

There is a famous story about Isidor I. Rabi, the Nobel laureate in physics, who was once asked why he decided to become a scientist rather than a doctor, lawyer, or businessman like most of the other children from his immigrant neighborhood. Rabi credited his career choice to his Mom. He wrote, "My mother made me a scientist without ever intending it. Every other Jewish mother in Brooklyn would ask her child after school: 'Nu? Did you learn something today?' But not my mother. She always asked me a different question. 'Izzy,' she would say, 'Did you ask a good question today?' That difference – asking good questions – made me become a scientist." (Donald Scheff, *New York Times*, Jan. 19, 1988)

This week we finally arrive at the holiday of questions, the sacred festival of Passover which begins on Monday night. We will gather around seder tables with family and friends, telling the tale of the Exodus and reciting an ancient liturgy, adding our own personal songs and traditions, recipes and family stories into the mix. For many of us, the iconic moment of the Passover seder is the singing of the Four Questions, an age-old rite of passage traditionally reserved for the very youngest amongst us. Some of us will remember warbling out these lines for the very first time, perhaps taunted or encouraged by older siblings and cousins; others will reminisce about teaching these verses to our children and grandchildren, delighting in their every word. Either way, the Four Questions are not only nostalgic but also essential. For as Rabi reminds us, the best learning comes through the asking of good questions which, of course, is the central task of the Passover seder in the first place!

Below you will find a Seder Source-pack that I have put together for the Four Questions – ideas for enhancing this particular section of the *Pesach* ritual. I hope that you might use some of these ideas and readings this year and save others for seders still to come. I look forward to hearing about the conversation – and hopefully the questions! – that these texts provoke.

All of us here at BHCBE join me in wishing you and your families a *chag kasher v'sameach* – a very happy and meaningful Passover!

Shabbat Shalom,  
Rabbi Annie Tucker

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## **The Four Questions: A Seder Source-pack**

***Created by Rabbi Annie Tucker  
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### **1. For The Poet**

I learned the Four Questions in the kitchen.

My mother handed me a towel and said: "I'll wash, you dry. I'll sing a few words, and you repeat."  
And so we sang, from the night after Purim, every night until I'd learned it all.

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I taught the Four Questions at bath time to two little ones, lithe and slippery as seals.

I'll sing a few words, and then you sing," I said. They loved to dip and splash for "*sh'tei f'amim*."  
And so we sang, from Purim to Pesach. Every night until they learned it all.

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This is a rite of passage. We learn our part and take our turn.

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Wine trembles in our cups. Candles flicker. Conversation stops.

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First we ask the prescribed questions. Then, we add our own.

-The Journey Continues: The Ma'ayan Passover Haggadah

## 2. For the Parent of Young Children

- Since the central goal of the seder rite is to inspire questions, encourage young guests (and older ones as well) to come up with those of their own by rewarding any good question asked with a piece of candy.
- Before singing the Four Questions, ask the youngest guests around your seder table to point out all the ways that this night actually *is* different from other nights (size of the table, number of guests, kinds of foods served, singing and other activities, etc.). Bonus points if they can explain why this is so!
- Tell the Four Questions a la Dr. Seuss:

Why is it only on Passover night we never know how to do anything right?

We don't eat our meals in the regular ways, the ways that we do on all other days.

Cause on all other nights we may eat

All kinds of wonderful bready treats,

Like big purple pizza that tastes like a pickle, crumbly crackers and pink pumpernickel,

Sassafras sandwich and tiger on rye, fifty falafels in pita, fresh-fried.

With peanut butter and tangerine sauce,

Spread onto each side up-and-down, then across,

And toasted whole-wheat bread with liver and ducks,

And crumpets and dumplings, and bagels with lox,

And doughnuts with one hole and doughnuts with four,

And cake with six layers and windows and doors.

Yes – on all other nights we eat all kind of bread, but tonight of all nights we munch matzah instead.

