

Have you ever counted how many times the number FOUR appears in the course of a Pesach seder? Or for that matter, how often it appears elsewhere in our scriptures and stories? The number FOUR is ubiquitous in Judaism, and its mystic connotations include completion and wholeness. Here is a sampling: יהוה, the FOUR letters of the Tetragrammaton; the FOUR archangels around the “Throne of Glory” [*Micha’el* (who is like HaShem), *Gavri’el* (HaShem’s power), *Rafa’el* (HaShem’s healing), and *Uri’el* (HaShem’s light)], who correspond to the FOUR directions of the wind as well as to the FOUR banners of the Israelite army; the FOUR legendary sages who dare to enter Paradise; and the FOUR kabbalistic worlds of *assiyah*, *yetzirah*, *briyah*, and *atzilut*. Chasidism teaches that there are FOUR categories in the natural world: *domem* (inanimate objects), *tzomeach* (vegetation), *chai* (animals), and *medaber* (the speaking, i.e., humans). Genesis 2:10 describes the FOUR rivers that flow from Eden’s river. The Diaspora extends to the “FOUR corners of the earth,” which symbolize not only our exile, but also our diversity. There are the FOUR matriarchs, FOUR new years, FOUR species in the Sukkot *lulav*, and the FOUR basic components of Judaism: *brit* (Covenant), *Torah* (teaching), *mitzvah* (commandment), and *teshuvah* (repentance). And let’s not forget the FOUR special Shabbatot preceding Pesach, the holiday that has FOUR names: *chag ha matzot* (festival of matzah), *chag ha- aviv* (spring festival), *chag ha-pesach* (Passover festival), and *z’man cheruteinu* (time of our freedom). The Seder itself is punctuated by FOUR blessings over the FOUR cups of wine that initiate each of its FOUR sections: *Kiddush* (sanctification), *magid* (storytelling, during which we discuss FOUR Bible passages), *birkat hamazon* (table grace, which itself consists of FOUR blessings), and *Hallel* (festival psalms). There are FOUR Pesach *mitzvot*: Pesach offering (now symbolized by the shank bone), matzah, bitter herb, and Haggadah (telling the story); and HaShem’s FOUR promises: *hotzeti* (I will bring you out of Egypt), *hitzalti* (I will free you), *ga’alti* (I will redeem you), *lakakhti* (I will take you to be My people). Then, we have the famous FOUR questions and the equally famous FOUR children who ask them. Asking questions at the Seder is so essential that the Talmud stipulates it: “If his son is wise and knows how to inquire, his son asks him. And if he is not wise, his wife asks him. And if even his wife is not capable of asking, or he has no wife, he asks himself. And even if two Torah scholars who know the laws of Pesach are sitting together, they ask each other.” (Pesachim 116a) These can go far beyond the four questions in the Haggadah, which are actually statements to spark curiosity about the Seder’s unique practices. The object is to ask any questions that stimulate discussion, from current events to age-old conundrums that relate to Jewish life. The only caveat is to be careful to maintain a respectful attitude toward those who offer differing opinions, especially if there are impressionable children present. Finally, there are the children themselves. The “wise” child is curious about the significance of Pesach. Answering this child is easy. The “wicked” child is simply rebellious, thoughtless, or confused because s/he feels different. Answering this child takes time and patience, but there is always hope that a child’s natural curiosity will prevail. The “simple” child may have a disability, or s/he is too young to be interested in the intricacies of the Seder. Simple answers that encourage further exploration are best for this child. The “child who doesn’t know how to ask” is likely pre-verbal. Including this child in the Seder can be strenuous, especially in the case of a fussy baby. Read to them, tell them stories, sing to them, even when they’re too little to really understand. It’s amazing how much we learn by just being present. One more instance of the number FOUR appears on the 7th day of Pesach, which marks the anniversary of the Crossing of the Sea of Reeds. Midrash Mekhilta teaches that upon seeing the approaching Egyptians, the people divided into FOUR separate factions: Those who wanted to throw themselves into the sea, those who wanted to return to Egypt, those who wanted to wage war against the Egyptians, and those who were paralyzed by fear and could only pray to HaShem. Moses himself was tending toward the fourth group until HaShem commanded him to act. In all these examples, we see that Judaism’s multitude of quartets is an eloquent metaphor for our diversity. Indeed, a midrash likens the *lulav*’s four species to four types of Jews, and we can see parallels in the four children as well: The etrog is the Jew who studies Torah and observes the commandments (“wise” child); the palm branch is the Jew who studies Torah but does not observe the commandments (“wicked” child); the myrtle is the Jew who observes the commandments, but does not study Torah (“simple” child); and the willow is the Jew who neither studies Torah nor observes the commandments (child who is unable to ask). We are as different from one another as the four corners of the world from which we come, and our predilections and opinions make up countless multiples of four; but like those four rivers that flow out of that single river in Eden, we all come from the same Source, and we all have intrinsic value. “[Ben Azzai] used to say: Do not despise any person, and do not discriminate against anything, for there is no person that has not their hour, and there is no thing that has not its place.” (Pirke Avot 4:3) The fourth letter of the Hebrew alphabet is *dalet*, which, among many other things, represents a door – a door into the enormous potential of our wonderful diversity. And right now, the combined efforts of that diversity are precisely what the world needs to counter the encroaching forces of ideological conformity.