

# WHAT'S WITH THE NUMBER FOUR?

*by Rabbi Yehudah Prero*

**At the Seder, we drink four cups of wine, we ask four questions, and we read about four sons. What is the significance of the number four?**

The Divrei Negidim (which is attributed to the Maharal of Prague) discusses the number four initially in the context of the four cups of wine. As we mentioned in the last post, the four cups correspond to four expressions of redemption that G-d uttered. The Divrei Negidim explains that the nation of Israel was subjugated threefold. Firstly, they were in exile, as strangers in a strange land. Secondly, not only were they in exile, but they were enslaved in exile. Lastly, not only were they enslaved, but they were tortured, physically and mentally. G-d first told us that he would take us out from under the burdens Egypt placed on us. G-d then told us that we would be saved from the slavery. Finally, we were told that we would be redeemed. This would bring the nation to a point where they would not be persecuted slaves in exile. But what would they be? That is the point of the fourth expression - And I will take them to Me as a nation. The nation would now be a just that - a nation, with a purpose, with a common bond unifying the nation. We were taken out to be the nation of G-d. This fourth expression brings us to a level of fullness and completion. The Jews were no longer just a large group of people. They were a true blue nation.

The number four signifies this completion, this fullness. The nation of Israel became full and complete upon the fulfillment of the fourth utterance of redemption, this fourth and final stage in their development.

The four questions known as Mah Nishtaneh, according to the Abarbanel, are meant to set the tone for the evening. The questions (or expressions of bewilderment, as some explain) are meant to point out the inherent contradictions in the evening. When the four questions are read, we are saying - Look at what will be going on tonight: We eat Matzo and Maror, which remind us of the bread we ate as slaves and the bitter life we had as slaves. We then dip our food and recline, which are actions of the aristocracy. Is this night a reminder of the bitter experience we had in Egypt, or is it a celebration of freedom?

We know the answer - Yes, we were slaves, and yes, G-d freed us. Why four questions? Perhaps because it is these very four questions which encapsulate the Seder. The questions focus on freedom vs. slavery - how can we have both in one night? These four questions are enough to set the very tone we need on this night. They are a perfect summation of all that needs to be said in order to get the ball rolling at the Seder. They point out four practices that are unique to this

evening, and that do not all fit into the same logical category. They are a set of questions that are complete and full. Nothing more needs to be asked. Only answers are needed.

The Divrei Negidim explains that the four sons are also a 'complete set.' The Chacham, the Wise Son wants to know. He researches. He inquires. He pursues knowledge and wisdom. He becomes wise. For this reason, he is called the Wise Son. The Tam, the Simple Son, is neither intellectually superior nor inferior to the Wise Son. However, he does not pursue intellectual growth. He does not strive for greatness. When he sees something out of the norm, he will inquire. However, unless there is an impetus to inquire, no query will be forthcoming. For this reason, he is termed Simple. The She'aino Yodai'a Lish'ol, the One Who Does Not Know How To Ask, is simply not as smart as the other two. Even when he sees something that is unusual, he will not inquire about it. Oddities are no inspiration for education. He just does not know how to ask even when questions are most definitely appropriate. The Rasha, the Wicked Son, is on par with the Chacham. He is smart. He does have a drive for the bigger and better. However, his drive is motivated by a desire to do evil. He has no urge to do good. Any knowledge gained is used for the pursuit of the amoral. His wisdom is not put to 'good' use. For this reason, he is called Wicked.

These four sons represent all the elements on the intellectual spectrum. There are those who are highly motivated, minimally motivated, and those who need more than motivation to bring them to a level of understanding. The Torah addresses the needs of each of these children by instructing a father how to tell each of these children about the departure from Egypt in a way that best suits their level of understanding. But what about that child who knows just fine what is going on, but could care less? What about that son who is not using his knowledge for good, productive purposes? The Torah has an answer for him as well.

These four sons and their respective responses are all the Torah needed to cover any situation. They are complete. They satisfy all options. Again, the number four signals a whole, a fullness, and a completion.