“And You Shall Ask”: The Power of Questioning

A Text-learning guide for your Seder

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A project of the Aleph Society
"And You Shall Ask": The Power of Questioning

Welcome!

At Passover, “The Four Questions” are a central part of our seders. Why are questions so important in the telling of the Exodus story? One of the most powerful forms of speech is asking questions, which informs our choice of study theme for the 2019 Global Day of Jewish Learning. The theme “Speaking Volumes”, serves as a lens to help us focus on new aspects of Jewish texts that we turn and return to each year.

Focusing on the Four Questions: in true Jewish form, let's ask questions about the questions. Passover is all about transmitting our history from generation to generation. Asking questions, both prescribed and spontaneous, connects each of us to that process of history in deeper ways.

The materials included here address these thoughts, and are taken from the writings and commentaries of Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. Rabbi Steinsaltz is internationally regarded as one of the greatest rabbis of this century, and is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and his work on Jewish mysticism.

This text selection is a deep dive into one small slice of the Haggada, framing it with the Bible, the Talmud and an essay from Rabbi Steinsaltz. Discussion questions accompany each text. Excerpts are from these sources:

1. Exodus 13:8,14, from the Steinsaltz Humash

The Haggada is a book that speaks volumes. Between the telling and the answering of questions, the seder is a dynamic discussion in which questions are a driving force. We hope this text selection prompts new ways of questioning and listening to its wisdom.

Chag Sameach,

Karen Sponder     Eliana Guralnik
Project Director  Community Coordinator

The Global Day of Jewish Learning
Text #1 – Exodus 13:8,14


13:8 You shall tell your son, on that day, when you commemorate the exodus, saying: It is because of this, that I will preserve the memory of these events and perform the commandments, for me upon my exodus from Egypt.

Discussion Notes:
d1 – You shall tell your son: This obligation, to preserve the memory of the exodus and to pass it on to the next generation by relating the story of the redemption to one’s children, is the basis of the Passover Haggada.

Discussion Questions for Text #1

1. Haggada means “telling”. What happens when you tell a story? In your life, how does the telling of a story help you preserve memories, and make new ones?

2. What is the connection between telling a story and asking questions about that story? How does telling a story or hearing a story shape how memories are made? How might asking questions about the Exodus change the way you internalize the meanings of the story?

3. Read Exodus 13:8 and 13:14 closely. Why are these different messages? What do you think is the significance of the “telling” being mentioned before the “asking”? How do the different verbs of “telling” and “answer saying” help you understand the Haggada?

4. What did your parents and grandparents pass down to you about the Exodus? How did that affect you when you were a child? What impact has that had on you as an adult? What relevance do you find in the story of the Exodus?
The four questions, which are traditionally posted before beginning the "answer" portion of Maggid, are exceedingly ancient in origin. Although the wording has undergone slight changes over the generations, the central aspects of this liturgy remain unaltered since the days of the Second Temple. The format of its central theme has likewise remained as it was in the very beginning, reflecting its identity as a children's query. Ideally, the children should ask questions about the customs of the seder on their own initiative, because the whole point of the seder is to expand upon the Torah's declaration, "And when your son asks you...you shall say to him:" (Exodus 13:14). Ultimately, in order to preserve the question-and-answer format, the earlier generations enacted that children should be taught to ask these four standardized questions.

There was a custom in some communities for the child to preface his remarks with the statement, in his own words, "Father, if you please, I will now ask you four questions." Some even had the custom to ask leave of a father who was no longer living before asking the four questions. They explained that this is because these questions also contain a hidden aspect of meaning, an allusion to our Father in heaven. Thus on a deeper level, we pose other questions to God, imploring Him: Why have we not yet merited the complete redemption? Why do we have cause to celebrate such a festive meal as this only once a year?

