

The Freedom to Question: Passover's Central Message

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Of all the rituals of the Passover Seder, the Four Questions and its infectious tune, are probably the most well-known.

In fact, the tradition is that the youngest person at the table, almost always a child, would ask the questions. I remember reading stories about survivors holding their first Passover Seders after liberation and sadly noting that there were no children to ask the Four Questions, since no children in their circles had survived.

But getting back to the Seder, and all its rich customs: Much of it is specifically aimed at children, to stir up their curiosity and prompting them to ask questions.

This points to the importance we place on ensuring our children are engaged in our traditions – and, for the purposes of tonight's sermon – the critical role that questioning has in a free society.

I'm not a sociologist or a political scientist, but my guess is that one of the reasons Western societies score much higher in the 2023 World Happiness Index (where Israel is number 4, Canada is number 13) is because they are liberal democracies.

In fact every country appearing in the top 20 of the list is a liberal democracy - free and open societies, where the ability to question is uninhibited, and in fact encouraged – whether it's the current government, established norms, scientific theories or long standing traditions.

The freedom to question and challenge is the life blood of democracy and a vital ingredient in the success, progress and well-being of any given society. Religion, Science, Industry, Academics, Medicine, Culture, Ethics – virtually every aspect of society and human progress is improved by an atmosphere that fosters and encourages open ended questioning of the status quo.

By contrast, during their slavery in Egypt, the Children of Israel were not allowed to question their lowly status or the arbitrary humiliations and murderous policies that Pharaoh inflicted upon them.

A well-known story from the Holocaust is told by Primo Levi in *Survival in Auschwitz*.

Shortly after Levi first arrived in Auschwitz he saw an icicle hanging from one of the barracks. Attempting to relieve his parched throat Levi reached for the icicle only to have it snatched away by a Nazi guard.

“Why?” the naïve Levi asked the guard yet unfamiliar with the alien rules of “Planet Auschwitz.”

The guard responded bluntly: “There is no why here.”

There is no “why” in Auschwitz.

This simple story illustrates the grim reality of a universe created primarily for the purpose of causing human suffering and ultimately murder. Where rules existed for the sole reason of crushing the human spirit and where this cruel intention was made amply known to the prisoners.

In Auschwitz there is no why!

Any place you can’t even ask why – is not a good place to be.

So it’s no wonder that during our Festival of Freedom that the role of questioning assumes such a prominent place.

Indeed in the Talmud, the preeminent Jewish text after the Torah, *Shakla V’Tarya*, Question and Answer, is the very essence of its content. Page after page is filled with questions, followed by answers, followed by even more questions.

There is the famous story of the rabbinic sage, whose study partner died. He was replaced with another study partner who he was unhappy with. This partner, he complained, brings me multiple proofs for everything I said. My last study partner, challenged me on every point, forcing me to sharpen my own thoughts.ⁱ

One of the most challenging questions in the Talmud is this: – why do righteous people often suffer while wicked people prosper? Indeed, this is a question that has echoed throughout the centuries, to our modern day and age – where we so often hear the question: where was God during the Holocaust?

And as difficult as this question is - even in the most traditional circles, the question is still asked and never discouraged.

But even good values have their limitations. As the famous quote goes, “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.”

So while, in principle, questioning is a positive value, it is not always the case:

In the Torah – we can find both good and bad examples of questions. So let’s begin with 3 examples of questions that were not asked in good faith. I will then conclude with three more positive examples:

1) The Snake and Eve in the Garden of Eden.
The text reads:

Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman: 'Yea, hath God said: Ye shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'

Now the snake very well knew what God had instructed Adam and Eve, but he was just trying to engage Eve in a conversation, to tempt her to eat the forbidden fruit.

2) Cain and God’s conversation after Cain murdered Abel (Genesis 4:9)
The text reads:
And the LORD said unto Cain: 'Where is Abel thy brother?' And he said: 'I know not; am I my brother's keeper?'

Cain had just murdered Abel – and he knew very well what had become of his brother. But he was just trying to dissemble, stall and distract from revealing the awful crime he had committed against his brother.

3) Korach’s rebellion against Moses in the desert (Numbers 16:3)
The text reads:
They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?"

Moses was the most modest and humble man who ever lived according to the Torah – He gave up being the Prince of Egypt to flee to the desert to become a simple shepherd. God had to twist his arm to assume the leadership of the Children of Israel. It was in fact, Korach who was the demagogue – the first populist if you will - who yearned for the trappings of power – but cloaked his lust for authority by asking why Moses had raised himself above others – when that's exactly what Korach wanted for himself.

