

One of my favorite renderings of “The Four Children,” the section of the Passover *haggadah* where we are instructed to teach the learners around our seder table each according to his or her disposition and ability, displays four books: one open with Hebrew writing, one open with blank pages, one open with fire erupting from the spine, and the last closed. At first glance, it seems like the burning book must correspond to the “wicked” child – particularly when one notices that the picture was created by David Wander in [The Haggadah in Memory of the Holocaust](#). There can be nothing more sacrilegious than setting holy words aflame, as we remember all too well from the horrors of Nazi Germany.

Yet studying this text in *hevruta* (with a partner) some years back, my friend Elianna suggested that perhaps the fiery book was instead the “wise” child – burning with curiosity and passion – while the “wicked” child was represented by the closed tome, its shuttered binding a rejection of tradition. We may wrestle with the stories of our people; we may challenge them or seek to re-interpret them or even, at times, struggle to find them relevant and meaningful in our lives. As long as we leave the book open, however, we are actively engaging with our Judaism in all of its fullness. This makes us most wise indeed.

The “Four Children” has always been my most favorite part of the *haggadah*, and below you will find a Seder Supplement that I have put together this year – ideas for enhancing this section of the *Pesach* ritual. As the text itself reminds us, each guest at our table comes with different interests and skills, questions and areas of expertise, and it is our job as seder leader to craft an experience that will speak to each of these unique participants. I hope that you might use some of the attached ideas and readings this year and save others for seders still to come. I look forward to hearing about the conversation that these texts provoke.

Wise. Wicked. Simple. Not Knowing How to Ask. Wishing all of us, and the various guests that we will welcome seder night, an early *Chag Sameach* - a very happy holiday.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Annie Tucker

The Four Children: A Seder Supplement ***Prepared by Rabbi Annie Tucker***

1. For the Musician...

The Ballad of the Four Children (sung to the tune of “Clementine”)
Said the father to his children, “At the seder you will dine.
You will eat your fill of matzah; you will drink four cups of wine.”

Now this father had no daughters, but his sons they numbered four.
One was wise and one was wicked, one was simple and a bore.
And the fourth was sweet and winsome; he was young and he was small.
While his brothers asked the questions, he could scarcely speak at all.
Said the wise one to his father, "Would you please explain the laws
of the customs of the seder, will you please explain the cause?"
And the father proudly answered, "As our fathers ate in speed,
ate the paschal lamb 'ere midnight and from slavery were freed.
So we follow their example and 'ere midnight must complete.
All the seder and we should not after twelve remain to eat."
Then did sneer the son so wicked. "What does all this mean to you?"
And the father's voice was bitter as his grief and anger grew.
"If yourself you don't consider as a son of Israel,
then for you this has no meaning. You could be a slave as well."
Then the simple son said simply, "What is this?" and quietly
the good father told his offspring "We were freed from slavery."
But the youngest one was silent, for he could not ask at all.
His bright eyes were wide with wonder as his father told him all.
My dear children, heed the lesson and remember evermore.
What the father told his children, told his sons that numbered four.

2. For the Feminist...

The daughter in search of a usable past. *Ma hi omeret?* What does she say? "Why didn't the Torah count women among the '600,000 men on foot, aside from children,' who came out of Egypt? And why did Moses say at Sinai, 'Go not near a woman,' addressing only men, as if preparation for Revelation was not meant for us, as well?" Because she already understands that Jewish memory is essential to our identity, teach her that history is made by those who tell the tale. If Torah did not name and number women, it is up to us to fill the empty spaces of our holy texts.

And the daughter who wants to erase her difference. *Ma hi omeret?* Why does she say? "Why must you keep pushing your women's questions into every text? And why are these women's issues so important to you?" "To you" and not "to me." Since she so easily forgets the struggles of her mothers and sisters, you must tell her the story of your own journey to the seder table and invite her to join you in thanking God for the blessing of being a Jewish woman.

And the daughter who does not know that she has a place at the table. *Ma hi omeret?* Why does she say? "What is this?" Because she doesn't realize that her question is, in itself, a part of the seder tradition, teach her that the Haggadah is an extended conversation about liberation, and tell her that her insights and questions are also the text.

And the daughter who asks no questions? You must say to her, "Your questions, when they come, will liberate you from Egypt. This is how it is and has always been with your mothers and grandmothers. From the moment Yocheved, Miriam, and the midwives questioned Pharaoh's edict until today, every question we ask helps us to leave Egypt farther behind."

3. For the Active Learner...

- Designate four corners of your dining room as “wise,” “wicked,” “simple,” and “does not know how to ask.”
- Ask seder guests to rise from their seats and choose the corner that best describes the kind of “child” they are when it comes to the following list of activities (read one-by-one, with time for guests to select a corner in between):
 1. Playing baseball
 2. Cooking
 3. Algebra
 4. Speaking Japanese
 5. Being a good friend
 6. Singing
 7. Using the latest technology
 8. Being Jewish
- Come back to the table and discuss:
 - What are some of the things you noticed doing this activity? What might this teach us about the text of the four children?
 - How does it feel to be wise/wicked/simple/not knowing how to ask? What kinds of support from others can be helpful (or unhelpful) in these situations?
 - How did you “rank yourself” on question number eight, the one about being Jewish? What kinds of things get in the way of our always being “wise” when it comes to our Judaism and what might we do to increase our knowledge and sense of connection?

