

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

The Torah addresses four “sons” – each one different from the other. One is wise; one is (called) wicked; one is simple; the last one is uninitiated, unable to ask. They all have one common denominator: they are sons. One deals differently with a son. One does not attempt to “best” a son; one seeks to teach a son, to enlighten, to help him understand, to inspire him. Thus, regardless of who the son is, how he acts, or how he presents his questions – remember, he is still your son. We do not seek to prevail, to triumph, over a son.

There are four categories/types of “sons.” *Horav Baruch Mordechai Ezrachi, Shlita*, explains that there are four – and no more. Everyone falls into one of these categories. We must listen to the question that is presented to us, because the question defines the questioner. The reply that we give should coincide with the answer given in the *Haggadah*. The right answer will be accepted. The wrong answer will not.

Veritably, not everyone asks a question. The *she'eino yodea lishol* has nothing to ask. The *ben rasha*, wicked son, does not really ask; he makes a statement, because he has all of the answers. Furthermore, are we really attempting to “blunt the teeth” of the *ben rasha*? The added comment, “Had he (*rasha*) been there (in Egypt), he would have not been liberated,” will certainly not facilitate a loving relationship. Is this the way in which we are supposed to speak to our children?

Rav Ezrachi explains that the father (which applies to us all) must walk a fine line. On the one hand, he is responding to his son, a son who, despite his deficient behavior, still maintains a special place in his father's heart. On the other hand, he cannot ignore his son's religious infraction, his reneging the Torah values that were taught to him at home, which are such a vital part of his father's life. To come down too hard will destroy his son and the father's relationship with him; to ignore his nefarious attitude and behavior undermines the very principles which support everything his father has taught him. Thus, the father painfully expresses his rebuke, “Had he been there, he would not have been redeemed.” These words are not expressed with disdain; derision does not creep in as he speaks these words. They are conveyed amidst pain, filled with fear, yet generating hope that perhaps, one day, his son will return. After all, he is his son. This is something of which he never loses sight.

We must remember that every Jew, regardless of how alienated from religion he has become, possesses an intrinsic and inextricable bond with Hashem and with His Torah. *Mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice for Hashem, is an inherent component of the Jewish DNA. Furthermore, every single OTD, off the *derech*, estranged, or disinterested Jewish child, if he were to wake up one day to the realization that he was the only Jew in the world -- the one upon whom *Klal Yisrael* depended – he would most certainly rise to the occasion. This is who we are. Nothing can, or will, change our essential nature.

Having said this, we wonder why this feeling of, “It is all up to me,” prevails only when it is all up to him. Why does the essential Jew manifest his true nature only under circumstances of duress, when faced with extinction? Why is the Jewish spark so dormant? The reason is that he thinks he is unimportant. He is one of many. No one really cares if he remains religious or not. Judaism will survive without him – so why bother?

The success in *chinuch*, educating a child, is often contingent upon our ability to convey to the child the notion that he counts; he matters; he makes a difference. Perhaps this is why the *Baal Haggadah* divides the family of sons into four categories. Each one is different; each one is an only child. Each child requires his father to respond to him on his level of understanding and acceptance. Some children require an explanation that is accompanied with a smile; others might require it to be repeated. Others might “hear” the answer, but, only after a few years of trial and error in life, do they begin to see the truth and accept it. We all must ask ourselves: “What can I do to inspire my child, to help him understand, to reveal his connection with Hashem? How do I nurture his spiritual growth?” Life is fraught with challenge. Not all can navigate through the ambiguity by themselves. Some need help; others need support. That is what parents are for. The *ben rasha* did not become like that overnight. At one time, he was probably one of the other sons. Something happened along the way. While we cannot always prevent what happens – we must be there to help and guide our child toward the solution. Otherwise, we might only have three sons at the table.