What Makes This Night Unlike All Other Nights? All of the festive meals that are held for Shabbat and festivals are regularly conducted at night. Besides, in the time of the Talmud the main meal would always take place at night, even on ordinary days. Bread or matza: This means that on every other night, we eat either bread or matza; it does not matter (and indeed one version of this question reflects this notion). Obviously, on any other night we may eat a mixture of bread and matza as well. Tonight we will eat bitter herbs: Although we do eat other vegetables tonight, it is only on the seder night that we are actually obligated to eat bitter herbs. We do not dip [our food] at all: Some versions featured the words "we are not required to dip at all"; people certainly dip their food occasionally during the course of any meal throughout the year. Our question relates to the outright obligation to dip tonight, and the unusual manner in which it is done.
**Discussion Notes**

**The Four Questions:** When the Holy Temple still existed, the format of these questions was somewhat different. In those days one of the questions was: "That every other night we eat roasted or cooked meat, but tonight we only eat roasted meat?" This question became irrelevant and was struck from the service during the generations that followed the Destruction of the Temple, since the Paschal offering was no longer eaten. Thus in order to preserve the formula of four distinct questions (as the Vilna Gaon points out, every aspect of the seder observance is based on elements of four), the additional question about reclining was later added. This practice was not difficult to understand in earlier times, and would not have merited a question, as people were accustomed to recline at every important meal.

**Tonight We Will Dip It Twice:** The commentators have pointed out that the children asking this question have only seen one act of dipping by the time their turn comes to ask. So how can they ask why we dip twice? Some have explained that since by this time they have observed that only the karpas was dipped, they can assume that the ḥazeret would be dipped later (Rashbatz and others). But in reality there is a simpler solution. It is understood that these are not necessarily the children's own questions. Indeed, if they were to ask questions based on their own initiative, they might ask about other changes and differences that they may notice during the course of the evening. The obligation of "And you shall tell your child" is equally fulfilled if one answers their questions about other things as well. But these questions were prepared and designed to capture the attention of all the seder participants, and to arouse their interest in the seder's significance and purpose. Therefore, the children now raise questions about things that will come up later, during the course of the evening.

**Discussion Questions for Text #2**

1. Each of the Four Questions compares everyday practice to something unusual about the seder; our awareness of difference prompts us to ask how and why that is. What about the Exodus makes you curious? In what ways does questioning help you to better understand the story of the Exodus? What questions might you ask in addition to The Four?

2. Is there actually a fifth question in this text? Could “What makes this night different?” be a separate question that deserves its own answer?

3. The words of the Four Questions themselves are ancient in origin. Rabbi Steinsaltz points out that these questions are almost exactly as they were asked in the time of the Second Temple. Why is that significant? Does asking questions that were asked thousands of years ago change how you think about these words?

4. Why does this part of the telling of the story begin with asking pre-determined questions? If the questions are proscribed and the answers are known, how do the questions stay relevant? What happens when we hear a question repeated many times – are we really listening to it? How does having the youngest person at the Seder (e.g. a child) ask the questions make the whole process feel new?
**MISHNA**

The attendants poured the second cup for the leader of the seder, and here the son asks his father the questions about the differences between Passover night and a regular night. And if the son does not have the intelligence to ask questions on his own, his father teaches him the questions.

The mishna lists the questions: Why is this night different from all other nights? As on all other nights we eat leavened bread and matza as preferred; on this night all our bread is matza. As on all other nights we eat other vegetables; on this night we eat bitter herbs. The mishna continues its list of the questions. When the Temple was standing one would ask: As on all other nights we eat either roasted, stewed, or cooked meat, but on this night all the meat is the roasted meat of the Paschal lamb. The final question was asked even after the destruction of the Temple: As on all other nights we dip the vegetables in a liquid during the meal only once; however, on this night we dip twice.

And according to the intelligence and the ability of the son, his father teaches him all or part of these questions. When teaching his son about the Exodus, he begins with the Jewish people’s disgrace and concludes with their glory. And he expounds from the passage: “An Aramean tried to destroy my father” (Deuteronomy 26:5), the declaration one recites when presenting his first fruits at the Temple, until he concludes explaining the entire section.

**GEMARA**

The Sages taught: If his son is wise and knows how to inquire, his son asks him. And if he is not wise, his wife asks him. And if even his wife is not capable of asking or if he has no wife, he asks himself. And even if two Torah scholars who know the halakhot of Passover are sitting together and there is no one else present to pose the questions, they ask each other.