Now let's turn to 3 positive examples of questioning in the Torah:

4) God's questioning of Adam after they eat the forbidden fruit. (Genesis 3:8)

The text reads:

And they heard the voice of the God walking in the garden toward the cool of the day; and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the God amongst the trees of the garden. And God called unto the man, and said unto him: 'Where art thou?'

Where are you?

God knew very well where Adam was but he wanted to give Adam space to come clean, to explain himself, to repent, rather than cornering him right away. Another explanation: Where are you spiritually, morally, ethically in your life – a question God demands of us, and a question our consciences should be asking ourselves every day, as long as we are alive.

5) Abraham challenging God regarding the fate of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah who are about to be destroyed (Genesis 18:23)

And Abraham drew near and said: 'Wilt Thou indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty righteous within the city.Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?'

Abraham was telling God:

You are God, the supreme judge, and therefore you must practice supreme justice – it's axiomatic.

For me, that's the most important line in the whole Torah – not even God, and certainly no human being, is above the law, or is above the principle of justice

6) The Prophet Micah's Summary of Religion (Micah 6:8)

The text reads:

It hath been told thee, O man, what is good, and what does God require of thee? only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God

I know of no more noble or succinct summary than those of the Prophet Micah - to practice justice, love mercy and do it all with humility before God.

So those are just a few biblical examples of the right and wrong forms of questioning.

But even in the Haggadah itself we see a distinction between good questions and those less desired. In the famous passage about the Four Sons, the difference between the wise son and the wicked son is that the wicked son asks his question in a mocking and sneering tone. He is not really interested in an answer or the truth. (If you remember – the wicked son asks: What are all these things to you? The Haggadah labels this question as evil because the son removes himself from the community, by asking what the observance of Passover means to you - and not to him.)

In terms of modern day equivalences of disingenuous questions – think of the former President Trump falsely questioning Barak Obama's country of birth. Or more recently, of Tucker Carlson asking questions about COVID 19, or vaccines, or gun control, or election fraud or January 6th – the list goes on. Tucker Carlson constantly proclaims that, "I'm just asking questions" but we all know the extremist agenda he is shilling for - one that firmly believes that vaccines don't work, that the 2020 Presidential election was stolen and that Jan. 6th rioters were just your average ma and pa tourists.

But Carlson insists on cloaking himself with the innocent, democratic and journalistic sounding, "I'm just asking questions" bromide.

But we know better!

So to summarize: the holiday of Passover celebrates freedom and reminds us the ability to question is a hallmark of free societies.

What kinds of questions are to be encouraged?

Those motivated by genuine curiosity, a desire to understand, a wish to improve the world, and where you don't seek to humiliate the person you are asking the question of.

To be discouraged?

Where you're not really interested in the truth, where you want shame someone else, where you are seeking to promote a hidden agenda, or are planning a power grab, or where you are trying to promote needless strife.

Conclusion:

Let me conclude with one last story:

Isidore Rabi, the winner of the Nobel Prize for physics, was once asked how he became a scientist. His answer?

"My mother made me a scientist without ever knowing it. Every other child would come back from school and be asked, 'What did you learn today?' But my mother used to say, 'Izzy, did you ask a good question today?' That made the difference. Asking good questions made me into a scientist."

So his mother did not ask him, 'What did you learn today?' But instead: Did you ask a good question today?

What a wonderful approach to education!

I wish you wonderful Seders – full of uplifting singing, delicious food, stimulating discussion – but perhaps most importantly – thoughtful and profound questions, questions with the intention to bring the light of peace, knowledge and freedom to our lives and to all humanity!

Chag Sameach!

ⁱ Ultimately, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, Reish Lakish, died. Rabbi Yohanan was sorely pained over losing him. The Rabbis said: Who will go to calm Rabbi Yohanan's mind and comfort him over his loss? They said: Let Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat go, as his statements are sharp, i.e., he is clever and will be able to serve as a substitute for Reish Lakish. Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat went and sat before Rabbi Yohanan. With regard to every matter that Rabbi Yohanan would say, Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat would say to him: There is a ruling which is taught in a baraita that supports your opinion. Rabbi Yohanan said to him: Are you comparable to the son of Lakish? In my

discussions with the son of Lakish, when I would state a matter, he would raise twenty-four difficulties against me in an attempt to disprove my claim, and I would answer him with twenty-four answers, and the halakha by itself would become broadened and clarified. And yet you say to me: There is a ruling which is taught in a baraita that supports your opinion. Do I not know that what I say is good? Being rebutted by Reish Lakish served a purpose; your bringing proof to my statements does not. (Bava Metzia 84a - <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/128022.28?lang=bi>)