

The One Who Knows How Not to Ask

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Pesah

We are about to celebrate Passover, and, in anticipation of the Festival, we need to prepare not only our homes but our hearts as well. As the Hassidic masters teach us, it is not enough to clear the leaven from our homes; we must also clear our hearts of the puffed-up-ness symbolized by *hametz* (leavened bread).

At the Seder, we will read of four children, four types of individuals. "One is wise; one is wicked; one is simple; one does not know how to ask." And the sequence itself raises questions.

Why is the "wicked" child placed immediately after the "wise" one? Tradition tells us it is so that the "wise" child can keep an eye on the "wicked," to keep the "wicked" from getting into more serious trouble. But such an answer is, somehow, less than satisfying.

Why do we "work our way down" from the "wise" to the "one who cannot even ask"? Our sages teach us that holiness should always increase, never decrease. Thus, the number of bullocks sacrificed during Succot increased from day to day through the Festival. Thus, the Hanukkah candles increase in number from day to day (following the ruling of the disciples of Hillel; the disciples of Shammai taught that we start with eight candles and kindle one fewer each day).

Why, then, do we start with the *hakham*, the "wise" child, seemingly at the highest level of the four, and end with *she'eyno yode'a lish'ol*, the "one who does not know how to ask," seemingly the least developed?

Our master and teacher Rebbe Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev teaches, for reasons we will, with G*d's Help, discuss, that *she'eyno yode'a lish'ol* is, in fact, the highest of the four, the one at the highest level. Based on the Berdichever's teaching and on the principle that we always go from lowest to highest, we may re-examine the Four Children, finding an explanation both for placing the "wicked" child next to the "wise" and for moving from the "wise" at the beginning to the "one who does not know how to ask" at the conclusion.

We begin with the *hakham*, the child who is called wise. S/he is at a high level, the level of full and detailed obedience to the Law. "*Hakham mah hu omer*," the Haggadah says. Not a question, as it is traditionally rendered – "The wise child, what does s/he say?" Rather, it is a statement – "The wise child is what s/he says." And what is it that the "wise" child says? S/he asks for all the details of Pesah observance, every smallest detail of the Law. And we teach this child all the details of the Law, "even that nothing may be eaten on

Seder night after the *afikomen*.” You want doing; I’ll give you doing. This child is wise in the ways of Action, in the World of *Assiyah*, the world of doing. And we do not fault this child, for this is, indeed, a very high level.

The next child is the *rasha*, traditionally rendered as “wicked.” And we can look at that word *rasha* and liken it (by sound, for the spelling is different) to *rosh*, the head (the first two letters of *rasha* are *resh-shin*, similar to the word *rosh*, spelled *resh-aleph-shin*) plus *ayin* (the letter *ayin*, the last letter of *rasha*), which means the eye. This child is on a head trip. “*Rasha mah hu omer*; the *rasha* is what s/he says. ‘What are all these observances to you?’” Traditionally, the *rasha*’s question is understood as being posed to the community, and s/he is therefore seen as implying, “I am not one of you.” But it is the *hakham*, the wise one, who has just spoken, and it would be natural for the next speaker, the *rasha*, to address the one who has just spoken. “What are all these observances to you?” s/he asks the *hakham*. “You just do them – and you do them well – but do you examine them, analyze them, to learn what they mean? At Sinai, we declared (Exodus 24:7), **Na’aseh v’nishmah; we will do and we will hear**, but you stop with the doing.” The *rasha*, the *rosh-ayin* child, is the one who insists on seeing (the eye) and knowing or understanding (the head). S/he goes beyond the level of the *hakham*, who merely does, in the World of *Assiyah*; s/he also understands; s/he is in the World of *Yetzirah*, the World of Formation, the world of knowing, the mind level.

Then along comes the *tam*, the “simple” child, and again we read, “*Tam mah hu omer*; the *tam* is what s/he says.” The word *tam* does, indeed, mean *simple*, but it also means *whole* (in Arabic, the word *tamam*, cognate to the Hebrew *tam*, is placed at the conclusion of a piece of writing, to signify that it is complete), and the *tam* is the one who sees the whole picture.

*Rebbe Yaakov Yitzhak, the Hozeh, the Seer, of Lublin, one of the least humorous of the Hassidic masters, had as a close disciple Rebbe Naftali of Ropshitz, who never missed an opportunity for a clever or humorous remark. “Naftali,” the Hozeh once said, “the Torah teaches us to be simple with G*d. Simple, Naftali, simple, not clever.”*

“That is certainly true, Master,” Rebbe Naftali replied, “but it takes great cleverness to be truly simple.”

