

Evolution of the Four Questions

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Source:

The questions asked by the child during the course of the seder meal have been changed over the centuries. The earliest version of these questions was preserved by the Jerusalem Talmud (Chapter 10 of Pesachim, written before the Babylonian Exile in 200 C.E.). This text contains only three questions.

1. On all other nights, we dip only once, and on this night, twice.
2. On all other nights we eat hametz, and on this night, only matzah.
3. On all other nights we eat roasted or boiled meat, but on this night only roasted.

As of this time, there was no traditionally fixed answer to these questions as was formulated later in the Pesach Haggadah. According to the Talmud (Pesachim 116a), the father's answer was intended to fit the knowledge and understanding of the child.

When the seder as we know it today took shape (from 200 CE to 1000 CE), the pattern of this new seder also resulted in the addition of a fourth question (maror) and a change in their sequence:

1. matzah,
2. maror [bitter herbs],
3. roasted meat, and
4. double dipping.

Rabbi Gamliel had issued a dictum calling for the interpretation at the seder of the paschal lamb (roasted meat), matzah, and maror. The last question, that of double dipping, originally had been the first because it was one of the first differences that a child would have noticed on the night of the seder.

Since the destruction of the second temple in 70 AD, eating lamb (or another animal) that has been roasted has been forbidden by the Shulhan Arukh. In the Geonic period (6th to 11th centuries), the form of the questions was changed again. The reference to the roasted meat was omitted and a reference to the custom of reclining was substituted in order to preserve the traditional number of questions in vogue during the Talmudic period. Thus, the latest version of the questions is:

1. matzah
2. maror,
3. double dipping, and
4. reclining.