



SHALOM HARTMAN INSTITUTE

PESACH GUIDE

Part One

The Four Children: Comparing the Torah and the Midrash

By Noam Zion

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The “question-answer” method is the fundamental educational cornerstone structured into the Seder night. It must be implemented with great skill on the part of the Seder leader if genuine communication with the younger generation is to be achieved.

In our opinion, the Midrash of the Four Children illustrates this educational skill, which includes three stages:

- To stimulate questions and queries;
- To determine the intellectual level and emotional approach of the child posing the question;
- To formulate an appropriate response, which will promote the younger generation’s identification with the generation of the parents.

The Maggid section of the Passover Haggadah provides Seder leaders with the material needed to follow through these stages, according to the guidelines set by the Mishna.

They fill a second cup for the seder leader. At this stage the child questions the parent. If, however, the child lacks intelligence, the parent teaches the child: Why (or how) is this night different from all other nights?! . . . According to the child’s level of intelligence (or mind-set), the parent teaches the child, beginning with the degrading aspect of the narrative and concluding with uplifting aspect (Mishna Pesachim 10:2)

Activities to stimulate questions:

At the beginning of the Maggid section, we encounter a number of ceremonies using wine and “bread” (matzah). These rituals are contrary to the expectations of those familiar with the regular customs performed on the Sabbath and holidays.

The Maggid section begins with the pouring of a second cup of wine, following the completion of the holiday kiddush (unlike the custom on Friday nights, when the kiddush is immediately followed by the washing of the hands and eating challah).

After the second cup is poured, the special matzah of the Seder night is raised, accompanied by the explanation of Ha Lahma Anya - “This is the bread of our poverty and persecution.” And indeed, the matzah we eat on the Seder night must be “poor” - it may not be enriched by any added ingredients.

The matzah is then broken in half in the Yahatz ceremony. Again the Seder is in complete contrast to the custom on the Sabbath or holidays, when we are careful to make the blessing over two whole challahs, which are often enriched with egg and sesame seeds.

The Questions

These deviations from normal procedure might already stimulate queries from an inquiring, very knowledgeable and alert child, and clearly these questions go beyond the traditional Four Questions to be asked by the youngest child “who does not yet have knowledge.”

Only after questions have been raised, does the Maggid section - whose express goal is to provide answers to the concrete inquiries put forth by the younger generation - begin.

General Response

“We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt” (Deuteronomy 6:4) - this is how the historical story begins. It provides a general answer to the questions that have been posed. But this sentence is not sufficiently detailed and it certainly does not provide a satisfactory response to the particular questions that may come up.

After all, the possibilities are endless. Therefore, the parent must be prepared to be flexible in the Haggadah procedure in order to satisfy the curiosity of all the children. How is the parent to learn the art of the great educator dealing with heterogeneous pupils?

The Midrash of the Four Children is part of the Maggid section of the Haggadah. It illustrates for parents how to distinguish among the various types of questions and how to vary the responses according to the educational principles laid out in the Mishna - “that the parent must teach each child according to his or her individual ability” (intelligence or mindset).

It is inconceivable that the authors of the Haggadah expected the Seder leader to make do with a mere reading of the Haggadah from Ha lachma anya on and that this would be sufficient to fulfill the role of educator. It is clear that the Seder leader is required to provide appropriate responses going far beyond the minimal story and commentary provided by the traditional Haggadah.

How did the Rabbis generate the educational approach of this midrash? This article will try to trace this creative process. The creativity index for the Rabbis is the ingenuity to build a bridge between the literal text and the interpretive midrash and the ability to take the conceptual nucleus in the Torah and develop it into a sophisticated idea in the midrash. Let us compare the raw materials in the Torah with the midrashic product.

The differences among the Four Children in the Torah and in the Midrash

The Torah does not mention four different children, but rather four cases in which the older generation provides answers to questions posed by children - directly or indirectly - concerning the Exodus from Egypt.

The authors of the midrash collected the four cases, discerned the intention of each questioner according to the four categories that they invented for this purpose: wise, wicked, simple and one who does not know how to ask. They then formulated responses that deviate from the answers provided by the Torah, in accordance with the midrashic understanding of the typical questioner.

