:7-8). (We follow here the Ramban's interpretation of this response, namely, that we must eat *matza* because of all that ה' did for us at the time of the Exodus.)

We saw that according to the literal interpretation of the text, there is no difference between the types of sons who ask these questions, nor is there any difference in the nature of the questions. All of these questions signify an attempt to understand the reasons behind the *mitzvot*, and in all four cases, the response is a direct explanation of either all the Torah's commands (in the first case) or one specific *mitzva* (in the other three cases).

Why, then, did the *Haggada* establish, "*Ke-neged arba banim dibera Torah*," that the Torah refers to the questions of four different sons?

B. The text of the *Haggada*

It would appear that the *Haggada* wanted to teach an important message which is relevant to the mitzva of *sippur yetzi'at Mitzrayim* (telling the story of the Exodus). The story must be presented to each child in a manner appropriate for him. The *seder* will likely be attended by different sons with very different natures, and one must tell of the Exodus to each son in accordance with his level and nature. In order to illustrate this message, the *Haggada* described four different characters. Of course, the *Haggada* would have been unable to do this had it left the questions and answers written in the Torah in their respective contexts. The *Haggada* therefore changed the responses that appear in the Torah, and in this way produced a new interpretation to the questions that are asked. Let us examine how the *Haggada* created these characters (source no. 5):

The wise son – what does he say? 'What are the testimonies, statutes and laws that the Lord our God commanded you?' You shall then tell him the

laws of Pesach: 'One does not eat of an *afikoman* dessert after [eating] the *pesach* offering.'

The wicked son – what does he say? "What is this service for you" – for you and not for him. Since he excluded himself from the nation, he denies the foundation of our faith. Therefore, You shall sharply condemn him and say to him, "It is because of what the Lord did for me when I left Egypt" – "for me" and not for him; had he been there, he would not have been redeemed.

The simple son – what does he say? "What is this?" And you shall say to him, "The Lord took us from Egypt, from the house of bondage, with a mighty hand."

The son who does not know how to ask – you shall start the conversation with him, as it says, "You shall tell your son on that day, saying: It is because of what the Lord did for me when I left Egypt.

Let us first examine the question asked by the wise son. As we noted earlier, the question, "What are the testimonies..." actually means, "What is the reason for these testimonies...", meaning, why we must observe the *mitzvot*. The answer mentioned in the *Haggada*, however, transforms this question from an inquiry regarding **the reason**, into a question concerning **the content**. In the *Haggada*, the son asking this question wishes to learn the content of the laws that must be observed. The *Haggada* instructs the father to respond to the wise son by teaching him **all** the laws of Pesach, until the very end of *Masekhet Pesachim* – "אין מפטירין אחר הפסח אפיקומן" – "One does not eat of an *afikoman* dessert after [eating] the *pesach* offering". Indeed, in some editions of the *Haggada* the response to the wise son reads, "You shall tell him the laws of Pesach, **until** 'One does not eat of an *afikoman* dessert after [eating of] the Pssach offering". Meaning, if a wise son participates in the *seder*, and out of his

own initiative expresses interest to listen and learn, then one should teach him as much as possible to take full advantage of this special privilege.

The wicked son's question – "What is this service for you" – is presented as expressing a desire to exclude himself from the nation, based on the use of the word "לכם" – "for you" (as opposed to "for us"). I'm sure in every home this question raises every year, why his formulation suggests exclusion more so than the wise son's formulation of his question: "What are the testimonies...that the Lord our God commanded **you**?" Of course, this question does not raise at all on the level of *peshat*, which doesn't recognize any difference between the sons asking these questions. However, it would seem that we might find basis for the distinction made by the *מדרש*, in several points that are relevant as well to the *peshat* interpretation:

1. Firstly, regarding the wise son the Torah writes, "When your son asks you...". In contrast, in the verse presenting the wicked son's question it is written, "When your sons say to you...". Even if on the level of *peshat* the meaning in both verses is the same, the *מדרש* could base itself on the distinction between a question posed out of a sincere desire to hear an answer, and "saying" something without necessarily anticipating a response.
2. Moreover, we must recall that the wise son's question relates to a specific historical event, which only the parents – and not the children – witnessed. Therefore, the son is justified in formulating his question as, "What are the testimonies...that the Lord our God commanded **you**," as the command was indeed issued specifically to the parents at *מעמד הר סיני*. The wicked son's question, by contrast, does not refer to a historical event, but rather to the **observance** of *mitzvot* – "What is this **service** for you?" Accordingly, we may indeed interpret this formulation as declaring the son's withdrawal from the rest of the Jewish people.

Once it has been established that the wicked son's question expresses his lack of interest in participating in this mitzva, the fact that this question is asked specifically in the context of *korban pesach* makes it particularly problematic. We mentioned before, that קרבן פסח signifies the special covenant between 'ה and *Am Yisrael* (For this reason, it is the only affirmative command – other than circumcision – which carries the punishment of *karet* – eternal excision from the Jewish people). The wicked son, who excludes himself from the observance of this mitzva, excludes himself in fact from *Am Yisrael*.

Therefore, the *Haggada* instructs the father to treat this son differently; if this son speaks cynically and with a deep feeling of alienation, then the father must respond in kind. He should not be treated forgivingly and considerately, out of an appreciation for his motives and needs, but should rather be responded to harshly and cynically, in the same manner in which he had spoken: " You shall sharply condemn him and say to him, "It is because of what the Lord did for me when I left Egypt" – "for me" and not for him; had he been there, he would not have been redeemed". The *Haggada* "borrowed" for this purpose the response that is originally brought for the son that doesn't ask (source no. 4), and transferred it to the wicked son. The הגדה couldn't use the original response given in the Torah for the wicked son's question ("It is a פסח offering to the Lord Who passed over the homes of the Israelites in Egypt when He brought a plague upon Egypt, saving our homes"), as it contains no personal pronoun that could be used as an appropriate reference to the wicked son.

The treatment advocated towards the wicked son clearly differs from the accepted attitude in our times, and the approach taken in the *Haggada* is certainly not a "politically correct" one. Later we will see what may have caused such a harsh response. In any event, it would appear that the *Haggada* seeks to prevent the wicked son's influence from impacting upon the other children, by

advocating a firm stance of rejection, rather than a soft response, which the other children could perceive as a sign of weakness.

In concluding our analysis of the text of the *Haggada*, we should note that the response given to the simple son includes only the first sentence – "The Lord took us from Egypt, from the house of bondage, with a mighty hand" – and omits the remainder of the Torah's response – "When Pharaoh was too stubborn to let us out, the Lord killed every firstborn in the land of Egypt...". The reason for this omission is clear. The *Haggada's* objective is to describe four sons each of whom asks about the *mitzvot* observed on the night of the *seder*. It therefore omits from the original response the portion that relates specifically to the obligation of *pidyon bechorot*, leaving only the first verse, which is relevant to all the *mitzvot* that are connected to the Exodus.

C. The text of the *Mekhilta*

The *Haggada* is a later version of an earlier text that originated from the period of the *Tanna'im*. In the *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Yishmael*, the ancient halakhic Midrash on *Sefer Shemot*, we find a slightly different text of the passage concerning the four sons (based on several manuscripts, including the Oxford edition, and on *Yalkut Shimoni*, Parashat Bo 425)(source No. 6):

It thus emerges that there are four sons: one is wise, one is ignorant, one is wicked, and one does not know how to ask.

The wise son – what does he say? "What are the testimonies, statutes and laws that the Lord our God commanded us?" You shall then tell him the laws of Pesach – "One does not partake of an *afikoman* dessert after [eating of] the paschal offering."