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And on all other nights we devour

Vegetables, green things, and bushes and flowers,

Lettuce that's leafy and candy-striped spinach,

Fresh silly celery (Have more when you're finished!)

Cabbage that's flown from the jungles of Glome

By a polka-dot bird who can't find his way home,

Daisies and roses and inside-out grass and artichoke hearts that are simply first-class!

Sixty asparagus tips served in glasses with anchovy sauce and some sticky molasses.

But on Passover night you would never consider, eating an herb that wasn't all bitter.

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And on all other nights you would probably flip, if anyone asked you how often you dip.

On some days I only dip one Bup-Bup egg in a teaspoon of vinegar mixed with nutmeg,

But sometimes we take more than ten thousand tails

Of the Yakkity-birds that are hunted in Wales,

And dip them in vats full of Mumbegum juice.

Then we feed them to Harold, our six-legged moose.

Or we don't dip at all! We don't ask your advice.  
So why on this night do we have to dip twice?

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And on all other nights we can sit as we please,  
On our heads on our elbows, our backs or our knees,  
Or hang by our toes from the tail of a Glump  
Or on top of a camel with one or two humps,  
With our foot on the table, our nose on the floor,  
With one ear in the window and one out the door,  
Doing somersaults over the greasy knishes, or dancing a jig without breaking the dishes.  
Yes – on all other nights you sit nicely while dining  
So why on this night must it all be reclining?

-Eliezer Lorne Segal in A Night of Questions Edited by Joy Levitt and  
Michael Strassfeld

### 3. For the Activist

- It happened when I was in Jerusalem several years ago, at a seder that was lovingly prepared. There we were in our linen clothes, fresh and eager to participate in the evening's ritual, the festival of freedom. We were planning to do our part to bring a better world into being. A young guest patiently listened to much talk of freedom and the end of slavery, and then voiced a question: "How can we sit here and celebrate our freedom when so many other people are now enslaved?" There was a silence. Then, tentatively, one by one, guests began trying to answer the question. And as the conversation haltingly continued, to my mind the real seder began.

This is the question I wait for every year. I have come to believe that the entire ritual of the seder is meant to evoke this question. We sit here together and extol and praise our freedom just so that we can ask how we dare to do so. How dare we spend the night singing to God about our freedom against the backdrop of an enslaved world?

-The Women's Seder Sourcebook edited by Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld et al.

- Passover is a special time when we gather with family and friends to retell the story of our people's freedom from bondage. We read from a prayer book, perform rituals that are thousands of years old, and eat A LOT of delicious and symbolic foods. Unfortunately, not everyone is lucky enough to have that luxury. Hunger in America is at an epidemic level. 50 million Americans – nearly 1 in 6 – struggle to put enough nutritious food on the table every day. One out of every five Israelis can't be sure when or if they'll have their next meal. These statistics are tragic, and they inspire our daily work. But at Passover, when it can seem as though the primary purpose of the Seder is to eat (and eat and eat), we feel the discomfort a bit more keenly. We set the stage early in the Seder, saying, "All who are hungry, let them enter and eat." We move ceremoniously through the haggadah, reminding ourselves that we once were slaves in Egypt and explaining the meaning of each bite we eat. But millions of Americans and Israelis have only a lack of food, which has a very different meaning – it is a reminder that they are *still* enslaved. This year, please join us as we again ask The Fifth Question: ***Why on this night are millions of people still going hungry?***

- *Incorporate The Fifth Question into your Passover Seder:* After the youngest person reads the four questions from the Haggadah, ask *The Fifth Question* and reflect as a group upon the crisis of hunger, why it persists and what you individually and collectively could do to end it.
- *Raise awareness about hunger in your community:* Contact your elected officials to advocate on behalf of those who so desperately need our help. Organize a campaign in your community to raise awareness about hunger.
- *Share your blessings:* Donate to MAZON. Give as much as you can or what you would have spent feeding one more person at your Seder table. After your Seder, tell your story to the extended MAZON family. Send us an email or post on our Facebook page to tell us about your discussion of The Fifth Question or your ideas for fighting hunger. Your words might inspire others to take action and fight hunger themselves!  
-<http://mazon.org/get-involved/the-fifth-question/>

