

Not all questions are created equal

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Judaism is all about asking questions!" Jews are a people who love questions, who are characterized by questions, who "answer a question with a question." Or so we tell ourselves.

At Passover we encounter this line of thinking a lot. The Haggadah's Four Questions, its question-and-answer of the Four Sons, the Talmud's instruction that if one is having a seder alone, one must still ask oneself, What makes this night different? – all of these elaborate on the basic theme of Judaism's love of questions. In his outstanding Haggadah, Rabbi Mishael Zion quotes Rabbi Steven Greenberg, who puts the sentiment beautifully: "Autocrats hate questions. We train children at the Passover Seder to ask why, because tyrants are undone and liberty is won with a good question. It is for this reason that God loves it when we ask why."

But the Jewish People has no monopoly on questions. The most famous questioner in history was Socrates. The great philosophers, artists, writers, and political leaders who have asked powerful questions are, by and large, not Jews. Yes, Talmudic reasoning is animated by question-and-answer, but so are most quality intellectual traditions. So to say that asking questions is an inherently Jewish activity isn't true. Jews may revel in questions more than some others, but the act of questioning belongs to all human beings.

Nevertheless, there is no disputing that the Seder is a night of questions. It is a night for discovery of the new. But it is also a night for rediscovery of what we already know. Questions become gateways to new reading, to new understanding, to "modes whereby to discover, interminably, new relationships or subtle correspondences, beauty kept secret or hidden intentions," in the words of French philosopher (and Jew) Vladimir Jankelevitch. The questions of the Seder express the rebirth and renewal of the spring, the Jewish people's season of redemption.

But not all questions lead to this kind of experience. There are different types of questions, and there are different ways to use questions. Questions can lead to connection and learning, but they can also lead to disconnection and disintegration. Questions can be used to build up, but they can also be used to destroy. All questions are not created equal.

Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, one of the great Torah scholars of the twentieth century, elaborated on this theme in explaining the answer prescribed for the Wicked Son in the Haggadah. The Haggadah reads:

The Wicked Son, what does he ask? 'What does this ritual mean to you?' *To you*, and not to *him*. By thus excluding himself from the community he has denied that which is fundamental. You, therefore, blunt his teeth and say to him: 'It is because of this that the Lord did for me when I left Egypt'; for *me*, but not for him. If he had been there, he would not have been redeemed.

Among the striking elements of this passage is the fact that in the previous paragraph, the Haggadah tells us that the Wise Son also asks a question in the second person: "What are the testimonies, the statutes and the laws which the Lord our God has commanded you?" Like the Wicked Son, the Wise Son refers to "you," and not to "us." So why does the Haggadah come down so hard on the Wicked Son?

Rav Hutner comments that the issue here is the Wicked Son's stance in asking his question. "The Wicked Son does not contribute to fulfilling the commandment to discuss the Exodus through question-and-answer," he writes in his work, the *Pachad Yizchak*. "Only a question genuinely asked as a question contributes to fulfillment of the commandment." The spirit, the tone, the emotion behind, surrounding, and within a question, matters just as much as the words of the question itself.

This is one of the most important insights of the Seder into the dynamic of questions: Questions don't exist independent of a questioner. A question must be asked in order to exist. And thus a question implies a relationship, a stance of the questioner to the one to whom the question is asked. Yes, as Steven Greenberg reminds us, questions can be sources of instability, harbingers of revolution. But questions, when asked genuinely and coupled with real listening, are also seed-bearers of conversation and mutual understanding, of empathy and community.

The Wicked Son is the person who uses his question as a weapon, who is not interested in listening. He is there to remind us, through a negative example, of the amazing potential of questions.

The Seder is a night of questions. But more than this, the Seder is a night of *questions and stories*. It is a night of renewing relationships—to one another, to ourselves, to our tradition, to God. The Seder calls us to ask our questions with generosity. It demands of us to take our questions seriously, not only as an intellectual or rhetorical exercise, but with our whole self.

So when we say that the Jewish people are a people of questions, and that Passover is a holiday of questions and questioning, let's delve a little deeper into what we mean. The great questions—the Big Questions—of Jewish tradition are ones that invite us into an eternal conversation. They are questions asked by everyone in every generation, questions that matter to everyone and that everyone can and must answer. In asking those questions, in having those conversations, we renew our lives and our commitments. That is what we aim for in the questions of the Seder.