

F

our Sons

Baruch HaMakom, Baruch Hu

Everyone has his or her own, favorite part of the Pesach Haggadah. Some of us love to watch the youngest child squirm through a rendition of the “Four Questio, *Mah Nishtanah*.” Some just love the songs at the end of the Haggadah. And some really enjoy the four sons.

What a brilliant idea! The sages that wrote and edited the Haggadah were truly wise to include the four sons. If nothing else it teaches us to relate to everyone at the Seder, each in his own special way. If you take another look at that section of the Haggadah you will see that the text the “Four Sons” is unique. There is actually an introduction to these four paragraphs. The following paragraph introduces the “Four Sons:”

בְּרוּךְ הַמָּקוֹם, בְּרוּךְ הוּא. בְּרוּךְ שֶׁנָּתַן תּוֹרָה לְעַמּוֹ
יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּרוּךְ הוּא. כְּנִגְדַּ אֲרַבְעָה בְּנִים דְּבָרָה תּוֹרָה.
אֶחָד חָכָם, וְאֶחָד רָשָׁע, וְאֶחָד תָּם, וְאֶחָד שְׂאִינֵי יוֹדֵעַ
לְשִׂאוּל.

*Blessed is God, the Makom (literally, place); blessed is He;
blessed is He who gave to Torah to His people, Israel;
blessed is He. The Torah speaks of four sons: One wise, one
evil, one simple and one who does not know how to ask.*

This introduction raises a number of questions. Why does the Haggadah provide a formal introduction to the “Four Sons”? And why the odd phrasing? Why repeat four times that God is blessed? Why

call God by the name *Makom*, which literally means place? Why mention the giving of the *Torah*? And finally, why single out each son with the word, “one”?

First, the Peshat

Before we begin to answer all of these questions, there is one strange choice of phrase that must be explained. When Ya’akov Avinu left home for the first time, to travel to his mother’s hometown of Charan, he camped outside. The Torah describes his arrival using the words, “*Va’Yifga BaMakom* - He arrived at the place” (*Berayshit* 28:11). The English translation does not begin to express the strangeness of this phrase. The word, *Va’Yifga*, in particular, does not mean to arrive. In other contexts, it means to pray. Thus, Rav Huna in the *Berayshit Rabbah* (68:9) assumes that the phrase is to be understood as “he prayed to the *Makom*, i.e., God.” This leads him to ask and answer, “Why do we call God, *Makom* (place)? Because He is the place of the world and the world is not His place.”

Rav Huna’s eloquent, philosophical explanation holds true for the use of this sobriquet for God throughout Talmudic and Midrashic literature. The name of God, *Makom*, implies that God is transcendent. He is beyond This World. Our universe, both physically and spiritually, cannot contain God. Nevertheless, He functions within our universe and world. He is the *Makom*. God functions within this-worldly space.

There is no question that the four introductory phrases are meant to match the four sons. It is also clear that the introduction is there to create an intimate connection between God on the one hand and the aggregate of the four sons on the other hand. Even though they are listed “One wise, one evil, one simple,” etc., they are understood to be a group, a unity. All together, they represent Klal Yisra’el, the totality of the Jewish people.

Rav Re’uven Margali’yot provides one example of matching up the first four phrases with the four sons. The words, *Baruch HaMakom* (Blessed is God, the *Makom*, literally, place), refer to the wise son. The

word, *Makom*, place, as a name for God implies a great deal of Jewish philosophical sophistication. The question of the wise son as well indicates that same level of knowledge and sophistication.

The second phrase, *Baruch Hu* - Blessed is He, is linked the wicked son. Here, God is referred to in the third person, which implies that He is hidden and transcendent. There is no possibility that you and I will understand how God will influence the evil son to give up his wicked ways and return to a life of *Torah* and *mitzvot*.

From the third phrase, we learn that the way to instill some meaning into the life of a simple, unsophisticated person is by teaching them Torah, which God gave to us all. Of course the fourth phrase once again indicates that God's methods are beyond our comprehension. While it seems impossible, God will succeed in communicating Torah values and ideas to those who are even too ignorant to ask a question.

