

Just Questions, Please

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Now is the time to give thought to the Seder.

Rather than a comfortable recital of a familiar text, the Seder is meant to provoke, excite, and inspire. How do we make this happen at our Seder? How do we transform what for most is a well-worn (if beloved) family ritual into a spiritual experience which will help us focus our spiritual lives and bring our religious identity into the forefront of our consciousness?

Some people are preparing insights to share at the Seder, but in my experience, this works only at a Seder of scholars, the knowledgeable and the intellectuals. How do we bring everyone in, from children to grandparents, from the learned to the disaffected?

Before telling the story of our emancipation from slavery, the Seder first presents several vignettes in which we witness others modelling for us the telling of the story. In short, before we do it ourselves, the Seder shows us how others have done it. One of these vignettes is that of the "Four Sons," wise and wicked, simple and silent. How does this model help us do a better Seder ourselves?

One key is that the sons in question ask questions. The wise son asks a complex question; the wicked one asks a pointed one; the simpleton asks naively; and even "he who does not know how to ask" would want to ask but doesn't know how.

All children are curious, and one sure way to engage children is to pique that natural curiosity. What the Haggadah doesn't explain is what makes these children ask questions in the first place. How do we pique their curiosity?

The Rambam answers:

"One must make *changes* on this night so that the children will see and ask... so that he can answer them and say, 'Here is what happened...'. How does one make *changes*? He distributes treats, clears away the table before they have eaten; people snatch the matzah one from the other; and similar kinds of activities." (Rambam, Chametz U-Matzah 7:3)

Curiosity happens when we notice the unusual -- so we must make sure to have a Seder punctuated by the unusual. And every year, it must be unusual in a new way; otherwise, remembering the routine from previous years, no one will be curious... and no one will ask questions.

Besides pulling little stunts during the Seder, there is another way to pique curiosity. All teachers know that one great way to engage students is to ask a great question, a really interesting question. Rather than preparing insights to share -- or, in other words, rather than preparing answers to questions no one has asked -- one idea which has worked really well for me is to just prepare a few good questions, or to ask each person to prepare a couple of questions.

I don't mean questions about the text of the Haggadah itself -- that would appeal mostly to the scholarly, but leave others disengaged. I mean questions like these, questions which truly matter to people:

-- How do we understand the halachic obligation to see ourselves as if we personally have just left slavery on this night? After all, it's simply not so, so why pretend that it is? And how?

-- Our emancipation from Egypt took place awhile ago. A long while ago! And since that time, there have been many ups and (especially) many downs in our history. How is this one event still not only relevant, but so central to us even today that even if we were (God forbid) sitting in Auschwitz, or being pursued by the Inquisition or the Crusaders, it would still make sense to look at Yetziat Mitzrayim as the most significant redemption in our history?

Try it -- and let me know how it works out!

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