

# Making God Part of the Passover Experience

One of the most humbling experiences a parent or educator can have is spending a few minutes with an inquisitive child. The curiosity and innocence of children will often compel adults to dig deeper in search of answers.

It is for this reason that the Hagada includes a very specific set of conversations between parents and children. The framework for these discussions is all in place — however, what we do with it is up to us. Upon closer examination of the dialogue between the *arba banim* — the four children — one will discover that it follows a rigid structure. First, the child poses a question, utilizing language taken directly from the Torah. Then, we counter their question by quoting another verse from the Torah to serve as the answer.

The wise child (quoting Deuteronomy 6:20), curiously inquires of the statutes, ordinances and laws surrounding Pesach. His profound question is dignified with an answer regarding the intricate laws of the *afikoman*. This exchange stands as the paradigm of a model student eager to ask, learn and practice.

Yet when the wicked child similarly inquires (invoking the text of Exodus 12:26), “*mah ha’avodah hazot lachem* — what is this service to you?,” he is harshly reprimanded, punished and even labeled an apostate!



Rabbi Ari Sytner

Director of Community Initiatives,  
Yeshiva University Center for the Jewish Future

Why, if the wicked child was only quoting a verse from the Torah, would he be so critically penalized? Ostensibly, by asking his question he did nothing different than the wise child who is praised for his question?

Rashi suggests that the language used by the wicked son should have been *lanu* and not *lachem*. He could have asked why do “we observe this service”; instead, he phrased his question as “why do *you people* observe this service?” It was his exclusionary tone – setting himself apart from the community, which warranted criticism.

Yet every parent knows that no two children are alike. Perhaps we should cut the *Rasha* some slack and not hold him to the same high standard as the wise child. Maybe the *Rasha* is not quite as erudite as the *Chacham* and deserves some more leniency?

The Avudraham answers that the wise and wicked sons are of equal intelligence. He notes that the order of the four children, strangely, does not follow the sequence of the Torah. The *Chacham*, listed first in the Hagada, is referenced in a verse

from Deuteronomy. The *Rasha*, listed second, is quoting a verse from Exodus. Why does the Hagada not follow the chronological order of the Torah and list the *Rasha* first?

He answers that the Hagada lists the four sons in order of their intelligence. We start with the wise, followed by the wicked, simple and finally, the one who is unable to frame a question. The Avudraham notes that in reality, the intelligence of the *Rasha* and *Chacham* are on par with one another. However, due to his deliberately wicked ways, the *Rasha* was relegated below the *Chacham*.

Nevertheless, despite his superior intelligence, one cannot help but feel as if the *Rasha* is given an overly harsh treatment. After all, we are all human and make mistakes. Nobody is perfect and when we err, we ought to be granted the opportunity to recompense. Yet when the wicked child presents his misdirected question, not only is he strongly reprimanded, but he is labeled an apostate — *kafar b’ikar* — having denied the foundations of our faith! Why does the response seem to be so

It is important to remember that the end game is not to simply fulfill the many customs, but to maintain our children's attention — for the higher purpose of connecting them to God's miracles and providence in the Exodus from Egypt.

disproportionate, particularly as his question made no allusion to denying the fundamentals of our faith?

The *Shibolei Haleket*, in his commentary on the Hagada answers that if you compare the verses of the wise and wicked child, you will notice that the wise child does not merely ask about the statutes and laws, but he concludes his question with the words “*asher tziva Hashem Elokeinu etchem*, that God our Lord commanded you.” For the wise child — God is a part of the equation! The nature of his questions informs us that he recognizes God and yearns to better understand His will. However, the wicked child chooses to deliberately leave God out of the question as he asks, “why do you people observe this service?”

The faux pas of the wicked child was that his exclusionary tone was not simply aimed at himself vis-à-vis the Jewish community, but it was aimed at separating himself from God. For him, God was neither present in Egypt, nor today at the Pesach Seder. The wicked child resentfully sits at the Seder and does not see his past or his destiny. He sees a group of outdated people carrying on with songs and traditions that appear completely irrelevant in his atheistic worldview. For that reason he is labeled an apostate and must be challenged.

