

WHAT IS THE QUESTION?

by Rabbi Label Lam

Why is this night different from all other nights? (Haggadah of Pesach)

The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when contemplating the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity. (Albert Einstein)

The Haggadah of Pesach is one of the greatest and most successful lesson plans of all time. It's a good thing that we have such an exceptional educational tool available. How else could we be confident in fulfilling our sacred obligation of relaying to next generation the experience of the exodus from Egypt?

We might be left fumbling for words and facts and even worse the children would be forced to endure that most terrible of all fates- a lecture. Children and adults detest lectures. I know! I'm a "Lecturer".

Every kid at some time heard the old, "when we were kids..." lecture. The harshness of the living conditions "back then" are always made to sound more severe year after year as time passes. "When we were young we had to walk to school up hill both ways, 15 miles in the snow. Do you think we each had our own coat?" Somebody once asked, "What will the next generation tell their kids? When we were young we had to get up and change the channel!" They will get that same blank stare of disbelief. The lecture is an oft abused didactic discipline.

The Pesach Seder is organized to avoid this pitfall. It violates its very name-"seder" which means order. It goes out of sequence by design only to accomplish one task initially and that is, to prompt a question. As one great philosopher once said, "There is nothing more irrelevant than the answer to a question that was never asked!" Without a question the most fascinating subject is reduced to a meaningless lecture. Life is the answer to what question? Once a question is asked, however, the search engine is ignited everything becomes relevant and all things potentially become our teacher.

Try any one of these on for size. What is the meaning of life? Why did Hashem choose us? Why and how have we survived? Is our history unique? Are there discernable patterns in our history? What is the message to us? Why are we gathering as a people again on this night? Who could have orchestrated these events? How will this drama end? Will all the suffering of exile be justifiably compensated in the end? Are we in exile now? What am I living for? What am I willing to die for? Do I

appreciate what I have? Do I know what I have? To Whom is gratitude owed? How should I express gratitude? What does it mean to be free? Am I truly free? Etc.

Not just the success of the Pesach Seder but the whole of existence hinges on a question. To the extent that a question is asked the world becomes lit up with significance. To the degree there is no question in the mind all the facts and information adds up to not more than an accumulation of "sound and fury signifying nothing". Perhaps that's why on Pesach night we are highlighting the importance of the question.

Jewish parents are often more impressed with a good question than a good grade. One of my principles told me, "The question is more important than the answer! Get them to feel the question!" We are less interested in teaching them "what" to think as we are in teaching them "how" to think.

A wealthy man was looking for a match for his beautiful daughter. He went to the Yeshiva and presented a difficult question in the Talmud. He offered his daughter's hand in marriage to the one who could solve the deep riddle. Not one student was able to present the correct answer so the wealthy man got into his carriage and swiftly rode to edge of town.

When he reached the city limits he heard the cries of young man who had apparently been chasing him for some time. Sweaty and covered with dust, exhausted and out of breath the student asked, "Nu?! So what's the answer to the question?" The wealthy man replied, "You're the one I want for my daughter!"

One question amongst many remains: "What is the question?"

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