Now that we have matched up the four phrases with the four sons, we can proceed to another question: Why does it say, "One wise, one evil, one simple, etc."?

Rav Shlomo Kluger explains. You would think that God rewards us differently for answering each son. For example, since the answer to the wise son's question requires greater knowledge, we should receive a greater reward. However, the Haggadah teaches us that the reward for answering each of the sons is the same. Each child must be viewed as equal to all the others.

Now, Deeper

Each of the four sons is looking for enlightenment. Even the challenge of the "evil" son must be met with real information. Nevertheless, says Reb Naftali of Ropshitz, we human beings are limited in what we can know, especially about God. Thus, the Haggadah

reminds us of our limitations before we begin to provide answers to our children's question. "Blessed is God, the Makom." Remember, says Reb Naftali, that when God enters our "place" and is manifest, we discover a little more about Him. On the other hand, "Blessed is He - Baruch Hu," God is hidden from view and beyond our understanding. The greatest source of information concerning God and His actions comes from the *Torah* that He so kindly and wisely gave us. However, in the end, "Blessed is He - Baruch Hu," God Himself is still hidden and transcendent. Now with this in mind, says Reb Naftali, go teach your children.

Rav Ya'akov Moshe Charlop comments on all the groups of four that are part of the Seder night. There are four phrases of salvation, which lead to the four cups of wine. There are the "Four Questions." And of course, there are the "Four Sons." The key to understanding these groups of four is the Kabbalistic model of the soul. According to Kabbalah, there are five parts to the soul: *Nefesh*, which animates the physical being; *ru'ach*, which represents the link between the spiritual and physical aspects and is expressed through speech; *neshamah*, which is involved in higher level spiritual functioning; *cha'yah*, the spiritual aura that envelopes the individual; and finally, *yechidah*, which links the person directly to God. The first four elements, says Rav Charlop can be grouped as pairs or as a set of four. However, the fifth and highest level has no pair. It is *yechidah*, meaning one or singular, just as God is One.

When items are grouped in sets of four, teaches Rav Charlop, they are really instruments and means for achieving the fifth and highest level. Thus, we reach out and teach each of the four sons the meaning and significance of the Seder. By doing so, we unite them together with ourselves and ascend to the "fifth" level, thus revealing the oneness and singularity of the people of Israel.

Rav Re'even Margali'ot adds another, deeper level of meaning to the four sons by quoting Reb Nachman of Breslov. Rav Nachman reminds us of the Gemara that says that Avraham established the morning prayers, Shacharit. If we view the word, *Shacharit*, as an acronym, then we will find hidden in this word, the four sons. The

letter *shin* hints at the son who does not know enough to ask a question, the *she'ayno yoday'ah lish'ol*. The letter *chet* is the first letter of the *chacham*, the wise son. The letter *raish* refers to the evil son, the *rasha* and the letter *taf* indicates the *tam*, the simple son.

After working out the acronym for us, Rav Nachman makes an enigmatic statement: "Our forefather Avraham repaired them all." In Hebrew, the verb, "repaired," is *tikayn*, which is the word the *Gemara* used to say that Avraham established or fixed in place the morning prayers. Thus, we would understand Rav Nachman as stating that our first forefather, Avraham, planted the seeds for all four kinds of children in the people Israel. From the very beginning, the potential existed for the "four sons."

On the other hand, the word has a Kabbalistic nuance implying that Avraham spiritually repaired the four sons. Rav Nachman could be hinting at this usage. If that is the case, then he is saying that Avraham Avinu already provided the solutions and answers for the problems of the four sons and the problems raised by the four sons. Either way, it is an intriguing idea.

Another Look at the Four Sons

By listing the four sons together in an introductory paragraph, the Haggadah challenges us to look at the four sons as a single unit. Indeed, the Haggadah singles each one out for individual attention. However, we must ask, what do we learn from considering them as a group?

