

# The Four Children Approach the Future

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Source: Ariel Kates

So, first of all, the four children appear in the Jerusalem Talmud, where Rabbi Hyyia, a student of Rabbi Judah the Prince, is quoted as bringing this parable. Hyyia's text varies quite a bit from the text we know today: for one, the simple child is not "simple" but stupid. But it is Rabbis at the time of the collection of the Mishnah and Talmud who are creating this rubric. And so we proceed:

**The "Wise" Child** asks about the rules and commandments that govern the Seder, and receives a full explanation of the details. This child looks to the future with the rules in mind, seeking structures and understanding that life necessitates systems. Looking toward the future, this child is savvy: what can I do within the structures I'm given, they might ask. In what ways do we search our surroundings for external rules that help us to structure our lives? How does this help, and how does this hurt? Do you look for structures, for open spaces? Sometimes one or the other?

**The "Wicked" Child** asks their interlocutor what Passover means to them. This is a separation that incurs wrath, and the statement that this child would not have been among those saved, because of a lack of collective self-identity. But, are they looking for a more personal explanation of how to connect individually with what's going on, and how to proceed? Taking in information from others' experiences in order to shape their own? This child might have done some self-education to ask a more targeted question, which might not have produced the same kind of wrath; perhaps we can ask each other "what does it mean to you to experience the Seder as though you were personally liberated from Egypt?" This child looks to the future, perhaps, with good boundaries and a different understanding of self - and what do we gain by othering this person who is a child in our midst? Do we really get to be arbiters of who would have been saved and who would not?

**The "Simple" Child** looks to the future, totally baffled. What does this all mean? What the heck is going on? This child has an open demeanor - there's not a lot of ego here, and it's clear from what's being asked, which isn't actually that different from the "wicked" child (the only difference is the absence of "to you"), but it's met with a much more tolerant kind of inclusion. By implying that we're all in this together, this child is given help understanding what's going on, approaching their communities with humility. Still, like the "wicked" child, their question doesn't show the deeper knowledge that would indicate self-education. This child is looking to the bigger picture, unlike the "wise" child who's looking for the micro-level of life.

**The Child "Who Does Not Know How to Ask"** is present but silent - looking to the future with a kind of carelessness, perhaps, or alternately with paralysis. The thing about silence is that you can't always tell which is which. The rabbis use "this is because of what god did for me" here - it's the same othering and dividing language as we saw with the "wicked" child, who doesn't get to be included in our collective. Not super merciful? What would have happened if the Rabbis had asked this child a question? How do we embrace our ignorance with humility when we don't know how to ask? That's a lesson from the "simple" child, perhaps. Have there been times when we've assumed ignorance from someone's silence?