By contrast, we get a better sense of the wise son's question when we look at the whole verse containing the wise son's question:

כִּי יִשְׁאַלְךָ בִּנְךָ מָחָר לֵאמֹר מָה הָעֲדוֹת וְהַחֻקִּים  
וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֲתָכֶם.  
דְּבָרִים ו':כ

*If your son shall ask you tomorrow saying: What are the testimonies, statutes and laws that God our Lord commanded you.*

**Deut. 6:20**

What is the relevance of the ostensibly superfluous word *machar*, tomorrow, which is found both in reference to the wise and simple sons, but not the wicked?

The *Kli Yakar* (Exodus 13:14) suggests that the term *machar* implies that the wise child only asks ex-post-facto, after having actively participated in the commandments. His observance is not conditional upon someone proving the existence of God to him. The wise child is the epitome of the Sinai generation who declared *na'aseh v'nishmah*, we will do and then we will hear — whose faith in God was so foundational, that he would gladly take action first, only to ask questions later.

### **Empowering Children to Ask Difficult Questions**

This is an important concept in Jewish education. For millennia we have taught our young children to go through the motions of reciting blessings, prayers and fulfilling rituals at an early age — even though they do not fully understand the reason or meaning behind them. The goal is to

orient and acclimate them, so that as they grow and develop, they will be able to integrate the presence of God into their daily actions.

The Gemara in *Pesachim* (109b, 114a) explains that additional customs, such as lifting the matzah or dipping our food twice, are innovations added to the Seder experience for no inherent reason, other than to pique the curiosity of the children and keep them engaged. Within this context, it is important to remember that the end game is not to simply fulfill the many customs, but to maintain our children's attention — for the higher purpose of connecting them to God's miracles and providence in the Exodus from Egypt.

In listing the 613 mitzvot, the Rambam writes:

מצוה ראשונה ממצוות עשה לידע שיש שם  
אלוה-ה' שני' אנכי ה'.

*The first positive commandment is to know that there is a God as it states “I am God...”*

As a child, I recall asking questions about God and being told not to ask, for in the minds of my teachers, the questions themselves suggested that I was a non-believer. This could not be farther from the truth, as I was genuinely curious and yearning for answers. Many of our children today are receiving wonderful Jewish educations and upbringings, where their minds are being fed, but too often, their hearts

and souls are not being sufficiently nurtured. That there exists in society the notion of bifurcating the two entities of religious observance and relationship with God seems unimaginable. It is for this reason that that just like the *Chacham*, our children, whether at the Seder, or throughout the year, should be encouraged to ask questions and talk openly about what faith, belief and trust in Hashem means. A 1995 research study published in the *Journal of Psychological Reports*, found that children, regardless of which cognitive developmental stage they are in, have the ability to comprehend and learn about faith in God (Pierce & Cox).

Many parents have told me that they are afraid to discuss the concept of God with their children because they simply do not feel equipped to properly answer their questions. “What if they ask me something I do not know?— I don’t want my ignorance to cause them to stop believing in God!”

However, I once heard a great insight in the words of *Ein K’Elokeinu*, which children are encouraged to sing as part of the concluding morning prayers. Logically, the passage should first ask, “Who is like our God, Who is like our master, Who is like our king,”

to be followed by the answer of “*Ein K’Elokeinu* — there is none like our God.” Yet the prayer opens with the answer first, as if to lay the foundation of faith that there is none like God. When one acts as the *Chacham*, they first affirm their belief in God. Once we declare what we believe and feel some security in our decision, can we then be free to ask the important questions and explore our faith further from a place of comfort.

The Seder demonstrates that it is the *modus operandi* of the *Rasha* to blatantly refrain from asking any questions about God — instead he completely ignores God’s existence. On the other hand, it is the *Chacham* who strives to know more about Hashem. Asking a question is not a lack of faith — it is a declaration of one’s thirst to know more.

