

THE FOUR SONS

by Dr. Abraham Twerski

Judaism encourages inquiry. However, this must be inquiry with a sincere intent to learn and to gain knowledge, and not provocation or derisive scoffing.

The question posed by the wise person is: Why are so many and varied mitzvot related to the Exodus? What is so significant about this historic incident that warrants its pervading every facet of daily life?

The response to the wise person is that which we have presented in this treatise. "You may not eat after partaking of the Paschal sacrifice." Why?

Because the latter is the symbol of spiritual liberation. The offering of the paschal lamb represents our rejection of paganism with all its inherent materialism and self-indulgence. Therefore, the taste of spiritual liberty must be permitted to linger, and we are to savor it as long as it can last. There are many pleasantries that titillate our temptation, and we must be aware that pleasant-tasting condiments might obscure the taste of our precious spiritual freedom, and hence must be avoided. Physical pleasures may be so seductive that we are always at risk of sacrificing our spirituality in their favor. We therefore need to be constantly reminded of the teachings of the Exodus. This is a thoughtful response to a reasonable question.

"THE WICKED SON - WHAT DOES HE SAY?"

The depraved person, however, does not ask in order to know. His mind is closed because he has already made his decisions. He prefers earthly pleasures to spiritual strivings, and his attitude is, "Who needs all this ritual anyway? If you do wish to celebrate Passover as an independence day, do so with a parade, picnic, and firecrackers, and then go about the business of living and forget about it until next year!" This can hardly be considered a question, but is rather a statement of defiance.

There is little value in trying to reason with a person like this, because he does not want to listen. So to this person we say, "There were the likes of you in Egypt, who refused to follow Moses into the desert. There were also those who did leave with Moses but relapsed into paganism with the worship of the Golden Calf. And there were those who complained about the manna, saying, 'We wish we were back in Egypt, when we had fish, onions, garlic, and melons' (Numbers 11:5). There were those who said, 'Let us appoint a new leader and return to Egypt' (ibid. 14:4).

"Had you been there, you might have grudgingly exited from Egypt along with everyone else, but

you would have willingly traded the hard-won, precious liberty for physical indulgences. You are far more interested in feeding your stomach rather than nurturing your mind. Yes, you might have left Egypt, but you would not have been redeemed. You would have maintained a slave mentality well into the liberation."

We should fashion ourselves after the wise person, who constantly seeks to gain knowledge, so that we may always progress in our quest of spiritual growth.

"THEREFORE, BLUNT HIS TEETH"

The response to the depraved son appears to be very harsh. Is this the way parents should discipline an unruly child?

Unfortunately, there are times when such extreme measures may be necessary. For example, in working with young people who have become involved with drugs and who turn a deaf ear to all reasoning, parents must be taught to institute "tough love." If necessary, they must say, "Our home is drug free. If you continue to use drugs, you must find yourself somewhere else to live." It is most difficult for parents to evict their own child, but the destructive and even lethal consequence of drug use may require a radical approach.

Parents should not be supportive of any lifestyle that is destructive. Not all defiance is destructive and, while certainly unpleasant, may not require application of such extreme measures. However, when a child engages in behavior that the parents know to be self-destructive, the parents may have no option but to implement "tough love," which is exactly what the very words mean. "Tough" because it is harsh on the child, "love" because it is applied out of concern for the child's welfare.

The Haggadah tells us that with a son who lives a degenerate lifestyle, rejecting all spirituality, there is a need for "tough love..."

"THE SIMPLE SON - WHAT DOES HE SAY?"

In contrast to the wise person -- who understands the value of spiritual freedom and therefore his only question is "in what way is the Exodus related to so many varied mitzvot?" -- the simple person is overwhelmed by all the ritual of Passover. He does not reject it like the depraved person, but in his bewilderment sincerely asks, "What is all this for?" and he deserves an answer.

