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Angel for Shabbat: Thoughts for Pessah

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The Passover Haggadah presents a dramatic format for dealing with questions relating to religious observance. It presents four children, representing different attitudes toward Jewish belief and ritual, along with the framework for how to answer each of the questioners.

The "rasha" (wicked child) is antagonistic to Jewish tradition. He/she does not feel part of it, and asks: what's the point of all this ritual? Why do you do these things? The Haggadah realizes that there is little to be gained by entering into argument with such a person, or to try to convince the "rasha" through logical discussion. Rather, the Haggadah provides a different kind of response: I do these things because God brought ME out of Egypt. I will not debate with you; but I will tell you why this is so meaningful to me. Through my personal testimony, perhaps you will get a sense of why Jewish belief and observance are so significant and meaningful.

The child "who does not know how to ask" (every child knows how to ask questions!) is one who is so uninterested in Judaism that he/she isn't even curious enough to ask a question. The response is identical to the response given to the "rasha"--I give my personal testimony of why being Jewish is so important and meaningful, of what the laws and tradtions mean to me. If I can give an enthusiastic and sincere story of my own commitment, perhaps the child's interest will be aroused.

The "hakham" (wise child) asks about the laws. He/she accepts Judaism and wants to know every detail of the halakha. The response is: we teach this child all the laws and customs.

The "tam" (simple or naive child) asks: what is this? We answer: Because with a mighty hand God took us out of Egypt. There seems to be a disconnect here. How is this response relevant to the question? How does it help the child understand what is transpiring at the Seder, or the broader issue of what is the meaning/purpose of religious observance altogether.

I think we need to re-examine the question and answer relating to the "tam". Although "tam" is usually translated as "simple" or "naive", the word also has a much different meaning. It means pure, unblemished, whole. Our forefather Jacob is described as being "tam" and so is Job. Noah is called "tamim", from the same root. The "tam" of the Haggadah isn't simple at all, but is actually the most profound of the four children.

The "tam" accepts Jewish belief and ritual, but his/her question isn't about what to do--but about why. The "tam", in search of wholeness, is not satisfied with an intellectual discussion of the laws and customs. The "tam" wants to understand how these laws and customs increase one's closeness to God, how they enhance spirituality. The "tam" is saying: yes, I'll do what the religion requires, but I need something more. I need to know the inner spirit of what the religion demands of me.

The response is: if you are seeking the inner meaning and you want to deepen your spirituality, then you need to understand: God is great, God is a presence in our lives, God's mighty hand took us out of Egypt, God's mighty hand continues to play a role in our lives today. The laws and traditions of Judaism aim at one thing: to bring us closer to God. Every time we perform a mitzvah, we bring God into our consciousness and into our lives. The more connected we are with God's presence, the deeper and more meaningful are our lives. If we will develop our spiritual natures, we will be better, happier and wiser people. God's mighty hand is reaching out to us every moment of every day.

The Kotzker Rebbe once said: When a person needs to cry, when a person wants to cry--but cannot cry: that is the most heart-rending cry of all. When a person feels the deep need to cry out, but is emotionally stifled--the person's life is not "whole". I would paraphrase the Kotzker Rebbe's words: When a person needs to feel close to God, when a person wants to feel close to God--but cannot feel close to God: that is the most heart-rending feeling of all.

This is dilemma raised bythe "tam": We are living at a time of spiritual malaise, of "existential vacuum", of "spiritual homelessness". I want to feel close to God--but I feel distant from God. How can I come closer? How can I achieve spiritual wholeness?

The answer: remember always that God is a presence in our lives. Every mitzvah is an entry point to a deeper spiritual awareness. Take time to think quietly and alone. You can open your heart and emotion and intellect. You can cry out. You can feel God's closeness. If you will open yourself to spiritual growth, you will find

the redemption and wisdom that you seek.

For us to be able to respond to the four types of "children", we ourselves need to have the commitment, knowlege, sincerity and integrity to give authentic answers. We need to understand the nature of the questions--and the questioners. We need to make our case honestly and powerfully. We need to explain the laws and traditions. Perhaps most importantly, we need to know how to respond to the "tam"--the person seeking religious wholeness, spiritual fulfillment, intellectual purity.

We need to reflect not only on "what", but on "why".

*** For more thoughts about Pessah and its symbols, please see https://www.jewishideas.org/passover-symbols-symbols-our-lives

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