

Passover Sermon
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"What Is This Worship to You?"
By: Rabbi Noah Gradofsky

The Passover Seder celebrates one thing over all else: Questions and answers. We have the four questions, and the four sons, for example. In fact, the Talmud teaches that asking questions is an obligation of the Seder, without which the Seder would be incomplete. So much so, that even if the Seder is attended only by learned adults, questions must be asked. And if a person is alone at the Seder, the person must ask questions of him or herself. There are many questions, and, hopefully, many good answers. And yet, I fear that the most profound and important question asked at the Seder is one that does go without an answer. In fact, I think many of us dare not answer this question. But it is such an important question, and we need to work on answering it. I am talking about the question asked by the wicked son. רשע מה הוא? אומר - מה העבדה הזאת לכם? *The wicked son, what does he ask? What is this worship to you?* In the Hagadah, the wicked son's question is seen as having a particular agenda. The wicked son is berating our religion, and has judged it as worthless. And so, we answer him sharply - *had he been in Egypt, he would not be redeemed.* But really, that doesn't answer the question. And the question is perhaps the most vital question there is - what is the purpose of our rituals? But the question must be answered. Without an answer to the wicked son's question, , our religion is empty. And so today, we should consider this question - מה העבדה הזאת לכם? *What is this worship to you?*

Of late, I have been reading Abraham Joshua Heschel's, "A God in Search of Man," which is perhaps the most important work of Jewish theology from the 20th Century. In it, Heschel discusses two types of religious thinking, which he calls *conceptual thinking* and *situational thinking*. Conceptual thinking is about knowing the facts of religion, with perhaps a more academic interest. What are the things we do as Jews? What are the rules? What are our beliefs? Situational thinking is far more personal. It asks how these observances impact us. How do we feel about these rituals? How do they affect us in our given situation?

In many ways, the questions of the wise son and the wicked son reflect these two types of thinking. The wise son asks the conceptual questions: מה העדות והחוקים והמשפטים אשר צוה ה' א-הינו אתכם? *What are the testimonies, laws, and statutes which A-donay our God commanded you?* What is the Passover ritual, how do we do it? What is this Afikoman? This is, of course, a vital question. Because without understanding the content of our religion, how can we understand its meaning to us? The question asked by the wicked son is a situational question, which asks how our religion touches us: מה העבדה הזאת לכם? *What is this worship to you?* Without an answer to this question, our religion is empty ritual, but an heirloom, rather than a living fountain (borrowing Heschel's words in the first paragraph of God in Search of Man)

Unfortunately, this all-important question, *What is this worship to you?* is one a question that I can't answer for you. After all, the answer to this question is unique to each of us. The impact of our religion in our lives is, by definition, dependent on our individual experiences. Each of us has our own set of triumphs and tragedies in our lives. Different jobs, different families, different personalities. What's more, our answer to this question is constantly evolving. Each moment and experience, affects how religion impacts our lives. And so, how religion impacts my life today, is different than how it will impact me tomorrow, or how it will impact me in five years. To be sure, there may be many similarities between what religion means to you, and what it means to me. But since each one of us is unique, and since each of us our constantly evolving, each of us must have our own answer evolving to the question *What is this worship to you?* Perhaps this is something that the Hagadah shows us in the verse it chooses to use to answer the wicked son. The wicked son asks: מָה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם? *What is this worship to you,* using the word לָכֶם, which is the plural for "you." And yet, the answer given (from Exodus 13:8) says: בְּעִבּוֹר יָהּ עָשָׂה ה' לִי, *because of this, God did for me*, instead of "for us." The Hagadah teaches us that the answer to this question is unique to each individual. And perhaps this is one of the reasons that the Hagadah later stresses בְּכָל-דּוֹר וָדוֹר חָיִיב אָדָם לְרַאוֹת אֶת עַצְמוֹ כְּאִילוֹ הוּא נֹצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם *in each generation a person must see him/herself as if s/he (personally) left Egypt.* Each of us must consider the impact of the departure from Egypt had on our lives. After all, our departure of Egypt was the beginning of our becoming the Jewish nation. From Egypt we went to Sinai where we received Torah, and from there we went to the Promised Land. Had we not been redeemed from Egypt, we might never have become the Jewish people, blessed with God's Torah and commandments. And so the Hagadah tells us that each one of us must feel the personal impact of the Passover story. So too, each facet of Judaism requires not only empty action, but consideration of meaning. We must constantly ask ourselves: *What is this worship to us?*