Where do these four categories come from? In the Bible, the categories generally come in pairs. The Gaon of Vilna (18th Century) points out that in the book of Proverbs, the common pair categories are: the wise person and the simpleton or fool, on one hand, and the wicked person and the morally simple/pure one, on the other.

Wickedness and simpleness are moral categories that contrast slyness and hostility with innocence and righteousness. But the wise person and the fool are intellectual categories with implications for wise or practical behavior, as opposed to foolish words and actions.

In light of these comments, we can say that the wicked and simple children of the Four Children reflect a moral criterion, while the wise child and the one who does not know how to ask reflect an intellectual one.

In this midrash, however, when the pairs are combined, new distinctions are born. The simple child becomes the reverse of the wise child, and not only of the wicked one. Consequently, in the Jerusalem version of this midrash, the simple child is called “stupid,” using an intellectual criterion.

Correspondingly, the wise child becomes the converse of the wicked as well. Here the wicked’s immorality is measured by showing disrespect, ingratitude and active alienation from one’s parents and their tradition.

The wicked child’s question is “What does this service mean to you?” (Exodus 12:26). By contrast, the wise child is supposed to show active identification with and interest in the Seder. That is why careful readers who compare the formulation of the wise and the wicked child’s question ask pointedly - but doesn’t the wise child distance him/herself from God (in the same way as the wicked one) when the wise one says: “What are the testimonies, the statues and the laws which the Lord our God has commanded you?” (Deuteronomy 6:20).

It is no surprise that the Jerusalem version of this midrash changes the question to “commanded us” in order to emphasize the distance between it and the question of the wicked child, “What does this service mean to you?” (Exodus 12:26) - “You and not him.”

Let us now trace the creative and conscious game the author of the midrash plays when working with the raw materials provided by the Torah.

The “Wise” Child in the Torah Deuteronomy 6:20-25

When your child asks you tomorrow: “What is our obligation to these testimonies, laws and regulations that the Lord our God has commanded you?”

Then you are to say to your child: We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord took us out of Egypt with a strong hand;

The Lord placed signs and wonders, great and evil ones, on Egypt, on Pharaoh and all his house, before our eyes.

And God took us out of there in order to bring us, to give us the land that God swore to our ancestors;

So the Lord has commanded us to observe all these laws, to hold the Lord our God in awe, for our own good all the days to come, to keep us alive as we are this day.

And it shall be considered just on our parts, if we take care to do all these commandments before the Lord our God, as God has commanded us.

In the context of the Book of Deuteronomy, the verse, “when your child asks you tomorrow” relates to the generation gap. The parents are the Children of Israel standing on the plains of Moab, in preparation for their entry into the Land of Israel, after wandering in the desert for 40 years.

Only the oldest ones among them remember their childhood in Egypt and the revelation at Sinai, and that is why Moses must review the past and draw educational conclusions that will be relevant for the future. The children of tomorrow, of whom Moses is speaking, will be born in the Land of Israel. They will not share the personal memories of the slaves from Egypt who were present at the revelation at Sinai, or of the generation of the desert that renewed the covenant with the Lord on the plains of Moab.

These first *sabras* will certainly ask questions about the ceremonial and legal tradition that was born out of the events of the exile. “What is our obligation to these testimonies, statues and laws which the Lord our God commanded you?”

This question does not stem from wickedness or hypocritical piousness. They will genuinely want to learn the historical background from which their parents’ commitment to the social and religious order in the Land of Israel sprang.

“You” - refers to the parents that God commanded directly, not to themselves. Therefore, it will be only natural for the native-born children to ask why does what God commanded “you” oblige “us” as well.

Before answering their question, let us try to understand why it is this question, according to the author of the midrash, that is attributed to the wise child. Let us examine the reasons and clues provided by the Bible. The question that appears in Deuteronomy 6:20

is appropriate for the person who is intellectually capable and whose faith is pure because:

- It is the longest of all the questions.
- The abstract concepts and fine distinctions among the various legal terms (testimonies, statutes, laws) are based on extensive knowledge.
- It implies awareness of God's authority and the child's acceptance of "our God."

