

Pesach 5778, 2018:

The Wise Son's Question and Answer

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, HaRav Raphael ben HaRav Ephraim, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Yekutiel Yehudah ben Pessel Lifsha and Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The narrative of the Four Sons is one of the highlights of the *Maggid* (Telling) section of the *Haggadah*. Contemporary versions of this work formulate the first two questions in this manner:

What does the wise [son] say? “What are these testimonies, statutes and judgments that the L-rd our G-d commanded **you** (*etchem*)?” ... What does the wicked [son] say? “What is this worship to **you** (*lachim*)?” To you and not to him. And since he excluded himself from the collective, he denied a principle [of the Jewish faith] ...
(<https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/2127> with my underlining, bolding and emendations)

An endless sea of ink has been spilt in an attempt to elucidate the differences between the wise son's use of “*etchem*” and the wicked son's use of “*lachim*,” since both terms may readily be translated as “you.” While the examination of the distinctions that obtain between these two questions is surely a significant endeavor, it takes focus away from the meaning of the wise son's inquiry - which deserves to be studied in its own right.

One of the major thinkers to focus upon the singular import of the wise son's question was the great Chasidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev *zatzal* (1740-1810), known as both “the Berdichever” after his location, and “the Kedushat Levi” after the name of his most famous work. He maintains that in order to fully comprehend the wise son's question,

we must first understand the defining characteristics of *matzah* and *chametz* (leavened products). To achieve this goal, he conceptually contrasts the nature of these substances:

Behold, the word “*matzah*” and its essence teaches us about the creation of the world, i.e. that it was created completely new, out of absolute nothingness, and brought forth from total emptiness. ... The intrinsic nature of *chametz* is that of something that is old, in stark contrast to *matzah*, which, by definition, represents that which is new. (*Kedushat Levi, Sefer Vayikra, Drasha on Pesach*, this and the following translations, parentheses and brackets my own)

The Berdichever deepens his analysis of the inner meaning of *matzah* by emphasizing Hashem’s roles as Creator of the Universe and Redeemer of our nation from Egyptian bondage:

Our Creator is teaching us through the *mitzvah* of *matzah* that there is a Creator of the Universe, and that each day, and each moment, He creates the world anew as is His desire. This is just like what He did in the Exodus from Egypt when He acted in an amazing manner that defied the laws of nature, since each one of the Ten Plagues violated the laws of nature.

Next, the Berdichever teaches us that the recognition of Hashem as the Creator and Redeemer leads us to profoundly spiritual heights:

When we know all of this with crystal clarity, then we will never move our hands and legs to do anything other than that which leads to the honor of His Name may He be blessed and exalted. Moreover, we will then be drawn to hold Him in awe and achieve the highest level of awe in His regard, “on account that He is the Master and the Ruler.” (*Zohar*, Volume I, 11:2) Then, too, we will love Him with the most powerful love [that is humanly possible] – when we recognize that He, may He be blessed, loves us with an eternal love.

Based upon this trenchant analysis, the Berdichever now explicates the deepest depths of the wise son’s question:

This, then is the [meaning inherent in] the wise son’s question, “What are these testimonies, statutes and judgments that the L-rd our G-d commanded you?” Is it not enough [the wise son might add] that we have the *mitzvah* of *matzah*? Behold, from it alone we learn to fear and love the honored, great and awesome Name of Hashem! Therefore, of what need are the testimonies, statutes and judgments [when our ultimate spiritual goals have already been achieved through the *mitzvah* of *matzah*]?

We are now in a better position to understand the *Haggadah*’s answer to the wise son:

“Accordingly, you will say to him, as per the laws of the Pesach offering, ‘We may not eat

an *afikoman* [a dessert or other foods eaten after the meal] after [we are finished eating] the Pesach offering.” At first glance, this seems to have little to do with the wise son’s question. Based upon the Berdichever’s analysis of the *mitzvah* of *matzah*, however, we can recognize that it is the perfect response. According to the Berdichever, when the wise son asserts, “from it [the *mitzvah* of *matzah*] alone we learn to fear and love the honored, great and awesome Name of Hashem,” we must inform him that while this is surely necessary, it is insufficient. Judaism is far more than the pursuit of such ideals, since their inner meaning must be concretized in practical actions in order to bring *kedushah* (holiness) into the world. How is this achieved? Precisely through the performance of “the testimonies, statutes and judgments” that the L-rd our G-d commanded us – including, the law of not eating an *afikoman* after we have eaten the *korban Pesach* (Passover offering). In sum, the wise son needs to know that as crucial as the attainment of spiritual heights may be, they must ever be built upon the heartfelt performance of action-based *mitzvot*.

This Pesach, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to redouble our efforts to strengthen our relationship with Hashem through the performance of His *mitzvot*. Then may we be deserving to be true sons and daughters of Hashem; as the Torah states in *Sefer Devarim*: “You are children of the L-rd, your G-d...” *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:
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*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.