

In a world where “children should be seen, but not heard,” and grownups often view their natural curiosity as bothersome at best and insolent at worst, we Jews are a true anomaly. We teach our children to ask questions! Judaism is literally founded on questions, which is why for us, using the word *belief* as a synonym for religion is a bit of a misnomer. Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist movement, taught that religious identity is based on the “three Bs” of belonging, behaving, and believing, and for Jews, in that order. Belonging is our foundation, starting with the Torah, which establishes our concept of peoplehood. We do certain things and behave in certain ways because it identifies us as a people. One of these things is asking questions, which automatically pushes belief far into the background. We have commandments, statutes, and ordinances, but we do not blindly accept them. Instead, we question and discuss them endlessly and in exquisite detail, as anyone who has stuck so much as a toe into the lively waters of the Talmud can easily attest. The Torah doesn't even have a word for *obey*. It uses the word *shema*, with its connotations of listening, understanding, internalizing, observing, and responding. Questions play a major role in the entire TaNaKh, often with us humans daring to question HaShem: Abraham pleading for the citizens of Sodom. Moses during his struggles with Pharaoh asking HaShem, “Why have You harmed this people? Why have You sent me?” Jeremiah asking, “Why has the way of the wicked prospered, all who deal with treachery have peace? ... How long will the land mourn and the grass of all the field dry out?” The Book of Job abounds with questions, both between other humans and from them to HaShem, with HaShem answering in a veritable barrage of questions. How quintessentially Jewish, answering a question with a question! And how Jewish too, for mortals to have the chutzpa to challenge HaShem. Without our penchant for asking questions, it would never occur to us to be so bold.

Our Pesach Haggadah is built around four questions asked by four different kinds of children. Children are often the first to notice the slightest change in routine, so it is only natural that they want to know why we behave so differently at this night's meal. These questions provide the basis for teaching our children not only about our origins, but also about our intrinsic values and how they apply in today's world. The four types of children and the four different answers we are instructed to give them are brilliantly conceived tools for including everyone in the learning process. The wise child loves details and asks about the meaning of all the testimonies, statutes, and laws that HaShem commanded *you*, which means we must assume that this child is not yet Bar or Bat Mitzvah. We start by explaining the basics of Pesach, our foundational story, concluding with the afikomen, which will definitely generate new questions. The “wicked” child has a hard time fitting in, hence the terse question, “What does all this mean to *you*?” Same word but said in a way that emphasizes the feeling of exclusion. Perhaps this child feels embarrassment or distain for a family that differs so much from the larger world. Those parents are advised to “blunt his teeth” – i.e., to make it clear that it would be best to first learn, thus opening a door to reentry whenever that child is ready to receive instruction. The naïve child may not be as intellectually strong as others, or simply may not be mature enough to be interested in complexity. We are advised to guide this child with simple answers that have the potential of arousing his curiosity and helping him delve deeper. The child who does not know how to ask is likely too young or is extremely passive. We are told to teach this child how to ask by devising simple questions and explanations. But there are also four types of parents: The wise ones, who value both education and tradition and find creative ways to impart this to their children, forming strong bonds that reach from generation to generation. The “wicked” adults are no more intrinsically evil than their children. They may have indeed rejected their tradition in favor of fitting in, or because their own experiences growing up were negative. The naïve ones likely grew up in homes with little religious tradition, so their limited knowledge makes it difficult for them to instruct their children. And the ones who do not know how to ask have been raised so far removed from their roots that they have lost touch. Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn z”l pessimistically saw four generations of American Jewry: the wise represents the Old Country; the wicked has assimilated; the naïve stands confused between grandparents and parents; and the fourth has no idea how, or what to ask. He added a fifth, who doesn't even know he is Jewish. But this fifth could be someone who is motivated to pick up the thread that was dropped and weave it back into the tapestry of Judaism. I am one of those, but I am fortunate that my parents preserved a bit of Yiddishkeit in our otherwise very assimilated home. We are indeed a diverse people with an enormous variety of traditions through which we can learn about our magnificent heritage, and we can do this in a multitude of ways that fit our individual needs and personalities. Asking questions is the key, and it's the Jewish thing to do. May you never run out of questions to ask!

A sweet and fulfilling Pesach to you and yours!