

The Four Children

In the book of Exodus, God instructs the Israelites—and now us—to tell the story of what happened in Egypt to the next generation, even before the Exodus begins. The four children embedded in the Haggadah represent four paradigmatic members of the next generation—one who fully buys into the project of Jewish peoplehood; one who feels exempt from the collective experience; one who engages on a surface level; and one who is unsure how to connect. The Haggadah teaches us that each of these children merits a response.

The questions of how to teach the story of the Exodus and how to understand our audience need to be revisited every year. This supplement includes texts addressing different concerns we may have about the four children today. Noam Zion provides an overall framing for responding to these contemporary children and Eleanor Harrison Bregman describes her own evolution from standing outside the Jewish people to finding a sense of belonging. We also offer three approaches to the oft-maligned wicked child: Donniel Hartman proposes that, in our ability to choose or reject Judaism, we are all wicked children; Sara Labaton urges us to spend less time accusing others of being wicked; and Joshua Ladon and Masua Sagiv encourage us to unpack the wicked child's question and draw them in. In a polarized society with increasing vitriol in public discourse, the four children and particularly the wicked child remind us that we owe it to one another to find ways to communicate across our differences. Now is not the time to write people out of our shared story.

Contemporary Children

Noam Zion

Today, as in the past, many Jewish families are challenged by generational conflicts about the definition of Jewish identity and Jewish loyalty. Parents' memories and experiences are, by definition, different from their children's memories and experiences; this is the original reason for the Haggadah. It is natural, says the Torah, that children will ask about the significance of the Jewish commitments and rituals central to their parents' and grandparents' worldviews and practices. It is good when both children and parents investigate and understand the gaps between their different perspectives and values.

In the Haggadah, the rabbis imagine four types of children and how a parent might respond to each one. Who is the wise child and what questions do we associate with them? Who, if any of our children, is the *rasha*, understood as wicked or rebellious or, perhaps, courageously critical? When is a child's alienation from their Jewish identity a matter of rebelling against their parents? When is it the product of that child's idealism and their dissatisfaction with the status quo?

I Belong to the Jewish People

Eleanor Harrison Bregman

After Shabbat dinner on October 6, I turned to our host, a rabbi who is a dear family friend, and said "Can we have a conversation soon? About converting. I've been considering it for over a year, and it feels right on many levels, but I've identified as the 'non-Jew in the room' for so long. Could I actually belong to the Jewish people? Would I ever really feel Jewish in my bones?" Eight days later, a lifetime later, there was time set aside at Shabbat services for beginning to process what had happened on October 7 and I attempted to say something. I tried to say, in so many words, "As someone who does not belong to the Jewish people, I'm with you. I am here for you in this grief. I'm in solidarity with you." As I spoke, however, I stumbled over the word "you." It felt like the most awkward thing to say "you," as if, like the wicked child of the seder, I was saying this happened to you and not to me. It was at that moment I knew in my body and in my heart: I was one of the Jewish people in the room, because this happened to me, too. After nearly 30 years of being part of a Jewish community and after 24 years of marriage to a Jewish man, I knew for sure I belonged to the Jewish people. I converted in March, and so, when I sit at the seder table this year, I will be like the wise child, claiming this heritage as my own.

Questions for Conversation

The Haggadah encourages a values-based conversation across generations. Try to remember a recent conversation about a complex issue where people were approaching the topic from their own, different, experiences. What experiences informed the various positions people were expressing? What strategies helped people in the conversation communicate despite those differences?

Questions for Conversation

- Share a moment when you have felt particularly connected to the Jewish people or actively claimed your belonging. What gave you that sense of connection to the Jewish people?
- What do you think is driving the increased interest in conversion since October 7? Have those same factors affected your connection to the Jewish community or Judaism? If not, what has kept you connected?

A *Rasha* (Wicked Child) Roundtable

The Wicked Child is All of Us

Donniel Hartman

This section of the Haggadah aims to remind parents that our children are not all the same, and, as we tell our story, we must adapt it to their different sensibilities and abilities. However, the section which purports to heighten parental sensitivity fails drastically, first by designating one child—the one who asks, “What is this worship to you?”—as “wicked,” and then the response it suggests, to “set that child’s teeth on edge.” We can see it as a valuable pedagogical model of what not to do. We also should remember that at the time the Haggadah was first composed, rude questions were threatening and individuals whose loyalty wasn’t guaranteed were a source of fear. If we bring the “wicked” child into our own moment, we can see that their question is a demand for a compelling reason to choose Judaism.

