

HAGGADAH SHEL PESACH (II): THE "FOUR SONS"

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I

INTRODUCTION

One of the most popular sections in the Haggadah is the "Arba'ah Banim", in which we are introduced to a wise son, a wicked son, a simple son and a son who cannot formulate a question.

We often engage in such wonderful and animated play-acting (not only) at this point in the Seder, dividing up roles and analyzing the personalities of these four distinct *fil's d'un pere* that an overarching difficulty in this passage is overlooked. Where did these four sons come from? How did Haza"l arrive at the conclusion that "the Torah speaks about four sons"?

In this essay, I would like to take the road less traveled to arrive at a popular destination. Instead of beginning with the passage in the Haggadah, assuming the Rabbinic formulation and using it as a point of departure, I'd like to suggest the process by which the Rabbis arrived at this famous conclusion: K'neged Arba'ah Banim Dibrah Torah.

Before entering the heart of the passage, we may as well take advantage of the expansive meaning of the title of this section and take a look at the introductory phrases:

"Barukh haMakom, Barukh Hu.

"Barukh SheNatan Torah l'Amo Yisra'el, Barukh Hu."

"Blessed is the Omnipresent, Blessed is He

"Blessed is He whogave the Torah to His nation Yisra'el, Blessed is He."

What is the purpose of this paragraph?

At first blush, it seems to be a shadow of Birkat haTorah - the B'rakhah recited every morning in advance of studying Torah. (There are either two or three B'rakhot within the context of Birkat haTorah - it is the second [or last] one which is the referent here). This same B'rakhah, even if recited in the morning, is repeated by anyone who receives an Aliyah; to wit, it is the enhanced mode of Torah study engendered by the public Torah reading which necessitates a re-recitation of the B'rakhah.

In much the same way, a number of Rishonim (see, inter alia, Shibbolei haLeket and R. Yeshaya

d'Trani in their commentaries on the Haggadah) suggest that because we are about to commence a special mode of Torah study, a "new" Birkat haTorah is called for. Since, however, the distinction between the Torah study we've engaged in until this point and that which will begin now is not as clear as the private/public distinction mentioned above, we do not make a "complete" B'rakhah. We omit "Shem uMalkhut" (God's Name and His Kingship - i.e. "Melekh ha'Olam"), substituting the cognomen "HaMakom".

Given this explanation (and there are other, related approaches. Some suggest that since there is no specific B'rakhah for the Mitzvah of Haggadah, this quasi-B'rakhah serves that purpose), most Rishonim suggest that the "special" experience of Talmud Torah which is beginning here is the special section of the "Arba'ah Banim". This explains the four occurrences of the word "Barukh" here.

For our purposes, the significance of this introductory phrase is that the section of the Arba'ah Banim is so significant that it may warrant an independent Birkat haTorah, albeit sans Shem and Malkhut.

Now, to the selection itself.

II

THE SOURCES

During his presentation, in Egypt, of the laws of the immediate Korban Pesach (Sh'mot 12), Mosheh instructs the people that they are to maintain this worship every year - once they reach the Land:

And it shall come to pass, when you come to the land which Hashem will give you, according as He has promised, that you shall keep this **Avodah** (worship).

And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say to you, What do you mean by this **Avodah**?

That you shall say, It is the sacrifice of Hashem's Passover, Who passed over the houses of the people of Yisra'el in Egypt, when He struck the Egyptians, and saved our houses...(12:25-27)

Curiously, about thirty verses later, Mosheh is instructing the people to maintain the seven-day feast of Matzot:

And you shall tell your son in that day, saying, This is done because of that which Hashem did to me when I came forth out of Egypt. (13:8)

At this point, we have seen two "commands of instruction" which seem to be somewhat connected and even have an interstices: In both cases, we are commanded to relate to our children about the Exodus.

Note, however, significant differences between the two interactions:

1. In the first, the father's instruction is preceded - and motivated - by a question. The second interaction is one-sided, with no words heard from the son.
2. The context of the first piece of information is the Korban Pesach; the second piece of information comes on the heels of the seven-day Matzah festival, combined with the destruction of all Hametz.
3. The nature of the information shared in the first interaction is detailed and focused on one aspect of the Exodus, whereas the second "lesson" is general, vague (and somewhat difficult to decipher - see the wide range of explanations about the phrase "Ba'avur Zeh" among the Rishonim ad loc.)