The mishna states that one of the questions is: Why is this night different from all other nights? As on all other nights we dip once; however, on this night we dip twice. Rava strongly objects to this statement of the mishna: Is that to say that on every other day there is no alternative but to dip once? Is there an obligation to dip at all on other days, as indicated by the wording of the mishna? Rather, Rava said that this is what the mishna is teaching: As on all other nights we are not obligated to dip even once; however, on this night we are obligated to dip twice.

**NOTES**

And here the son asks — אֶלָּא שֶׁיֵשׁ שִׁיעוּר. When the second cup of wine is brought to the table, the young son will think that they are about to recite Grace After Meals. He therefore asks: Why are we reciting Grace after Meals before we have even eaten? (Ninukkut Yosef). Alternatively, the child might wonder why a second cup of wine is poured before the meal, or he may be confused when he sees everyone dipping vegetables instead of the usual practice of breaking bread immediately after reciting kiddush (Tosefta Rosh).

This night all is roasted — מַעֲלֶה הִיא הָיָה מֵאָט. This question is problematic, as one is allowed to eat cooked meat at the seder meal. However, it was previously stated that only two cooked dishes are brought to the head of the household before the meal, and therefore the child asks why he sees only roasted meat at this stage of the proceedings. The child will not ask about the four cups at this point because they are not all present in front of him (Rashash).

According to the intelligence of the son — מַעֲלֶה הִיָּה מֵאָט. In other words, the father adapts his teaching of the redemption to the child’s level of intelligence (See Berakhot Mosthe and Hagahot Mahashomah).

He begins with disgrace and concludes with glory — מַעֲלֶה הִיָּה מֵאָט. Several comments explain that the purpose of this narration is to present God’s great love in raising us from a state of severe degradation. After mentioning the wonders of the Creator, it naturally follows that we offer Him praise (Rid). Other authorities claim that the reason for this order is to capture the child’s attention (Mahashan). A third approach is that a person is truly happy only when he remembers what he once lacked and the sorrow that preceded his joy (Zohar Seiva).

**HALAKHA**

The obligation to ask questions — מַעֲלֶה הִיָּה מֵאָט. One must ask the four questions at the seder. If a child is present who knows how to ask them, he should do so. If not, the wife asks the four questions. If one is alone, he asks himself. Even Torah scholars must ask each other the four questions (Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayim 435:2).
Discussion Questions for Text #3

1. Rabbi Steinsaltz refers to a text that says, “If one is alone, he asks himself. Even Torah scholars must ask each other four questions.” In what ways does this change your understanding of the significance of asking questions during the Seder? How does one continue to learn, even if asking these questions alone?

2. According to the Talmud, when telling the Exodus, one “begins with the disgrace and concludes with glory”. What does this change about your understanding of the Haggada? Why ask questions first, instead of beginning with an expression of gratitude for freedom?

3. This Mishna says to “teach the child according to the abilities of the child”. What can you learn from the seder about telling or teaching? How might this awareness change the way you speak to people on other occasions?
The Passover seder is in general an act of transferring memory from the older generation to the younger one, but its main emphasis is on the children. The Haggada is oriented first and foremost toward children; its very name, which literally means "telling," refers to the act of telling our national-historical narrative to our descendants, as it says, "And you shall tell (vehiggadeta) your child" (Exodus 13:8). To be sure, the text of the Haggada, like its content, is quite largely influenced by this overarching purpose.

In light of this emphasis, the tendency to seat the children at the seder table, immaculately groomed and completely silent throughout the evening, besides being undoubtedly unpleasant for the children, completely misses the original point of the seder. The children are not merely afterthoughts to the grand scheme of the seder; they are the seder's chief intended audience.

Indeed, in many places the unofficial custom is to allow the children some measure of freedom to leave the table and play. "Stealing" the afikoman is, of course, one method designed to pique the children's interest, even if they do not understand the meaning and purpose of the afikoman itself. Some adults will even go so far as to join the children in their games, allowing them to feel more at ease, more like benei horin – free people on this unique night.

In the most general sense, it can be said that the sages went out of their way to ensure that the Passover seder would be the Jewish people's most memorable ritual. Indeed, even the most assimilated Jews, who have all but completely forgotten their traditional past and the faith of their ancestors, often cherish their memories of the seder night.