The *tam*, the “simple,” the whole child, asks a simple, whole question – “What is it?” And again, we may understand this child’s question as being directed to the two who have come before, the *hakham* and the *rasha*. Turning to them, s/he asks, “What is it? In its essence, what is it? You, *hakham*, are so concerned with what you must do, and that is, of course, very important. But it limits you; it keeps you from understanding, from reaching the deeper levels of meaning. And you, *rasha*, are so concerned with the meaning of what

we do, and that, too, is very important. But it subjects you to the paralysis of analysis. Yes, we need to do, and yes, we need to know. But beyond that, we need to be whole, to see it in its simple wholeness, its *Gestalt*, its heart level. And so, 'What is it?' How does it truly enter into your heart? What does the observance of Pesah do to you? Have you cleared the leaven not only from your home but from your heart as well? 'What is it?'" The *tam*, the whole, the "simple" child, cuts through the details of the doing, breezes past the understanding, the knowing, and, by that simple question – What is it? – reaches the level of feeling, the heart level, the World of *Briyah*, and thereby surpasses the doing *hakham* and the knowing *rasha*.

(It is true that the traditional commentaries, both rabbinic and Kabbalistic, have identified the World of Knowing with *Briyah*, thereby placing it "above" the World of Feeling, identified with *Yetzirah*. I have intentionally reversed that sequence, for I find the heart to be, indeed, a higher level than the head. If I lack "head" knowledge, I can always look it up. If someone asks me a "head" question to which I do not know the answer, I can always research it. I can ask others with broader knowledge than mine, or I can search out the books in which the answer is to be found. But, if I lack feeling, if I lack the "heart-stuff," I lack it; there is no place where I can go to look it up. The rebbe outranks the rabbi!)

Then we have *she'eyno yode'a lish'ol*, the one who does not know how to ask. "For the one who does not know how to ask, *at p'tah lo*; thou must open." *At*, not *atta*; the feminine form, not the masculine. And that fact, too, tells us much, as it reflects the reality of this child, who reaches the level of pure being.

In Genesis, we read on several occasions that a man "knew" his wife, "knowing" being a euphemism for sexual relations. Interestingly, we never hear of a woman "knowing" her husband. It is easy and self-satisfying for us to say that those who transcribed the Torah were not concerned with women – and, reading Torah solely on its surface, solely in the plain-text meaning of the words, that conclusion is often justified. But it does an injustice to ourselves, to those who transcribed the Torah, and to the Torah Itself. It is in the nature of heterosexual genital relations – and we cannot get around the fact that the Torah speaks in heterosexual terms, although we may today extrapolate its teachings to include same-sex relationships – that a woman "knows" the man with whom she has sexual relations; a part of him (and we can take the part for the whole) is inside her. (Thus, a woman who is virgin is described as "never having known a man.") The man, however, does not naturally "know" the woman; she is not inside him. Thus, it need not be said that a woman "knows" her husband; she naturally does so. But for a man to "know" his wife – that is worthy of mention indeed, for, in order to do so, he must exercise his own feminine nature, and that is not easy for most men.

“Thou [feminine] must open for” *she’eyno yode’a lish’ol*. *She’eyno yode’a lish’ol* is wholly immersed in Pesah – and, indeed, in everything s/he does. And thus, in explaining to this child, one must be in the feminine mode and accept this child inside oneself. The Hassidic masters asked which is the highest Mitzvah (Commandment) of all. Some spoke of the dietary Laws, some of the Yom Kippur fast, some of dwelling in the Succah. But Shabbat won out. Why? Because one can always escape the other Mitzvot. One can turn away from Kashrut; one can refuse to fast; one can step out of the Succah. We cannot step out of Shabbat. We can violate Shabbat; we can deny Shabbat’s significance; we can ignore Shabbat. But, no matter what we may do, when it is Shabbat we are in Shabbat; we cannot leave it. Just so, *she’eyno yode’a lish’ol* is so immersed in Pesah that s/he does not leave it and Pesah “knows” this child intimately.

Thus – and here we rejoin Rebbe Levi Yitzhak – we read *she’eyno yode’a lish’ol* not as the *one who does not know how to ask* but as the *one who knows how not to ask*. This child just looks. S/he looks at the *doing* child and smiles. S/he looks at the *knowing* child and smiles. S/he looks at the *feeling* child and smiles. This child has gone beyond the *doing*, beyond the *knowing*, beyond even the *feeling*. This child just *is*. This child has no need to ask, for this child truly immerses in the actuality, the reality, of Pesah. This child *becomes* Pesah. And this is the World of *Atzilut*, the World of Emanation, the level of *being*, the soul level, the highest level of all.

And so it is that the four children of the Haggadah are, indeed, presented in sequence, from high to higher to still higher to the highest, and we sing:

*L*rd, I want to do for Thee;*
*L*rd, I want to know for Thee;*
*L*rd, I want to feel for Thee;*
*L*rd I want to be for Thee.*

As s/he learns and grows, the *hakham* does and transcends the doing. The *rasha* knows and transcends the knowing. The *tam* feels and transcends the feeling. The *she’eyno yode’a lish’ol* just is and transcends all. And then we may understand the instruction of the Haggadah, “*at p’tah lo*, thou shalt open *to* (not, as traditionally rendered, *for*) this one,” as directed to the One by Whose Word the world exists. Not an instruction, but a statement of fact. This child has transcended the need to ask; this one knows how not to ask; this one just is, and to this one the Creator is fully open. *Ken tih’yeh lanu*; so may it be for us!

Hag Pesah Same’ah; may you have a joyous Pesah.