If we return to the Biblical question, it is clear that the question of the wise child does not boil down to, "What are the details of these commandments," but rather, "Why do they bind you and us?"

Now it is clear why the answer does not list testimonies, statutes and law, but rather relates the history of the delivery of the generation of the grandparents, as if it were the personal history of the parents ("We were slaves unto Pharaoh in Egypt"). This is followed by the history of the delivery of the generation of the parents, who gained a land of their own. ("God brought us out of there so that God could take us and give us the land that had been promised on oath to our ancestors.")

The answer stresses that the Exodus from Egypt contributed directly to the generation of the children, now living in their own land, because of God's constancy to the parents. The obligation to observe the commandments stems not only from the authority of God the redeemer, but also from the people's gratitude. ("And it shall be just on our parts if we take care to do all these commandments before the Lord our God, as God has commanded us." Deut. 6:25).

The commandments are not only a reminder of the redemption of the past, but are additionally a "gift" to the generation of the parents and the children. The commandments preserve their lives - "And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes . . . for our good always, that God might preserve us alive as it is this day." (Deut. 6:24).

The Torah understood all the problems of the generation that did not experience the exile (and in our generation - the Holocaust) and the entry into the Land of Israel (and in our times - the generation of 1948 or even that of the Six Day War).

In every generation, the children are liable to ask, "Why am I obliged to observe Jewish tradition?" What is the relevance of this history to my life? The Torah gives a twofold answer:

The history of the past generated the present as we know it and creates an obligation to show gratitude. And in the language of the Haggadah: "If the Lord had not taken our ancestors out of Egypt, we, and our children, and our children's children would still be slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt."

The value of the commandments and the Jewish way of life continue to exist to this day. This is a living Torah that benefits the Jewish people and strengthens it.

For parents who want to base their answer to their children on the model of Book of Deuteronomy, the Seder night is a fitting opportunity for the child to ask the most natural and inevitable question: “Why should I continue to be a Jew committed to any Jewish tradition?”

The parents will have to show the part our ancestors played in Jewish history, how the past has affected the present, and how the present is the direct result of the past. They must also discuss the current significance of preserving tradition and how it can contribute to the quality of life of our generation.

This is no easy task, but it is the central dialogue of the Seder. It is much more important than just reading from the Haggadah. It is the “haggadah” in its literal sense of “you shall tell your children.”

The Wise Child in the Midrash

When the authors of the midrash took the question out of the context of the Book of Deuteronomy and provided it with a new answer (taken from the tractate of Pesachim), they changed the essence of the question in its Biblical context.

The wise child of the midrash does not ask about the meaning of the laws and why they bind him or her - as can be understood from a literal reading of the verses in Deuteronomy. The wise child is asking about the details of the Biblical law as developed in the Mishna.

The wise child has already passed the initial stage of learning the Biblical text (according to the tradition laid out in The Ethics of the Fathers: “Bible should be taught from age five, and Mishna from age six”).

That is why the response to the wise and somewhat older child involves the section of the Tractate Pesachim, which concludes with the mishna, “Nothing should be eaten after the Afikoman.” The “laws” that interest the wise child in the Haggadah are not the Ten Commandments or the laws of the covenant on the plains of Moab as mentioned in Ch. 6 of Deuteronomy.

He is interested in the laws of the Paschal lamb and the Seder night. The focus of the midrash has been reduced from Judaism in general to the specifics of the Seder night. That is why the parents who respond to the wise child in the spirit of the midrash must be very well versed in the details and minutiae of the law, so that they prepare the child to take his or her place in the next generation as a Seder leader who meticulously follows all the laws and statutes.

Tradition cannot be passed on exclusively by means of emotions, e.g. a feeling of identification (“In every generation, one is obligated to see oneself as one who personally

went out of Egypt”). Practical knowledge is vital in order for the ceremony and ritual to be passed on to the next generation. But is that enough?