Firstly, we should take note of the fact, that in the *Mekhilta*, the wise son formulates his question with the word *otanū*, "us" ("What are the testimonies, statutes and laws that the Lord our God commanded us?"), instead of the original word of the verse – "you". This change emphasizes the fact that we deal here with a *וְאַתְּ* – rather than the *וְאַתְּ* – which is aimed at drawing a distinction between the sons. From the perspective of the Midrash, it is legitimate to change the text of the verse in order to present the notion of the four sons.

The two most obvious differences between the version of the *Mekhilta* and that which appears in the *Haggada* regard to the *Mekhilta*'s reference to the "simple" son as *טפול* ("ignorant"), and to the sequence of presentation: the *Mekhilta* addresses the "ignorant" son's question before that of the wicked son, whereas the *Haggada* introduces the wicked son before the "simple" son. As the *Mekhilta* is the older text, we might wonder why the *Haggada* chose to change the original wording and structure. The answer is fairly simple: the *Mekhilta* speaks of the fundamental principle, whereas the *Haggada* is recited as the children sit around the table. How would a son feel if at the *seder* he receives in response to his question an answer entitled "the answer to the ignorant son"? The *Haggada* therefore changed the wording, and rather than using the insulting term "ignorant," it listed the more gentle term "*tam*" ("simple").

This change in formulation caused another difference. Originally, the ignorant son was mentioned right after the wise son, because "ignorant" is the the opposite of "wise." However, once the *Haggada* renamed the "ignorant" son the "simple" son, he could no longer be a contrast to "wise". Therefore the Haggada had to rearrange the sequence, such that the opposite of the wise son would be the wicked son. This rearrangement, in turn, brought with it a different perspective on the wise son, who is now not only smart, but is also a *קדוש*, a pious.

In light of this, we might also suggest that the *Mekhilta* presented two pairs – the wise and ignorant sons, and, correspondingly, the wicked son and the son who cannot ask. It is possible that according to the *Mekhilta*, the *she-eino yodei'a li-sh'ol* (son incapable of asking) is the pious son, who directly contrasts with the wicked son. According to this approach, the two pairs of sons relate to two different perspectives: the wise son and ignorant son make a contrasting pair on the intellectual plane, while the wicked son and *she-eino yodei'a li-sh'ol* are a pair on the ethical religious plane. Why would the *she-eino yodei'a li-sh'ol* be a *ק'ד'ץ*? We might answer on two levels. Firstly, the notion of "not knowing to ask" brings to mind *Am Yisrael's* famous declaration of *na'aseh ve-nishma* ("we will do and we will hear" – *Shemot* 24:7), their full acceptance of the Torah without any questions (see *Masekhet Shabbat* 88a). The willingness to accept the *mitzva* without any questions does not necessarily stem from intellectual limitations; it may also result from a refusal to raise questions about the divine command before proceeding to fulfill it.

Secondly, we should note the fact that the question attributed to the *she-eino yodei'a li-sh'ol*, as recorded in the Torah, relates to the specific *mitzva* of eating *matza*. The fact that *Am Yisrael* ate *matza* at the moment of their release from Egypt demonstrated their formal acceptance of divine kingship (*kabbalat ol malkhut Shamayim*). *Am Yisrael* lived as slaves in Egypt for many years, and now, as they finally emerge from bondage to freedom, they are commanded to eat *lechem oni* – "bread of poverty" (*Devarim* 16:3)! Eating the *matza* expresses the notion that *Am Yisrael* did not leave slavery for complete freedom, but rather left the service of a human king for the service of the King of kings, knowing that "a servant of God – only he is free" (as formulated by Rabbi Shlomo Ibn Gabirol in a famous poem). The slogan "Let my people go" (*shalach et ami*), which has accompanied various struggles for freedom throughout the world, is only the beginning of Moshe's demand – "Let my people go so that they shall serve Me" (*shalach et ami ve-ya'avduni*). Eating the *matza*, the *לחם עוני*, without asking any questions, serves as a meaningful expression of faith.

