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Thoughts for Pessah

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Haggada features the “four children” to whom parents are to explain the message of redemption from slavery. They are presented as four different individuals, each of whom requires a distinctive approach. The wise child is given full explanations; the naïve is given a simple story; the wicked is chastised; the dumbfounded is fed answers to questions never asked.

But what if we see these four children not as different people—but as aspects of just one person, ourselves?

The grand message of Pessah is redemption from servitude. While the focus is on the national liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian oppression, the theme also relates to the life of individuals. We each have experienced moments when we’ve felt oppressed, unappreciated, abused, spiritually exiled. We’ve also experienced moments of validation, exultant victory, love and joy. Life is a series of ups and downs, oppressive moments and moments of liberation.

Sometimes the world perplexes us. We feel helpless in the face of challenges confronting humanity as a whole and Jews in particular. The problems seem so vast: warfare, climate change, crime, economic downturns etc. Is disaster inevitable? We can’t even verbalize all our concerns and anxieties.

Sometimes we feel so mentally overloaded that we look for simple answers to complex problems. We want to feel good, peaceful. We try to shut out the bad news, we look for amusements and entertainments. We don’t want to hear all the details, just simple headlines.

Sometimes we feel frustrated and angry about the way things are going. It seems that the whole system is corrupt, leaders are hypocritical, violence and hatred are rampant, the future is bleak. We rebel against the status quo in whatever ways we can.

Sometimes we are calm and reasonable. We want to know as much as we can about the problems that face us, and we seek intelligent answers to our dilemmas. We don’t want glib soundbites or superficial analyses. We think carefully, we speak carefully and we act responsibly.

The “four children” struggle within each of us. Each has legitimate claims; but how are we to address all the children within us?

The Haggada provides a framework for dealing with the internal struggles we all face.

When we feel perplexed by the challenges, the Haggada reminds us: We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Lord redeemed us from Egypt with a strong hand and outstretched arm. What could have been bleaker than the situation of the ancient Israelite slaves? What could have seemed more hopeless than generations of demeaning servitude? But the seemingly hopeless and overwhelming situation was overcome. God redeemed the slaves. They left Egypt in high spirits. They found words in the beautiful

Song of Moses sung after the Israelites crossed the Sea. They were silent no more.

When we are mentally overloaded and only want simple answers to our questions, we need to remind ourselves: Yes, there are short answers available, and these are important for calming us temporarily. But avoidance is ultimately self-defeating. The problems don't disappear on their own. When the Israelite slaves heard Moses speak of freedom, they initially did not take heed due to their crushed spirits and hard labor. They wanted to go from day to day without contemplating long-term solutions to their dilemma. The Haggada teaches us to deal patiently with ourselves and with the desire for simple answers. Be patient, but get over the impasse! We have a Promised Land ahead of us.

When we feel angry and disappointed, it's easy enough to blame the "leaders," the "system," and God. We allow negativity to overcome us and we want to lash out however we can. The Haggada reminds us that these feelings are part of who we are, and actually are healthy in some ways. We should be angry and frustrated by evil, foolishness, and immorality. But the Haggada tells us that we must not let negative emotions dominate us. It reminds us that negativity is essentially a dead end; it does not lead to redemption. When we feel the negative emotions arising within us, we need to direct them constructively.

When we feel wise and reasonable, that's a good feeling. We can analyze, think, dream, plan for the future. We feel competent and confident. But beware: unless we listen to the other three children within us we can become complacent and self-righteous.

The story of Pessah is a realistic/optimistic story. It tells candidly about slavery, hatred, cruelty, loss of human dignity. But it also tells of redemption, freedom, God's providence, human development. As it relates to the national history of the people of Israel, it also relates to each one of us.

Our individual stories—our lives—are composed of a variety of experiences and emotions—some negative and painful, some positive and redemptive. The ultimate message of Pessah is that optimism and redemption will ultimately prevail.

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Lord redeemed us with strong hand and outstretched arm. The four children within us crave for redemption...and the redemption will surely come through our personal efforts and with the help of God.