

Passover And Human Diversity

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One of the most popular passages of the Haggadah is that of "The Four Sons." I have often wondered why I never met any of these four "in the flesh," as it were. Is there anyone so "wicked," so evil, that he has no redeeming feature whatsoever - even that of making the trains come on time? Is there a Wise Son who never committed a faux pas; who never uttered a foolish statement? Have we ever met a Pious Son who never sinned - in defiance of the verse in Kohelet (7:20) that "there is no man upon earth who [always] does good and never sins"? And the Son who does not know enough to ask - has he no modicum of intelligence at all?

After a few youthful years of having my curiosity seasonally piqued by this question, it occurred to me that these are archetypes, not four real, living, distinct individuals; indeed, it is extremely rare, indeed impossible, to find pure examples of these types in real life. Almost all people are composites of two or three or four - in fact, hundreds - of types of "sons," and in different proportions. Were they meant to represent real people, the Tradition would most likely have identified a representation for each of the Four Sons. Yet this is not the case, except for Haggadah artists throughout the ages whose fertile imaginations led them to identify and illuminate individual "real" people, as Wise or Wicked, Simple or Who does not know enough to ask, in their illustrations for the Haggadah.

In that case, the passage on The Four Sons reflects Judaism's acceptance of the human propensity for internal contradictions, inconsistency, ambivalence and paradox. This acknowledgment is more than a reluctant reconciliation with painful fact; it is, as well, a desideratum, a welcome aspect of human character. Furthermore, the selection of the Four Sons is not the only part of the Seder that reveals an understanding of ambivalence and paradox; another significant exam-

ple is the prevalence of the matzah, which is considered both a sign of freedom and a sign of servitude.

The complexity of human personality was clearly recognized by the Torah and the Sages throughout history. Thus, according to the Avot de-Rebbe Natan (I, chap. 37), man is like the beasts in three ways and like the angels in three other ways. He is partly an animal and partly a Divine Image. The moral drama of life is usually driven by the endless battle between a man's sense of righteousness and his concupiscence - his yetzer ha-tov and his yetzer ha-ra.

The Jerusalem Talmud records the law, which we follow to this day, that whoever sees large numbers of people massed together should recite the blessing, "Blessed be the One who is Wise over all secrets," for just as people's faces differ one from the other, so do their characters and opinions differ one from the other (J.T. Berachot 9:1, p. 13c). The "secret" is how people of such diverse qualities and outlooks can yet coexist as part of the same multitude.

In a sense, this individual differentness is surprising, given the doctrine of the creation of man in the Image of God. If we are all created in the Divine Image, should we not all be the same? The answer is that the unity of God is not merely a matter of number but also of utter uniqueness, and it is this quality that constitutes the essence of the Divine Image that we are bidden to reflect. Hence, we are each unique despite, or perhaps because, we are created in His Image. The Talmud explains (Sanhedrin 38a) that the variance of mankind is a manifestation of God's glory through His ability to create many varied images from one mold. Our differentness, then, is our glory, for it is the reflection of our creation in the Divine Image that is the source of the sacredness of our individuality.

Man's rich complexity, a composite that accounts for each human as distinct and different from every other human being, thus has the potential for his noblest achievements - as well as his most disgraceful failures.

Indeed, there are times that this inconsistency is startling in the boldness of its internal clash, and the psychological and spiritual consequences of such contradictions do not warrant any benevolent interpretation or apology. As the Rabbis taught, a sin "extinguishes" a Mitzvah, (Sotah 21a). Despicable conduct is not excusable by occasional or even frequent acts of goodness.

A dramatic example of the dangers of such inner dissonance is that of King Solomon. The Biblical Song of Songs, or Shir ha-Shirim, contains one verse (3:11) that disturbed the Rabbis. The verse reads: "Go forth, O daughters of Zion, and gaze upon King Solomon, even upon the crown with which his mother has crowned him on the day of his wedding and the gladness of his heart."

What is it that so intrigued the Sages? "We reviewed all of Scripture and could find no reference to a crown that Bat-Sheva made for Solomon," declares Rav Chanina bar Yitzchak in Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 3. But if Scripture provides no details, the eminent commentator Rabbi Moshe Alshech points to the Oral Law, both Talmud (Sanhedrin 70b) and Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah, 10), which offer them in abundance. According to these sources, "the day of his marriage" refers to the day King Solomon married the pagan daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh. "The day of the happiness of his heart" refers to the day he dedicated the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

What a remarkable - and disturbing - coincidence! The king violates the cardinal prohibition against intermarriage on the very same day that he presides over the culmination of the historic dedication of the Beit ha-Mikdash! To compound matters, the celebration of the wedding far exceeded that of the Temple's dedication, and Solomon overslept while all the people were awaiting him for the Temple service. His mother, upset by the sudden and uncharacteristic transgression by her royal son, punished him and bitterly reproached him with searing words of censure. Here Rabbi Alshech adds that this very

harsh rebuke was the "crown" she made for her son! "The day of painful and enforced awareness of his striking inconsistency was the gift his mother bestowed upon him.

While this account contains much aggadic hyperbole, the lesson is clear: If such glaring and calamitous disjunctiveness and inconstancy of character can afflict the Biblical personality hailed as the "wisest of all men" (see Kings 13:12), how much more so the rest of the human race!

The catastrophic inconsistency ascribed to King Solomon is shocking because of the dominating and charismatic personality of Solomon as depicted in the Tanach. The Talmud (Sukkah 52a) avers that the greater the man, the greater his yetzer ha-ra - his libidinous capacity and his powerful negative urges. Unfortunately, the type is all too common, a universal affliction, and is not at all restricted to eminences. Consider, for instance, the man who is generous, who helps and is courteous to friends, but is humiliating and abusive to his wife and children. Or the one who prays with great intensity, but has no compunctions about cheating from his employer or deceiving his customers. Or the person who eats kosher, but does not act, talk or sleep kosher. Regretfully, there is no dearth of illustrations of similar outrageous dissonance of character. In many such cases, the culprit possesses elements of each of the Four Sons, perhaps with the Rasha, or Wicked Son, predominating. We are all prone to inconsistency; it is universal and usually benevolent, but no one should quietly accept the kind of clash of attributes that bespeaks a horrendous violation of one's avowed principles. Magnanimity to the synagogue building fund does not excuse intermarriage, as Solomon's mother taught him. Each act stands on its own, and the owner of the fragmented character must wrestle with his spiritually split personality.

King Solomon wore many great crowns - those of royalty, wisdom, and power - but the most meaningful of all was the crown his mother gave him: her refusal to accept his weakness as incorrigible, his inconsistencies as unsolvable and his self-indulgences as excusable simply because he built the magnificent and Holy Temple in Jerusalem. It was the crown of rebuke by a wise mother to a beloved child whose superior wisdom failed him at the most critical time of his life. Bat-Sheva

taught us all that in raising children - even adult children! - we must be honest and unsparing in our criticism. Such reproach is what parents owe their children - provided, of course, that while we are angry we must not be hostile/harsh but not mean, hurting but not hating.

Equally if not more important is the mirror that she urges us to hold up before our own eyes so that we might learn for ourselves when inconstancy, although ubiquitous, is intolerable. Or, as the author of the Haggadah implies, each of us has a bit of the Rasha within himself or herself, but we must never let our own rish'ut get the best of us.