



Holiday

Four Children, One Question, and Redemption

by Marissa Elana James on Friday March 26, 2010

11 Nisan 5770

Holiday, Pesach 5770

“The Torah speaks of four children: one who is wise, one who is wicked, one who is simple, and one who does not know how to ask.”

We find these four children about half-way through our Passover seder, all of them trying to understand something new about their tradition. On this night of questions, each attempts to ask a question which the parent is told how to answer. But the “answers” provided are not necessarily models for good parenting, or for good teaching. In the midst of a ritual that has so much to do with listening and understanding, these parent-child relationships seem more worrisome than illuminating.

This is clearest in the different responses to the questions of the first two children.

“What does the wise child ask? What are the customs, rules and laws which our God commanded you? And you shall tell this child the laws of Passover, without stopping until the Afikoman.

What does the wicked child ask? ‘What is this service to you?’ To you and not to him. Since he excludes himself from the group, he denies belief. And you shall darken his teeth and say to him, ‘Because of what God did for me, in taking me out of Egypt.’ For me, and not for him. If he had been there, he would not have been redeemed.”

In every English translation I have seen, the wise child’s question is transformed into “What are the customs, rules and laws which our God commanded us?” even though it is clear in the Hebrew that the child says “you.” If this was not changed, then the ‘answer’ to the wicked child’s question would make no sense; both siblings asked about the significance of the seder to the parent. (1)

What makes the response so different must be something other than the fact that the wicked child says “to you.” When we look again we see that the two children have the same basic



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question – what does Passover mean to their parents? – but have approached it in different ways.

The wise child has enveloped the question in acknowledgment of the basic principles of the parent's belief. The wise child specifically asks about "the customs, rules, and laws which our God commanded," indicating that the child already has much in common with the parent; there are many rules and laws, and that the child's God is the parent's God.

But the wicked child has not made the question into a statement of unity. The wicked child's question, "What is this service to you," indicates curiosity and a desire to know what the parent thinks. Perhaps now the response of the parent makes more sense. Parents want their children to share the same values that they hold, and the wise child makes it clear that they already share a basic understanding. But does the wicked child deserve exclusion from redemption and revelation for the sin of not sharing the previous generation's connection to tradition, or worse, for feeling disconnected from that tradition entirely?

In the "Love and Justice in Times of War Haggadah," published online by Dara Silverman and Micah Bazant in 2003, the authors have added other children, including "the Tranny Child." The Tranny child asks, "What is up with this gender essentialist crap?" (p. 58) It's a question that some children understand today before they hit puberty, but one that I would not have understood until I was in college, and that some people will never understand. When learning or teaching something new, it's most comforting to start with what one already knows and believes. But some of my most incredible moments of learning have come from times when my beliefs were turned upside down, and I had to reconsider that which I thought I understood.

These first two children (and even their quieter siblings) sound to me like children coming out to their parents, attempting to tell them "I am not exactly like you." And the parents represent two categories of typical responses, with the first translating into "We love you, and you are still part of our family," and the second translating into "If you aren't just like us, you are a disappointment, and thank God your grandparents don't know."

As I said, this is not a positive model of parenting or pedagogy. The more difficult and more rewarding path, regardless of how the question was phrased, would have been to respond with love, to make the best possible effort to make the child feel welcomed and included, even if the parent does not completely understand what the child's life is like.

In the "Love and Justice" Haggadah, the four children have been transformed into four adults, "to remind us that as adults we have a lot to learn from youth." (p. 56) I would add that we all have a lot to learn from each other, and that the things we need to learn most are often the things that initially make us uncomfortable because we don't understand them. The things I have the hardest time understanding often come from those even younger than I am, who use



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technologies I've never encountered, who live in worlds I've never experienced, who come out as gay and lesbian and bisexual and transgendered before they even enter middle school. I may not know their music, I may not understand their cultural references, but I will not allow my fear of their technology skills and their incredible self-awareness to detract from my celebration of the changes they are already bringing to the world.

The parent of the wise child felt comfortable answering the child's question because it did not threaten the parent's worldview. But in the question of the wicked child, the parent heard only a challenge to the traditions and customs so carefully preserved, and reacted defensively and antagonistically. Our challenge, both at the seder table and in the larger world, is to respond to questions and natural curiosity with care, and to do our best to forge connections with people of all ages, religions, genders, sexualities, and political inclinations to better understand that which we don't understand, and might therefore want to avoid. Venturing into the unknown can be terrifying, but the act of pouring all our love into trying to understand what we don't know can be redeeming.

(1) There is an alternate source text from the Palestinian Talmud which says "which our God commended us" in Hebrew as well, but that version does not appear in any modern Haggadah I have encountered.



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