So far, we should not be bothered by the Torah's presentation of these two pedagogic instructions, seeing as the context, background and content are significantly different.

We move a few verses down and find a third example of instruction. While detailing the laws of sanctifying the first-born animals and humans, Mosheh states:

And it shall be when your son asks you in time to come, saying, What is this? that you shall say to him, By strength of hand Hashem brought us out from Egypt, from the house of slavery; (13:14)

Suddenly, we are struck by the apparent redundancy in the Torah's commands. This third piece of information sounds like something of a mix of the first two - staying general in nature, yet mentioning God's "strong hand". Although the context is different, the background/motivation to this instruction is, again, a mix of the two earlier ones: It contains some question, like the first one, but is less pointed - "What is this?".

What need does the Torah to tell us three different times to, effectively do the same thing?

The one answer which suggests itself goes back to the issue of context. Both of the earlier interactions revolved around the holidays of Pesach and Matzot (Hag haPesach is a one-day holiday, beginning on the fourteenth of Nisan in the afternoon and lasting until midnight or dawn of that night; Matzot begins at sunset of the fifteenth and lasts until the twenty-first at nightfall); this third occurs anytime that a member of the flock "opens the womb" and that **B'khor** (first-born) must be brought to the Kohen or redeemed. One might argue that the Torah has to instruct us that not only at the Pesach and Matzot holidays must we instruct about the seminal event which we celebrate, but also during the year when we fulfill Mitzvot which both commemorate and result from the Exodus, that story ought to be transmitted.

That leads us to our fourth father-son interaction, in Sefer D'varim:

And when your son asks you in time to come, saying, What do the testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments, mean, which Hashem our God has commanded you? Then you shall say to your son, We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt; and Hashem brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand; And Hashem showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, upon Egypt, upon Pharaoh, and upon all his

household, before our eyes; And He brought us out from there, that He might bring us in, to give us the land which He swore to our fathers. And Hashem commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear Hashem our God, for our good always, that He might preserve us alive, as it is at this day. And it shall be accounted virtue in us, if we take care to do all these commandments before Hashem our God, as He has commanded us. (D'varim 6:20-25)

Before analyzing the specific problems with this text, its very presence challenges one of the principles of Torah interpretation: The principle of economy. It is axiomatic that the Torah avoids verbosity and expects its students to derive lessons from unusual phrases, extra words and even, in some cases, extra letters.

Why would the Torah tell us, four different times, to do the same thing - to teach our children about the Exodus?

Before proceeding, let's reexamine this question and test its validity. Aren't there numerous occasions where the Torah repeats itself - even verbatim? Indeed, the lengthy repetition of Avraham's slave's story in B'resheet 24 inspired the Midrash Tanhuma to comment that "the idle talk of the servants of the patriarch's homes is dearer before God than the Torah of the children". The construction of the Mishkan is not only presented in exquisite detail (Sh'mot 25-31), but its actual construction is, likewise, presented in painstaking and explicit fashion (Ch. 35-40). Even the dedication ceremony (Bamidbar 7) includes twelve nearly identical paragraphs - of six verses each - describing the offering of each of the chieftains.

How can we cry "foul" when the Torah repeats the command to instruct the children regarding the Exodus in light of this evidence?

Without digressing too far from our stated objective, it is prudent to point out a significant distinction between different genres of Torah text. This distinction, borne out of the context and content of the text itself, is attested to throughout Rabbinic literature, where the homiletic treatment of text varies depending on its style and framework. Creation narratives are understood to be much more meta-historic - as many of the Midrashim in the first few Parashiot of B'resheet Rabbah can attest - than, say, even the Patriarchal narratives. Shirah (Biblical poetry; e.g. Sh'mot 15, Shoftim 5, Yonah 2) is expounded upon with a broader and deeper eye than, say narratives or legalistic texts.

The counter-examples brought above are either from narrative texts (e.g B'resheet 24) or celebratory texts (e.g. Bamidbar 7) where the repetition serves as an "agent of environment", serving to do much more than communicate information. The majestic scene of the twelve dedication-offerings of the chieftains has an air of coronation and the eclat of a royal ceremony; that sense of grandeur is enhanced by the repetition.