The “Wicked Child” in the Torah Exodus 12:22-27

Take a hyssop, dip it in the blood (of the Pesach lamb) in the basin and touch the lintel cord and the two door posts . . .

When God sees the blood, the Lord will pass over the entrance . . .

You are to keep this commandment as a law for you and your children forever.

Now it will be, when you come to the land which the Lord will give you, as promised, you are to keep this rite.

And when your children say to you: “What does this ritual mean to you?”

Then say: It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Children of Israel in Egypt, when God struck Egypt and our houses were rescued.

In the Biblical context, the “wicked” child is not wicked at all, and the question posed seems natural enough. In the midst of the preparations for the evening of the Plague of the Firstborns, the Torah describes not only the details of how the lintels were smeared with the blood of the Paschal lamb, but also the questions that the children are likely to ask about this ritual in coming generations.

“And it shall come to pass, when you shall come to the land . . . and you shall keep this service. And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’”

“This service” is the ritual of marking the lintel with the blood of the Paschal lamb, which was supposed to continue in the Land of Israel, as a reminder of the Plague of the Firstborns and how the Children of Israel were saved: “. . . God passed over the houses of the Children of Israel in Egypt”

However, if the Jewish people continue the blood ritual after the Exodus from Egypt, in subsequent Passovers far from the fear of the plague of the first born, then “this service” will arouse natural astonishment not only in the rebellious or wicked child, but rather in an entire generation of sabras - “Your children” - who did not experience the fear of the Egyptian exile firsthand and who want to be provided with historical information that can explain the extremely unusual ritual.

The Torah apparently left the rite of the blood as a permanent law to serve as an educational device. It is clear that its original purpose - to serve as a sign to protect the homes of the Children of Israel from the plague of the firstborn - is no longer relevant.

The blood joins a series of historical symbols (like the matzah and the maror) that not only recreate the experience of the original Pesach night, but also arouse questions among the generation of the children, serving as a convenient springboard for the parents to tell the story they want to tell.

The Wicked Child in the Midrash

“Whatever does this service mean to you?” (Exodus 12:26)

Emphasizing “you” and not him or herself! And because the child excludes him or herself from the community and rejects a major principle of faith, you should also “set that child’s teeth on edge” and say: “It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt” (Exodus 13:8) “Me” and not that child. Had that child been there, he or she would not have been redeemed.

Alternative Midrash of the Wicked Child from the Jerusalem Talmud

What does the wicked child say?

“Whatever does this service (or work) mean to you?” (Exodus 12:26).

What is this drudgery that you bother us with year in and year out?

Because the child excludes him/herself from the community, similarly you should say to the child (or regarding the child), “It is because of what the Lord did for me” (Exodus 13:8). For “me” God did it, for “that person” (pointing to the wicked child) God did not do it. If “that person” had been in Egypt, s/he would never have been worthy of being redeemed, not ever.

Why then, did the midrash decide to attribute this question to the “wicked” child? There are a number of possible answers to this question:

The word “this” takes on a particular tone and emphasis for the author of the midrash. It can be read as a contemptuous expression of remoteness and alienation.

The word “you” (plural) can be understood as an expression of removal and separation. Removed from the Biblical context where it is a natural reflection of the gap between the generation of the Exodus and the generation of settlers in Eretz Yisrael, it becomes a flagrant demonstration of defiance on the part of the rebellious child.

A careful examination of the question will show that it does not mention the divine source of the service, as the wise child’s clearly does in saying “our God.” That is why the question may be perceived as a denial of God.

Because the wicked child is perceived as one who closes the door on dialogue, the author of the midrash must choose an answer different from the one provided by the Torah. In

Exodus 12, the original answer is informative and to the point: “And you shall say: ‘It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s Passover, who passed over the houses of the Children of Israel in Egypt, when he struck down Egypt, and saved our houses.’”

The “house” is both the physical building in which the families of the Children of Israel hid from the Angel of Death, as well as the family, for which the firstborn son represents continuity.

God passed over the physical homes of the Jews, the moment God recognized the prearranged symbol of the blood on the lintel, thus saving the home and the future of the family - the firstborn.

