Insight #1 The Four Sons, Jewish Diversity, and Story-Telling for Jewish Continuity

*The Biblical Basis for the Four Sons*

**Wicked Son**

*Shemot/Exodus 12:26-27*

“...you shall say, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, because he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians but saved your houses.’”

**Child Who Does Not Know How to Ask**

*Shemot/Exodus 13:8*

“...And you shall explain to your son on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt.’”

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Olivia Hannah, ‘The Sea Splitting’
Simple Child
*Shemot/Exodus 13:14*

“And when, in time to come, your son asks you, saying, ‘What does this mean to you?’ you shall say to him, ‘It was with a mighty hand that the Lord brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage.’”

Wise Child
*Devarim/Deuteronomy 6:20*

“When in time your children ask you, ‘What do the decrees, laws and rules mean that the Lord our God has enjoined upon you?’ you shall say to your children, ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Lord freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand.’”

*Rabbi Sacks on the Four Sons*

“The four children are a vignette of the Jewish people. One asks because he wants to hear the answer. A second asks because he does not want to hear the answer. A third asks because he does not understand. The fourth does not ask because he doesn’t understand that he doesn’t understand. Ours has never been a monolithic people. Yet there is a message of hope in this family portrait. Though they disagree, they sit around the same table, telling the same story. Though they differ, they stay together. They are part of a single family. Even the rebel is there, although part of him does not want to be. This, too, is who we are. The Jewish people is an extended family. We argue, we differ, there are times when we are deeply divided. Yet we are part of the same story. We share the same memories. At difficult times we can count on one another. We feel one another’s pain. Out of this multiplicity of voices comes something none of us could achieve alone. Sitting next to the wise child, the rebel is not fated to remain a rebel. Sitting next to the rebel, the wise child may share his wisdom rather than keep it to himself. The one who cannot ask will, in time, learn how. The simple child will learn complexity. The wise child will learn simplicity. Each draws strength from the others, as we all draw strength from belonging to a people.” - *The Jonathan Sacks Haggadah, p.18*

The Rebbe of Ger once pointed out that the ‘four sons’ of the Haggadah represent four generations. The wise son is the immigrant generation who still lives the traditions of the ‘home’. The rebellious son is the second generation, forsaking Judaism for social integration. The ‘simple’ son is the third generation, confused by the mixed messages of religious grandparents and irreligious parents. But the child who cannot even ask the question is the fourth generation. For the child of the fourth generation no longer has memories of Jewish life in its full intensity. Our children are children of the fourth generation. Already it is clear that what we took for granted, they do not. They do not take it for granted that they will belong to an Orthodox synagogue or indeed any synagogue. They do not take it for granted that they will marry, or marry another Jew, or stay married. They do not take it for granted that they will have Jewish children or that it is important to do so. Nothing can be taken for granted in the fourth generation, least of all in the secular, open society in which even a common moral code is lacking.” - Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “Will We have Jewish Grandchildren?,” p. 60
Haggadah Insight #2: A Night of Constructive Questioning

The Importance of Questions

“In Judaism, to be without questions is not a sign of faith, but of lack of depth. ‘As for the child who does not know how to ask, you must begin to teach him how.’ Many of the customs of seder night (dipping the parsley and removing the seder plate are two examples) were introduced solely to provoke a child to ask ‘Why’? Judaism is a religion of questions.”
- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’s Haggadah, p. 105

“Religious faith has often been seen as naïve, blind, accepting. That is not the Jewish way… To the contrary: asking a question is itself a profound expression of faith in the intelligibility of the universe and the meaningfulness of human life. To ask is to believe that somewhere there is an answer… We ask, not because we doubt, but because we believe.”
- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’s Haggadah, p. 106

Three Conditions for Asking a Jewish Question

The first is that we seek genuinely to learn- not to doubt, ridicule, dismiss, reject. That is what the ‘wicked son’ of the Haggadah does: ask not out of a desire to understand but as a prelude to walking away.

Second is that we accept limits to our understanding… Faith is not opposed to questions, but it is opposed to the shallow certainty that what we understand is all there is.

