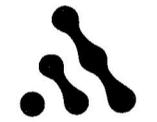


Rabbi Jonathan Sacks's HAGGADAH

HEBREW AND ENGLISH TEXT WITH
NEW ESSAYS AND COMMENTARY BY

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continuum

NEW YORK

question-mark against the random cruelties of the world. It is His call to us to 'mend the world' until it becomes a place worthy of the Divine presence, to accept no illness that can be cured, no poverty that can be alleviated, no injustice that can be rectified. To ask the prophetic question is not to seek an answer but to be energized to action. That is what it is to meet God in *redemption*.

The three types of question are therefore inter-related. When we use our understanding of creation in conjunction with the commands of revelation, we help to bring redemption – an act at a time, a day at a time, knowing that it is not given to us to complete the task, but nor may we stand aside from it.

There are three conditions, though, 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. Not everything is intelligible at any given moment. There were scientists at the beginning of the twentieth century who believed that virtually every major discovery had already been made – not suspecting that the next hundred years would give rise to Einstein's relativity theory, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, Gödel's theorem, proof of the 'Big Bang' origin of the universe, the discovery of DNA and the decoding of the human genome. In relation to Torah, there were many German and American Jews in the nineteenth century who could not understand Jewish prayers for a return to Zion, and deleted them from the prayer book. These facts should induce in us a certain humility. Not every scientific orthodoxy survives the test of time. Not everything in Judaism that we do not understand is unintelligible. The very features of Jewish life one generation finds difficult, the next generation may find the most meaningful of all. 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, no way of appreciating how Jewish laws of family purity enhance a marriage without observing them. Judaism, like music, is something that can only be understood from the inside, by immersing yourself in it.

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.

What Does the Wicked Son Say?

What does the wicked son say? 'What does this service mean to you?' By saying 'you', not 'me', he excludes himself and thereby denies a basic principle of our faith. You in turn should set his teeth on edge and say to him, 'Because of what God did for me when I came forth from Egypt' – for me, not him. Had he been there he would not have been redeemed.

Haggadah

The section of the Haggadah that speaks of the 'four sons' is a brilliant example of the subtlety and creativity of rabbinic interpretation. It is based on the fact that in four places in the Torah (three in Exodus 12–13, one in Deuteronomy 6), reference is made to parents instructing their children on the meaning of Jewish practice by relating it to the exodus. True to their conviction that no word in the Torah was superfluous, they did not see these passages as mere repetition. Each teaches something new. Passionate about education and ultra-sensitive to nuances in the biblical text, the rabbis sensed that the four verses were about different kinds of child. Three included questions, but were of varying levels of sophistication and therefore signalled children of different temperaments and abilities. The fourth, which made no reference to a question, must refer to the child who has not yet reached the stage of asking. The passage as it stands testifies to the centrality of education in Jewish life, and especially to the role of parents as teachers.

From the evidence of parallel passages in the rabbinic literature, it seems likely that the text as it appears in the Haggadah was the result of several centuries of debate and a long process of editing. There exist, in writings from the Mishnaic period and also from the Jerusalem Talmud, sources which read like early drafts on which the Haggadah text was based. Of great interest, though, is the fact that in two sources we find reference not to the 'four sons' but to the 'wicked son' alone:

And when your children say... (Exodus 12:26). [This implies that] in the future, some may say, 'What does this service mean to you?' One

who says 'to you' is a wicked person who excludes himself from the community. [In reply] you too should exclude him from the community by saying, 'Because of what God did for me' – meaning 'He did this for me – not you. (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*)

And you shall tell your son on that day, "It is because of what the Lord did for me..." (Exodus 13:8). Why does it say this [and not "because of what the Lord did for us"]? Because it earlier says, 'What does this service mean to you?' This refers to a wicked son who excludes himself from the community – and because he excludes himself, so too should you exclude him [by saying], 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt' – 'me' not 'you' [implying] 'had you been there you would not have been redeemed. (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*)

The two men – Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai – from whose schools these teachings come, lived in the second century CE, through one of Judaism's most turbulent and tragic eras. They witnessed the ferocity of Rome in suppressing Jewish life. They saw Jews defect from Judaism – some to ally themselves with Rome itself, others to join the new Christian sect. Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Shimon were different personality types, the former a rationalist, the latter a mystic, but they were both intensely loyal to Jewish identity and destiny and shared a sense of distress, verging on anger, at Jews who left the fold. We can now place their comments on 'the wicked son' in a specific historical context. It was not Pesach as such, nor were they speaking about young children. They were talking about Jews who, seeing the fall of Jerusalem and the rise of Rome, changed sides and allied themselves to forces that were in the ascendant. This was, for the rabbis, a kind of betrayal.

