

PARSLEY IS A SYMBOL OF SPRING AND OTHER MISCONCEPTIONS

by Rabbi Yisrael Rutman

Some of the most cherished misconceptions about Judaism revolve around the Passover Seder. For example, many think that the parsley on the Seder plate symbolizes springtime. The misconception is understandable, probably due to the fact that the Torah decrees that Passover, which is on the 15th of Nisan, shall always be in the spring, and the intercalation of the Jewish calendar is designed to insure that it comes out that way. Indeed, the renewal of nature at this season reflects the spiritual renewal of the Jewish people in their deliverance from slavery.*

Nevertheless, I have searched through numerous Haggadahs, and none of them associate parsley with spring. (Of course, I am confining myself to the traditional commentaries; almost anything is possible in the non-traditional ones.) Actually, according to most opinions the vegetable on the plate need not be parsley, at all. It can just as well be a potato or a carrot. (As long as it isn't lettuce, which is reserved for the bitter herbs later on.) The main idea is that we have a bit of food before the meal commences, a symbolic appetizer to get the attention of the children. It is one of several curiosities of the Seder---such as covering or removing the matzot from sight, and pouring the second cup of wine right after Kiddush, long before it's meant to be drunk---that are designed to stimulate the children to ask questions along the lines of, "Why is this night different from all other nights?"

Which brings to mind two other misconceptions. One of them is that the recital of The Four Questions, is mandatory. But since the point is to ask questions about the meaning of Passover, and not just to impress everybody with the kids' precocious mastery of Hebrew, if appropriate questions are being asked, The Four Questions may actually be omitted.

The fatal misconception, however, is that once The Four Questions have been heard, one should either send the children to bed, or read the rest of the Haggadah---which contains the answers to those questions, the story of the inception of the Jewish people---as quickly as possible, so that everyone can soon enjoy the chicken soup with keneidelech (matzo balls). This defeats the whole purpose, not only of the Four Questions, but of the entire Seder. After all, the purpose of getting the

kids to ask questions is in order that they may hear answers.

More than that, it gives a tragically wrong picture of what Judaism is all about. For Judaism is pre-eminently the question-and-answer religion. The Haggadah is only one example. The whole of the Talmud, Judaism's central legal and philosophical text, is built on the question-and-answer format, called in Aramaic *shakla v'tarya* (give-and-take). And in Talmudic study a good question is often prized as much as a good answer.

But that doesn't mean we aren't interested in the answers. The story is told of a certain Jew in nineteenth century Europe who wanted to marry off his daughter to the finest young Torah scholar he could find. Disdaining the matchmaker route, he hit on a unique method. A great scholar himself, he went from yeshiva to yeshiva, posing an extraordinarily difficult and complex Talmudic question of his own devising. The student who could answer it correctly would be offered the chance at his daughter's hand in marriage. But even the best minds of the next generation were stumped; no one could answer satisfactorily.

As he was departing one yeshiva, a young man ran after his carriage, breathlessly calling for him to stop. The man leaned down toward the young fellow. "Do you have the answer?" he inquired expectantly.

"No," he admitted, "I don't. But please don't leave until you tell me what the answer is," he implored.

On the spot, he decided that this young man would indeed be a fitting match for his daughter. Though perhaps not possessed of the intellectual brilliance that he was seeking, the desire to know the answer to the question, to know the truth regardless of any personal gain, was deemed equally important.

Every Jewish child---and for that matter, every Jewish adult---needs to hear not only the questions of the Seder, but the answers, too.

** That's another misconception. Some people think that Nisan is the name of a Japanese car manufacturer, but it also happens to be the name of the month in the Jewish calendar in which Passover falls out. Furthermore, Nisan is not a Hebrew word. The names of the Jewish months are Aramaic, and were brought with the exiles returning to the Land of Israel from Babylon at the beginning of the Second Temple period. Nisan means miracles, referring to the miraculous events which attended the Exodus.*

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