In the modern world, we are blessed with multiple identities that all lay claim to our loyalty. Being Jewish is one of many identities available to us. Today, each one of us is the “wicked child.” If Judaism is to claim our loyalty, it will be because we actively choose it over or alongside others. And we will only choose to do so if the Jewish story welcomes our difficult questions and embraces our differences, and if it is morally, intellectually, culturally, and spiritually compelling. Only then will we, the “wicked ones,” choose Judaism as our home.

Instead of Pointing Fingers, Cultivate Humility

Sara Labaton

The Haggadah depicts four caricatures of children, including the *rasha*, the wicked one. But what makes the *rasha* wicked? There is a deliberate vagueness in the text about the *rasha* and his three siblings. The writers of the Haggadah accuse the *rasha* of excluding himself from the Jewish people, because he asks, “What is this worship to you?”, but the same claim could just as easily have been brought against the *chacham*, who asks a strikingly similar question, “What are these testimonies, statutes, and judgments that the Lord our God commanded you?” The characterization of the *rasha* as a wicked child would have been far more convincing if we had been given a catalog of his sins, rather than a nitpicky interpretation. Moreover, while the Haggadah excoriates the *rasha* for excluding himself from the community, he seems to be engaging in conversation about the story and even participates at the seder, which calls into question how much he has actually abandoned the Jewish story and the bonds of peoplehood.

We could read the *rasha*’s question as searching for meaning, intended to stimulate and not provoke. Perhaps we should not be so sure that this child is guilty of the crime of betrayal. Perhaps in this imagined family of four children,

the family members themselves disagree about which child is wicked. The *chacham*, the wise child, though typically praised, is also vulnerable to critique. In Jeremiah 9:22, God proclaims, “Thus said God: Let not the wise glory in their wisdom; Let not the strong glory in their strength; Let not the rich glory in their riches.” Like strength and wealth, wisdom is a commodity, and the person who possesses it can fall into hubris.

The Haggadah calls our attention to the temptation to sit around the table and pass judgment on one another, particularly when the company is diverse or in the midst of crisis. The scene depicted here reminds us that sitting together is hard. And yet, as we look at each other across the rowdy finger-pointing table and recite the story of God’s liberation of the Children of Israel, we have an opportunity to cultivate humility. We may be certain we are wise, good, and faithful and not *rasha*, but only God knows for sure. As it says in Jeremiah 9:23: “But only in this should one glory: In being earnestly devoted to Me. For I, God, act with kindness, justice, and equity in the world; For in these I delight—declares God.”

Bring the Wicked Child Close

Joshua Ladon and Masua Sagiv

What is it about the wicked child's question that needles us so much?

A great question illuminates a path we had not previously considered. Questions, according to twentieth century French philosopher, Maurice Blanchot, are intentionally incomplete speech. Even when we respond with an answer, all the other possible answers remain hovering, just out of reach.

The wicked child's question comes when we are at our most beleaguered. In the months since October 7, many of us have become defensive and armored, even against our own families and friends. And then, when we are telling our story so that our children will see themselves as the inheritors of our tale and contributors to our story, we get eye rolls, side comments, disdain both soft and loud. That one word—*lachem*, to you—makes us snap, even when the question seems so similar to that of the wise child. In this moment, we demand sincerity and connection. Just be with us, tonight, in this exodus from Egypt!

Was this child already wicked or is it their question that makes them so?

Some children do choose to remove themselves from our collective story. It is possible that the wicked child exempted themselves from our people as the Haggadah suggests. It is also possible they did not, but our answers, both our words and our frustration, showed them the door.

We may answer the wicked child forcefully, but the ghosts of other, gentler answers remain. This is only one moment in a collection of moments when we pull our children into the story. Maybe instead of blunting their teeth, we would be better off drawing this child close.

Questions for Conversation

- Which of these approaches to understanding the wicked child do you find compelling?
- How do you interpret the character of the *rasha*? Do you think this child is wicked? Why or why not?
- If you were writing the Haggadah, how would you have scripted a response to the wicked child's question?