

The Wicked Son Wasn't Really So Bad
Shabbat Vayikra; March 28, 2009/3 Nisan 5769
Rabbi Adam Raskin; Congregation Beth Torah

As parents, Sari and I have tried to be conscious, when disciplining our children, NOT to say, *You are a bad girl*; or *You are being a very bad boy*. Instead, we have trained ourselves to say, *I am disappointed by what you are doing right now*; or *Your behavior is very upsetting*; or *What you're doing is making me angry*. The difference in this subtle slight of tongue is that the child doesn't hear themselves being judged, but the action, the behavior that is causing the problem. I have to confess to you that I have struggled with the episode in the Haggadah which describes four very different sons or children, and their relationship to Passover and to Judaism in general. *Keneged arba'ah vanim dibra Torah*...the Torah speaks of four children...Indeed it does. In four separate passages in Deuteronomy and Exodus, the Torah mentions four different questions that children in the future will ask about the meaning of Passover. However, the Torah does not label these questions, it does not make a value judgment about whether they are good questions or bad questions, and it does not associate them with a specific kind of child. Just four questions, pure and simple. However, when the Haggadah appropriates those questions, the Haggadah transforms the questions into distinct personalities...the *chacham*, the wise son, the *rasha*, the wicked son, the *tam*, the simple son, the *she'eino yode'a lish'ol*...and the son who is unable to even formulate a question. To each of these inquiries, the Haggadah provides a script for how to respond. Sometimes that script is a bit startling...Today I want to focus on the *rasha*...I never want my children to hear anywhere in their heads a parental voice saying "you're bad." That's why we're so conscious about disciplinary language in our family. The Haggadah doesn't seem at all perturbed about this, which is why I want to examine the "Wicked" child, to try to understand what could possibly be meant by this label...

Let's consider what this allegedly wicked child says:

Rasha, ma hu omer: The wicked son, what does he say?

Mah ha'avodah ha'zot lachem? What does this service mean TO YOU? *Lachem, ve'lo lo...*To YOU and not TO HIM. Thus he excluded himself from the community, denying the basic fact of the celebration.

So it is that since the wicked son does not say that this ritual is meaningful to us; does not use language that includes himself in the Passover narrative, he takes himself out of the destiny of the Jewish people, right?

Well, there's a problem with that. The problem is that the "Wise" son, though his question is more nuanced, also says you and not us! Listen: The wise son asks: What are the testimonies, statutes, judgments, which the Lord our God has commanded YOU. Doesn't he therefore commit the same offence as the "wicked son"? He doesn't, by his question, include himself in those testimonies, statutes or judgments...so why is he wise, while the other is wicked?

And not only that, but if the wicked child is really so awful, so detestable...if the wicked child has cut himself off from his own people, his own holidays, his own cultural narrative, then what is he doing at the Passover seder? A true *rasha* would have declined the invitation...would have come up with some excuse, maybe invented a matza allergy, anything to get out of being at a seder. But how wicked can this guy be if he agreed to sit at the table? There's a great illustration in a 19th Century American Haggadah of the four sons. The wicked son is at the head of the table, even reclining. However, he is conspicuously not wearing a kippah, unlike the other men in the illustration, he does not have a beard. He is wearing contemporary clothes rather than traditional dress, and while his right hand is defiantly raised in the air, he puffs on a cigarette, right there at the seder table. What chutzpah! But, I keep coming back to the conundrum...He's still there! He's engaged in the discussion! He is participating in the seder. In fact, in this particular haggadah everyone else looks pretty bored...but the *rasha*, he's just getting started! I've had a lot of people around my seder table. I wish that some of them would challenge the story, get involved in the text, question the tradition in the way the *rasha* does. And that's why I am suspicious as to whether this guy is really so bad. It seems to me that if

the wicked son was meant to be the enemy of the Jewish people, the last stop on the train to assimilation, then the haggadah would not have placed him in the story. The fact that he is at the table, asking questions, participating, albeit pointedly in the discussion, means that he is valuable and important.

The wise son asks about laws and statutes and details. He wants to know the minutia, the *halacha*. Great, wonderful. **The wicked son wants to know what it all means.** And that too is great and wonderful! You see, as David Arnow writes in his fascinating analysis of the Passover seder, Today, many don't...question traditional observance. With little or no real understanding, they reject it out of hand as hopelessly primitive. Now that's something to worry about. When people reject without learning; dismiss without questioning; walk away without showing the slightest bit of interest...that's a danger to the Jewish people. Asking difficult questions, asking about the underlying meaning and purpose may makes us squirm a bit, but I think the Haggadah is trying to tell us, don't assume those are just critical, dismissive, nudgy questions...Don't label that questioner as wicked—or if we were writing the haggadah today—a pain in the tuches. Take him seriously. Answer her thoughtfully. The question she is asking you is, after all the Hebrew school lessons, and bar or bat mitzvah preparations, and schlepping to the synagogue, tell me, what does Judaism mean to you!!!???

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach quotes in his magnificent Haggadah a tradition of the Belzer Hassidim. The response to the wicked child, says the haggadah text is a strange phrase: *hak'he et shinav*, blunt his teeth. Tell him that he would not have been privileged to participate in the Exodus had he lived at that time. The hassidic tradition analyzes the letters of the word RASHA. The outside letters, *reish*, *ayin*, spell the Hebrew word *ra*, or bad. And that's how this child may appear to you, with all his acerbic questions. But the middle letter, shin has three prongs, three lines. Say the Belzers, each line stands for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob respectively. *Hak'he et shinav*, blunt his teeth, can also mean blunt his shin, or knock the shin out loose from the rest of him; show him that he is connected to those ancestors and to this precious tradition of ours.

Now admittedly this is not easy. Answering without judging; Speaking without scolding; Responding without reproaching; these things take patience and care. But no child is really wicked. No person who sits at a seder table is a lost cause. Let us live and teach and role model a Judaism of substance and sensitivity, so that every soul is cared for, and every question taken seriously.