One of the highlights of our family’s weekly Shabbat table is a discussion about our encounters with *hashgacha pratit*, Divine intervention. The tone of such conversations, where we can share inspiring moments wherein we felt a real connection to Hashem, conveys the presence of God in our everyday lives. It reassures our children that it is safe to talk about God and encourages them to seek a personal relationship with their creator.

## Yetziat Mitzrayim as a Lesson in Faith

There is a common misconception that the name of Moshe does not appear at all in the Hagada. In truth, it appears one time in passing, while quoting a verse describing the splitting of the Sea. It is certainly no accident that Moshe’s name is generally omitted from the Hagada. This is done so that one should not be misled to believe that redemption was brought about by Moshe, when in fact, it was the hand of God. This further emphasizes the importance of maintaining a true focus during the Seder on our personal and collective relationships with God.

The Vilna Gaon notes that that the singular appearance of Moshe’s name is specifically in the following verse:

וַיִּרְא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-הַיָּד הַגְּדֹלָה, אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' בְּמִצְרַיִם, וַיִּירָאוּ הָעַם, אֶת-ה'; וַיֹּאמְרוּ, בְּה', וּבְמֹשֶׁה, עַבְדּוֹ.  
שמות יד:לא

*And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord; and they believed in the Lord, and in His servant Moses.*

**Exodus 14:31**

The only time on Seder night that we reference Moshe is in the verse that first declares Jewish people’s awareness and belief in God. Only after that disclaimer has been made and we are reminded of the primacy of our faith, can we mention Moshe. Even at that, Moshe is described as *avdo* — the servant of God, further solidifying the point that the focus during the Seder is on Hashem.

This can be further seen in the manner in which the plagues were carried out. Consider the fact that if Hashem truly wished to free the Jewish people with





one swift and harsh plague, He could have saved a lot of time in doing so. Why then did Hashem employ a slow and drawn-out Exodus process over the course of 10 plagues?

The Abarbanel, Shemot ch. 10, teaches that the purpose of the plagues was not merely to punish the Egyptians, but to show the Jewish people that God created and continues to actively watch over the world.

This notion of finding God can be seen in the narrative throughout the unfolding of the plagues.

In anticipation of the plagues, Hashem told Moshe:

וַיִּדְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי-אֲנִי ה', בְּנִטְתִּי אֶת-יָדֵי עַל-מִצְרַיִם:

*And the Egyptians shall know that I am God, when I stretch forth My hand upon Egypt. (7:5)*

With the plague of **blood**, the Torah states: (7:17)

בְּזֹאת תִּדְעֶה, כִּי אֲנִי ה'.

*With this they will know that I am the Lord.*

With the plague of **frogs** the Torah states: (8:6)

לְמַעַן תִּדְעֶה, כִּי-אֵין כֵּה' אֶלְקֵינוּ.

*So they will know that there is none like God.*

With the plague of wild **beasts**: (8:18)

לְמַעַן תִּדְעֶה, כִּי אֲנִי ה' בְּקִרְבֵּי הָאָרֶץ.

*So they will know that I am God throughout the land.*

With the plague of **hail**: (9:14)

בְּעִבּוֹר תִּדְעֶה כִּי אֵין כְּמוֹנִי בְּכֹל הָאָרֶץ.

*In order that they know that there are none like Me in all the land.*

With the plague of **locusts**: (10:2)

וַיִּדְעֶתְם, כִּי-אֲנִי ה'.

*And they will know that I am God.*

More than the message of freedom, the essence of Pesach is to see Hashem in the pages of the Hagada and appreciate the love that He has for us. There is no better time than when surrounded by family at the Seder and among the warmth of many Pesach meals to engage in these important conversations. We do so, not with

skepticism, but with genuine curiosity, relating to each of the four children on their own level.

If we are honest about it, we will acknowledge that nearly every child will naturally have questions. However, unlike any prior generation, today they have unfettered access to finding their own answers. This is where Pesach provides a golden opportunity. Amid an evening replete with significant customs and practices, it can be easy to get swept away in the details and minutiae of Seder night. Therefore, rather than leaving it to our children to turn to their friends Google and Siri to discover their own answers to life's questions, the Seder empowers every adult to accept their responsibility to pass the torch of faith to the next generation.