Third is that when it comes to Torah, we learn by living and understand by doing. We learn to understand music by listening to music. We learn to appreciate literature by reading literature. There is no way of understanding Shabbat without keeping Shabbat…

Given these caveats, Judaism is a faith that, more than any other, values the mind, encouraging questions and engaging us at the highest level of intellectual rigour. Every question asked in reverence is the start of a journey towards God, and it begins with the habit which, on Pesach, Jewish parents teach their children: to ask, thereby to join the never-ending dialogue between human understanding and heaven. - Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’s Haggadah, p. 108

It may be that the ‘four children’ are not different people but successive stages in the development of a child. We begin by being unable to ask. We accept the world as given. The next stage in intellectual growth is curiosity (the ‘simple’ son). We ask questions with no ulterior motive. We simply want to learn. This is often followed by a period of testing and challenging the values we have received (the ‘wicked’ or adolescent son)… The culmination of cognitive growth is ‘wisdom’, the point at which we have both internalised the values of our heritage and are sufficiently mature to see their objective merits… Wisdom, in Judaism, is not a state, but a process of constant learning. That is why it lies as much in the questions one asks as in the answers. Every answer is itself the prelude to a deeper question, and thus there is constant growth as we move to new levels of understanding. - Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’s Haggadah, p. 17
Some Questions/Prompts for Your Seder Table

- What was your most memorable Seder?
- Who do you miss at your Seder table and why?
- What is your favorite food at the Seder?
- **Yachatz** is the broken matza. There were times when things were hard in our family, when we felt broken. Let me tell you about it…
- One thing I treasure about our family is…
- My favorite part of the Seder is…
- A Passover ritual that is important to me is…
- Here’s a symbolic prop that helps tell my Jewish story:
- “Next year in Jerusalem,” reminds me of my relationship to Israel, which started when…
- When I sing Dayenu, I am personally grateful for…
- This night is different from all other nights for me because…
- I hope that by next Passover (name a wish or a hope)…

Insight #3: Rekhush Gadol: The Importance of Material Wealth for Nation Building

“And He said to Abram, “Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years; but I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth. As for you, You shall go to your fathers in peace; You shall be buried at a ripe old age.

So I will stretch out My hand and smite Egypt with various wonders which I will work upon them; after that he shall let you go. And I will dispose the Egyptians favorably toward this people, so that when you go, you will not go away empty-handed. Each woman shall borrow from her neighbor and the lodger in her house objects of silver and gold, and clothing, and you shall put these on your sons and daughters, thus stripping the Egyptians.”

The most important legacy we can give our children is not money or possessions, but spiritual ideals.” - Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Letters to the Next Generation
And the Lord said to Moses, “I will bring but one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; after that he shall let you go from here; indeed, when he lets you go, he will drive you out of here one and all. Tell the people to borrow, each man from his neighbor and each woman from hers, objects of silver and gold.” The Lord disposed the Egyptians favorably toward the people. Moreover, Moses himself was much esteemed in the land of Egypt, among Pharaoh’s courtiers and among the people.

Shemot/Exodus 12:34-36

So the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls wrapped in their cloaks upon their shoulders. The Israelites had done Moses’ bidding and borrowed from the Egyptians objects of silver and gold, and clothing. And the Lord had disposed the Egyptians favorably toward the people, and they let them have their request; thus, they stripped the Egyptians.

Devarim/Deuteronomy 15:14

Furnish him out of the flock, threshing floor, and vat, with which the Lord your God has blessed you.

Rabbi Sacks’ Explanation

Why the silver and gold? The Israelites were in such a hurry to leave, and the Egyptians so hasty in urging their departure, that they did not even have time for the dough to rise. Why then was God so insistent that they take the time to ask for these parting gifts? What conceivable use did they have for them in the long journey across the wilderness?...

Why was this so important? It is not until we reach the end of the Mosaic books that we can begin to understand it, only in retrospect. Two details from the book of Deuteronomy provide the key. The first has to do with the liberation of slaves:

If a fellow Hebrew, a man or a woman, sells himself to you and serves you six years, in the seventh year you must let him go free. And when you release him, do not send him away empty-handed. Supply him liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to him as the Lord your God has blessed you. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today. (Deut. 12:12-15)

The second is one of the most striking commands of all. Moses insists:

Do not hate an Edomite, for he is your brother. Do not hate an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land. (Deut. 23:7)
This is remarkable. The Israelites had been enslaved by the Egyptians. They owed them no debt of gratitude. On the contrary, they were entitled to feel a lingering resentment…They should bear the Egyptians no ill will. Why?...

A people driven by hate are not – cannot be – free. Had the people carried with them a burden of hatred and a desire for revenge, Moses would have taken the Israelites out of Egypt, but he would not have taken Egypt out of the Egyptians. They would still be there, bound by chains of anger as restricting as any metal. To be free you have to let go of hate…

That is why, when a slave went free, his master had to give him gifts. This was not to compensate for the fact of slavery. There is no way of giving back the years spent in servitude. But there is a way of ensuring that the parting is done with goodwill, with some symbolic compensation…One who has received gifts finds it hard to hate.