D. The text of the Yerushalmi

In conclusion, let us consider the text of the corresponding passage in the *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Pesachim* 10:4):

Rabbi Chiya taught: The Torah spoke in reference to four sons: a wise son, a wicked son, an ignorant son, and a son who does not know how to ask.

The wise son – what does he say? "What are the testimonies, statutes and laws that the Lord our God commanded us?" You should then say to him, "The Lord took us from Egypt, from the house of bondage, with a mighty hand."

The wicked son – what does he say? "What is the service for you? What is this trouble that you are forcing upon us each and every year?" Since he excluded himself from the nation, you shall thus say to him, "It is because of what the Lord did for me – He did for me, and not for that person. If that person had been in Egypt, he would have never been worthy to be redeemed from there."

The ignorant son – what does he say? "What is this?" You shall thus teach him the laws of Pesach, that one does not eat of an *afikoman* dessert after [eating of] the Pesach offering, so that he will not leave one group and join a different group.

The son who does not know how to ask – you shall first initiate on his behalf.

Here, too, it is interesting to examine the changes made from the earlier texts. One obvious difference is that the answer provided in the earlier sources for the wise son is given here specifically for the ignorant son – “one does not eat an *afikoman* dessert after [eating] the *pesach* offering”. It would seem that the nature of the response depends on whether it is given to the wise son, or to the ignorant son. Where it serves as the answer to the wise son, it refers to an explanation of the entire meaning underlying the laws of Pesach, from beginning to end, as we have said before. If, however, we are dealing with the ignorant son, then it refers to an explanation of only the most basic information, in order not to ruin the entire *seder* by the ignorant son, leaving to go to another group. To the wise son, by contrast, the Yerushalmi instructs that one should not explain the content of the *mitzvot* – with which we presume he is already quite familiar – but rather the reason for the obligation to observe the *mitzvot*. According to the Yerushalmi, the wise son is special not because of his knowledge, but rather because of his depth and insight, his desire to fulfill the *mitzvot* not by mindless rote, but with a deep understanding of their full meaning and significance.

The Yerushalmi presents a long question asked by the wicked son, adding to the earlier texts the sentence, "What is this trouble that you are forcing upon each and every year?" This question appears to address the effort that is needed in order to fulfill the *mitzvot* each year, and likely reflects the Christian approach, which tended to undermine the importance of performing מצוות. If so, then we could perhaps suggest a novel explanation for the response given to the wicked son: "He did for me, and not for that person [*oto ha-ish*]. If that person had been in Egypt, he would have never been worthy to be redeemed from there." As we know, the term *oto ha-ish* often refers to the founder of Christianity. If this is the intent in this context, then the response "If that person had been in Egypt, he would never have been redeemed" takes on special significance. "That person" represents for his followers the redemption of the world, yet had he been in Egypt, he himself would never have earned redemption.

Earlier we noted that the *Haggada's* response to the wicked son is surprisingly harsh and unsympathetic. According to what we have seen, we might suggest an explanation. The *Haggada* speaks not of a son who simply speaks against Torah observance, but rather of a son who has rejected the Torah and joined a different faith. As such, the parent must avoid-at all costs his negative influence upon the other family members, as part of the struggle against the influence of Christianity upon Jews, at that time.

E. Summary

As I noted earlier, the common denominator between all of the various texts is the notion of individualized responses, a concept which has particular relevance at the *seder*. The Midrash wants to teach the message that each person is likely to have children with different natures and characters, and the story of the Exodus, the telling of which constitutes the central mitzva at the *seder*, should be told to each in accordance with his unique nature. One who reads only the standard text of the *Haggada* at the *seder*, without adding another word, has not fulfilled the mitzva of "*Ve-higadeta le-vinkha*" ("You shall tell your son"). Each child must be given the attention suitable for him. This, of course, applies throughout the year, as well, to the entire educational approach one should take in teaching his children, but it has particular significance on this night, when one's attention is primarily focused upon his children and their education.