

Sources for Reflection

Questioning as Quest

Why is it so crucial that the child ask questions? Why do we prompt him? Simply put, Judaism insists that God reveals Himself to the one who seeks after and thirsts for God. We want to initiate the child into a community that seeks out the Almighty and yearns for His presence and illumination.

-Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, from The Nine Aspects of the Haggada

Is There a Right Question?

Why do we clear the table [before we start eating]? The school of Rabbi Yannai says: So that the children will take notice and ask questions.

-Talmud Pesachim 115b

That is to say, asking these questions will lead the children to ask about other matters. But we do not fulfill our obligation to say Mah Nishtana through asking why we clear the table. -Tosafot, Talmud Pesachim 115b

Once the young pupil, Abaye, was invited to the Seder of his teacher Rabbah. While still at the beginning of the Seder, Rabbah ordered the servants to clear the dishes from the table. Amazed, Abaye asked, "Why are you removing the Seder plate before we have eaten?" Rabbah exclaimed, "Your question has served the same function as the usual four questions of 'Ma Nishtana'. Let's dispense with those set questions and proceed directly to the telling of the story"

- Talmud Pesachim 115b

It All Begins with a Question

מזגו לו כוס שני וכאן הבן שואל
אביו. ואם אין דעת בבן, אביו
מלמדו: "מה נשתנה הלילה הזה
מכל הלילות?"

- משנה פסחים י:ד

They pour the second cup, and it is here that children ask their parent [about Pesah]. If the child is too young to ask, his father teaches him. "How is this night different from all other nights?"

- *Mishna Pesachim 10:4*

The Need to Hear a Question
Our Rabbis taught: If his child is wise, he asks the father. If his child is not wise, his wife asks. If not her, he asks himself. Even two scholars who know all the laws of Passover must ask each other.

-Talmud Pesachim 116a

Defying and Initiating
Judaism is forever engaged in a bitter battle against man's deeply rooted belief in fatalism and its ensuing inertia in social, moral, and spiritual conditions. Abraham started in rebellion against his father and the gods of his time. His great distinction was not in being loyal and conforming but in defying and initiating.

- A.J. Heschel, The Insecurity of Freedom

A Call to Action and Change

At moments like these the young generation always comes to the older one, looks carefully into their eyes, and asks their questions. The essence of the question and the tone never change: "Ma Nishtana? What has changed?" The young people are demanding an accounting of the past from their elders; they don't want to hear a cold lecture of an observer, but rather a living story of a participant in events: "Ma nishtana halila haze? What has changed this night?" They are asking: What did you contribute and how did you invest in the shared endeavor – in the days of your youth and your vigor?

- Ze'ev Jabotinsky, from Forging the Iron

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Why is it so important to begin the telling of the Passover story with a question?
- 2) Why does the Mishna prescribe what questions we should ask while later sages, including Rabbi Yannai and Rabbah, leave room for us to ask our own questions? What are the pros and cons of asking the traditional questions versus asking our own questions? Which kind of questions do you find more meaningful?
- 3) Think of an experience when someone asked you a question (or you asked a question of yourself) that had a powerful impact on you. How did the question impact you and why was that question so powerful?

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4) What questions do you hope to ask of yourself or others this year? How might these questions lead to positive change?

A Nesiya Commentary

And when your children ask you, "What do you mean by this service?" you shall say, "It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, because He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians but saved our houses."

(Exodus 12: 26-27)

Since Biblical times, long before Maxwell House published those handy paperback Haggadahs, we told the Passover story through questions. The central Biblical ritual itself, the Paschal sacrifice, was designed to arouse the curiosity of children and serve as the jumping off point for one generation to present the narrative of the Jewish people to the next. While watching adults perform the traditions of Pesach, children are prompted to ask: "What's going on?"

The Rabbis seem to find more in this Biblical call to question and engage than simple pedagogic strategy. The Mishna tells us that the entire telling of the Passover story must be launched with questions. The form of the telling – question and response – is designed to shape our experience in hearing or reliving the story every year. If even accomplished scholars must ask themselves these questions, the goal is clearly not only to capture the attention of young people. Rather, the tradition challenges all of us to tell and hear our collective story as “askers of questions.”

Why is questioning so important, and how is questioning connected to the Passover story?

Only free people, who see the circumstances of their lives as open to challenge or change or a search for purpose, ask questions. A slave does not have the right to question, and often loses the capacity to even imagine that his life could be different. When we ask questions, we confirm our power to challenge reality as it is and imagine a different reality. By structuring the Seder around questions, we affirm ourselves as questioning and searching people who have a voice.

Routine and passivity pose constant threats to our growth and development as human beings. The more we let convention, social expectations and fear of the unknown determine our choices and behaviors, the more our true selves disappear. As we hear in the voices of Jabotinsky and Heschel, only when we allow ourselves to challenge and question what is around us do we become able to inspire change and growth. We ask questions not only as theoretical or intellectual exploration, but as a call to action – in ourselves and others.

The tension between questioning and tradition:

But if questions are tools for promoting change, why does the tradition prescribe what questions we should ask? If routine can be a threat to growth, why do we make so much of the Seder a routine, including even the questions we ask? Should we be prompting our children to ask someone else's questions? If questioning is a sign of freedom and a call to change, what are the costs of limiting the questions we ask?

The Seder contains within it both a tradition of questioning and a questioning of tradition. On the one hand, even in our questioning, the rabbis challenge us to connect to tradition through asking the same questions that Jews have asked for generations. Through asking these questions, we become part of something much greater than ourselves. We transcend our limited time and space to relive the Passover story together with Jews all over the world and throughout the generations.

On the other hand, the rabbis also encourage us to ask new questions, even to question tradition. Through asking new questions, we celebrate our power to challenge the status quo and to imagine and build a different and better reality.

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The Seder challenges us both to embrace and to question tradition, to affirm a tradition of questioning while learning to ask our own new and inspiring questions.