

And it shall be that when your children say to you, “What is this service to You?” (12:26)

The *Mechilta* considers this to be the question presented by the *ben rasha*, wicked son. He has removed Hashem from the service, refusing to recognize that what the rest of the family is doing is Divinely ordained. The wicked son has essentially removed himself from the community. This is a common excuse: “I do not have to do this, because I am not Orthodox.” Being Orthodox is not a choice. Reneging Orthodoxy is also not a choice. One either follows the law, or he does not. Excuses to justify one’s errant behavior, to assuage one’s guilt, are meaningless. On the other hand, the fact that the wicked son attends the *Seder* and interacts with his family – regardless of the nature and tenor of his comments - is in and of itself a major step in the right direction.

The four sons and their questions are a highlight of the *Seder* experience and offer much material for homiletic exposition. One of the more insightful interpretations, attributed to the *Lubavitcher Rebbe, Horav Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, zl*, has profound meaning today. The *Rebbe* suggested that the four sons, in fact, represent the four generations of the American experience. The wise son represents our European roots, the generation of the grandparents who came to this country, their European garb and their way of life and burning idealism still intact. They were pious, displayed a love of learning, and possessed a profound knowledge of tradition, but were a bit too naive. They did not realize the spiritual vacuum which existed here.

The members of the first generation which was raised in America’s “melting pot” soon rejected their parents’ customs, way of life and adherence to tradition. Their son considered himself a new person in a new country, forging for himself a new tradition. This son, whom we will call the *ben rasha*, resented his parents, considering them odd for not adopting the American way of life, which was clearly more “satisfying” both culturally and economically. Indeed, many of these first generation sons amassed great fortunes, which they used to build their personal empires devoid of Torah, *mitzvos* and respect for tradition. Their goal was to distance themselves as far as possible from the *shtetl* by assimilating totally into American culture.

Their son was confused. At family gatherings, and also when he went to the nursing home where they “kept” his grandparents, he saw individuals who looked and acted diametrically different from his parents. On Shabbos, when *Zaidy* was there, his parents put on a show. Sadly, only *Zaidy* could make *Kiddush*. Dad could hardly read, and “son” could not even decipher the letters. So, this son just simply asks, *Ma zos?* “What is this?” He is unable to figure out why his father and grandfather are at such odds with one another. It certainly is having a harmful effect on him and his relationship with Judaism.

It is, thus, no wonder that his son, the fourth generation, is the child who does not even know what to ask. He never had the advantage of seeing his great-grandparents. They were gone and buried by the time he appeared on the scene. Their pictures were even gone! He knows only his self-

loathing, assimilated grandfather, who cringes at the mention of tradition. His religiously-confused father is pathetic. So, what is he to do? He is unable to ask. This is America of today, where children wonder whose birthday it is when they see their great-grandmother light *Shabbos* candles. How sad that this is so true.

The story gets worse: There is a fifth child who does not even know that it is “Passover,” or what this festival represents; or yet worse: He does not even know what Judaism is. The wicked son may have serious religion issues, but at least he has shown up at the *Seder*. The fifth son is the one whom we must seek out before it is too late.

Why is the wicked son at the *Seder*? Is it guilt? Perhaps it is his conscience speaking to him. The other day, I had occasion to speak with a man who, for all intents and purposes, fits the description of the *ben rasha*. Despite his bitterness, we happen to be friendly. I asked him, “Fred, why do you attend the *Seder* every year at your brother’s home? After all, you are far from observant. You are constantly putting down ritual and tradition. Whenever you find a degrading article or hear of a disgraceful incident concerning an Orthodox Jew, you get on your, ‘I told you so,’ stand. Why do you attend the *Seder*?”

His response shocked me. “I come because I want them to know that they are to blame for what I have become.” He then rambled on with his usual litany, with his laundry list of complaints against the observant Jews. Obviously, it is a way of justifying his behavior, but it is a perspective which we should not ignore.

Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, spoke every *Shabbos* at the Zichron Moshe *shul*. One *Shabbos*, he banged on the *shtender* as he cried out, “Jews of Zichron Moshe! One day when we come before the Heavenly Tribunal, we will be called to task for *chilul Shabbos* and shaving with a razor!” The assembled crowd was shocked. The Jews of Zichron Moshe were devout and observant. The mere mention of such sins in connection with these people was ludicrous. Then an explanation followed. *Rav Sholom* and his close friend, *Horav Ezra Barzal, zl*, heard concerning a certain barber in the area that he used a razor when shaving his customers. They could not prevent the customers from doing so, but they could speak with the offender. The man was impossible. An immigrant from Eastern Europe who grew up with little religion, he was not prepared to risk his livelihood for some “archaic” laws. The *rabbanim* were relentless, visiting him weekly until he acquiesced to their requests. A number of months went by and, suddenly, word reached them that the barber was back to being open on *Shabbos* and using a razor for shaving. They returned to the barber shop and asked for an explanation.

“It was one year after my father had died, and I wanted to say *Kaddish*. I obtained a *kippah* and went to the Zichron Moshe *shul* where there is never a shortage of *minyanim*. I entered the *shul* to see a sign emblazoned with the words: It is prohibited to speak during prayer and reading of the Torah. Right in front of the sign a money exchange is going on; people are discussing the going rate of exchange for various currencies – and this is all taking place while *davening* is going on in

the various rooms! You *rabbanim* are coming to rebuke me – what about them? (Obviously, those who were praying were not speaking, but a person sees what he wants to see. Likewise, the wicked son who attends the *Seder* and wants to blame everybody but himself for his spiritual downfall has a jaundiced eye on religion; he seeks any way to justify his errant behavior.)

Rav Sholom continued, “Now, you know why we will have to give an accounting for *chilul Shabbos* and shaving with a razor!” We must be acutely aware that he who wants an excuse for turning his back on *Yiddishkeit* will find it. We, however, should not make it easy for him to find it.