So, how do we answer this question? How do we find meaning for ourselves in our religion? After all, no one else can find this answer for us. Our search must begin, actually, with the question the wise son asks: מָה הָעֵדוּת וְהַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֱ-הֵינוּ? *What are the testimonies, laws, and statutes which A-donay our God commanded.* Before we can know the meaning of our religion, we must know the content of our religion. It's easy to brush off as meaningless that which we don't know or don't understand. And so, in order to grow our understanding of Judaism's impact on us, we must increase our understanding of Judaism, studying the texts, learning the rules and rituals, understanding the prayers, etc.. We need the wise son's conceptual questions, before we can go on to the wicked son's situational question. Next, in order to understand our religion's impact on us, we must experience our religion. How could we possibly understand the peace and rejuvenation of the Shabbat without setting aside that time to break away from the daily grind towards a day of quiet, of reflection, and of enjoyment? How could we understand the power of daily prayer without having those times each day to reflect on our relationship to God and God's world? How will our daily experience change, when we take more time for prayer in our lives? Well, there's only one way to find out. What does it mean to understand that our basic functions such as eating are endowed with holiness, and require us to be consciencious of limitations and aware of our personal gifts? Laws of keeping kosher and blessings said before and after meals can have impact only when they are followed. And so, we can find new depth in our answer to the wicked son with greater understanding and experience within Judaism. But we must study and practice our religion not as dispassionate

scientists, but as human beings searching for their meaning. Throughout our lives - wether we are performing a ritual for the first time, or for the ten-thousandth time - we must always have those powerful words of the wicked son echoing in our hearts and minds: **מָה הָעֵדוּת וְהַחֻקִּים** *מה העדות והחוקים* *What are the testimonies, laws, and statutes which A-donay our God commanded.*

There are many facets to the answer to the fundamental Jewish question asked by the wicken son. As individuals, Judaism speaks to our spirituality, our ethical behavior, and to our personal mental and physical wellbeing. As a community, Judaism speaks to our common goals, our responsibility to one another, and our responsibility to the rest of the world. And so, we pray to plumb the depths of Judaism. Learning and doing, but more importantly, experiencing and understanding.

הוּא בְרוּךְ הַמְּקוּם בְרוּךְ הַמְּקוּם בְרוּךְ הוּא *Blessed is the Omnipresent, Blessed is He.* *: May omnipresent whose Torah teaches of the questions of four sons, inspire our hearts with the curiosity to search for meaning in our religion, combined with the ambition to fulfill those mitzvot and to feel their impact. May Judaism be for us a living fountain, providing wisdom, guidance, and meaning, to every moment in our lives, from the mundane every day, to moments of joy and triumph, to moments of pain and loss. May Judaism remain our tree of life, a source of strength, power, and meaning. May each of us find a deep, impactful answer to that all important question, **מָה הָעֵבֶדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם?** *What is this worship to you?* May each of us experience a Judaism that impacts our every day, guiding us to lives of meaning, of charity, and of peace. May the lives we live reflect the true meaning of our religious practice, so that we may have the privilege of saying to our children: **בְּעִבּוּר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי** *,because of this, God did for me,* taking me out of Egypt and giving me the Torah, as a sacred inheritance. Amen.

* This is the Hagadah's introduction to the Four Sons.