**Insight #4: The Missing 5ths**

**Shemot/Exodus 6:6-8**

וְהוֹצֵאת יְאָכֶם מִתַחַת סְבָלָם וְהָצַלְתֶּם יְאָכֶם מֵעֲבֹדָתָם וְגָאַלְתֶּם יְאָכֶם בְּזֶרֲעָנָה וּבֵשְׁפָט יָם גְדוֹל יָם.

וְלָקַחְתֶּם יְאָכֶם לִלָּם וְהָיִיתֶם לְאֶלֹהִים; וַיִדְעֵהֻם כִּי אֲנִי יְקֹוָק אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, הוֹצֵאת אֶת יְאָכֶם מֵעֲבֹדָתָם מֵעַל יָם.

I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm, and with great judgments; and I will take you to Me for a people, and I will be to you a God; and ye shall know that I am the L ord your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you in unto the land, concerning which I lifted up My hand to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you for a heritage: I am the L ord.'

Is freedom only the absence of external pressure or is it also the presence of something? Can freedom become a burden, too heavy for man to bear, something he tries to escape from? Is there not also, perhaps, besides for an innate desire for freedom, an instinctive wish for submission? - Erich Fromm, Escape from Freedom, p.4

**This year we are slaves- next year, may we be free.**

There are two words for freedom in Hebrew, chofesh and cherut. Chofesh is ‘freedom from’. Cherut is ‘freedom to’. Chofesh is what a slave acquires when released from slavery. He or she is free from being subject to someone else’s will. But this kind of liberty is not enough to create a free society. A world in which everyone is free to do what they like begins in anarchy and ends in tyranny. That is why chofesh is only the beginning of freedom, not its ultimate destination. Cherut is collective freedom, a society in which my freedom respects yours. A free society is always a moral achievement. It rests on self-restraint and regard for others. The ultimate aim of the Torah is to fashion a society on the foundations of justice and compassion, both of which depend on recognizing the sovereignty of God and the integrity of creation. Thus we say, ‘Next
year may we be bnei chorin,’ invoking cherut not chofesh. It means, ‘May we be free in a way that honours the freedom of all.’ - Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’s Haggadah, p.12

In the half-century since the Holocaust the Jewish people has emerged from darkness to light. The State of Israel has come into being. The Hebrew language has been reborn. Jews have been brought to safety from the countries where they faced persecution. In the liberal democracies of the West Jews have gained freedom, and even prominence and affluence. But Israel is not yet at peace. In the Diaspora assimilation continues apace. Many Jews are estranged from their people and their faith. Something is missing from our celebration- the 5th cup, deliverance, question and son. That is a measure of what still needs to be achieved. We have not yet reached our destination. The missing fifths remind us of work still to be done, a journey not yet complete. -“The Missing Fifth,” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’s Haggadah, 104

The drama of the fifth cup [cup of Elijah] now becomes apparent. Pesach represents the start of the great journey of Jewish history, from slavery to freedom, Egypt to the promised land. What then became of it after the destruction of the Second Temple, the failure of the Bar Kochba rebellion, the Hadrianic persecutions and the long, tragic series of events that led to the greatest exile of Jewish history? Could Jews celebrate freedom under such circumstances?...
The very festival that spoke of liberty gained became –for almost 2,000 years –a poignant reminder of what the Jewish people had lost: freedom, a land, a home. A new phrase was born: next year. ‘This year we are slaves; next year we will be free… The loss was only temporary. The Divine promise was forever. It was in this context that the debate over the fifth cup arose. Jews could speak about the four preliminary stages of redemption – but could they celebrate the fifth: ‘I will bring you to the land’? That is the debate between Rashi, Rambam and Ravad. Rashi says one should not drink a fifth cup; Rambam says one may; Ravad says one should. Hence the extra cup at the seder table. Out of respect for Rambam and Ravad, we pour it. Out of respect for Rashi, we do not drink it. According to the Sages, unresolved halachic disputes will one day be resolved by Elijah... Hence the fifth cup became known as ‘the Cup of Elijah’.

According to a Hasidic tale, a pious Jew once asked his rabbi why Elijah never appeared on the night of the seder, even though the door was opened for him and his goblet of wine was waiting on the table. The rabbi told him: “There is a very poor family in your neighborhood. Go visit them and propose that next year you and your family will celebrate Passover with them in their house and that you’ll provide everything they need for the whole holiday. Then on the night of the Seder, Elijah will certainly come.” The man did as he was told, but after the following Passover he returned to the rabbi, complaining that once again Elijah had failed to appear. The rabbi responded, “Elijah came, but you couldn’t see him.” Holding a mirror to the man’s face, he continued, “Look, this was Elijah’s face that night.” Here the possibility of meeting Elijah is surpassed, as one learns to enact the prophet’s quality of compassion, thereby becoming Elijah.
- Daniel Matt, Becoming Elijah, (Yale University Press, 2022), p.156