Indeed, the Rabbis never express any concern or puzzlement over the repetition of narrative, prophetic, praise or ceremonial texts - it is purely within the realm of "legalistic" sections that the challenge of "Lamah Li" ("why is it needed, it is already known from another passage") is raised.

That is why we are confused when we find, not twice or three times but four different instances where the Torah commands us to inform our children about the Exodus. In essence, we have one Mitzvah: Teach your children that God took us out of Egypt. Why does the Torah seemingly violate the principle of economy and repeat this command three "extra" times?

III

THE SOLUTION:

THE FOUR SONS

In parallel fashion, both the Mekhilta (Parashat Bo) and the Talmud Yerushalmi present the solution with which we are familiar:

The Torah spoke concerning four sons - one wise, one wicked, one simple and one who cannot formulate a question. (In the Talmud Yerushalmi, the **Tam** is called a **Tipesh** [imbecile]).

Although this first piece of the solution remains consistent throughout early Rabbinic sources (with the one exception noted above), the variations in the rest of the presentation are many. A proper presentation of these variations is well beyond the scope of this shiur (the interested reader is directed to Kasher's Haggadah Sh'lemah pp. 120-122); nonetheless, it is interesting to note that the response given to the **Hakham** (wise son) in our Haggadah is, in the Talmud Yerushalmi, given to the **Tipesh** - a curious and somewhat disconcerting reversal. In one version of the Haggadah, that same answer ("we teach him the laws of the [Korban] Pesach, [up to the law] that we do not eat any dessert after the Pesach") is given to the **Rasha'** - (wicked son).

We will confine our analysis to the version with which we are most familiar - the one which appears in the conventional Haggadah:

The Torah spoke about four sons, one wise, one wicked, one simple and one who cannot formulate a question.

What does the wise son say? "What do the testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments, mean, which Hashem our God has commanded you?" You should also say to him the laws of the [Korban] Pesach, [up to the law] that we do not eat any dessert after the Pesach.

What does the wicked son say? "What does this **Avodah** (worship) mean **Lakhem** (to you)?" "To you" [meaning] and "not to him". Since he excluded himself from the community, he has denied the basic principle. You should also set his teeth on edge and say to him: "It is on account of this that Hashem did for me when I left Egypt" "for me" and not "for him" - had he been there, he would not have been redeemed.

What does the simple son say? "What is this?" "that you shall say to him, By strength of hand

Hashem brought us out from Egypt, from the house of slavery; "

Regarding the one who cannot formulate a question, you must open up the discussion, as it says: "And you shall tell your son in that day, saying, This is done because of that which Hashem did to me when I came forth out of Egypt."

To wit, the solution suggested by Haza"l is that the Torah repeats the command to instruct the children regarding the Exodus because each son requires a different approach. Unlike most Mitzvot which are static in form (although, ideally, dynamic in content and meaning), the actual parameters, form and means of fulfillment of this Mitzvah is totally dependent upon the "other" here - the son. If the son asks wisely, we respond in kind, etc.

In other words, the Rabbinic solution to the Toraic conundrum is that unlike most Mitzvot which only need be presented once because the mode and method of performance is essentially fixed, this Mitzvah can only be properly fulfilled by responding, intelligently, thoughtfully and deliberately, to the child on his or her own terms.

Although this may represent something of a departure from conventional Mitzvot, it comes as no surprise to those of fortunate enough to work in the world of education. I would be a poor teacher were I to share Haggadah insights in the context of our adult "outreach" programs, such as the new Simon Wiesenthal Center's Project Next Step, in the same way as I do when teaching my precious freshman boys and sophomore and senior girls at Yeshiva University High Schools of Los Angeles. Even within those groups, a responsible and successful teacher must prepare materials and a lesson plan which speaks to the concerns, needs and curiosities of that particular group (and there is little which freshman boys have in common with senior girls!).

In spite of the somewhat obvious nature of this lesson, the Torah goes out of its way to teach it by "violating" the principle of economy - because not only are all parents, ipso facto, teachers and in need of this guidance; in addition, most people who have cognitive awareness of this principle have difficulty putting it into practice. For them - and for all of us parents and teachers who forget this lesson from time to time - the Torah provides a clear and cogent set of examples of how to teach the same curriculum to different students, responding to their questions in kind.

