

In a world where grownups often view children's 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 does not hold true. We have commandments, statutes, and ordinances, but we do not blindly obey 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 is full of questions, both between other humans and from them to HaShem, with HaShem answering with 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 notice the tiniest changes in routine, so it is only natural that they want to know why we behave so differently at this night's meal. Their questions are 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 giving everyone a chance to learn. 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 is sure to 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 implies exclusion. Perhaps this child feels embarrassed that his family is so different. Those parents are advised to "blunt his teeth," i.e., to admonish him to first learn about what he wants to reject, thus offering an open door. The naïve child may not be as intellectually strong as others, or is simply not mature enough to process complex ideas. We are advised to offer this child simple answers to arouse his curiosity and encourage him to delve deeper. The child who does not know how to ask is either 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, form strong bonds that reach from generation to generation. The "wicked" adults are no more intrinsically evil than their children. They may have rejected their heritage in order to fit 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 defined 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 pessimistically added a fifth, who doesn't even know he is Jewish. But I suggest that 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. And now, after October 7, 2023, we have new questions that present new challenges for parents with different backgrounds to react to the differing needs of their questioning children: 1. When will the hostages be released, and how many are still alive? 2. Why do people who have no relationship to Israel, to Jews, or to Gaza, and are also often woefully and stubbornly ignorant, blindly condemn Israel and blame all Jews for this war, even to the extent of physical attacks? 3. Why are there not similar reactions to the many atrocities in other parts of the world such as Yemen, Sudan, China, Russia, Ukraine, Haiti, Central America, etc. etc.? 4. How should we Jews, with our tragic history, respond to this new and increasing danger without letting fear, pessimism, rage, and hatred destroy the ideals our Torah has instilled in us? And a fifth question: How can we celebrate this Pesach without losing the joy that defines our festival of freedom? We are a diverse people with an enormous variety of traditions that honor our history of redemption, liberation, and rebirth following dark periods of oppression and trauma. Let us draw upon those traditions in all their splendid diversity, renewing the hope that we dare not lose, in ways suited to our individual needs and personalities. Asking questions is the key, learning and teaching from parent to child. That is what has preserved us for millennia, and that is what ensures our future.

Shabbat Shalom, and CHAG PESACH SAMEACH to you and yours!