Another *midrash* gives us an idea of what defecting Jews argued. As always with rabbinic interpretation, we have to realize that when they spoke about their own time, they did so obliquely, by commenting on earlier times, in this case the Babylonian exile in the days of the prophet Ezekiel:

So you find that Israel sought to free itself from the yoke of its oath in the days of Ezekiel. Men from among the elders of Israel came 'to seek the Lord'. They said to him [Ezekiel], If a slave is purchased by a priest, may he eat *terumah* [food set aside for priests]? He replied, He may. Then they asked, If the priest sold him back again to an Israelite, has he then left the priest's domain? He said to them, He has. Then they said [to Ezekiel], So it is with us. We have left [God's] domain and we shall become like the heathen nations. (*Midrash Tanchuma, Nitzavim, 3*)

The argument (it was restated by Spinoza in the seventeenth century when he abandoned Judaism) is that God's covenant with Israel was conditional on their

independence. God was their sovereign, precisely because they were not ruled over by anyone else. Therefore, when they went into exile – in the time of the Babylonian conquest and again in the days of Rome – they lost their independence and became subjects of another king. God could have no further claim on them. He had sold or abandoned them to another power. The covenant was at an end.

This is, it should be said, a powerful case, not to be dismissed lightly. It tells us how profound the crisis was when Jews came under foreign rule. The very survival of Jews and Judaism depended on rejecting it, but that took immense religious courage and determination. Writing in the fourth century from a Christian perspective, Augustine cannot restrain himself from a note of astonishment at the tenacity of Jewish faith: 'It is in truth a surprising fact that the Jewish people never gave up its laws, either under the rule of pagan kings or under the dominion of Christians. In this respect it is different from other tribes and nations; no emperor or king who found them in his land was able to prevent Jews from being differentiated, by their observance of their Law, from the rest of the family of nations.' The persistence of Judaism depended on a leap of faith: that despite everything, the covenant was still in force. God had not abandoned His people and would one day redeem them. It should be added that Augustine was right: no other people in history demonstrated so tenacious a loyalty to their past and future. Virtually without exception, every other people who had been conquered adopted the culture of their conquerors.

The Roman era was not the first time, nor was it to be the last, when the very future of Judaism lay in the balance. It had happened before under Babylon, and again in days of the Greeks. It happened again in fifteenth century Spain, when Jews came under almost unbearable pressure to convert to Christianity. There is an astonishing admission by one of the outstanding figures of the Middle Ages, the scholar and statesman Don Isaac Abrabanel, as to the depth of despair he felt at the time of the Spanish expulsion. There was a time, he writes, when he felt like saying: 'all the prophets who prophesied about my redemption and salvation are all false... Moses, may he rest in peace, was false in his utterances, Isaiah lied in his consolations, Jeremiah and Ezekiel lied in their prophecies.' Nor was he alone. 'Let the people remember,' he adds, 'all the despairing things they used to say' in the days of 1492.

Yet Abrabanel, like Rabbi Ishmael and Shimon bar Yochai thirteen centuries earlier, was convinced that defection, conversion or assimilation were wrong. Not only were they the ultimate betrayal of the covenant of Jewish identity; they would not even succeed in sparing Jews from antisemitism:

Many of our brethren have forsaken the religion of their forefathers as a result of persecution and wished to be like the nations of the world, thinking that thereby they would remove from them the providence of God and the duty of keeping His Torah, and would prosper in their works just like other nations and would no longer belong to the body of their people. But [they are mistaken, because] though they and their

descendants would do all in their power to assimilate, they would not succeed. They would still be called Jews against their own will, and would be accused of Judaizing in secret and be burnt at the stake for it.

370 years later, in 1862, Moses Hess wrote in almost identical terms about the German Jews of his time: 'Because of the Jew-hatred which surrounds him, the German Jew is only too eager to cast aside everything Jewish and to deny his race.' This too, says Hess, will fail: 'Even baptism itself,' he writes, will 'not save him from the nightmare of German Jew-hatred.' Tragically, history proved both Abrabanel and Hess right.

Behind the simple paragraph about 'the wicked son' is a long and painful history of Jews who, faced with persecution on the one hand and the blandishments of the ruling power on the other, chose to abandon Judaism. Viewing this history it is hard not to feel the irony of the fact that ancient Greece and Rome, two civilizations that prided themselves on their tolerance, and medieval Christianity which claimed to worship the God of love, showed surprisingly little tolerance and love when it came to Jews. Their principle often seemed to be that Jews were to be tolerated and loved, *provided* that they relinquished their Judaism. There can, however, equally be no doubt – it is reflected in the harshness of the reply to 'the wicked son' – that Jews themselves felt betrayed by those of their number who, at times of crisis, went over to the other side, to the persecuting power.

That is the history behind 'the wicked son'. Nowadays, however, the situation is somewhat different. Throughout the Diaspora, Jews are again assimilating and outmarrying. As in the days of Rome and Spain the Jewish people faces a crisis of continuity. This time, however, the cause is not persecution but something else: indifference, perhaps, or ignorance, or the sheer pressure of an age and culture in which long term commitments are becoming rarer and harder to understand. Each age brings its own challenges, and because ours is new, I am inclined to offer a radical re-interpretation of the passage, 'What does the wicked son say?'

