

WHO'S LISTENING

by Rabbi Label Lam

The wicked son, what does he say? "What is this service to you?" "to you," - "but not to himself." Since he has excluded himself from the people at large, he denies the foundation of our faith. Therefore, you should blunt his teeth and tell him: "It is because of this, what G-d did for me when I went out of Egypt." - "for me," : "but not him." Had he been there, he would not have been redeemed. - Pesach Haggadah

At the Pesach Seder we have a sacred obligation to "tell your child" about the Exodus from Egypt. It is of vital importance that each and every child exit that Pesach Seder feeling that much more attached and committed to the historical mission of the Jewish People. Therefore the Mitzvah of the evening is expressed in terms of speaking to "your child" and not to children in general. Each one needs his or her own special medicine or lesson.

The "wicked son" as he is titled cannot be totally wicked. Otherwise, why is he at the Seder, and why do we even engage him in discussion? Why is he called wicked? He has given up! He has surrendered to negativity. Our definition of failure is not falling down but staying down. Now he speaks from his lowly perch, having separated himself from the community of Israel and feeling cynical about the possibility of change.

It is interesting that in answering him, most of the conversation is expressed as an aside. The parent is not talking to him at all but rather to the others, in his presence. Yet the Mitzvah of the evening is to "tell your child". Why are we then advised to speak to the assembled? It is as if saying, "Everyone has free choice! If he does not want to be a part of it he is not a part of it!"

I heard an unbelievable story not long ago from Rabbi Mordechai Twerski. He had recently met up with family members of the Debriciner Rov and they shared with him the following incident. They went to the grave site of their holy relative, the Debriciner Rov ztl. There they saw a youngish couple praying. Not recognizing them as family members they were curious as to why this couple was there. So they asked them what it was that brought them to this place.

They told the following story: "Twenty-two years ago we were young kids who got married to each other. After a short while it became clear to us that we didn't know what we were doing together. Every day was a different disagreement and another fight. We were not getting along at all. After trying and trying we were thinking about divorce. Then my wife was expecting, so we stayed together in the meantime. Having a child did not make married life easier. If anything it complicated

matters. So we decided it was time to get divorced. We didn't know exactly how to go about getting a Jewish divorce so we went to the Debriciner Rov. After hearing about our struggles in marriage he agreed to help us with the divorce. He instructed us to come back the next day and to bring our son. We thought this was part of the process. When we came back the next day with our son, he asked to see the child. He motioned that we hand him over. We did.

He sat with the child, a little baby, in front of us, and he spoke to the child, stroking him affectionately all the while. "From this day forth your life is going to be very difficult. You will be bounced from house to house. You'll spend one Shabbos with your mother and another Shabbos with your father. Most of the kids in school won't understand your situation. They might not be eager to play by your broken home. Growing up as a happy child will be a steep challenge for you. Getting married will be difficult as well. It is not your fault. You have done nothing wrong. This is the lot that has been handed you. I want you to know that you will need extraordinary strength and courage and tremendous help from heaven to attain a normal life."

After his little talk with the child he handed the baby back to us. We were both crying. We looked up at each other and decided then and there, for the sake of the child, to give it another try. That was twenty years ago we had that encounter with the Debriciner Rov. We eventually worked out our differences. We are now happily married, Baruch HASHEM. Tonight that child, our son is getting married and we wanted to come here today to express our deep feelings of gratitude to the Rov."

Sometimes the wise approach is not to speak directly to a person especially if they have demonstrated they are not ready to listen. Speaking aloud to another is a preferred method to land the same powerful message but indirectly. The natural defense mechanisms of the one who is feeling so hopeless and defeated are relaxed, the words are less likely to be taken as a personal affront, and hey you never know who's listening.