

# Encouraging A Culture of Questions

Contributed by [Shalom Hartman Institute](http://ShalomHartman.org)

Source: [http://hartman.org.il/Blogs\\_View.asp?Article\\_Id=83&Cat\\_Id=275&Cat\\_Type=Blogs](http://hartman.org.il/Blogs_View.asp?Article_Id=83&Cat_Id=275&Cat_Type=Blogs)

**By Noam Zion**

In a culture of questions like that of the Rabbis, they wish to understand the purpose and the reason for each commandment and every social institution and to exercise free choice between options. This type of education is critical by nature and it generates not only the aspiration to political freedom, but also spiritual and intellectual freedom.

That is why the Rabbis took the image of the first Jew, who obeyed unquestioningly the divine commandment of lech lecha - "Go out of your land" - and accorded the spiritual hero the content appropriate to their world.

The Rabbis, like Philo the first century Jewish philosopher, attribute to Abraham a search for truth that involved challenging the accepted beliefs of his idolatrous society. (See the midrash about Abraham the iconoclast in the Haggadah itself.)

It is noteworthy that the Rabbis, and following in their footsteps, Maimonides, painted a portrait of Abraham as a doubter, someone who questions society's conventions and is searching for a philosophical truth. He also tries to free others from their intellectual bondage by creating a situation that forces them to pose questions, as Hillel did with the proselyte and as the Rabbis demanded that each parent do on Seder night with one's own child.

Here, the Rabbis painted a portrait of Abraham based on the Biblical nucleus of the story of Sodom, in which God encourages Abraham to ask tough intellectual and moral questions, challenging the supreme authority - God.

## **Willing participation**

"Shall not the judge of all the land be just?" - This rhetorical question seems defiant toward God, and yet God invited this defiance by involving Abraham in the debate concerning the fate of Sodom. Why? Why did God not fear rebellion? Why did God agree to enter in the extended negotiations that involved making concessions to the product of God's own creation, Abraham?

The answer, in my opinion, lies in a radical educational approach - God's desire to teach humans to willingly participate in God's plan, out of rational understanding and recognition of the intrinsic justice of God's Torah.

The Rabbis also took this direction and constructed an educational method based on the idea of the mentor, the apprentice. In this relationship, there are no questions that may not be asked, no doubt that may not be raised - as long as the true motive for the question is a genuine desire to learn.

## **Raising doubts, continuing tradition**

The child and spiritual heir, who raised doubts and discovered the inner logic of the Seder, who queried and contributed to its ongoing design in a process of questions and answers, will continue the tradition most faithfully.

A genuine question is not a rebellion against authority, but rather authentic curiosity that enables the tradition to be passed on. It is not easy for authoritarian figures who are already convinced of the rationality of their world and of the unreason of other ways, to listen to criticism from the younger generation.

It is vital that the parent-teachers learn at the very least how to open themselves, their teachings and the

existing social order to the new questions. If the parent and teacher discover they have innocent pupils before them who do not know how to ask, they must open up to them and open them up to the asking of incisive questions.

Democratic society can learn a great deal from the openness of our Rabbis to the culture of kushiyot - questions. A kushiya is not merely an educational tool to arouse the interest of students in the "material" of Passover, but rather an educational "form" that educates teacher and pupil, parent and child to the dialogue of freedom.