

THE FIFTH SON

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Many of us are aware that there is a detailed discussion amongst the commentators to the Seder night Hagadah regarding the possibility of a fifth cup of wine as part of the Seder service. Some are of the opinion that the cup of wine that is designated as the Cup of Eliyahu serves as this fifth cup. Be that as it may, I wish to discuss another foursome that in our time may have developed into a fivesome.

We are taught in the Hagadah that there are four categories of children in the Jewish world. They are: the wise son, the wicked son, the naïve and simple son and the son who knows nothing and cannot even begin to ask anything intelligently.

We are all acquainted with the wise son. He has had a thorough Jewish education and is intelligently loyal to the Torah and its values system and traditional way of life. We unfortunately are able to clearly identify the evil child amongst us - the apostate, the self-hater, the one who is addicted to anti-Jewish ideologies and practices.

The simple son is also known to us. He has no real animus towards God and Torah though he certainly may be repelled by the behavior and statements of those of us who arrogantly claim to represent Him and His Torah. He only asks: "What is this all about?" It is a legitimate if somewhat depressing question. After all, after 3500 years of Jewish life and history, that son should, by now, have an inkling of what it is all about. Nevertheless there is still hope for this son - life and its events and the non-Jewish world will eventually help explain the matter to him.

And finally the son who knows nothing, not even what to ask can also be salvaged by education, warmth, direction, role models and proper mentoring. Even the evil son can be corrected and redeemed but apparently not without pain and discomfort. After all it was Stalin that basically cured the Jewish communists of their malignant Marxist disease and made them Jews once again.

But there is a fifth child that sits at the Jewish Seder table in our time. He has no qualms about marrying a non-Jew, he is probably liberally pro-Palestinian, he has never visited Israel, though he knows it to be a racist and apartheid place, he considers himself to be part of the intellectual elite, he has no real knowledge of Torah or Judaism and yet considers himself an expert on these matters.

He knows the best policy for Jews and Israel to follow and he is so convinced of his rectitude and astuteness that he is willing, nay even demanding, to use all types of force to coerce the Jewish people and its small national state to adopt his will. He is out to fix the world and is willing to

sacrifice Israel, Judaism and Jews in the process. He sits on boards of Jewish organizations, he chooses rabbis and proclaims himself to be a faithful Jew. Yet he will contribute generously to general non-Jewish charities but gives only a pittance towards Jewish educational projects. He is not an evil son nor is he a wise one.

He certainly will deny that he is somehow simple or naïve and he certainly claims that he knows what questions to pose. Yet he may be the most tragic of all of the sons, for though he is able to pose the questions he is unwilling to hear the answers. In the words of the prophet Isaiah "the heart of the people is overladen with fat and their ears are stopped up."

It is this hedonistic, intelligent, but very deaf son that troubles us so deeply. For we have developed no plan or method to deal with him - either to exclude him from the Jewish society completely or to somehow redeem him and bring him closer to Jewish reality and positive participation in Jewish life. It is certainly not clear to us how to accomplish this second option.

So perhaps we will have to rely on the inspiration represented by the fifth cup of wine - on the miraculous powers of the prophet Eliyahu and on his unfailing faith in the restoration of Jews and the Jewish people generally. Pesach teaches us never to say never. It is the holiday of rebirth and constant renewal. So will it be for all of our different children all of whom we gather and embrace around our Pesach Seder table.

Chag kasher v'sameach,

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com