

Sermon/Drasha The Arba Banim: How to Talk to Your Children
Rabbi Ze'ev Smason, NHBZ 28-march-2015

Two brothers were terrible trouble makers. They were always breaking and stealing things, lying, and making all kinds of trouble. Their parents tried everything to get the boys to change, to no avail. Finally, out of options, they asked their rabbi if he could help. The rabbi agreed to talk to the boys, but only one at a time. The parents dropped off the youngest and went home, promising to return to get him soon. The boy sat in a chair across from the rabbi's desk. They just sat looking at each other.

Finally, the rabbi said, "Where is G-d?"

The boy just sat there and didn't answer.

The rabbi began to look stern and loudly said, "Where is G-d?"

The little boy shifted in his seat, but still didn't answer.

The rabbi became even more irritated at the boy's refusal to converse and practically shouted "Where is G-d?"

To the rabbi's surprise, the little boy jumped up out of his chair and ran out of the office.

The boy left the shul and ran all the way home, up the stairs and into his brother's room. He shut the door and blurted out, "We're in BIG TROUBLE. G-d's missing and they think we did it!"

We have to learn how to talk to our kids!

The Haggadah contains abundant wisdom in approaching this challenging subject. The Haggadah says, *Kneged arba banim dibra Torah: chacham, rasha, tam, aino yodea lishol*. This well-known passage is often translated, *The Torah speaks of four children: One wise, one wicked, one simple and one who does not know how to ask a question*. This statement is based upon four different passages in the Torah. Four times does Moshe tell us how to speak to our children about Pesach: Three passages are found in Exodus (Parshas Bo), and one in Deuteronomy (Parshas Vaeschanan).

The author of the Haggadah says, *arba banim dibra Torah -- The Torah speaks of four children*

Arba - Four: One 'cookie-cutter approach' will not work for all children. There are *four different* types of children -- each of whom require a unique approach.

Banim - Children: They're all your children. They all belong to you. They are your flesh and blood. Make sure you get this right.

Torah: The Torah has something to say about how to talk to each of these children, according to who they are. Not who I think, or want them to be.

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Dibra - Speaks: The conversation has to be different with each child.

Based upon insights from the Sefas Emes -- a great Hasidic rabbi who lived in the late 19th and early 20th century -- let's get to the heart of what the Haggada is talking about.

1) **Chacham.**

The *chacham* is often translated and described as the wise child. This first child we encounter in the Haggada is astute. He's an intellectual. He is an exceedingly curious child. He uses a rational approach to understand the world around him. Later in life, perhaps he'll become a scientist or inventor. Even at a young age, his thoughts are driven by a need to understand by regularly asking "why?"

What bothers the chacham at our Seder? The *chukim* -- those mitzvos seemingly beyond the grasp of human logic and not easily explained are like a pebble in his shoe. The chacham says:

I can understand the need to be ethical. 'Love your neighbor as yourself' makes perfect sense to me. But not wearing a garment containing wool and linen? Waiting six hours between milk and meat? Not tearing toilet paper on Shabbos? I don't get it. They don't speak to my mind and reason. I don't see the logic and value of so much in Judaism. I don't get the sweetness of much that you seem to enjoy and find meaningful.

In a polite manner the chacham is saying: Large parts of Judaism are wacky. I get the ethics, compassion and justice aspects of Judaism, but all the other strange laws? Black boxes on my head? ***I don't get it.***

The Haggadah tells us we answer the chacham: *Ain maftirin*. We don't bring out dessert after eating the afikomen, the final piece of matzah.

Have you ever been at a seder when someone said, "Wow, the matzos taste good this year!?" Matza isn't normally considered a delicacy. But on Pesach, we understand what it means for the matzah to taste good. And if we truly appreciate matzah -- we tell our child, the chacham -- it's better than the sweetest of desserts.

How we communicate Judaism to the chacham involves two approaches.

First, the Torah comes from Hashem, the ultimate source of truth. The fact that you can't wrap your mind around a particular mitzvah doesn't make it irrelevant or incomprehensible. No one would be surprised that a five year-old wouldn't understand a lecture on nuclear physics. The deficiency isn't in the lecture, but in the child's comprehension.

Second, to the degree we can grasp the meaning of Judaism and mitzvos, we're obligated to transmit that understanding to our children. While we can't say we know "the" reason for any commandment, we certainly can gain insights into the mitzvos that can make Judaism relevant

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to our children -- and to ourselves. Work to teach the chacham the "why" of Torah, not just the "what".

2) *Rasha*

Though often translated as "wicked", I've always found it problematic using this term to describe one of our children. Is this child a murderer or violator of a cardinal principle of Judaism that we call him "wicked"?

Rather, the Haggada is describing a child who is rebellious. And why is he rebellious? Because he's depressed. When he asks *mah ha'avoda ha'zos lechem?* -- *what is this service to you?* -- he's saying, "How can you possibly believe that a small creature like me can serve Hashem?" He questions the entire concept of Divine Providence as it may apply to himself or anyone else.

