

How to Respond to *Challengers of Judaism*

וְהָיָה כִּי־תָבֹאוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יָתַן ה' לָכֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־הַעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת: וְהָיָה
כִּי־יֹאמְרוּ אֵלֵיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם מָה הַעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם: וְאָמַרְתֶּם זָבוּחַ־פֶּסַח הוּא לַה' אֲשֶׁר פָּסַח
עַל־בְּתֵי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִצְרַיִם בְּנִגְפוֹן אֶת־מִצְרַיִם וְאֶת־בְּתֵינוּ הִצִּיל וַיִּקַּד הָעָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּוּ:
(שמות יב:כה-כז)

When you will come to the land that God will give you, as He has spoken, you shall guard this service. When your children say to you what is this service to you, you shall say, it is the passover sacrifice to God, who passed over the houses of the Children of Israel in Egypt when He plagued Egypt, and our houses He saved. The nation bowed their heads, and prostrated themselves.

(Exodus 12:25-27)

¹After relating God's commandment of the passover sacrifice to the Children of Israel, Moshe informs them that (certain elements of) this service shall be practiced annually. Moshe then teaches the Children of Israel how to respond to their children when they "ask" about this service in the future.

This "question" may sound familiar – it is the official question of the *rasha* (evil son) that we read in the *Haggadah* on *Pesach*. The *Haggadah* relates that there are four types of children: Wise, evil, simple and not-yet-even-curious. Each type of child has a unique question. The wise child asks sophisticated questions (the one in the Torah reflects a prior three-part classification of all *mitzvos* see Deut. 6:20). The simple son asks a simple question, "What's that (Exodus 13:14)?" To which every parent responds, "What's *what*?!" This child is not yet mature enough in his thinking to be able to properly articulate his question. It is the responsibility of the parent/teacher to draw out what precisely is bothering him. There is another child who is not yet intellectually curious, and simply takes in whatever he sees as a given. It is the parent/teacher's responsibility to prevent this attitude and create a question where there was none to begin with. To this son, we *tell* him (see Exodus 13:8) why we are doing whatever we are doing. We inform him that our behaviors are not robotic, thoughtless actions, but possess and reflect purpose and deep meaning.

It seems clear that three out of the four types of children reflect levels of intellectual sophistication. If so, how does an "evil" son fit in to this structure²? "Evil" is not a level of intellectual sophistication... right?

I think the answer is that "evil" is also on the spectrum of intellectual development. Let me

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1. The ideas presented herein are based on ideas I have heard from my *Rebbi*, Rav Aharon Kahn *ל"ט"ע* over the years.
 2. The *Haggadah* relates that he is clearly evil because he does not include himself among those obligated in the service – what is this service to *you* – since he excluded himself from *mitzvos*, he is rejecting Judaism. So there are actually three sons, and a nasty fellow. It is interesting that the author of the *Haggadah* included this son in his list of levels of intellectual sophistication. It is this point that I would like to address.

explain.

If one contrasts the presentation of the question of, and answer to, the *rasha* with that of the other children one begins to see the critical distinction that labels him a *rasha* in terms of his intellect.

The “question” of the *rasha* is presented in the Torah as follows:

וְהָיָה כִּי־יֹאמְרוּ אֲלֵיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם מִהַ הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם:
When your children say to you, “What is this service to you.”

The questions of the other children are presented as follows:

כִּי־יִשְׁאַלְךָ בְנֶךָ מִנָּחָר לֵאמֹר מַה הָעֲלִידֹת וְהַחֻזְקִים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֲתָכֶם:
When your son will ask you, in the future, saying, “What are the testimonies, laws and judgements that Hashem, our Lord commanded you?”

וְהָיָה כִּי־יִשְׁאַלְךָ בְנֶךָ מִנָּחָר לֵאמֹר מִה־זֹּאת
When your son will ask you, in the future, “What is this?”

The fourth son, of course, doesn't ask a question, as he is the official son “who does not know how to ask”! So there is no presentation of his non-existent question.

What is the difference between the presentation of the “question” of the *rasha* and that of the other children? When it comes to the *rasha*, the Torah does not say, “when your children will ask you”, the Torah says, “when they will say to you”. The *rasha* is not asking a question at all – he is making a *statement*, an excuse, if you will.

Sometimes we hear “questions” that are not actually questions at all³. This is the “question” of the intellectually dishonest; one who has already made up his mind. Why then, is he asking a question? The answer is that the question of the *rasha* is a ridicule of our religious practice and service of Hashem. It is not an open, honest, search for truth, his “question” is a reflection of a hidden (or perhaps not so hidden) agenda, and an attempt to invalidate the significance of our religion. I think this is why he is included in the list of four sons. It is important to understand that there is a “question” that has to be dealt with in an appropriate manner, just like the other three. However, the “question” is not truly a question, and it therefore must be dealt with in an alternative manner. There is a *rasha* in *chochmah*, in intellect. This is also a “level” of intellectual “development”.

