

Why is this night different?

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מה נשתנה הלילה הזה

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How are our questions different from the original questions?

One of the main purposes of the seder is to recount the Exodus story to our children for generations[1]. The Mishnah (Pesachim 10) which outlines the structure of today's seder, opens the section describing Magid by saying, "here the child asks the parent" and further explains that if the child does not know how to ask, the parent teaches him or her Ma Nishtana. For generations since young children memorize those words and recite them proudly at the beginning of the seder.

The strange thing about these four questions, is that two of them are never actually answered in the text of the haggadah. The first two questions regarding hametz and matza, and maror instead, of regular vegetables are discussed, while the last two questions, regarding dipping and leaning never seemed to be addressed. What is the purpose of the child's questioning if s/he is to be ignored?

If one examines the text of the Ma Nishtana as it appears in the printed volumes of the Mishnah 10:4, one immediately sees that the last two questions are different than what appears in our haggadah. It states: "That on all other nights, we eat meat roasted, stewed or boiled, on this night we eat] only roasted [meat]. That on all other nights, we dip [vegetables] once, on this night, we] dip twice." There is one question about the korban pesach (paschal offering) and a very similar one with slight variations in language about dipping.

Now one can understand the question about leaning, which does not appear in the Mishnah. Such a question would never have been asked by a mishnaic child, as all communal meals were eaten leaning, and the seder was nothing special in this regard[2]. The child instead asked about the korban pesach, the special main dish eaten only at the seder. Once the Jewish people stopped eating the sacrifice, obviously to ask such a question would be irrelevant. Although table manners changed, the leaning practice from the time of the Mishnah was still preserved. However, no formal answer was incorporated into the text of the seder itself, and one needs to informally .explain to the children that this is the way wealthy, free people ate in mishnaic times.

Not only did table manners change but eating habits did as well, and with these changes the original meaning of the dipping question was lost. In Babylonia they did not have a starter course of vegetables as was the norm in Israel[3]. When the child in the time of the Mishnah asked: why on all other nights do we start with our usual veggie dipping course but on this night we have another vegetable which we dip?, the child is actually asking about the maror [dipped in haroset fruit-and-nut mortar of the seder plate)]. Vegetables as a starter was customary so that is not the child's question. The real question is: what is this special vegetable being eaten with the main course? The question is not about dipping at all, but about eating the bitter herb! Once the dipping question was no longer understood, it lost its meaning about maror and only focused on the act of dipping. A question about maror was subsequently added to the text because its symbolism at the seder is essential to experiencing the going out of Egypt.

Both the question about dipping and the explicit question about maror appear in the printed version of the Mishnah. However, the printed versions of the Mishnah are affected and corrupted by the normative known liturgy of the haggadah. If one examines the manuscripts of the Mishnah and the version of the Mishnah as it appears in the Jerusalem Talmud Pesachim 37b (Chapter 10:4), where it has not been reworked, one will see

a fascinating thing. There are only actually three questions asked by the mishnaic child. And now things begin to make more sense. The previous Mishnah explains that the food is brought to the table before the questions are asked. Even a young child can see things are different than the usual meal s/he is used to eating with the family. And so the child is prompted to ask three questions: one about maror, one about matza and one about the korban pesach, the core elements of the seder meal which s/he sees laid before him/her. These different food choices are addressed directly in the next Mishnah and its text is preserved in our haggadah until today. Rabban Gamliel explains that by eating these foods, each generation throughout history is viscerally experiencing the slavery and redemption anew and fulfilling the commandment to recount it to our children. When these three are the questions asked by the child they are not just something recited by heart, detached from the rest of the seder experience and not addressed in a serious manner, but rather Ma Nishtana becomes the key jumping off point for telling and retelling the story of slavery and redemption from Egypt to the next generations.