

The World Will be Redeemed When We Ask More Questions

Shabbat Ha'Gadol 5770

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March 27, 2010; 12 Nisan 5770

Rabbis love questions! We love to be asked, as I was earlier this week for example, if peanut butter is kosher for Passover. We live for questions like that! All six years of rabbinical school I dreamt at night about being asked those kinds of questions! We love it when people come up to us after services with their Etz Hayim open and point to an issue in the text that is troubling or confusing or surprising! We love when people ask us how to celebrate and we love when people ask us how to mourn. The idea is not that we rabbis revel in being “the sage on the stage,” the idea is that when someone asks a question it means that they care about the answer. If you ask me about kashrut or the parasha or how Jewish tradition provides some kind of framework for what you are experiencing in your life, it means that you are intellectually and spiritually engaged enough to want to know more. People generally don't ask questions about things they don't care about! Remember back to your dating years...maybe some of you are in the dating game right now. No matter what, some dates are hits, and others are definitely misses! Can you recall how hard it was, how painful it was to make conversation, to ask questions across the table when you knew without a shadow of a doubt that this relationship was going absolutely nowhere?! The reason that those conversations are so difficult is that we have already disengaged. We have moved on mentally and emotionally. To ask sincere questions, to be involved in true dialogue implies that you have a stake in the conversation, that you are invested in the person or people you are talking to. The truth is it's not just rabbis who love questions...your spouse loves questions too...Maybe even more than flowers or chocolate! Because to ask your spouse a question about their day, about their work, about their life reminds your spouse that you're not just roommates, but that you are best friends. Inquiring about your spouse's day is another way of saying 'I love you,' because I'm interested in you, I want to know about everything in your life. The same goes for our kids...Even when they grumble 'nothing' when you ask them what they learned in school that day...the fact that you asked the question implies that what they did that day is important and that you are paying attention to them. How many teachers report that their greatest frustration is not the kids, not their students, but the parents! If they could only get the parents to come to a conference, to care enough to ask their kids to see their homework assignments, to be involved enough in their kids' lives so that they got the message that school is important...it would change the entire educational system. Asking questions, good questions, sincere questions is one of the most important, penetrating forms of human communication.

No wonder then that the very scaffolding of the Haggadah is asking and answering questions. Nearly every ritual, every act of dipping and drinking and reclining and eating unusual foods is meant to create a discourse between parents and children, between participants who ask and answer each others' questions in the course of retelling this epic story. The Mishnah suggests that if the child doesn't ask a question after the second cup of wine is poured, then the father prompts him to ask something with the words: *Mah nishtanah ha'layla hazeh mikol ha'leilot?* 'Tell me, how is this night different from all other nights?' You see nowadays every kid learns to chant these words in preschool or Hebrew school as part of the Four Questions. But the Four Questions really begin with the words *She'chol haleilot anu...*(you fill in the blank), in other words the child asks, 'On all other nights we do X but on this night how 'come we're doing Y?' And then the dialogue begins. On some level the Haggadah is meant as a default, a script just in case the questions don't come organically. I personally think we rely these days on the Haggadah too much, not encouraging questions to emerge more

extemporaneously or organically. Every traditional Jew knows the phrase *a gute kashe*...a good question...to ask a good question is almost better than giving a good answer. To ask a good question is to be astute, to be paying attention, to be thinking, and most of all, to care.

This is why the *rasha* is a *rasha*...this is why the Haggadah is so uncomfortable with the quote un-quote wicked child. I used to have a lot of trouble with this part of the Haggadah. How could anyone label a child "wicked?" Maybe a '*vilde chaye*,' but "wicked?" I go to such great lengths to tell my kids that the choices they might be making are not good choices, but never that they are not good kids. What could be so bad that such a label is called for? It seems to me that the threat of this child's question is that **it is not a question at all**. The wicked child in the Haggadah is making a statement, not asking a question. *Mah ha'avodah ha'zot lachem!* At best this is a rhetorical question...but it sounds more like a condemnation. "What can all this work really mean to you!" The '*mah*' is like the '*mah*' in *Mah Tovu*...Nobody reads *Mah tovu ohalecha Ya'akov* as a question...it is a statement: What beauty there is in your tents O Jacob! Similarly, this is the *Mah* that starts the wicked son's "question." *Mah ha'avodah ha'zot lachem!* What can all this Passover minutia...the cooking, the cleaning, the detail, the rituals, the seder...what can it possibly mean. And the implied answer is delivered along with the alleged question...NOTHING. It is ridiculous, it is arcane, it is "*lachem*;" that is to say it's not for me. The other children in the Haggadah ask various questions about meaning, about content...some are better questions than others, but all are truly inquiries into the meaning of Passover. The problem with the *rasha* is that he already decided upon the answer.

