

# ARE YOU REALLY LISTENING?

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

*"And it will be, when your children will say to you, 'what is this service for you?' that you will say, 'it is the Passover sacrifice for G-d, who passed over the houses of the Children of Israel in Egypt, when He struck the people of Egypt, and He saved our houses'..." [12:26-27]*

When we look in the Passover Haggadah, we see a very different conversation surrounding this same question. In the Haggadah, the question "what is this service for you" is attributed to the second of the four sons - the wicked one. And the Haggadah continues, "'for you' and not for him - because he removes himself from the congregation, he is denying everything. So you too should break his teeth and say to him, 'because of this that G-d did for me when I left Egypt.' [13:8] 'For me' and not for him - had he been there, he would not have been redeemed."

How can the Haggadah venture so far afield of the verse itself? Why does it offer such a different answer - and, indeed, a different attitude - from the one found in the Torah?

Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz of the Mirrer Yeshiva answers as follows: we should not think, he explains, that the Torah is speaking to those who "deny everything," who have no interest. On the contrary, the question need not be taken as a wicked challenge, nor does the answer necessarily involve disgracing and brushing off those who would ask a question this way. Heaven forbid, he says, that we should even think that the Torah wastes words dealing with such people!

The question itself is an appropriate question, one which deserves an appropriate answer. This is what the Torah teaches us within its verses. "And you shall say, 'it is the Passover sacrifice to G-d..." - this is the Torah's answer to the question.

The Haggadah, on the other hand, forces us to distinguish between those with questions, and those with challenges. The very same question - one which is entirely appropriate and worthwhile, one which the Torah itself accepts and answers - can also be nothing but mockery. The discerning person must be able to distinguish between the tone of voice which indicates a question of the wise son, from that which indicates the challenge of the wicked, and respond accordingly. "Had he been there, he would not have been redeemed" - this answer is enough to alert the second son to the fact that he has just posed a challenge rather than a question, and thus he has received an answer in kind.

Rav Meir Malbi"m was known not only for his great scholarship, but for his sharp tongue. He explained the difference between the two types of questions by playing on the word "teretz" - a Hebrew word which means "answer," yet also means "excuse." He said: one can only give a teretz to a "kasha" - a "difficulty", something which needs an answer. One cannot, however, give a teretz to a teretz!

Sometimes we have questions - real, sincere questions which we want to answer. Everyone has questions, and we should ask them and look for answers. At other times, though, we don't really have questions at all. We may **pose** them as questions, but our real intention is to dismiss the very idea that there might be a valid answer.

Both coming from others, and coming from ourselves, we must first distinguish: is this a question, or is this just an excuse, a challenge? A person who comes with excuses has no interest in answers, however valid they might be. One can only give an answer to someone who is listening!

Good Shabbos