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## The Four Children Within

By Rabbi Kerry Olitzky

The Haggadah speaks of four children - four sons, actually - whose questions instigate the narrative retelling of the Passover story. While the idea may emerge from four separate people and represent four different perspectives, the personalities of these four children lie dormant in each of us, coming to the surface at different times, in different places, and in different contexts. The Haggadah may speak of four different people, but we realize that we are all of them.

### Preparation

Can you identify four people who are close to you who exhibit the characteristic of the four children in the seder? And when you are about to meet them individually or as a group, how do you prepare for such an encounter? Perhaps it is your one close friend who exhibits these different characteristics at different times. Whether we are speaking about the different attributes of one person or four people each representing a particular characteristic, our preparation to engaging with them is probably the same. We can't relate to everyone in the same way. Nor do we relate to the same person the same way each time. To nurture a relationship, therefore, we have to be attentive and responsive listeners. But even good listening is not enough - we have to listen intensely so that we might respond accordingly - when in popular jargon we say, "I hear you."

Similarly the Torah was given in different voices so that it could be heard by different people. One midrash teaches that the Torah was revealed in the seventy languages of the world so it could be fully understood. Another Midrash suggests that God revealed the Torah in 4,000,000 voices so each Israelite could hear it according to his or her ability. Yet, some people remain incapable of hearing the "how to" of Judaism. They only want to "do" Judaism. Everything else seems to pale in comparison to Jewish behaviors. Others are interested only in the "why" of Judaism. That is, the rational, the intellectual that speaks to them, and they may care little for ritual or ceremony. Still too many others

don't even know what to ask of the Torah - and may choose to walk away from it disengaged and unconnected as a result.

As we prepare for Passover we ready ourselves to listen to others. We ask God to open our hearts to others even as we ask the Holy One of Blessing to open our hearts to ourselves. Our ability to experience slavery, to make the journey through the desert, and to taste the freedom of the Promised Land helps us listen as the experience of others is told to us.

### **Looking Inside Ourselves**

It's easy to read about the four sons in the Haggadah and not give them much thought. We all know people who exclude themselves (evil), who are preoccupied with doing things according to the accepted convention (wise), who are foolish and do stupid things (not intellectually sophisticated), or who are so uninformed that they can't engage in a conversation (unable to ask questions). Some of these people may even be members of our own families. Perhaps they are our brothers and sisters-or our parents. We tried to be patient with them, although it is difficult at times. That's why the Seder (and it's preparation) is a lengthy process. Jewish tradition understands our human impatience and forces us to take the time to listen, to discuss, to respond thoughtfully and appropriately.

By identifying these four kinds of children in the Haggadah, our rabbis are also identifying four salient characteristics in each human being - in each of us. There are times when we all feel excluded (or intentionally isolate ourselves); when we wanted to do things just right (forgetting about why we wanted to do so in the first place); when we do or say things without thinking (even when we know better); or when we have no idea what someone else is talking about and don't want to appear uninformed or "look stupid" (so we refrain from asking questions). This is not a description of different people. This is us, who we are at different times in our lives, maybe even the same time. And it's because we are afraid of what others may think, or even afraid of what we think of ourselves, that anyone of these aspects of self becomes the salient element of self. When we are not prepared to acknowledge or confront this idea, then we indeed run the risk of becoming "children within" once again. Why do we sometimes feel excluded from the journey? Why are we meticulous about Passover preparation but not about the rest of our spiritual lives? What is it about Passover that we want to know even as we realize that we do not have enough knowledge to ask basic questions? Why do we sometimes ask absurd questions in order to avoid doing what we have just been critical of? Go ask the questions and then listen for the answers to emerge from inside of you.



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