

The Wise Son and the Simple Son

Contributed by [The Telling By Mark Gerson](#)

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The wise son loves God, he is curious, he has absorbed the Jewish teaching about distinctions, he thinks about these issues in the future. Where does all this lead? He finishes his question by asking his parent what has been commanded to you— not to us! So does he accept the testimonies, decrees, and ordinances or not?

The simple son is often portrayed visually in Haggadot and at the Seder discussions generally as stupid. The Hebrew word for simple— as used in simple son— is tam. It is used dozens of times in the Bible as tam or tamim, and figuring out its unifying meaning will help us understand the second son in the Haggadah and at our Seder. In Genesis 17:1, God appears to Abraham and offers him the most meaningful, ambitious, and inspiring directive possible: “I am the Almighty God; walk before me and be tamim.” God is not telling Abraham to be stupid.

We are introduced to Abraham’s grandson Jacob, with God referring to him as an ish tam— a simple man. Jacob is, like every developed biblical figure, full of virtues and flaws. He also seems to have understood genetic engineering millennia before Gregor Mendel “discovered” it. The “simple” person, therefore, can be a genius— and also highly complex.

In the Pesach sequence in Exodus, God tells Moses that the sacrificial lamb— which the Israelites are to consume during their last meal in Egypt— must be tamin. In Deuteronomy, there are two uses of tam that are deeply instructive for these purposes. God calls himself tamim— and explains what he means: “The deeds of the Rock are tamim, for all His ways are just; a faithful God, without injustice, He is righteous and upright.” And God commands us, “Be tamim with God.” Achievement of tamim has long been the spiritual ambition of the Jew. It is wholeheartedness. And this quality is personified at the Seder by our tam— the child who is really our “wholehearted son.”

A question for the parents (and their children) at the Seder: Who would you want your daughter to marry— the wise son or the simple/wholehearted son?

As a father of two girls (and two boys), I choose for my daughters—wholeheartedly— the wholehearted son.