The answer the midrash provides comes from Exodus 13, “This is done because of that which the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt . . .” “For me, and not for him!” The midrash stresses gratefulness for the act of God in contrast to the alienation demonstrated by the defiance of the wicked child.

Answering that *chutzpadik* child in the same coin, the midrash answers the wicked child’s distancing “You” with an equally distancing “For me, and not him.”

And indeed, the answer is not directed at the wicked child who spoke rhetorically and cynically, but rather to an unseen audience, in the third person, rather than second person: “For me, and not for him,” rather than “For me, and not for you.”

The response of the author of the midrash interprets the wicked child’s question as “excluding him or herself from the community,” and accordingly removes that child from the dialogue.

The Simple Child in the Torah and the Midrash Exodus 13:11-14

It shall be when the Lord brings you to the land of the Canaanites, as God promised to you and your ancestors and gave it to you.

Then you are to dedicate every first born of the womb to the Lord . . . and every first born of men, among your sons, you are to redeem.

It shall be when your child asks you tomorrow: “What does this mean?”

You are to say: by a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of a house of bondage.

The Simple Child of the Midrash: “What is this?” (Exodus 13:14)

And you shall say to him: “by a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” (Exodus 13:14)

In the book of Exodus, Chapter 13, the Torah added a series of symbolic commandments which are not necessarily performed on Passover, although they are intended to perpetuate the memory of the Exodus from Egypt in general and the plague of the firstborn sons in particular.

One of these commandments is that of tefillin or phylacteries:

And it shall be for a sign to you upon your hand, and for a memorial between your eyes, so that the Lord's Torah will be in your mouth, because God took us out of Egypt with a strong hand (Exodus 13:9).

And it shall be for a sign upon your hand, and for frontlets between your eyes, for God took you out of Egypt with a strong hand (Exodus 13:16).

The commandment of the tefillin is also mentioned in two sections of the Shma prayer:

And you shall tie it for a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes (Deut. 6:8; 11:18).

These symbolic forms of "jewelry" - a tiara and an arm bracelet of leather - serve as a reminder of all the commandments of the covenant at Sinai and as a technique to teach the next generation. In Exodus 13, they explain the symbol of the tefillin on the arm as an historic reminder of God's taking us out of Egypt with a "strong hand."

A second commandment that relates to the Exodus from Egypt is the obligation to set apart the firstborn:

Sanctify to me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the Children of Israel, both of human and of beast, it is mine. (Exodus 13:2)

You will set apart to the Lord all that opens the womb, and every firstling that comes of a beast which you have, the males shall be the Lord's (Exodus 13:12).

This obligation is directly connected to the description of the plague of the firstborn in Exodus 12: 4-5. The first offspring of a pure (kosher) animal is offered up as a sacrifice, and the first offspring of an impure animal is redeemed for its worth in silver; alternately, a pure beast may be donated to the Tabernacle.

Firstborn human male children were dedicated to serve God in the Tabernacle. Following the sin of the golden calf, in which the entire nation - including the firstborns - participated, with the exception of the tribe of Levi, the sanctity of the firstborns of the Children of Israel was exchanged for that of the tribe of Levi.

The firstborns were to be redeemed from then on for five shekalim of silver that were to be given to the priest on the 30 th day of the baby's life (see Numbers 3:44-51).

In a literal reading of the context in which it appears, the question of the simple child, “What is this?” relates to the ceremony of the redeeming of the firstborn (“And all the human males firstborns among your children you shall redeem”).

This question arises not on the Seder night, but rather on the day when the child actually witnesses the act of redemption of the animal or human firstborn. This is not a question based on lack of intelligence; it is the question of the generation born in Eretz Israel, which is not familiar with the historical origins of the commandments that they as the children of the next generation are expected to observe.

Perhaps the author of the midrash designated the child asking this question “simple” because this question is so short, compared to that of the wise child and the language so meager, or because it contains no abstract concepts, indicative of a lack of knowledge on the part of the questioner. Perhaps it is because of the use of the word “this,” showing that the one asking the question needs a tangible concrete object - “this” - to stimulate the question.