4. For the Parent...

Some scholars believe there are four kinds of parents as well. The Wise Parent is an utter bore. Listen closely, because you are younger than I am,” says the Wise Parent, “and I will go on and on about Jewish history, based on some foggy memories of my own religious upbringing, as well as an article in a Jewish journal I have recently skimmed.” The Wise Parent must be faced with a small smile of dim interest. The Wicked Parent tries to cram the story of our liberation into a set of narrow opinions about the world. “The Lord let us out of Egypt,” the Wicked Parent says, “which is why I support a bloodthirsty foreign policy and am tired of certain types of people causing problems.” The Wicked Parent should be told in a firm voice, “With a strong hand God rescued the Jews from bondage, but it was my own clumsy hand that spilled hot soup in your lap.”

The Simple Parent does not grasp the concept of freedom. “There will be no macaroons until you eat all of your brisket,” says the Simple Parent, at a dinner honoring the liberation of oppressed peoples. “Also, stop slouching at the table.” In answer to such statements, the Wise Child will roll his eyes in the direction of the ceiling and declare, “Let my people go!”

The Parent Who Is Unable to Inquire had had too much wine, and should be excused from the table.

5. For The One Who Loves Discussion...

Four more questions for the seder table:

1. What do you think about the four children in this text? Have they each fairly “earned” their label? Is there another name that we might instead give to the “wicked” child? Why might it be important to have individuals like him in our families and our communities?
2. What do you think of the four parents in this text? Are there different answers you might give instead to these children?
3. Why do you think the haggadah chooses to label these four children? What is the potential danger in doing so? What is the greater message that this text is trying to send us about teaching and about child-rearing?
4. If you were to add a fifth child to the seder, who would it be and why?

6. For the Activist...

The Wise One: I want to know where this *matzah*, this brisket, this chocolate cake came from? Is the food at this feast truly sanctified? Has the meat that is giving me pleasure been processed by someone who is too young to be working? By someone who is paid the wages of a slave? With what research tools and by what methods may I identify food which is in every way kosher?

The Wicked One: How is it my problem if that animal whose flesh I enjoy tonight suffered as it lived and died? Why should I be concerned if the women my parents have hired to serve and clean up our large gathering cannot go home until after the buses have stopped running?

The Simple One: Who harvested all the produce at our seder and how are their lives blessed or plagued? What dishes can we make from fruits and vegetables grown near our home or frozen in season and stored for tonight? What is a carbon footprint?

The One Who Does Not Know How To Ask A Question: I just want to celebrate this happy holiday and not disturb myself with large issues I cannot possibly understand or problems that are too vast to be solved.

-Merle Feld, *This is the Bread of Affliction Food and Justice Haggadah Supplement*

7. For the Historian...

The section of the Haggadah which speaks of the “four sons” is a brilliant example of the subtlety and creativity of rabbinic interpretation. It is based on the fact that in four places in the Torah (three in Exodus 12-13, one in Deuteronomy 6), reference is made to parents instructing their children on the

meaning of Jewish practice by relating it to the exodus. True to their conviction that no word in the Torah was superfluous, they did not see these passages as mere repetition. Each teaches something new. Passionate about education and ultra-sensitive to nuances in the biblical text, the rabbis sensed that the four verses were about different kinds of children. Three included questions, but were of varying levels of sophistication and therefore signaled children of different temperaments and abilities. The fourth, which made no reference to a question, must refer to the child who has not yet reached the stage of asking. The passage as it stands testifies to the centrality of education in Jewish life, and especially to the role of parents as teachers.

From the evidence of parallel passages in the rabbinic literature, it seems likely that the text as it appears in the Haggadah was the result of several centuries of debate and a long process of editing. There exist, in writings from the Mishnaic period and also from the Jerusalem Talmud, sources which read like early drafts on which the Haggadah text was based. Of great interest, though, is the fact that in two sources [the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* below and a similar text from the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*] we find reference not to the “four sons” but the “wicked son” alone:

“And when your children say...” (Exodus 12:26). [This implied that] in the future, some may say, “What does this service mean to you?” One who says “to you” is a wicked person who excludes himself from the community. [In reply] you too should exclude him from the community by saying, “Because of what God did for me” – meaning “He did this for me – not you.” (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*)

The two men - Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai - lived in the second century CE, through one of Judaism’s most turbulent and tragic eras. They witnessed the ferocity of Rome in suppressing Jewish life. They saw Jews defect from Judaism – some to ally themselves with Rome itself, others to join the new Christian sect. Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Shimon were different personality types, the former a rationalist, the latter a mystic, but they were both intensely loyal to Jewish identity and destiny and shared a sense of distress, verging on anger, at Jews who left the fold. We can now place their comments on “the wicked son” in a specific historical context. It was not Pesach as such, nor were they speaking about young children. They were talking about Jews who, seeing the fall of Jerusalem and the rise of Rome, changed sides and allied themselves to forces that were in the ascendant. This was, for the rabbis, a kind of betrayal.

-*Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’ Haggadah* by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

8. For the Artist...

An enormous amount of art has been produced visually depicting the four children and recasting these different personalities using a variety of different metaphors. An online gallery of such art (along with explanations of the pictures) may be found at <http://www.haggadahrus.com/4childrenGallery4.htm>

and images can be printed and shared around the seder table to serve as the basis of discussion. Below I've included just a few examples.

Guests, particularly children, can also be encouraged to make their own picture of the four children before Pesach to share on seder night (or participants could be asked around the seder table how they might capture the four children visually). Individuals need not stick simply to human representations as David Wander's image below reminds us. Working with 5th graders in New York many years ago, some of my religious school students recast the four children as "four shoes," "four animals," and "four objects in nature" amongst other things.