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## A selection of Rabbi Raymond Apple's insights on THE FOUR SONS OF THE HAGGADAH

### Which son am I?

The Four Sons of the Haggadah are not just sons nor even children, but human types. Inevitably we ask, "Which son am I?" and its concomitant, "Which son are you?"

The famous 18th century Chassidic personality, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, played this game too. He could have said he was the wise son, because he certainly had a good mind and well stocked memory. He could even have said he was the wicked son, because he knew he was no angel of perfection and he had his moments of doubt and rebellion.

He could have humbly considered himself as the simple son, an average person without exceptional traits or special talents.

He could have regarded himself as the son who knows not how to ask, often curious about life and the world, worried about what was happening to himself, to the Jewish people, to mankind as a whole, but not always certain how to put it into words.

So what did he do? He had the habit, like most believers and even some who claim to be unbelievers, of having private conversations with God.

In this case his conversation (actually an amplified conversation, as it took the form of a Pesach homily in the presence of his followers) went like this:

"Master of the World, I am sure I am the son who does not know how to ask. But the Haggadah says to the parent, 'You take the initiative – *at p'tach lo'*. God, You are my Parent. As such, please – You tell me what it is all about!

"Then again, I'm not sure I would fully understand the answers if You gave them to me. But in the meantime, like all Your people Israel, I am suffering. So there is one thing I implore You to tell me, the son who knows not how to ask.

"I do not ask why I am suffering; I only want to be assured that I am suffering for Your sake!"

In these terms, we are, all of us, the son who knows not how to ask. Each in our own way, our request to the Almighty is the same as Levi Yitzchak's.

As he wanted God to promise that the suffering had meaning, so we yearn that God will assure us that life is no fraud, that human experience is more than a "register of the crimes and follies of mankind", as one historian put it; that history is more than "just bunk", which was the view of Henry Ford.

On Pesach we yearn to know that everything that we continue to undergo, and the patience with which we must continue to await the final redemption, have their purpose in the Divine scheme of things and are, in the end, for God's sake.



## Should we abolish the Rasha?

That there are four sons (really four human types) in the Haggadah everyone knows. The precise identification of each of the four always gives *seder* participants a field day. That is one of the beauties of the Haggadah, that it seizes our imagination and provokes our thinking.

If this is true of the other three sons, how much more does it apply to the *rasha*, the wicked son.

Jewish history has often attached epithets to famous (and infamous) names – *Avraham Avinu* (Father Abraham), *Rachel Immenu* (Mother Rachel), *Yoseph HaTzaddik* (Joseph the Righteous), *Moshe Rabbenu* (Moses our Teacher), *Miriam HaN'viah* (Miriam the Prophetess), *David HaMelech* (King David), *Eliyahu HaNavi* (Elijah the Prophet), *Yehudah HaNasi* (Judah the Prince); *Bil'am HaRasha* (Balaam the Wicked), *Haman HaRasha* (Haman the Wicked).

Note that the term *rasha* has been sparingly used, and then only in relation to notorious villains.

So when the Haggadah applies the term to a fellow-Jew, we are taken aback. It must imply ultimate disapproval.

Akavya ben Mahalalel, when criticised by his Mishnaic colleagues, said, "I would rather be called a fool all my days than a *rasha* even for one hour".

We do not know who was the original *rasha* of the *seder*. Later commentaries and illustrations sometimes see him as a soldier; as a philosopher; as a man about town, intent on pleasure and indulgence.

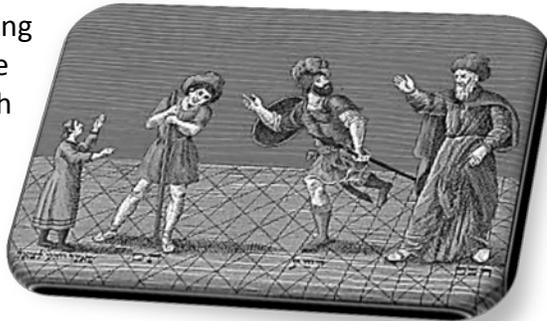
Many Haggadot see the *rasha* as a heretic whose question, "What does this service mean to you?" places him outside the pale.

At times the wicked son was a Karaite, a member of a dissident sect. In the 19th century some saw him as a reformer.

The message is obvious: a wicked son is not politically correct. A wise son does not dissent from tradition; a wicked son does.

Today, though, the battle-field is larger. Orthodox and Reform (and Conservatives) trade insults, not only on Pesach but throughout the year. Chasidic communities cast aspersions on each other. Chasidim and non-Chasidim indulge in name-calling. The religious and the secular have a go at each other.

In Israel, not just the religious spectrum but the political divide brings extreme epithets.



Some say this lusty language is part of the democratic process. People have freedom of speech and opinion, so if a Jew believes another Jew is profoundly wrong, should he say nothing?

The problem, however, goes far beyond the issue of democracy and free speech.

Verbal violence tears the Jewish people apart. If we can't speak respectfully of others, however much we disagree with them, we will dissipate our energies and fail to see the spark of potential in innumerable others who, like ourselves, are groping for a Jewish response to the complexities of today.

Rabbi Yehudah explains the verse, "You are sons to HaShem your God": "When you behave as sons then you are called sons, but not when you do not behave as sons." Rabbi Meir says, "In either case they are called sons."

The *rasha* is a son, brother, daughter, sister. His attitudes may pain us. But the time has come to moderate our language about him. Hurling epithets across a divide achieves very little. Civility may work better.

