

And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, "It is because of this that Hashem acted on my behalf when I left Egypt." (13:8)

In the *Haggadah*, this is the father's response to his errant son, the *ben rasha*, wicked son. He makes a derisive statement, and his father responds with a litany underscoring his historical connection with *yetzias Mitzrayim*, the Egyptian exodus. Does the response really clarify anything in the wicked son's mind? For that matter, is the wicked son really seeking an answer? When someone reaches the point of derision, nothing anyone says really matters to him. He is interested only in "hit and run," ridiculing and skewering the subject of his derision and leaving, supposedly satisfied that he has shot his bullets. I think that we misunderstand the *ben rasha*, wicked son. First of all, the mere fact that he attends the *Seder* with the rest of the family is in and of itself an indication of his troubled life. His animus might be expressed toward the religion from which he alienated himself and against his family, but his true loathing is for himself. He has great difficulty reconciling himself with his errant behavior, so he lashes out at those who had the courage to maintain their commitment to the way of life and conviction that had always been a part of their lives.

What aspect of his question defines him as a *rasha*? How does the father's response change anything? His son continues to loath. The wicked son tells his father: "You are wrong. Why spend an entire evening focusing on the past? Memories are wonderful if one has nothing else. What about the present? Think of today, not days gone by. Times have changed. We are no longer slaves in Egypt; we are free men. Archaic ideas are out of touch with today's progressive society." Little does he know that it is those "archaic" ideas that enhance the present. They set the foundation for a sustainable future. Regrettably, one cannot argue with the *ben rasha* on this level. The only way he will ultimately understand his father's position is if he sees personally the fallacy of his beliefs, and, in contrast, the verity of his father's way of life.

One thing is clear: the *ben rasha* wants nothing to do with tradition. Torah and ritual are out of touch with "today." He is concerned with how the outside world of today views him. If his appearance stands out, if his way of life is different than the prevailing culture adopted by society in order to satisfy their desires, then he wants no part of it. In short, he is an insecure person and being different exacerbates his insecurity. He seems clueless concerning ritual and tradition, referring to them as hard work. To him, *mitzvah* observance is work, and he conceives what Hashem demands of us as subjugation, no different from the slave labor to which we were subjected in Egypt.

What a veritable characterization of the Jew who has alienated himself from all forms of tradition. The secular-oriented Jew who has divorced himself from tradition views ritual as demanding work, impeding his freedom. I recently came across an article by an outspoken critic of Orthodoxy, suggesting: that all reference to the rebuilding of the *Bais HaMikdash* be removed from our prayer

books; and that *Tisha B'Av*, our national day of mourning and yearning for the return of the Temple, be amended. Tradition, ritual, history, remembrance are terms which the *ben rasha* wants extirpated from the Jewish lexicon. I think, if he would have his way, he would do away with the term "Jewish." It is too exclusive.

The father is confronted with a problem. On the one hand, he is happy that his entire family managed to come to the *Seder*. On the other hand, his errant son, who has allowed the outside influences to permeate his mind, is spewing forth his diatribe against religion, a diatribe which is really an expression of his own self-loathing but, nonetheless, disturbing and exerting a negative influence on the rest of the family.

We must also take in consideration that this is a father responding to his son. As disappointed as the father is with his son's derisiveness, he is still his son whom he loves. A parent may never lose sight of the painful truth. It is not easy for the father to tolerate his son's insolence, but at least he came to the *Seder*. Thus, to lash out and give his son the tongue dressing that he deserves would only serve to alienate the son even more. To ignore his criticism would be worse. It would give the appearance of capitulation, of acquiescence.

Therefore, we blunt his teeth by diminishing the potential harm his words can have. In response to the son's shameful denunciation of our tradition, his belittling of the *Passover Seder* commemorating the slavery and eventual liberation from Egypt, the father focuses -- not on replying to his critique-- but rather, on showing him what he really is. He explains that this is not work, but ritual: not simply a commemoration, but a celebration of how far we have come from those days of bondage: a time to pay gratitude to Hashem, Who has been with us through thick and thin. His father tells him that, by his attitude and actions, he has removed himself from the ranks of those who should celebrate: "It is not the ritual and tradition that is flawed; it is you my son, who has distanced himself from Hashem and His People." In order to celebrate freedom one must experience the bondage and persecution -- or, at least, empathize with those who did. To deride those who maintain their conviction is to reveal one's true, inner flawed self.

The father sees his son in his unembellished debasement. Covering up will be to no avail. His son talks like an assimilated Jew who has turned his back on the religion for which his ancestors had died. A father, however, is a father. To let his son's diatribe go unchecked might negatively influence the rest of the family. To come down hard on his son might push him over the edge, so that the father will lose him completely. At least he showed up at the *Seder*. Next year, he might not come altogether.

The only option is *hakkeh es shinav*, "Blunt his teeth"; "hit back," but not hard; stun him, take out some of his sting; humble him -- but do not destroy him. "Had he been there, he would not have been redeemed." Redemption is a process. First, one must be a slave, feel the pain, and maintain his conviction to be deserving of redemption. The one who denies the bondage has no business celebrating the redemption. He wanted no part of the travail; why should he enjoy the salvation?

Hakheh es shinav, “Blunt his teeth.” What do his teeth have to do with it? When a person smiles, his teeth are revealed. When a person is happy, satisfied, his teeth show. Teeth represent attitude. The wicked son cannot leave the table feeling that he bested his father: that smug feeling must be wiped off his face – otherwise, there is no chance of his return; plus, he will leave a harmful impression on the rest of the family. His father had to blunt his teeth –get rid of his smile, explain to him that he has not only removed himself from *Yiddishkeit*, he has also destroyed his future generations. They will not ever come to a Seder! If he wants to express his self-loathing in public, he may not be allowed to leave with a smile, indicating that he had succeeded. Perhaps if he leaves with his teeth blunted, i.e. without a smile, he will confront the truth: he is his own biggest enemy.