

Message for Passover

“When ADONAI brings you into the land of the Kena'ani, Hitti, Emori, Hivi and Y'vusi, which he swore to your ancestors to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you are to observe this ceremony in this month. For seven days you are to eat matzah, and the seventh day is to be a festival for ADONAI. Matzah is to be eaten throughout the seven days; neither hametz nor leavening agents are to be seen with you throughout your territory. On that day you are to tell your son, 'It is because of what ADONAI did for me when I left Egypt.' "Moreover, it will serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder between your eyes, so that ADONAI's Torah may be on your lips; because with a strong hand ADONAI brought you out of Egypt. Therefore you are to observe this regulation at its proper time, year after year." (Shemot 13).

The reasons why we celebrate Pesach, and the origins of just *how* we celebrate it quite as we do today, are found in these seminal verses from Shemot 13. The seven day duration of the festival is, for instance, made clear, and this is corroborated by other passages such as Shemot 12:15, which states, “For seven days you are to eat matzah — on the first day remove the leaven from your houses. For whoever eats hametz [leavened bread] from the first to the seventh day is to be cut off from Isra’el.” The prohibition against possessing chametz is also made clear and is corroborated elsewhere. So too is the positive mitzvah to eat matzah. As Shemot 34:18 adds, “Keep the festival of matzah by eating matzah, as I ordered you, for seven days during the month of Aviv; for it was in the month of Aviv that you came out from Egypt.” Of course, as ever with the mitzvot, we should remember that all these positive and negative commandments are ultimately intended for a spiritual purpose. The rituals are not an end in and of themselves but are a means to an end. They are intended to teach and develop us morally, principally by provoking us to ask questions. Quite how asking questions about the respective abstinence from chametz and the eating of matzah enables us to grow morally is something that we will shortly address. For now let us simply note that in the parallel Shemot 12 passage the Torah anticipates the curious reaction of our children to these rather strange Pesach practices. As we read, ““When you come to the land which Adonai will give you, as he has promised, you are to observe this ceremony. When your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this ceremony?’ say, ‘It is the sacrifice of Adonai’s Pesach [Passover], because [Adonai] passed over the houses of the people of Isra’el in Egypt, when he killed the Egyptians but spared our houses.”” We find this question and answer session between child and parent in Shemot 13 too, though in a much more abridged form: “On that day you are to tell your son, 'It is because of what ADONAI did for me when I left Egypt.”

It is the out of the ordinary practices that pertain to Pesach that causes the child to question. He or she is somewhat confused and perturbed by it all. Why, for instance, is it that throughout the rest of the year he or she *may* eat chametz - it’s kosher for 51 weeks of the year - but for one week at Pesach all of this is chametz is to be purged and considered something of an enemy, with only matzah permitted be possessed and eaten. You must admit it does sound crazy! And the child naturally, like many of us, simply wants to know

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what has changed? He's confused, and sometimes so are we. Honesty is always the best policy. If you don't know then say so. But we so often want to cover up our inadequacies don't we. Instead of admitting our own lack of knowledge or understanding, especially when it comes to matters of faith, we so often deflect or try and blag it. Indeed, sometimes in life deflection takes the form of a display of anger or irritation. Sometimes when a child is questioning, and let's face it, when kids are young they seem to question what we do all the time to the point of irritation, we just pull out the trump card: "Because I said so!" or "Just do as I say!" Boom! Game over! How all this takes me back to my childhood. 'Tidy your room!' my mother would command. 'Why?' I would respond. 'Because I said so!' or 'Because I'm your mother,' would come back the reply. Further recalcitrance on my behalf would solicit the much feared statement, "Just wait 'til your father gets home!" followed by a scramble to clear the mess. Such is normal life among many if not all families. The Torah, however, prompts us to model a different approach in this regard. Rather than scold the child for his lack of perception or perceived impudence for questioning our adult ways we note that the parent is encouraged to take time to answer at the child's level of understanding. The answer is not only to be delivered with patience but with gentleness and compassion. "It is because of what Adonai did for me when I left Egypt." Rather than engage in a deeply theological treatise with the child about the Exodus, the parent is encouraged to tell his or own story of divine grace. At some point every child will become inquisitive about their parents' own life story. Indeed, truly knowing our parents is vital to our own self-understanding, and this is why the Torah instructs the parent to reply as it does. The explanation of the Exodus that the parent is to give is deeply personal and centres on God's gracious acts. Indeed, this Pesach example serves as a model for how we raise our children in general. As the Tanakh also says, "Train a child in the way he [should] go; and, even when old, he will not swerve from it." Sometimes I think that we parents forget just how fascinated our children are by our life story; of how deeply impactful it is in terms of their own self-understanding for our children to know where they came from. Life is busy, but a child asking questions along these lines should be lovingly and graciously replied to. Knowing who we are from an early age truly sets us up for life. When a child asks questions about life and matters of faith they are to be taken seriously. In fact, perhaps more important than the answer itself is the tone of the reply and in this we might aim to follow in the example of our Messiah. As we read, "Then children were brought to him so that he might lay his hands on them and pray for them, but the talmidim rebuked the people bringing them. However, Yeshua said, "Let the children come to me, don't stop them, for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these." Then, after laying his hands on them, he went on his way." Here we see Messiah modelling for us the Torah ideal. While others regarded the children as an annoying interruption to the oh so adult business of worshipping and serving God, the Messiah made space and time for and bent down to the level of the children. Indeed, no child's question is to be considered too much. Moreover, inasmuch as Messiah instructs us to be childlike in our approach to matters of faith he gives us permission to ask, like children, hard questions of our faith and of God Himself.

