

Any Questions?

What the Seder is really about

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Yidden have a reputation for being high inquisitive. We love to explore, to ask and to question. We do not find the need to question the practices or rituals performed during the other Jewish festivals. But at the Seder on Pesach, questions are the flavour of the day (Kedushas Levi, Pesach). We deliberately perform strange acts *in order* to elicit questions from the children. Questions are integral to the night. Indeed, the halochah is that an individual alone at the Seder is equally obligated to verbalize questions (Pesachim 116a). Why are questions so essential? And why do they form the necessary backdrop in the introductory part of the Seder?

The Haggodoh discusses the Four Sons – Chocham, Rasha, Tam and She'ayno Yodea Lishol – their respective questions and our response to them. We picture the Four Sons asking their questions sitting around the Seder table. But a look at the context of the citations in the Chumash reveals that some of these questions were not posed at the Seder! The Chocham's question is posed in the context of loyalty to Torah; the Tam's question is asked in the context of pidyon haben, "redemption of firstborn". And the identical response is given to the Rasha and She'ayno Yodea Lishol (see Meshech Chochma)! What do questions have to do with Seder night? And how is one to understand the responses to the Four Sons?

Questions occur throughout the Torah concerning all different topics throughout the year. Still, whatever questions are asked all year round, there is one central and unifying answer to them all. Inevitably, the answer goes back to Yetzias Mitzrayim. Seder night marks the birth of the Jewish nation and the stepping stone to accepting Torah at Sinai. *Consequently, the purpose behind bringing all these children to the Seder is to show that the Seder holds the key to answering everything.*

We need the children on this night to have "questions" in order to offer them the "answers".

It is the night to freely ask questions. The impact of Seder will only be truly felt by the soul-searching individuals who are genuinely looking for true answers. It will be missed by those who don't actually have any questions. Neither the cynical Rashah nor the uninterested She'ayno Yodea Lishol are "seekers". So we have to provoke a response by opening them up – cue the sharp retort to the Rasha "if you would have been there, you would not have been redeemed"! We intentionally do not give the Four Sons an immediate answer; we whet their appetite to ask and probe deeper.

Actually, there are elements of the Four Sons within each one of us. Peculiar foods. Curious practices. More than 1 cup of wine? Leaning or not leaning?

Covering matzah, but then uncovering it? What's going on? We can't contain ourselves anymore – until we finally burst out with Ma Nishtana, "Why is this night so different?"

That is the desired goal. The night is about provoking "questions" (Rambam Chametz uMatzah 7:3) – and to even direct those questions to ourselves. It absolutely makes no difference what our level is. "Even if we are all wise, we still have an obligation to discuss this tonight" and to continue the conversation about Yetzias Mitzrayim throughout the night – like

b'shvach, "you beginning with the degradation and finish with the praise" (Pesachim 116a). There is a Talmudic dispute about what historic degradation we should focus upon: the ancestral idol-worship (going back to Terach) or the Egyptian slavery. Both are mentioned – with Hashem bringing Israel close to Him by taking them out of Egypt.

The Hagoddoh proclaims how Hashem is the *Baruch shomer hav'tochos l'Yisrael*, "He Who keeps His promises to Yisroel" by making mention of the *bris bein habesarim*, "Covenant of Parts"

followed by the famous declaration *Vehi she'omda*, "This has stood for us..." in our survival against many enemies who desire our destruction. Curiously, the selected passage the Hagoddoh then uses is taken from the pronouncement made when a Jew ascended to bring bikkurim, "first fruits" to the Beis Hamikdosh – one that includes mention of Lavan's role in the descent to Egypt (Devarim 26:5-8).

The bikkurim statement fits the criteria to fulfil the obligation of "hagaddah" to relate to one's son the Exodus (Shemos 13:8) as it is also classified as hagaddah (Devarim 26:3) (See Avudraham). Nevertheless, many other passages from the actual Torah narrative relating the Exodus or mention of the miraculous 10 Plagues

would have been more memorable? Why is a sweeping 4 verse passage chosen? Why should the wider historical perspective be necessary? And what is so significant about the Bris bein HaBesorim?

True, Hashem redeemed us from slavery. But was He not also responsible for enslaving us in the first place? Like the descent to Egypt is partially attributed to Lavan's scheme (where Yaakov ended up marrying two sisters and led to division of the tribes as a catalyst to descent to Egypt – (See Chukkas haPesach), Hashem similarly engineered exile for Avrohom's descendants centuries earlier at the Bris bein HaBesorim.

It is essential to see the wider, sweeping historical context in order to understand the reason for Israel's enslavement. Here we need to mention the pagan origins of Israel. *We must carefully trace their transformative historic journey from idolatry to closeness to Hashem.*

It was a process that would span several generations: the 3 Avos (to the exclusion of Eisav and Yishmael), the formation of Yisrael in the 12 tribes, and the national persecution within Egypt. The slavery was also instrumental in the eternal formation of who Yisrael would be.

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the Talmudic scholars in Bnei Brak. "The more one relates the Exodus, the more it is praiseworthy".

Consequently, the Seder is not about learning new information. The Hagaddah text, format and foods are the same every year! But at every Seder we assume a new identity; we become a "searcher" (Kedushas Levi, ad loc). *Seder night is "the night of answers". But the key is that we first have to have the questions.*

The "art of questioning" at the Seder is specifically designed to bring out the "questioner" within us. It is supposed to jolt us out of our all-knowing complacency. And it is to turn us into people who are constantly searching, forever striving to further our relationship to Hashem. Indeed, Seder night begins the year-long quest for learning.

This is the objective of the first, opening section of the Seder: to lead us on the road to questioning and to search.

What's the Story?

Having opened ourselves to be "seekers" through the medium of questions, we are now ready for answers. This requires a discussion of the story of Yetzias Mitzrayim, "leaving Egypt" in the national birth of the Jewish People.

How the Hagoddoh presents this story is itself very interesting. The Hagoddoh does not limit itself exclusively to the Egyptian exile; it places the Exodus within the grander purview of Jewish history. There is the application in the Haggodoh of the principle *mas'chilim b'genus u'mesayim*