

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

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

The Ohr Somayach, Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, notes that the Haggadah classifies the above as the question of the Wicked Son. He then asks -- what is the difference? What is it about this question, compared to the others, that told the writers of the Haggadah that this question in particular was asked by the Wicked Son?

The question of the Wise Son is found in Deuteronomy 6:20: "When your son will ask you tomorrow, saying, 'What are the witnesses and the decrees and the laws, which Hashem our G-d has commanded You?'" The Simple Son asks in Exodus 13:14, "And it will be, when your son asks you tomorrow, saying, 'What is this?' And you will say to him, 'With a mighty hand G-d took us out of Egypt, from the house of servitude.'" And concerning the son who does not even know what to ask, we do it for him: "And you will tell it to your son on that day, saying, 'it is because of this that G-d did for me when I left Egypt.'" [Shemos 13:8]

In each of these we find the additional, apparently redundant word "saying." Only wicked sons "say [it] to you" straight the first time. What is the point of the redundant "saying" that precedes each of the other questions, and is this relevant to understanding the question of the Wicked Son?

Reb Meir Simcha takes us to a Medrash at the beginning of Parshas Vaeschanan, Deut. 3:23. "And [Moshe] prayed to G-d at that hour, saying..." -- again, the word saying is appended. Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki) quotes the Medrash, which says that Moshe is demanding an answer. What does it mean when the Torah adds an extra word, "saying?" It means that the speaker is demanding a response.

And this, says the Ohr Somayach, is the difference between the Wicked Son and the others. The others are all demanding an answer. They want to know! The Wicked Son, on the other hand, has no desire to know. He just wants to mock. "What's it to you? What do you need this for?"

The Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer, offers the same answer to a different question. In the Torah, the Wicked Sons ask their question and we respond, "it is the Passover sacrifice to G-d..." But the Haggadah tells us that we respond to the Wicked Son by "blunt[ing] his teeth." We say, "because of what G-d did for *me* when I left Egypt" -- saying that had he been there, he would not have been

redeemed. The Gaon explains that since the Wicked Son intends to mock rather than to ask a question, we "blunt his teeth" with a reply which blunts his mockery.

But if so, why does the Torah give a different reply to the Wicked Son? The Haggadah cannot contradict the Torah, so why do we have two totally different responses to the same question?

The Vilna Gaon answers: the "reply" given in the Torah isn't intended for the Wicked Son at all. The response is directed back at us -- it is only intended to help us to strengthen ourselves, to remind us that indeed the Haggadah serves a great purpose and has a great meaning. The proof? The Torah says "and you will say..." -- not "and you will say to *him*." We are not responding to him at all; we are just teaching ourselves.

When someone comes to mock or make fun, there is no reason to provide a serious answer to his or her question -- it will not help in any case. That person does not want a response, and no response will be acceptable. The only thing you can do is blunt his mockery.

But we also see a second lesson here, in the Medrash and the Ohr Somayach which say that one who uses the expression "saying" is waiting for an answer. How many times do we see Hashem use this expression? Countless times! From "And G-d spoke to man, saying 'be fruitful and multiply'" until "And G-d spoke to Moshe on that very day, saying 'go up onto this mountain of Avarim, Mt. Nevo... and die on the mountain which you will ascend...'"

Is there a dialogue with G-d? Of course! He says to each person, "here, I love you, here is my Torah, here is a Mitzvah to do, for you. Will you do it?" And the Torah uses the expression "saying" -- meaning that G-d, too, is waiting for our answer!

Good Shabbos,
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This week's class is dedicated to the speedy healing of Azriel Yitzchak ben Chaya Gitel.

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