

Meshech Chochma

- Jacob Solomon

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 the meaning of 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 Hagada identifies "What is the meaning of this service to you?" as the question of the rasha, the wicked son. "To you" means "to you, but not to me". Unlike the Israelites who "bowed and prostrated themselves" in recognition and due respect for the Hand of G-d that intervened in their favor, the rasha's words imply that he has no desire whatsoever to associate with the experiences and teachings of his people.

Abarbanel observes that out of the four sons, the rasha is the only one whose question is expressed in the plural, opening with "When your children say", not "When your child says". He explains the use of the

plural as recognition of there being many varieties of "wicked sons". For negative attitudes and behaviors of "What is the meaning of this service to you?" imply a deliberate policy of self-exclusion that can come in different forms, depending on the particular position and outlook of the individual. With one, it may be disrespectfully attacking the source of the Torah heritage. With another, it could be viewing the Seder night proceedings as family indulgent self-gratification: emphasizing "What is this service to you?" And so on. Common to all are a malicious desire to degrade and denigrate the proceedings.

And the Meshech Chochma adds yet another dimension. The father's answer to the rasha may well be effective in prompting him to change his attitude, in whatever particular way he demonstrates it: if not immediately, in the long run. He derives that from the words that come before the rasha's question: "When you come to the Land that G-d will give you as He said, you shall observe this service." "The Land ...as He said" is the land of prosperity, where things will be good: "a land flowing with milk and honey" (3:17, D'varim 26:15). This, the Meshech Chochma emphasizes, gives an insight into background of the son

having become a rasha in the first place. It was through his prosperity that he strayed from G-d and his teachings: like the numerous periods recounted in the Book of Shoftim when the Israelites as a whole did the same thing. They were living comfortably, all was well, and then they joined their neighbors in their idolatry. G-d responded by throwing them into fear and poverty (e.g. Shoftim 6:1-6, 10:6-10) and then they would cry out to G-d and He would send a savior: Otniel, Ehud, Devora, Gidon, Yiftach and so on. The point is that they would only turn away from G-d when things were going well. Once things took a turn for the worse, they would come back to G-d, and cry out to Him. For that reason, the wicked son genre was not irredeemable. Thus the father is told to tell him about Yetzi'at Mitzrayim, and also, as the Rabbis emphasize, "set his teeth on edge": even if he won't react immediately, he will take note of the reply in future when times get hard, and change his attitude to a more positive one accordingly.

That, explains the Meshech Chochma, is a reason why the "people bowed down and prostrated themselves". In the knowledge that however far wrong their sons might go when things were good, they would return when things got tough.

There is still hope...

Also, the Hagada additionally addresses the question's nuances of rebuking with V'AF HAKHEI ET SHINAV, "and also set his teeth on edge". Give him also a sharp, cutting retort. "Because of what G-d did for me when I came out of Egypt". "For me" and not "for you", commenting that "had been there, he wouldn't have been redeemed".

The key words are "and also set his teeth on edge". First, answer the question according to the content. Secondly, answer the question according to the nuance, with the linking "also".

That contains an important principle in teaching. Some students "try it on" by asking questions to show-off or to disrupt, rather than quest for knowledge and understanding. In each case, the teacher should initially accept the content of the question for what it is and respond to the question as it stands. Afterwards, publicly or privately depending on the situation, he should address unacceptable nuances of the question as necessary. And, following the Meshech Chochma, he should bear in mind that even if his words appear to fall on deaf ears, they may well be recalled and make a critical difference when times get hard.