The answer provided, that "God delivered us from the Egyptian bondage with a mighty hand," refers not only to the coercion of Pharaoh, but to the fact that even many of the Israelites had to be coerced to leave Egypt. As we noted earlier, Moses had to convince the slaves that liberty was preferable to enslavement, and not all Israelites accepted his message. We therefore explain to the simple person that even today there are many people who may adapt themselves to contentment, and whose primary goal in life is to be comfortable.

These people may reject the message of being liberated from the tyranny of one's physical drives, and that striving for spirituality -- even though it may interfere with one's tranquility -- is the primary goal that makes man worthy of being created in the Divine image. The simple person, because he is sufficiently aware to ask, may accept an answer and be willing to investigate the spiritual life.

THE FOURTH SON

As for the son who is unable to ask, you must initiate the subject for him.

In Chassidic lore there is a quote from Rabbi Hirsh of Rimanov. "Take my word for it. The one who does not know what to ask comes away with the best." Just what could he have meant with this?

At one weekend dedicated to the search for spirituality for people recovering from various addictions, there was a session called "Ask the Rabbi." One woman, Bernice, who had little exposure to Judaism, spoke up.

"This morning I was frustrated, more than I have ever been in my entire life. I passed by the room where you were having services, and I saw all of you praying. I wanted to join you, but I don't know how to pray. It's not that I cannot read the Hebrew, because I could read the English. It's just that my family was not religious, and we never went to synagogue. I don't know the first thing about prayer. I stood outside the room, wanting to go in, but not knowing what I would do if I was inside."

I said to Bernice, "Let me understand this. You were frustrated because you saw us praying, but you did not know how to pray. That's how things appeared in your prospective. But let us look at how God perceived this.

"When God sees us entering the synagogue, He may very well say, 'Oh, Oh, look who's coming. Some more people with their selfish requests: God give me this or God give me that. All they can think about is their own needs.'

"Then God saw you standing outside the room, broken hearted, wanting desperately to pray but not knowing how. God then said, 'Look at My child, Bernice. She is in such agony because she wants to reach Me, but does not know how.'

"Now tell me, Bernice," I said, "whose prayer was more sincere? My prayers for all that I desire, or your silent prayer for wishing to be able to come closer to God?"

SINCERITY OF THE HEART

Chassidic lore is replete with stories of people who wanted to pray but knew nothing about prayer.

One of my favorite stories is that of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, who held up services on Rosh Hashanah. He later explained.

"There is a young lad in town who is a shepherd. He was orphaned at a young age, and never had the opportunity to learn how to read Hebrew. This morning, when he saw everyone streaming toward the synagogues, and upon inquiring was told that today was the solemn day of Rosh Hashanah, he felt very bad that he could not join others in prayer.

"The young lad went out into the field and turned his eyes upward toward heaven. 'Dear God,' he said. 'I have never learned to pray like others have. All I know is the aleph-bet. I will recite the letters for You, and You put them together to make the proper words.'" The lad began reciting aleph, bet, gimmel, daled, etc."

The rabbi continued: "The lad is now reciting the aleph-bet, and God is busy putting the letters together to form the proper words. We must delay our prayers until the lad is finished with his, at which time God can be attentive to us."

The Baal Shem Tov often quoted the phrase, "God prefers the sincerity of the heart." Everyone should, of course, become as fluent in prayer as possible. However, the essence of prayer is the emotional investment one places in it.

The one who does not know what to ask for -- and is broken-hearted because he would like to pray but does not know how -- his prayer may be the most precious of all.

The author is Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, and founder and Medical Director of Gateway Rehabilitation Center in Pittsburgh.

Excerpted with permission from **"FROM BONDAGE TO FREEDOM"** - a Passover Haggadah with a commentary illuminating the liberation of the spirit. Published by Shaar Press/Mesorah Publications Ltd., Brooklyn, NY ArtScroll.com/Mesorah Publications Ltd., Brooklyn, NY

include '/usr/web/torah.org/ssi/footer.php3';