3. In my article on *Shmos: Why?*, I suggested that this is, perhaps, the implication of the word *lamah* as opposed to *madua*.

The story is told of a student of Rav Chaim Voloshiner who left the path of Judaism. Some time later, he returned to the *Beis Medrash* to “ask some questions” of his former teacher. Apparently, before the assembled students, this fellow began to bark his issues at Rav Chaim, who proceeded to stare at him with a calm, cold, confident, silence. The former student, irritated at the lack of response, turned around and left.

The students of Rav Chaim did not understand their Rebbi’s response. After all, he was well versed in all the issues that this fellow brought up, and more than capable of debating him on these points. Rav Chaim Voloshiner responded to his students that for a *question (kasheh)* there is an answer (*teirutz*), but for an excuse (*teritz*) there is no answer (*teirutz*). It is useless to respond to a statement that is not a true question.

Similarly, we find in the *Haggadah*, that the *rasha* and the son who is too immature to even ask questions, receive the exact same “response”. Both the *rasha* and the *eino yodeiah lish’ol* are told, “For this, God did for me when I was leaving Egypt.” Everyone asks why do they get the same answer? Is the son who isn’t curious also a *rasha*?!

The Vilna Gaon explains that both get the same answer is because when the *rasha* makes his *statement*, we do not respond to him, we turn to the impressionable young child that is not yet questioning and tell him that “this (the paschal lamb, the *matzah* and *marror*)” was why God took us out. Had the *rasha* been there, he would not have been redeemed. We do not respond to the *rasha*.

You see this approach towards the *rasha* already from the Torah. Contrast the presentation of the answer to the *rasha* with the answer to the other three sons.

The answer to the *rasha* is presented as follows:

וְאָמַרְתֶּם יְבוּחַ-פֶּסַח הוּא לָהּ אֲשֶׁר פָּסַח עַל-בֵּיתִי בְּנִי-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִצְרַיִם בְּנִגְפוֹ אֶת-מִצְרַיִם וְאֶת-בְּתֵינִי הִצִּיל
You shall say, it is the passover sacrifice to God, who passed over the houses of the Children of Israel in
Egypt when He plagued Egypt, and our houses He saved.

The answer to the other three sons is presented as follows:

וְאָמַרְתָּ לְבִנְךָ לְבָרְךָ לְעַבְדִּים הֵינֵנוּ לְפַרְעֹה בְּמִצְרַיִם וְיֹצֵאֵנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה:
You shall say to your son, we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and God took us out from Egypt with a
mighty hand.

וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו בְּחֹזֶק יָד הוֹצֵאֵנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים:

You shall say to him, with a strong hand God took us out of Egypt, from the house of bondage.

וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר בְּעֵבֹר יְהוָה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרָיִם:

Tell your son on that day saying, for this God did for me when I was coming out of Egypt.

What is the distinction between the presentation of the answer to the *rasha* versus all the other children? By the other three children the Torah instructs us to tell “your son”, but when it comes to the *rasha*, the Torah only says, “You shall say” but does not inform us to whom we are speaking! The reason is because we are speaking to ourselves (or when impressionable young children are present and hear the comments of the *rasha*, we speak to them). When our Judaism is challenged, not honestly questioned, we do not even attempt to respond to the challenger, but we need to shore up our faith, and that of those whom may be affected by his preposterous statements.

From the Torah and from the *Haggadah* we see that we are *not* supposed to respond to the *rasha*. But why not try? We have nothing to lose! What happened to *kiruv* – Jewish outreach?

The answer is a fascinating psychological fact. If a person is not open-minded; if he has an agenda and is not honestly questioning – then *whatever response you provide will be convoluted into a proof that he is correct*. I have experienced this many times, and I trust you have as well. We have a lot to lose when we try to respond to someone who is angry, for example, because he is not thinking straight, and will likely say things that he will later regret. For this reason, *chazal* tell us (*Avos 4:18*) not to attempt to appease someone while he is angry. The same goes for a person who has an agenda. When we hear a “question” that begins with the word, “why”, but is clearly a statement, and not an attempt to discover truth, we should *not* respond. We should act as Rav Chaim Voloshiner did and calmly, comfortably smile. Comfortable with our religion, confident in its requirements and certain of its truth. Otherwise, we risk the creation of a convoluted proof for the challenger, and we succeed only in making it more difficult for this poor fellow to find God and the truth.

This is the Torah’s presentation regarding how to respond to an agenda-laden “question”. From it, we learn how to respond when we are faced with such a scenario. However, I think we also need to take another lesson from it for ourselves, namely, we need to make sure *we* are always asking honest questions, and searching for the truth. There are four sons; four levels of wisdom, and one is a *rasha*. We should always keep an open mind and ask honest questions – this reflects our confidence in the truth of the Torah. We have nothing to fear, no question will ever truly challenge our religion – never has, never will.