#### 4. For the Language Lover

While we often recite the Four Questions in Hebrew and/or English at our seder tables, traditionally the questions and answers of the seder were recited in the vernacular or language of the people. Try asking the Four Questions in as many different foreign languages as possible. For extra fun, check out the site: <http://whyisthisnight.com/samples.html> before seder night or order the book 300 Ways to Ask the Four Questions by Murray Spiegel and Ricky Stein.

#### 5. For the Historian

It is the custom for the youngest child to ask the Four Questions. Actually, the Talmud states that *anyone* can ask them, even a scholar at a table of scholars, or, since the questions are somewhat rhetorical, a lone person celebrating a seder. The Four Questions were originally meant to be sample questions, but later they became integrated into the ritual. The Talmud relates that Abbaye was once present at a seder with his teacher Rabbah. When the dish with the Pesach foods was removed, Abbaye exclaimed: "We have not yet eaten. Why have they taken away the dish?" Rabbah replied: "You have exempted us from reciting *Mah nishtanah*" (Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 115b). From this incident we deduce that any relevant questions can serve as starting points.

In Temple times there were only three questions; they referred to (1) *matzah*, (2) dipping twice, and (3) the roasting of the *Pesach* offering. When dipping food, once standard practice at meals, was no longer fashionable, the second question was modified. After the destruction of the Temple, a question about *maror* was substituted for the question dealing with the sacrifices. The question about reclining was added at a later date.

Factors psychological as well as logical determine the protocol of the seder. The meal used to come before the Four Questions so that these could reasonably relate to the foods which had already been eaten. But it seemed to the sages that the attention of the participants waned after the wining and dining, and so the narration was advanced and the repast delayed.

Why are these questions asked and never directly answered in the Haggadah? To this question there are more than four answers:

1. Questioning is a sign of freedom, proof that we are free to investigate, to analyze, to satisfy our intellectual curiosity.

2. The simplest question can have many answers, sometimes complex and contradictory ones, even as life itself is fraught with complexity and contradictions. To see everything as good or bad, *matzah* or *maror*, is to be enslaved to simplicity.
3. The Haggadah challenges us to ask ourselves whether we are asking the right questions.
4. To accept that not every question has an answer, that not every problem can be neatly resolved, is another stage of liberation. In the same way that questioning is a sign of freedom, acknowledging that some things are beyond our understanding is a sign of faith. Says Rabbi Wolfe of Zhitomir: "For the believer, there is no question; for the non-believer there is no answer."
5. When we find the answers for ourselves, we find ourselves experiencing and understanding the true meaning of the Exodus.

-Passover Haggadah: The Feast of Freedom published by the Rabbinical Assembly

## **6. For the Feminist**

At all other seders, we hear the stories of our forefathers, but the voices of our mothers are silent.

*Tonight they will be heard.*

At all other seders, the heroic deeds of our sisters Miriam, Yocheved, Shifra and Puah are kept hidden.

*Tonight we will celebrate their courage.*

At all other seders, we denounce the Pharaoh of the past.

*Tonight we will also examine the pharaohs of our day.*

At all other seders we rejoice only in our liberation as a people.

*Tonight we also celebrate our empowerment as Jewish women.*

-The Dancing with Miriam Haggadah by Elaine Moise and Rebecca Schwartz

## **7. For the One Who Loves Discussion**

After asking how this night is different from all other nights, you might want to take this opportunity to go around the table and have people share: How am I different tonight and this year from previous years? What has changed this year? This can be a wonderful way to mark the changes and differences in and around us, as well as a way to "catch up" with the many guests at the seder table.

-A Night to Remember by Mishael and Noam Zion