## Wayward or wicked?

I like the wicked son. He has spirit and a mind of his own. Not for him the conventional piety of the good boy who learns his lessons, goes to *shule* and does all the right things.

The wicked son needs to be himself. He accepts nothing on trust, nor does he automatically comply with instructions. “What does this service mean to you?” he demands (Ex. 12:26-27).

I know that according to the Haggadah translators, he gets punished for saying, “to you”. “To us” wouldn’t have been so bad, but what he says seems to show he has no share in the community. However, doesn’t the wise son also say “to you” (Deut. 6:20-21), and no-one thinks of rebuking him!

The Haggadah says that the wicked son “denies a fundamental principle” (*kafar ba’ikkar*), but since when is community affiliation a fundamental principle which one must accept or else?

Yes, the Pir’kei Avot tells us not to separate from the community, but no-one regards the rejection of this dictum as a grave sin. So why give the wicked son such a rough ride?

If there is something wrong in what he does or says it must be found elsewhere. Compare his words with those of the wise son and you have the answer.



Says the wicked son: “What does this service mean to you?” Says the wise one: “What mean the testimonies... which the Lord our God has commanded you?”

The wise son mentions God, the wicked son leaves Him out. To the wise son, all is from God. The wicked son doesn’t bring God into the equation. How did Pesach get there according to his reasoning? Presumably it just came to be; its source is in sociology or anthropology, not in religion. That’s where the wicked son has committed his offence.

Does the Haggadah go along with this point of view? Free yourself from the translations and you find that this is precisely what the Haggadah is telling us.

*Hotzi et atzmo min hak’lal*, it says; not, “He (the wicked son) excludes himself from the community”, but “He excludes *Atzmo*, Himself – God, referred to by some of the philosophers as *Atzmo* – from the story”. That’s the “denial of a fundamental principle” of which the wicked son is guilty. Imagining the world can manage without God, that’s his offence.

Now the *Seder* service makes sense: *Hakheh et shinav*, it says: “Blunt his teeth” – i.e. “Give him a harsh retort”... or, as some read the passage, *Hak’heh et shinnuyo* – “Rebut his distortion”.

Do I still like the *Rasha*? Certainly... but I would be the first to try and persuade him he is wrong.

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## Four types of parents

The Torah tells parents, in case they did not already know, that their children are going to query the meaning of Pesach: “And it shall come to pass that your children shall say to you, ‘What does this service mean to you?’” (Ex. 12:26). And the rabbis analyse the implications of this question.

One rabbi said it was bad that the children should ask.

How reactionary, you might think! How can it be bad for children to ask, even though it is a little tiresome? But Rabbi Levi explained, “When your children ask, it shows they are ignorant... and ignorance carries its own warning for the future.”

Other rabbis adopted the opposite approach. “When your children ask,” said they, “it is a good sign, for where a spirit of enquiry means interest, and a revival of interest suggests hope for the future.”

Today, even though Jewish commitment is not always so strong, young people are seeking to know.

Once a person would say they had a *froom* grandfather; now an increasing number are speaking with amused tolerance of their *froom* grandson or granddaughter.

Young people are asking. But we have to know how to answer. If there is no answer, they will give up asking. A modern thinker has written, "On the continued discussion between the generations depends the future of Judaism."

If there are four types of son who ask, there are four types of parent who reply – the Wise Parent, the Wicked Parent, the Superficial Parent, and the Parent Who Knows Not How to Reply.

The **Wise Parent**, what does he say?

He looks at things intelligently and he realises how important it is to know and understand your Judaism. He encourages the search for knowledge and commitment.

If he knows the answers, he presents them. If he does not know, he says to his child, "Come, let us search together".

The **Wicked Parent**, what does he say?

He opposes or even ridicules the child's interest in Judaism. "What," he says, "do you want to become *meshugga froom*? I'm not religious and you're not going to be either!"

But just as the wicked son cuts himself off from the community, so does the wicked parent. He sabotages the chance of our faith surviving in his children.

What does the **Superficial Parent** say?

He simply says, *Mah zot?* – "What's all this about? Why are you asking me rabbinical questions? Do you expect me to be a professor? Isn't it enough for you that I'm Jewish and I'm proud of it? I give to Israel, don't I?"

The superficial parent can't understand the things of the spirit. All he needs is his races and his cards and to enjoy a Jewish joke. He does not realise that today we have a generation of young people who repudiate their parents' compromises of conscience.

The **fourth parent**, who knows not how to reply, is unconcerned, apathetic and far from Jewish life. He was born a Jew but he has no Jewish commitment.

His children have to help their parents along. It is as if the Haggadah said to the child of the fourth parent, "You who have caught a spark of Judaism and are seeking to come closer to Torah – *you* take the initiative, and try and bring your parents with you into a true Jewish commitment."

Once it was, "You shall teach them diligently to your children." Now the command is sometimes reversed: "You shall teach them diligently to your parents."

It is happening more and more often that because of their children's questions, and because their children are becoming interested in Judaism, parents are reassessing their own Jewishness.

The tragedy is that so many are status-quo Jews, *dayyenu* Jews. They keep as little as possible of Judaism. The minimum is good enough for them.

To be a *dayyenu* Jew is a good thing, if you put a question mark after the *dayyenu* and ask, "Am I doing enough as a Jew? Am I making enough effort as a Jew?"

Please invite the questions, and make an honest attempt to answer, so that the great Passover night dialogue between the generations may continue, and our people, faith and tradition may be assured of survival.

Many more insights on the Haggadah and Pesach are available at [www.oztorah.com](http://www.oztorah.com)