IV

IDENTIFYING THE SONS

One of the difficulties raised by this section of the Haggadah (and its antecedent - the Mekhilta), is the identification of the sons. What makes us think that the son who asks about the Korban Pesach is evil? Indeed, all four characterizations could be challenged, although we will focus most of our attention on the Rasha'.

The two words in his question which are used to attack him (one in the Haggadah and both are found in the Yerushalmi's treatment) are **Avodah** [the Yerushalmi expands this word to mean "what is this hassle with which you burden us every year"] and **Lakhem** (as seen in the Haggadah).

Yet, there is really nothing untoward about either of these words. In the verse which immediately precedes the son's question, Mosheh Rabbenu instructs the B'nei Yisra'el that

And it shall come to pass, when you come to the land which Hashem will give you, according as He has promised, that you shall keep this **Avodah**.

Mosheh himself calls the worship involving the Korban Pesach an **Avodah** - how else should the son refer to it?

Regarding the pregnant **Lakhem**, what else would we expect the son to say? After all, he is asking his father, who is performing this worship, what it means to him. It would be a strange use of the language for the son to say "What is this worship to us?" His **Lakhem** becomes even less offensive when compared to that last word in the "wise son's" question: "What are the laws...commanded **Et'khem** (you)?" (This difficulty motivated several versions - beginning with the Talmud Yerushalmi - to alter the "wise" question to end with the inclusive **Otanu**).

In sum, there is nothing about the words of this son which would justify categorizing him as evil. What, then, is the source of this descriptive?

If we only had the interaction in Sh'mot 12, we would have no reason to decry this boy and his attitude. It is only when aligning all four interactions that we begin to see the dysfunction in this interaction.

There are three textual clues which not only help us identify the son in 12:26 as "evil", but which guide us in our response to him.

CLUE 1: THE RHETORICAL QUESTION

There are three interactions which are initiated by the child (12:26, 13:14 and D'varim 6:20). Ours is introduced with the words **v'Hayah Ki Yom'ru...** - if your children will **say**...

If we only had this one occurrence, we might think that in Biblical Hebrew, the verb **Amor** is valid for "asking" - until we see the other two interactions:

And it shall be when your son asks you in time to come, (13:14)

And when your son asks you in time to come, saying, (D'varim 6:20)

We now understand, by virtue of the contrast of **Sha'ol** with **Amor**, that the son in 12:26 is asking - but not really asking. Although his words are framed as a question, the text is telling us that he is really making a statement. His question is not interrogative, as he is not interested in an answer; rather, he is phrasing his statement as a rhetorical question. Whether these sort of phrasings are

appropriate from teacher to student or parent to child, there is little question that when a child speaks this way to his father, there is already a sense of something inappropriate here.

CLUE 2: THE FATHER'S NON-RESPONSIVE RESPONSE

To further understand the **Rasha'** moniker, we again have to compare our four texts against each other. In all four, the father is instructed to speak. In the later three, a preposition is used to describe speaking **to** the child:

Relate to your son (13:8)

Say to your son (13:14)

Say to him (D'varim 6:21)

Moving back to our first dialogue, we see that that preposition is missing:

That you shall say, It is the sacrifice...

The father is instructed to respond to the child's question/statement - but not to address the child himself. (Again, we are only sensitive to this lacuna after having compared all four selections).

CLUE 3: THE CONTENT OF THE INSTRUCTION

What is the father told to relate to his son?

In Sh'mot 13:8, a very general and positive message is given.

In Sh'mot 13:14, a more specific but fully redemptive lesson is shared.

In D'varim 6:21-25, great detail is attended - all of it positive.

What is the response here? (to be "overheard" by the evil son) "It is the sacrifice of Hashem's Passover, Who passed over the houses of the people of Yisra'el in Egypt, when He struck the Egyptians, and saved our houses..."

There is surely no need to add the phrase "when He struck the Egyptians"; it seems that the Torah is not only instructing the father to ignore his son - he is also to make a declaration in his son's presence which carries a subtle threat, evoking the memory of the smitten Egyptians.

We now understand how the Rabbis came to identify this son as evil: He doesn't ask, although he seems to; his father is instructed to "speak past him" and the message to be broadcast carries with it the carrot of redemption along with the stick of punishment. Again - we would never have been able to see these nuances without comparing the four texts. This is, perhaps, another way of

understanding the notion of the "four sons" solution - that we only understand the Torah's pedagogic directives by seeing all four together and noting the subtle yet telling differences.