The author of the midrash took the question out of its context in the Torah, but kept the answer provided by the Biblical text: “God took us out of Egypt with a strong hand.” “This” in the context of the midrash refers to the actual ceremonies taking place on the Seder night itself, to the foods on the table, rather than to the ceremony of redeeming the first born which does not occur on Pesach at all.

The Child Who Does not Know How to Ask Torah: Exodus 13:7-9

Matzot are to be eaten for seven days ...And you are to tell your child that day saying: “It is because of what the Lord did for me, when I went out of Egypt.” It shall be for the sign on your hand and for a reminder between your eyes, in order that the Lord’s law may be in your mouth, that by a strong hand did the Lord bring you out of Egypt.

Midrash

As for the child who does not know how to ask, you should prompt the child, as it is said: And you shall tell your child on that day, saying: “it is because of that which the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt.” (Exodus 13:8)

The lack of the question in Exodus 13:8 “invites” the author of the midrash to designate the fourth child as the “One Who Does Not Know How to Ask.” The author of the midrash also attributes inferior intelligence to the Simple child and the One Who Does Not Know How to Ask, because the answers provided by the Torah are presented in simplistic and concrete terms.

God demonstrated his power “with a strong hand:” and we, both parents and children, left Egypt. These two types of children need concrete answers and personal identification, as,

for example, Maimonides suggests: “If the child is young or foolish, he or she should be told: My child, we were all slaves, like this slave or this maidservant, in Egypt. On this night, God redeemed us and took us out to freedom.” (Laws of Hametz and Matzah 7:2).

From this passage, it is apparent that non-Jewish servants who served the diners were present at Maimonides’ table, and that keeping slaves was a common practice at the time (Egypt, 12th century). The concrete illustration from the child’s immediate environment was sufficient to make the concept of slavery real.

The immediate identification between the parent and child (“My child” is a term of endearment) does not allow for a generation gap, because the young child is not yet aware of historical periods and the passage of time.

The parent illustrates the personal identification further by saying, “On that night God redeemed us . . . ,” thus enabling the child to feel a sense of belonging. The child not only gains an intellectual understanding of the source of the ancient commandment, but also becomes emotionally involved in it through this feeling of identification and belonging.

According to a literal reading of the Biblical text, the answer “for this reason” relates to the hidden question of “What is this?” “This” is not directed at the eating of matzah on the Seder night in particular, but rather to the holiday of Passover in general - “You shall eat unleavened bread for seven days and no unleavened bread shall be seen” (Exodus 13:7).

However, the author of the midrash was referring to the concrete symbols that come into play on the Seder night itself, as explained in the midrash that appears soon after the Midrash of the Four Children: “You shall tell your child on that day: ‘It is because of this, that the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt.’”

Could this verse mean that one should begin to tell the story at the beginning of the month (in which the Exodus occurred)? No, for the verse explicitly states “on that day” (of the Exodus). Could it mean that we start when it is still daytime? No, for the verse explicitly states: “because of this.” “This” refers to the time when matzah and maror are laid before you (only on Seder night).” (Passover Haggadah, Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael)

According to the author of the midrash, the fact that an explicit question is missing in Exodus 13, does not reflect only literary variety. Rather, it provides clear educational instruction for parents to pinpoint the child who is “One Who Does Not Know How to Ask,” and to find a way to enter into dialogue with that child concerning the concrete symbols which are laid out before him or her.

The principle of “You should prompt him” is valid not only on Seder night, and not only for the child who does not know how to ask, but for all children.

Summary

The ability to identify the disparities between the Torah and the midrash, creativity in offering various interpretations to questions and resourcefulness in composing new answers to old questions contribute significantly to the skill of the parent as teacher. The parent must identify, between the lines, through the tone used and the explicit questions asked by the children, what really disturbs them and offer different responses in accordance with the character, age, background and approach of each child. The art of the midrash is also the art of the teacher. “Reading” a child’s needs and concerns in a short question may be even more challenging than a close text reading of a Rabbinic source.