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Part of the problem here is that many religious traditions are quite intolerant of such hard, probing questions, whether asked by children or adults. In many fundamentalist religious traditions, there is an idea that faith is clear, and that what ought to be believed is evident, because it's down in black and white in the pages of Scripture, and is codified as a Statement of Faith. In such quarters you will often find that faith and thus also salvation are conflated with assent to a the group's theology. But to do so, in my opinion, is to elevate creeds almost to an idolatrous level. Believe all the right things and you're in! Halleluyah! Believe all the right things and you're one of the elect; you're one of the saved! Which, in the words of the late Jim Bowen is 'super, smashing, lovely and great' if you can manage to believe it all. But, boy of boy, you do not want to be one of 'the others,' one of those who do not believe quite as we do; one of the 'reprobates,' as John Calvin would call them, because 'the reprobates' are in a for a sticky, or should that be fiery end?! Indeed, it's probably this sword of Damocles - the threat of eternal damnation and hell fire - which is held permanently hanging over people's heads that keeps honest questioning of faith and doctrine at a bare minimum. In fact that's very much how cults work - with the people kept subservient to the leadership by that ultimate threat of damnation. In fact, the threat of damnation for daring to question or having the temerity to think the 'wrong thing' about God, has not only been a powerful form of social control but has been a major cause of human misery since the dawn of time. It was, for instance, at the root of the Crusades and the Inquisitions, when so-called 'infidels' and 'heretics' like Jews and Muslims were tortured and slaughtered for having different ideas about God to the Christians. It was at the heart of the wars between Protestant and Catholic nations after the Reformation, where people were burned at the stake for disputes about Transubstantiation or a different count of the sacraments. This intolerant mindset has been at the root of the wars between Sunni and Shia Muslims which have resulted in millions of deaths and is also at the root of the barbarous violence of the so-called Islamic State - Daesh. It's so sad, but nevertheless true, that from the dawn of time organised religion has hated people who ask hard questions of it or disagreement with it and the threat of damnation is used to shut down debate. While most evangelical Christians today would shudder at the thought of Calvin's police state the reality of much church life is that hard questions are only to be tolerated in as much as they ultimately lead to conformity of belief. But let's be clear, this is not the Jewish way! Not that we haven't had our own problems in this regard. The brilliant, mercurial Baruch Spinoza, for example, was excommunicated in 1656 for criticising what he perceived as internal contradictions in the Torah, rejecting its Mosaic authorship as well as the idea of a transcendent God who related to human beings. Spinoza, who was 23 years old at the time of the cherem, stopped attending the synagogue and succeeded in persuading many of the youth of the community of the validity of his ideas, which were also considered blasphemous by the Christian Church. Fearful that Spinoza's activities could lead to the expulsion of the Jews from Amsterdam, the leaders of the community pleaded with him to repudiate his heretical beliefs. When he refused, the cherem was read in Hebrew from in front of the Ark in a crowded Sephardi synagogue in Amsterdam: "Senhores of the ma'amad [the congregation's lay governing board] having long known of the evil opinions and acts of Baruch de Spinoza, they have endeavoured by various means and promises, to

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turn him from his evil ways. But having failed to make him mend his wicked ways, and, on the contrary, daily receiving more and more serious information about the abominable heresies which he practiced and taught and about his monstrous deeds, and having for this numerous trustworthy witnesses who have deposed and borne witness to this effect in the presence of the said Espinoza, they became convinced of the truth of this matter; and after all of this has been investigated in the presence of the honourable chachamim [‘wise men’, or rabbis] they have decided, with their consent, that the said Espinoza should be excommunicated and expelled from the people of Israel. By decree of the angels and by the command of the holy men, we excommunicate, expel, curse and damn Baruch de Espinoza, with the consent of God, Blessed be He, and with the consent of the entire holy congregation, and in front of these holy scrolls with the 613 precepts which are written therein; cursing him with the excommunication with which Joshua banned Jericho and with the curse which Elisha cursed the boys and with all the castigations which are written in the Book of the Law. Cursed by he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed by he when he rises up. Cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not spare him, but then the anger of the Lord and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven. And the Lord shall separate him unto evil out of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant that are written in this book of the law. But you that cleave unto the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day.” This document concludes with the warning that “no one should communicate with him, neither in writing, nor accord him and favour nor stay with him under the same roof nor [come] within four cubits in his vicinity; nor shall he read any treatise composed or written by him”