V

HAGGADAH V. TORAH

As noted above, the Torah provides responses to the father in each of the four cases - yet the Haggadah seemingly ignores the Torah's advice in two of these cases and suggests alternative answers.

In the case of the wise son, the Torah tells us that when he asks us

What do the testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments, mean, which Hashem our God has commanded you?

We are commanded to relate to him that

We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt; and Hashem brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand...

In the Haggadah, however, we are given different advice:

You should also say to him the laws of the [Korban] Pesach, [up to the law] that we do not eat any dessert after the Pesach.

Similarly, in the case of the evil son, the Torah gives us a clear response:

You shall say: "It is the sacrifice of Hashem's Passover..."

Here, again, the author of the Haggadah takes considerable liberties:

...Since he excluded himself from the community, he has denied the basic principle. You should also set his teeth on edge and say to him: "It is on account of this that Hashem did for me when I left Egypt" "for me" and not "for him" - had he been there, he would not have been redeemed.

Apparently the Ba'al haHaggadah has decided that he has better answers than those provided by the Torah! How can he "override" the directives of the Torah, suggesting other responses?

We will first address the "alternative" answer given to the evil son and conclude with the wise son; in each case, we will demonstrate that the Ba'al haHaggadah is acting with complete fidelity to the text of the Torah.

VA'AMARTEM

- A DECLARATION

As noted above, the father is never really told to give his son a response in Sh'mot 12. He is told to make a declaration - and a rather frightening one at that - regarding the Korban Pesach. If this were all of the information given, we would leave the evil son without any response - but it is possible that the Torah does provide a direct response to be given to him.

In the next chapter (13:8), we encounter the "odd man out" interaction. The father is told to "relate your son" but, unlike the other interactions, there is no son present who has asked a question.

There are, *prima facie*, two ways to explain this exception. Either this is a different type of son, one who does not ask - or it is one of the other sons who is being given this information. Within the sequence of the Torah, we find one son who has already been presented - and who never got a response! The "evil" son of 12:26 raised his challenge, made his statement - and heard a declaration in reaction. He was not, however, ever given a direct response.

We could, therefore, interpret the "unasked" response of 13:8 in two ways - both legitimate. It is either the "one who cannot formulate a question" or it is the answer given to the "evil" son - who did not receive a response until this point.

The Ba'al haHaggadah is being 100% loyal to the Torah's instructions. He tells us that this son has excluded himself from the group (the words **Avodah** and **Lakhem** only become problematic once we understand this child's overall attitude, as communicated through the textual clues outlined above) - as evidenced by the directive to ignore him. The response to the Rasha' comes some thirty verses later, when we tell him "this is what God did for **me**" - and not for you.

AF ATAH EMOR LO

- IN ADDITION

We can now revisit the response to the wise son. Before assessing the Haggadah's "alternative" answer, there is a difficulty within the response of the Torah itself.

The child asks a straightforward question. To wit - "teach me Halakhah". We would expect the Torah to command us to respond in kind; instead, we are told to relate the story of the Exodus. Why the "evasion"?

I believe that the Torah is teaching us a valuable lesson in education. There are many people who are drawn to the "message", "values" etc. of Torah but have little interest in (or use for) the structured system of Halakhic practice; on the other side of the fence, there is a not insignificant number of people who are drawn to Halakhic minutiae but who fail to embrace or integrate (or internalize) the

underlying ethos of the Torah.

The Torah is teaching us that if a child comes to us with a single-minded focus on the details of the law, we must first respond by telling him **why** these laws are significant; the grand history that is the foundation of our relationship with God as expressed through our commitment to Mitzvot etc. Of course, the Torah expects us to also answer his question - but only after showing him the "big picture".

We now open our Haggadot and see how beautifully the author has complemented the Torah's stated response:

Af Atah Emor Lo

- the opening word **Af** means "also" or "even". In other words, the Ba'al haHaggadah is suggesting that **in addition** to the answer given by the Torah (which, it is assumed, you will give - besides which, it has already been given at the beginning of the Seder), you also give him what he wants:

You should also say to him the laws of the [Korban] Pesach, [up to the law] that we do not eat any dessert after the Pesach.