

In Consideration of the Wicked Son

One of the highlights of the *seder* night is the recitation of the four children- the wise, the wicked, the simple, and the one who does not know how to ask. The *haggadah* (the Jewish text read on Passover) recognizes the different needs of each child, and our need to respond to each child appropriately.

When I was a child, I always was puzzled by the ‘wicked child’. What were we supposed to make of his questions, and were we really supposed to ‘blunt his teeth’? For many years I did not know what to do with this problematic text. I would like to share with you a reflection that came to me this year.

What about the wicked child were the rabbis so concerned about. The answer is revealed in the question he asks- “What is this worship mean *to you*.” The Haggadah rightly tells us that with these words he excludes himself from the Jewish people; their story is not his story. This person sees no lesson from the Exodus to apply to his life. The ritual is therefore a meaningless exercise in utter futility.

It is important to point out, that *this child is not a skeptic*. Skeptics are invested in the process, only they have many questions. People who ask the difficult questions about the meaning of Jewish tradition deserve an answer, not a sock in the mouth! They are sitting at the *seder* because they are searching for meaning. Each of us has been that skeptical child at different points in our lives. This type of child is in fact praiseworthy, because it is people like this that keep us thinking about the vitality and meaning of what we do. Maybe our ritual is indeed empty and formulaic, and it is the skeptical child that sees all too well the hypocrisy inherent in it. On the other hand, the wicked son asks not for clarification of for meaning. *The wicked son challenges the basis upon which the Passover holiday was established- the value of peoplehood and community.*

Consider the following – tze u’lemad. It is interesting that the Jewish people became a nation in the midst of slavery. As our *haggadah* tells us “they became a nation *there*”. Before Egypt we were seventy individuals. One would think that a small band of individuals who come to Egypt would have assimilated immediately, but instead they grow into a nation. It was through the experience of common suffering that hearts were meld together. In the turning towards our brother and sister in need, we felt their pain. Thus the nation of Israel, while later united through common ideals and destiny, were at the beginning united in pain and suffering. Soldiers who have gone to war together experience a special bond. They have gone through the crucible of war together and have come out the other side. The Jewish people went through their own crucible- the crucible of Egypt. They care for their fellow Jew and human because they experience their pain.

The wicked child is not looking for an answer. Rather, his question manifests his utter lack of concern for people around him. The wicked son is self-serving, selfish, and does not want to reach out to others. The only reason the wicked son is at the table is to undermine the ethic of caring, feeling for the other in need. For the rabbis who wrote the *haggadah*, this is unforgivable, as the *haggadah* states, “because he has excluded himself from the community he has committed heresy.” The wicked child cannot partake of Passover, because the holiday commemorates the creation of the Jewish people and the concern God showed to us. The wicked son cannot partake in this because the wicked son cares only for himself. In short, the wicked child is a narcissist.

The *haggadah's* response now makes sense. It is a response not aimed at the wicked son but at those around him. Note the language that we are told to use, "For this purpose God took me out of Egypt, me- not him. If he was there he would not have been redeemed." Note that the response presents itself in third person, as if the wicked son is not at the table. In fact, the response is directed to the *other participants*. We try to neutralize this poisonous opinion, and state to those around us that if people had this attitude, redemption would be impossible, for redemption only happens when the world is defined by concern and caring.

In life, the challenges around us seem so overwhelming. We are often afraid to care, because once we care, we become claimed by demands which we can never fulfill. It is easier to turn the other way, deciding to focus on ourselves. During Passover, we go back to Egypt, and we become aware that our world is indeed unredeemed. In recognizing our own suffering we feel the suffering of other people. Passover is a wake-up call to our inner conscience of responsibility. The wicked son knows this more than anyone else, and challenges this fundamental Jewish ethic. Working at the Jewish Federation, in the business of serving our fellow Jews and humanity, we know this ethic only too well.

May Passover renew within each of you the recognition of the holy work you do.

Chag Sameach (Happy Passover)

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