Sefat Emet sees the four sons as four kinds of personal exile that an individual can experience. The Gerer Rebbe begins by finding a link between the four phrases of freedom mentioned in *Shemot* (6:6-7) and the four exiles that the Jewish people were destined to experience (Egypt, Babylonia, Greece and Rome). "The 'salvation' is from all four exiles," say Sefat Emet.

This last statement is particularly obtuse. Perhaps Sefat Emet means to say that just as the four phrases of salvation from Shemot are different concepts of freedom, so, too, the historical exiles can be viewed as concepts as well. Thus, each concept of salvation and freedom relates not just to one “exile,” but also to all of the exiles. If that is the case, then we can understand how Sefat Emet extends the idea further by delineating the four personal exiles that an individual can experience. Each one of these exiles and the salvation from them is hinted at in the “Four Sons.”

Even an observant Jew questions the logic of *mitzvah* performance from time to time. The answer to this wise son’s question is to teach him that the joy of the *mitzvah* is more important than the understanding of why we do the *mitzvah*. It is the joy of doing that should linger on with us when the observance has ended. This is why we do not eat anything after finishing the *afikoman*. We want the taste, i.e., the joy, of the *mitzvah* to stay with us.

It is a particularly evil thought to think that our performance of a *mitzvah* is a meaningless act, that we are powerless to truly worship God. To think this way is to deny that there is any real spiritual connection between God and mankind. The answer comes as a shock: It is indeed paradoxical, but God cherishes our *mitzvot* because we have limited intellect and are weak, flesh and blood humans. God loves us because we rise above our limitations by loving Him and dedicating ourselves to Him.

Sometimes even simple questions can be asked in an arrogant tone of voice. The answer to such a question must emphasize that what God did for us was out of His great love for us, and not because we earned it.

The worst of all the personal “exiles” is the inability to ask a question. Unfortunately, it is not just the mouth that will not open to speak coherently, but the heart is closed as well. This kind of situation requires personal intervention. “You must open his mouth,” says the Haggadah.

Each and every one of us, concludes Sefat Emet, passes through one or more or even all of these “exiles” at one time or another. When we come through whole, in one piece, then we can begin to sing God’s praises.

Rav Charlop asks a serious question regarding the “Four Sons.” These four paragraphs constitute a list. We have a rule regarding lists: Usually, the items on the list are in ascending order - “We rise in sanctity - *ma’alin bekodesh*.” Yet we view the list of the four sons in descending order! Can we understand the list in ascending order?

Rav Charlop answers, “Yes!” His explanation gives us a totally new perspective on the “Four Sons.”

The four sons represent four stages or levels in religious development that are experienced by an individual. The first stage is to be wise. Indeed, we are told in the beginning of the Haggadah that we are all wise. Certainly, each of us has the wisdom to begin the process and to complete it as well! First, we must learn the wisdom of Torah. We must see the fine points in the laws, so we can differentiate between statutes and laws and testimonies.

The second stage is to use our wisdom to divorce ourselves from all evil. We learn to drive the evil out of our lives. Once we accomplish this, we ascend to the third level. This is the level of Ya’akov Avinu, the level of Tam. Our forefather Ya’akov is described as an *ish tam*, implying that he was whole, complete and near perfect. By using our wisdom to expel the evil we, too, become whole, just like Ya’akov Avinu.

As a result, when we encounter God, we become like one who cannot ask any questions. This is the result of the extreme awe that overwhelms us when we approach God. This is the fourth level, the stage of *hitpa’alut*, total spiritual awe and excitement. At this point there is nothing to say. The individual stands speechless before God.

The ability and potential to ascend these levels and stages are imbedded within the exodus and available to us through the Pesach Seder. If each of us becomes the "four sons" as described by Rav Charlop, then we will surely sing, "*Baruch HaMakom, Baruch Hu* - Blessed is God, the *Makom* (literally, place); Blessed is He!"