While it has to be said that Judaism is not completely blameless in this regard it is also true that in Judaism we have long practiced tolerance of thought. In Judaism it’s not a case of believe what I believe or else and we are not, generally speaking, a credal culture like Christianity in which genuine questions and debate are stifled by the threat of hell fire. The closest that Judaism gets to a Statement of Faith is the Rambam’s Thirteen Principles, and it is a matter of supreme irony that the Rambam was actually excommunicated by many rabbinical authorities for having had the temerity to do so! Judaism welcomes hard questions. Judaism welcomes honest spiritual struggle that comes from taking the Bible seriously. And Judaism welcomes spiritual pilgrims and refugees. This tradition of tolerance is modelled for us by none other than Avraham Avinu who respectfully argued with and questioned God’s own morality in defence of the people of S’dom. As we read, “Avraham approached and said, “Will you actually sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Maybe there are fifty righteous people in the city; will you actually sweep the place away, and not forgive it for the sake of the fifty righteous who are there? Far be it from you to do such a thing — to kill the righteous along with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike! Far be it from you! Shouldn’t the judge of all the earth do what is just?” Adonai said, “If I find in S’dom fifty who are righteous, then I will forgive the whole place for their sake.” Avraham answered, “Here now, I, who am but dust and ashes, have taken it upon

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myself to speak to Adonai. What if there are five less than fifty righteous?" He said, "I won't destroy it if I find forty-five there." He spoke to him yet again: "What if forty are found there?" He said, "For the sake of the forty I won't do it." He said, "I hope Adonai won't be angry if I speak. What if thirty are found there?" He said, "I won't do it if I find thirty there." He said, "Here now, I have taken it upon myself to speak to Adonai. What if twenty are found there?" He said, "For the sake of the twenty I won't destroy it." He said, "I hope Adonai won't be angry if I speak just once more. What if ten are found there?" He said, "For the sake of the ten I won't destroy it."

The story of Iyov is another powerful example from the Bible of paragons of our faith asking hard questions of about and of God. These and others from our Scriptures actively disrupt the idea that true faith is about having to believe all the right things and they likewise inspire us to follow in their footsteps. And so it is that God Himself makes the asking of hard questions the centre piece of the Seder and the central purpose of the Pesach experience. As such He is inviting us into a profound dialogue with Him and with each other about the meaning of our lives, the universe and indeed of everything. Rabbi Lawrence Hajoiff, the author of "Jew Got Questions?" recently wrote about how important questions are to our spiritual and moral development.

"One of the first Jewish books I remember reading as a child belonged to my sister; it was the Jewish Book of Why by Alfred Kolatch. Its easy-to-read Q&A style kept me interested enough till the next question. When I began to formulate the idea for my book, I felt the short answer formula was the way to go. I reasoned if people didn't have patience to read a long answer thirty years ago, how much more so today! As I mentioned in my previous post, writing 'short' answers to 'big' questions carried with it the danger of trivializing questions that need a longer more nuanced response. But the 'Kolatch way' was well received, so why wouldn't mine be? The more I thought about, the more I realized how much of an important role questions play in Jewish life. Many of us fondly remember standing as a young child by the Pesach seder asking the four questions. With our parents and grandparents watching us with tremendous pride, our entire introduction to familial Jewish life was through those four questions. Even though we were reading from a script laid out in front of us, we understood that questions were good. We loved them and we sang them. The 'four sons' of the haggadah are also part of the world of questions. We have the 'wise son,' the 'wicked son,' the 'simple son,' and the one who 'doesn't know how to ask questions.' Traditionally we look at the 'wicked son' as the worst of the bunch, with his question that is both cynical and disrespectful. Does he really want to learn or is he just asking in order to mock? Either way we give him a response to keep him engaged in the conversation. The best of the bunch, one would expect the 'wise son' to be beyond questions and be answering questions the other three sons are posing him, but he too is asking a question, albeit in more respectful and interested manner. The worst of the four I have come to believe is the last in the list. He sits alone, outside of the conversation, not knowing what is going on and is barely present except for his blank stare at the excited goings-on at the Pesach seder, the son who has no

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questions. He is a tragic and mute character who is not part of our people as he isn't even inquisitive enough to ask about the strange and foreign rituals he is watching. Over the years I had heard countless stories of people describing their frustration at not being able to ask questions during their time at Hebrew or Jewish day school. They felt judged or were humiliated by teachers who may have felt threatened by being asked philosophical questions about G-d, Judaism, heaven, hell, or anything else. The fear of asking questions is antithetical to being Jewish. To be part of the people of the book is to take pride in learning and questioning until the truth is revealed. Why are questions so important? The Maharal of Prague explains that people feel satisfied with their view of life. Thus they are complacent when it comes to assimilating new ideas. But when a person has a question, it is an admission of some lack. This creates an "empty space" to be filled. Ultimately I wanted to allow the reader to finish reading my few hundred questions and feel confident enough to ask some of their own."

So on this Pesach tide I leave you with just one question. Are you already spiritually full? Have you got all the answers already? Or is it just possible that there is still space to be filled?