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin (in his Passover Haggadah) teaches that the opposite of the wicked child is not the wise child...the opposite of the wicked child is the "*tam*," the simple child. We tend to view the brevity and simplicity of his question as a sign of intellectual inferiority. But that is not the case. Our patriarch Jacob is referred to as an *Ish Tam*. Could it be that the Torah calls Jacob a simpleminded person? In *Parashat Shoftim*, the Torah tells us "*Tamim tihyeh im Adonai Eloheichem*," You should be "*tam*" with the Lord Your God. The idea is not that Jacob or you and I are to be simple...*tam* also means wholehearted. It means to be sincere. The quote un-quote simple child acknowledges that he doesn't have the first clue about the answer, but he is sincere and humble enough to say "*mah zot?*" Explain this to me. Help me to appreciate this more deeply. Just because I don't understand doesn't mean I reject it out of hand, or declare it meaningless in my life. How I wish for more *temimut* in our world. I wish there were more *b'nai tam*...more sincere children out there, who could scratch beneath the surface of rhetoric and jargon and assumptions and preconceived notions to ask good questions about our world.

The public discourse over the past week has made me wish for this even more. To witness fellow Americans calling for the vandalizing of congressional offices of members who voted in favor of the health care package...to see protesters hold signs with the president's face and a Hitler moustache painted on it...to hear people call racial epithets and threats at their ideological opponents...this all reminds me of the *rasha*! *Mah ha'avodah ha'zot lachem!* What have you done...you with whom I disagree?! That's not a question, that's an indictment. That's not participating in civil discourse, that's taking yourself out of responsible, reasonable, constructive dialogue just as the wicked child exempts himself from the whole Passover experience out of frustration and disillusionment. This is the paradigm of all those who condemn Israeli settlement building, but don't take the time to consider that adding a room onto a home to accommodate the birth of a new child in a Jerusalem neighborhood where tens of thousands of other Jews live is not the same as 14 Jews, a trailer and a portable electric generator plopped onto a hilltop surrounded by Palestinian villages. The *rasha* says...they're all settlements! They're all bad! They should all be dismantled! The *tam* is inquisitive and nuanced enough to admit that perhaps he doesn't understand the whole story. That perhaps the word 'settlement' does not mean the same thing in a Jerusalem neighborhood as it does in the interior of the West Bank. And that perhaps, just perhaps, the issue is not about settlements at all. Perhaps the settlement hysteria is yet another

front by the Arab world, which possesses 800 times more land than Israel does, to delegitimize the Jewish State and its sovereignty over any of the land of Israel.

You see the wisdom of the Haggadah is that it refuses to accept the *rasha's* attempt to distance himself or to excuse himself from responsibility or participation. The Haggadah instead demands that even the *rasha* has a place at the table. That even the *rasha*, for all his doctrinaire intolerance, even he should be engaged. That even though he didn't really ask a question, he still deserves an answer. At first the answer sounds like a dentist appointment gone awry. *Hakeh et shinav*...set his teeth on edge. Then the parent is supposed to tell the child that had he articulated views like these at the time of the exodus he would not have gone free. He would have stayed behind in Egypt disappearing into the anonymous masses of slaves who stayed behind. The underlying current is: don't make the same mistake again. Join us now...stay at the table...take part in the conversation. Feel free to disagree, to dissent, but stay and ask good questions, and be ready to hear different answers. But just because we may disagree does not mean that you don't deserve a seat at the Seder table. God forbid!

In our world today I sometimes feel that our tables are losing seats. Kind of like what happens after every round of musical chairs...another chair is taken away. Another person is disenfranchised. Another view is no longer heard or welcomed. How relevant, how prescient is our Haggadah in not taking the seat away from the *rasha*, but instead encouraging him to be a participant. How might it change the dynamics in our families in our nation and in our world if we added seats to the table instead of so often pulling them away.

May God bless you and your families with seders filled with good questions, with heartfelt answers, and with many, many seats around the table.

A Zissen Pesach! Chag Sameach!