

MAGGID - PART 7: THE EVIL SON

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

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The Hagada speaks about the famed "Four Sons:" The Wise son, the Evil Son, the Simple Son, and the Son who does not know how to ask. The dialogue of the evil son is particularly interesting. The Hagada Says: "The Rashah (The wicked son) - What does he say? 'Of what purpose is this service to you?' To you (he said), (implying) and not to himself. Because he took himself out of the community, he has denied the basic principles. Therefore, you should strike his teeth and tell him 'Because of this, G-d did this for me during my departure from Egypt.' For me, and not for him. And if he was there, he would not have been redeemed. "

Why is the evil son so bad? Why are his comments considered "heretical?" Furthermore, what is the unusual response of striking his teeth supposed to accomplish? In order to get a fuller appreciation of this dialogue, it is necessary to understand the true meaning of the conversation. Therefore, a little background information is needed.

Our forefather Yaakov was the father of the 12 Tribes of Israel. We find in the Torah that Yosef, Yaakov's favorite son, was not liked by his brothers. Yosef had dreams about how he would be in an elevated position over his brothers, which he related to his brothers. These revelations combined with other factors that our Sages discuss caused a large rift between Yosef and his brothers. Yaakov was not oblivious to this rift. Indeed, he knew that Yosef distanced himself and was distanced from his brothers, and he attempted to ameliorate the situation.

We find in Bereishis (37:11-14) that the brothers were tending to their father's flocks in the city of Shechem. Yaakov sent Yosef to check on his brothers. The language that Yaakov used to request this of Yosef is odd. He told Yosef "To check on the peace of your brothers and the peace of the sheep." Why did Yaakov give this lengthy order, when he could have simply stated "Check on the peace of your brothers and the sheep?"

The answer is that Yaakov was telling something more to Yosef than to just check on his brothers' well being. There are two types of "peace." There is a type of peace which is merely an absence of war. People do not necessarily get along, nor care for each other. However, as long as one does not bother the other, all is well. This is contrasted to a vastly different type of peace. It is a true peace, where people care for each other. People more than just co-exist with each other: They live together as a community, a collective whole where all are concerned for each other's benefit, and where

cooperation is the norm, not an exception, not a burden. Sheep are a perfect example of the former type of peace. One sheep does not necessarily care for the others in the flock. As long as any specific sheep gets its food to eat, it will not bother any other sheep. Sheep co-exist with each other. The brothers of Yosef, on the other hand, demonstrated the latter type of peace. They lived together in a unit, caring for each other's needs, concerned for each other's welfare. The brothers lived in a harmonious unit, a unit which typified the peace we long for.

Yosef, by acting in the ways he did, was distancing himself from his brothers. His relationship with his siblings was like that between sheep: as long as Yosef did not bother his brothers, they did not bother him, and vice versa. Yaakov knew that it was of utmost importance that this change. Yosef had to realize that he had to make himself a part of the whole. He could not be content with his status as an individual, separate from his brothers. He had to realize how important unity was, and act on this realization. In order to point out to Yosef that his behavior was not as it should be, Yaakov told Yosef "Go, look at the peace of the sheep. See how they act towards each other. That is how you are acting towards your brothers, and it is wrong! How should you act? Go see the peace of your brothers! They are truly a unified group, where care for each other is of utmost concern. That is how your relationship should be with your brothers!"

The Torah tells us that by this point in time, it was too late for Yosef to rectify the situation. His brothers sold him into slavery. This sale was the first link in the chain of events that lead to our slavery in Egypt. By the time we were taken out of Egypt as a nation, we had rectified the situation. The Torah points this out when the nation of Israel was camped by Mount Sinai not long after the departure. The Torah, when saying that the nation was camped, uses the singular verb "*va'yichan*" - "and he camped," instead of the proper verb of "*va'yachanu*," "and they camped." Why the odd choice? To tell us that the entire nation was one - like one person, with one heart. We have to assure that our relationship with our "brothers" is one of unity. Without unity, our nation will not survive.

It is because of the importance of unity that the question of the Rashah is deemed "heretical." The Rashah stresses that he is not part of the rest of the nation. He is not interested in what everyone else is doing. He is for himself. It is this type of attitude that dooms our nation. The Rashah has taken himself out of the community. By separating himself, he is illustrating that he does not care for the rest of the nation, nor for the nation's continued existence. So how does striking his teeth help? The Hagada tells us that the nation of Israel while in Egypt was as numerous as grass. Why the comparison to grass, as opposed to other "numerous" objects, such as the stars and sand? The Leil Shimurim writes that individual blades of grass have no value. Only with the combination of countless blades is there any significance to the grass. The same is true with the nation of Israel. The greatness of the nation of Israel is their unity. Teeth as well are only of value as a group. One tooth does not help a person much. We therefore "strike the teeth" of the Rashah - to illustrate to him that just as a few scattered individual teeth are not of much value, so too he, by separating himself from the nation, is of insignificant value. Just as teeth need each other to work properly, so too the nation

of Israel needs all brothers and sisters working together.

Without unity, our status as a nation is in jeopardy. At this time of the year, we should do all that we can to increase the unity between our sisters and brothers, thereby strengthening our nation, the nation of Israel.

(Based on the thoughts of Rabbi Michel Twerski of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.)