Our child is despondent and speaking from a deep pain. He says,

"I'm worthless. I'm insignificant. We're here today, gone tomorrow. Do you really believe that G-d cares or thinks about what you're doing? What is the value of my life, and of my actions? Do my struggles really matter? Who even cares? Therefore, just leave me alone to have as good a time as I can while I'm still here."

Ilan Ramon, z"l, was the first Israeli astronaut. Ilan became a Jewish international hero, giving pride to every Israeli and to people around the world. Their elation was cut short when in 2003, Ilan, along with six others, lost his life when the *Columbia* exploded just minutes before its scheduled landing. From space, Ilan said, "The world looks ... so fragile."

Our world and our lives can seem so fragile, so small, so insignificant.

I heard of a man who comes into the office each morning who googles himself to see how many times his name comes up. Each morning he becomes depressed when he compares the scant results with *Obama*, which has over 580 million 'hits'. Can we appreciate that the rasha, like many others, asks, "Do I really have value? Do my actions mean anything?"

The Haggada tells us we answer our child: *B'avur zeh asah Hashem li -- Because of this, Hashem did for me.* *B'avur zeh:* Because of your very question, He cares! The significance of you, in creation, is even greater than that of the angels precisely because of your question, and your struggles. If G-d was looking only for perfect entities, He would have stopped after creating the angels that scream 'Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh'. But Hashem LOVES those who struggle. Those qualities that make you feel distant, dear child, should make you feel close. *Bavor zeh -- Because of this* We are called 'Israel.' Our name means 'he who struggles in the presence of the Almighty.' Your struggles are infinitely precious to Hashem.

Hotzei min ha'klal -- He has removed himself from the community. Why? Perhaps he hasn't been made to feel comfortable and welcome in our family, school and community. Especially if he

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hasn't had much success. He's **depressed** and doesn't believe he amounts to anything. Let him know that he matters to you as much as all your other children.

3) Tam

Often translated as the 'simple child', or 'simpleton', the word *tam* literally means 'whole' or 'complete.' The *tam* who asks, *mah zos?* -- *what is this?* -- is arrogant.

He says,

"Take a look at what I have. Can't you see my success? Who even needs G-d? If you work hard like I have you'll turn your life into a success story. I'm a self-made man. I lead my own life and define my own destiny. In our world of science and technology, the old needs are gone. We can understand everything! If you understand science, you don't need G-d. I built my practice. I built my business. Look at all the patients and clients I have. Look at all the lectures, classes and sermons I teach and preach. Who do you think did this? Me!"

He's arrogant and has a sense of completion. He believes he is *mushlem, tam* -- *whole, complete*. What he doesn't realize regarding science is that the more science you study, the greater the miracles you can see. With a spirit of humility, the student of science can appreciate that the brilliant, infinite design of the world and the depth that exists in even one cell is of Divine origin. The more you observe of the world, the more 'wow' you'll see. But this perspective is hidden from the *tam*.

The Haggadah tells us we answer the *tam*: *b'chozek yad* -- *with a mighty hand*. It's all a gift. **He's arrogant.** Don't become arrogant with your success and money. Hashem took you out of Egypt without your participation. You didn't do it yourself. Don't become arrogant in this world.

4) Aino yodayah lish'ol

Often translated as 'the child who doesn't know how to ask', the fourth child is better described as the child who *doesn't care to ask*. What is he saying by not saying anything? "I couldn't care less." When we say, "Do you have anything to ask?" He says, "Nope." When someone is perplexed, distressed or angry, it shows something is bothering them. But the toughest nut to crack may be apathy.

The college student was asked, "What do you think is the biggest problem facing the world today -- ignorance or apathy?"

Answer: "I don't know, and I don't care."

The *aino yodayah lishol* **doesn't care**. He is saying, "You asked me to come for dinner. I'm here. I came for dinner. What more do you want from me? Can't you leave me alone?" These are bitter words for us to hear from our child when he says, "I don't hate you, I don't love you, I just don't care."

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At times, this apathy exists in every person: You're sitting at in a class or lecture, and someone

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is getting excited about the subject. He engages with the teacher or lecturer by asking several questions. You look at him, thinking to yourself, 'what is this guy getting so excited about?'

We answer the *aino yodayah lishol*: *At p'sach lo -- You should open to him and respond.* It's your responsibility to open his heart. He didn't open his heart because you didn't open your heart. The Hebrew word *at* indicates passivity. You were too passive with your child. You didn't engage his heart. Every person has a heart. The responsibility is on you, not him. What has your Yiddishkeit been giving him? There isn't a person in the world not looking for love, meaning, truth, healing, depth of life. Every lock has a key Every child has a way of being reached.

Until now we have described four different types of children. But within each of us at various times, one or more of those four 'children' might be found. At any given moment we too might question G-d's logic, feel depressed and alienated, be arrogant or apathetic. The answers we give to each child are responses we can share with ourselves.

We were redeemed from Egypt. Soon, we will again be redeemed The process of redemption begins with understanding our children, knowing how to talk to them and guiding them, each according to their personality and unique needs.

Good Shabbos

The above lecture was based upon insights from Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib, known as the Sefas Emes, was one of the greatest Torah scholars of his generation in the late 19th and early 20th century. I also acknowledge the insightful presentation of these ideas by Rabbi YY Jacobson