There are countless stories relating that even in the harshest and most remote locations, such as the Gulag camps in Siberia, the one ritual that the Jews preserved was the Passover seder. This is no coincidence, but rather a focal point of the seder: "In order that future generations may know" (Leviticus 23:43). On the seder night we transmit our heritage to every single Jew, even those whose lives have taken them far away from that heritage.

The Passover seder can be compared to a kind of opera, but one that is more complex than any kind of opera the world has seen. It is a combination of recitations, melodies, and various activities that can only be described as a kind of theatrical game: Raising, lowering, covering, uncovering, standing, sitting, washing hands, pouring cups of wine for one's fellow participants, and on and on.

In addition, there are also elements that cannot be found in any play, and these are the essential parts of the seder night. There are unique tastes, smells, and sounds: the taste and smell of the matza, maror, and haroset, the special foods of the festival, the cracking and crunching of the matza. All of these elements join together to form a complete performance that engages all the senses – sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste – creating an indelible memory that is passed along to the next generation.

As noted above, this powerful memory is not always accompanied by a complete and accurate awareness of the meaning of the events that the seder night commemorates. Nevertheless, something will inevitably remain, even if it is only the simple question: "What is this?"
Discussion Questions for Text #4

1. How does Rabbi Steinsaltz describe the connections between asking questions, the freedom to play, and childlike wonderment? Where is the balance point between the sense of play and the seriousness of the Passover message? What is the seder encouraging us all to do?

2. Rabbi Steinsaltz compares the seder to a complex kind of opera. What do you think of this analogy? In what ways does your seder engage various senses, and which are the senses you are using? Does asking questions reinforce our sensory experiences? In what ways could making your seder more engaging for children also enrich it for people of all ages?

3. Text #4 ends with the question, "What is this?", that was posed in Exodus 13:14. Is it actually a simple question? In what ways does this essay help you understand this verse or answer the question?

4. What are you passing on to the next generation in your telling/saying? How might your answers to the next generation’s questions affect the way they see the world? What are some ways you might use the telling of the Exodus story to continue your family’s traditions?
Discussion Questions for All Texts

Exodus 13:8, 14

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Haggada – "The Four Questions"

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Talmud Pesahim 116a

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“The Children’s Role at the Seder”

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About the Global Day of Jewish Learning

The Global Day of Jewish Learning unites Jewish communities across the world through the study of our shared texts. Explore the richness of our Jewish heritage with the 2019 Global Day of Jewish Learning on Sunday, November 17. The study theme this year is Speaking Volumes. From ancient arguments to modern meanings, from raising our voices to remaining silent, explore how and why words matter. Tens of thousands of Jews in 500+ communities in 46 countries across 6 continents come together for this truly unique learning event.

The Aleph Society

The Aleph Society is the parent organization of the Global Day of Jewish Learning. Founded in 1988, its mission is to expand Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz’s goal of the development of Jews, Jewish identity and Jewish communities. With operations in Israel, Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, The Aleph Society has given Jews everywhere access to fundamental texts, the skills with which to understand those texts, the motivation to study, and an appreciation for the contributions of fellow Jews of all backgrounds.

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz is a teacher, philosopher, social critic and prolific author. His lifelong work in Jewish education earned him the Israel Prize, his country’s highest honor.

The author of over 60 books, Rabbi Steinsaltz is the first person since the medieval sage Rashi to have completed a full translation of and commentary on the Babylonian Talmud and the entire Bible (Tanakh). In 1965, he began his monumental work on the Talmud; this historic achievement was commemorated in 2010 by the inaugural Global Day of Jewish Learning, which has since become an annual international event in over 48 countries.

In 2012, Koren Publishers released the English edition of Rabbi Steinsaltz’s Talmud translation and commentary. The groundbreaking Hebrew-English Steinsaltz Humash was published in 2018. In 2019, Rabbi Steinsaltz’s commentary on the entire Bible including the Prophets (Nevi’im) and Writings (Ketuvim) will be published.
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The Global Day furthers the mission of Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, to “Let My People Know”

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