

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

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In the future, years after Yetzi'at Mitzrayim...

When you come to the Land that G-d will give you, as He said, you shall observe this service. And it shall be when your children say: "What is this service to you?" You shall say: "It is the Pesach sacrifice for G-d, who passed over the Israelite homes in Egypt, when He plagued the Egyptians, and saved our households. And the people bowed and prostrated themselves" (12:25-27).

The Pesach Haggada identifies "What is the meaning of this service to you?" as the question of the rasha, the wicked child. "To you" means "to you, but not to me". Unlike the Israelites who "bowed and prostrated themselves" in recognition and with due respect for the Hand of G-d that intervened in their favour, the rasha's words imply that he has no desire whatsoever to associate with the experiences and teachings of his people. The Haggada tells the father to give him a sharp and irrefutable answer (literally "blunt his teeth") "...G-d did this for me when I came out of Egypt" (13:8). "For me" and not "for you". "Had you been there, you would not have been redeemed".

This text in the Haggada invites two

questions. Firstly, the reply that the Torah gives, but the Haggada does not quote is "This is the Pesach service for G-d". This response appears to be an explanation. It is hardly a means of teaching the rasha to show more respect for the ways of his father and his ancestors. Secondly, the pasuk that the Haggada does quote as a response to the wicked son is not the one that the Torah gives to that person and within that context.

As an approach, the Ha'amek Davar pays close attention to the reply that the Torah gives: "You shall say it is a Pesach sacrifice for G-d..." Unlike the responses to the other three sons: the chacham, the tam, and the sheino yodei'a lishol, it does not say "You shall tell your son" or "You shall say to him", but simply "You shall say it is a Pesach sacrifices for G-d." No mention of the son. The Ha'amek Davar derives that the son, the rasha, is missed out for a purpose. He is unworthy of the Torah's reply. The Torah's reply is for the other people who are sitting at the table who are committed or at the very minimum, show derech eretz, show respect. They are to be reminded of the importance of this practice and not be influenced by the negative arrogance of the wicked son.

So, for the rasha himself, the Torah does not give an answer. But the Haggada fills the gap. Respond in a

sharp and irrefutable manner, addressing his attitude, not his question. Get to the subtext of his question and retort accordingly: "...G-d did this for me when I came out of Egypt" (13:8), implying: "For me" and not "for you". "Had you been there, you would not have been redeemed".

The Haggada is effectively giving an insight into the nature of a person who asks: "What is this service to you?" - of a person who asks such a question in that way. It tells the respondent to look not at the text of the question, but at the implication of the question: at the subtext of the question. Here, the rasha's question implies his agenda, which is to undermine the annual Pesach ceremony. So remind the rest of the gathering how significant those proceedings are in order that they will stay focused and not be swayed by the rasha's attitude. That is what the Torah tells us. But at the same time, get right at the subtext by recognizing the agenda of the rasha for what it is. That is what the Haggada tells us. Give him a personally-directed irrefutable answer that will put him in his place and allow the others to continue the Seder proceedings: "...G-d did this for me when I came out of Egypt" (13:8). "For me" and not "for you". "Had you been there, you would not have been redeemed".

This explanation illustrates a valuable principle in handling questions that other people ask in life generally. Look not just at the text, but consider the sub-text. Think for a moment: why is that person asking the question? Is he or she genuinely interested? Or wants to stand out in a crowd? Or trying to undermine? Then respond accordingly if a response indeed needs to be given... 