

*Walk through the Parsha*

with **Rabbi David Walk**



# Questions

**Bo**

When I was a kid, I was always asking questions, my mother thought this was cool, and proved that I was smart. However, many others found it annoying and proved that I was obnoxious. According to our Sages, this week's Torah reading is about kid's asking questions, and they encourage it. I feel vindicated. Three of the four verses attributed to the Four Sons (for the rest of this article these offspring will be 'children') asking their questions appear in this week's parsha. Let's take a closer look at one of them.

The first of the verses which concern us is: And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this rite (AVODA, service or work)?' (Sh'mot 12:26). This is the question connected by our Sages to the RASHA, the Wicked Child. Next we have: And you shall explain (HIGAD'TA) to your child on that day, saying (LEIMOR) 'It is because of what HaShem did for me when I went free from Egypt' (13:8). Because in this verse we only have the parent's shpiel to the child, but no question, we, therefore, attribute

this to the Child Who Doesn't Know How to Ask.

In this verse, we have the root HAGADA, which, of course, gives us the name for the text of our Seder ceremony. However, this word is identified by our Sages as 'tough talk', as opposed to EMOR, which is 'soft talk'. In our verse, we have the HAGEID root before the EMOR root. From this, our Sages conclude that our recitation of the Exodus story must begin with negative material ('our ancestors were slaves', 'our ancestors were idolators'). We then move to positive stories ('now we are free people', 'now we are close to God'). We go from tough and negative to soft and positive.

The third reference is in the antepenultimate (third from the last, I love that word!) verse in our parsha: And when, in time to come, your child asks you, saying, 'What does this mean?' you shall reply, 'It was with a mighty hand that HaShem brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage (13:14). Our Sages have connected this question to the TAM, simple or innocent child.

Finally, we have to wait until parshat Va'etchanan for the last child, who ironically gets listed first in the Hagada: When, in time to come, your children ask you, "What mean the

decrees, laws, and rules that the LORD our God has enjoined upon you?" (D'varim 6:20). This complex question is, of course, identified with the Wise Child, who is told that he will only understand the evening's proceedings at the end of all the activities designed to teach the story, namely the AFIKOMEN. The material after this is celebratory rather than pedagogic.

But this week I'm really interested in our Bad Boy. According to the Hagada, the question 'What is this service TO YOU?', is really a statement: This is about YOU, but not about ME. The Midrash explains that this Child is 'excluding himself from the (Jewish) community' (Mechilta). This denial of connection to Judaism and its rituals is considered a dire declaration of rejection of our people.

The Yerushalmi, on the other hand, claims that the evil expressed by the recalcitrant child is: What is this bother (TIRCHA) that you bother yourselves with? In other words, the child is claiming that mitzvot are just a bothersome set of rules, not meaningful endeavors. The Hagada (and Midrash) emphasize the word LACHEM (for you) in the question, while the Yerushalmi stresses the word AVODA (service, work).

Both of these approaches are, of

course, D'RASHOT, extrapolations of meaning from the text. They are not the P'SHAT, literal meaning of the statement. I think that in the P'SHAT we must give equal weight to the words AVODA and LACHEM. The idea I'd like to share was inspired by a SICHA by Rav Aharon Lichtenstein z"l (<https://torah.etzion.org.il/en/what-service-you>), however his conclusion was different from mine.

Rav Lichtenstein assumes that the real question of this child was, 'in exile, the commandments were necessary for the purposes of creating a national identity and uniqueness that would protect us from assimilation, but why must they still be observed now that we are in Eretz Yisrael?' This is actually an excellent approach to the issue. This child is discussing the modern Israeli problem of non-observant Israelis claiming that Mitzvot are no longer relevant in our proto-redeemed State.

This way of looking at the issue got me thinking. This child isn't mocking or even challenging the parent. Our offspring wants to sincerely know: Mom, Dad what does all this effort invested into this evening's program really mean to you? Please, let me know how this ceremony can meaningfully change my life?

**This is now a very cool question, which must be addressed. We, as parents, must relate to this very serious inquiry into our motives. We work very hard to prepare and present the Seder. Probably no other annual family get together requires this much work or expense. So, it's legitimate to ask, 'But what does it really mean to you?'**

**Our Sages, for very valid pedagogic reasons, have made the whole Q & A at the Seder very formal and a bit complicated. That's great and legitimate. However, at some moment during this formal evening, we, as parents, should leave the prepared script, and tell our kids what this evening has meant to us and how it helped form our spiritual persona. Make your Seder personal. It's worth it.** 🙏