I do so for the following reasons. First: has any Jewish parent ever truly believed that his or her son is 'wicked'? The Torah contains a law about 'a stubborn and rebellious son', brought to court by his parents for punishment. The Talmud records the statement by one of Israel's sages that 'there never was nor ever will be a stubborn and rebellious son'. To be a parent is to have compassion for one's child. The Hebrew word for compassion, *rachamim*, comes from the word *rechem*, meaning 'a womb'. No parent can write off a child as irretrievably wicked. That is why, when we plead for God's forgiveness, we call him *Avinu*, 'our parent'.

Second: is the dismissive response – 'set his teeth on edge' – the best way of dealing with a rebellious child? The biblical Jacob did not rebuke his children, Reuben, Shimon and Levi, until he was on his death-bed. According to tradition, he reasoned, 'If I rebuke them during my lifetime, they will leave me and go to my brother Esau.' When, in the early twentieth century, a distressed father wrote to Rav Abraham Kook, about how he should treat his son who had abandoned Judaism, Rav Kook replied, 'If

you loved him before, love him even more now.'

Third (a rabbinic objection, this): how *old* is the 'wicked son'? Either he is older than bar mitzvah age (thirteen) or younger. If he is younger, then his question is correct, not dismissive: 'What does this service mean *to you?*' which might well mean, 'I, who have not yet reached the age of commandedness, do not know what it means to be commanded. You, however, do. Please therefore explain it to me.' If however he has reached the age of thirteen, then Jewish law states, 'One who chastises his adult son is to be excommunicated, for he has transgressed the prohibition against "placing a stumbling block before the blind."' Among the prohibitions included under the rule of the 'stumbling block' is provoking someone else to sin. A child over the age of thirteen who strikes his parent is guilty of a major offence. Therefore a parent is forbidden to provoke such a child by acting in such a way as to give rise to retaliation.

Fourth: why does the Haggadah use the strange phrase, 'set his teeth on edge'? Classical Hebrew contains many words meaning instruction, chastisement, correction, remonstrance and reproof. The Haggadah is a rabbinic document, and the rabbis tended to prefer plain speaking to circumlocutory metaphors. Why, therefore, 'set his teeth on edge' instead of the plain 'rebuke'?

The last question provides the clue. The phrase, 'set his teeth on edge', is in fact a biblical allusion. It is cited by two of the prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as a well-known proverb: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge.' By using this unusual locution the sages were hinting at something profound. Children do not always rebel of their own accord. The parent of a rebellious child should ask himself or herself: did I do something to cause it? Was it my 'sour grapes' that set my child's 'teeth on edge'? Taking this as a key to the whole passage, I suggest the following re-interpretation:

What is the child whom others see as wicked – the adolescent, the rebel, the breakaway – really signalling by his conduct? We know what he says. But what is the question *beneath* the words, the inarticulate cry? 'Father, mother, what does Judaism mean *to you?* You sent me to Hebrew school. You gave me a bar mitzvah. You hired teachers for me. I know what Judaism is supposed to mean. I listened to the lessons. I read the books. But all the time I was growing up, you sent me mixed messages. When I neglected my secular education, you were angry, but when I missed Hebrew lessons, you never seemed to mind. I learned about the laws of Jewish life, but you did not seem to keep them, or if you did so, you did it selectively. What you *said* was that Judaism mattered, but what you *did* seemed to show that it did not matter very much. At my bar mitzvah, you were more concerned about the catering than about how much I understood of the words I said in synagogue. As I grew older, you seemed more interested in which college I went to and which career I pursued than whether I was continuing to study and practice Judaism. You wanted me to marry a Jewish girl, but you never gave me a real reason why. I know what Judaism is supposed to mean to me – but you are my parents. I am Jewish only because you are. So I ask you from the depth of my soul: what does Judaism mean *to you?*'

This is a deep question and it brooks no evasion. The only answer one can give –

the existential response which alone is capable of teaching from soul to soul – is to say what Judaism means *to me* – not to him. We must *own* Judaism before we can pass it on. We must live it if we are to inspire those who will live on after us. The Torah says, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might... And you shall teach these things to your children.' Rabbi Moses Alshikh, explaining the connection, said simply: we can only teach to our children what we ourselves love.

What prompts such honesty? The knowledge that without it, 'Had he been there, he would not have been redeemed.' No parent can leave a child unredeemed. Therefore to be a parent is to be willing to take one's child and walk, hand in hand, part-way on the Jewish journey, showing that we are prepared to live by the faith we want him or her to continue. On this reading, the 'wicked child' is not wicked, merely confused, and it is we, his parents, who have confused him. To end his confusion we must first end ours by asking, in the depths of self-knowledge, what Judaism means to us.

Begin with the Shame, End with the Praise

[When telling the story of the going out of Egypt] begin with the shame, but end with the praise.
Mishnah

If you want to understand a people, listen to the way it tells its stories. In the literature of humanity there are many kinds of story. There are those – we know them from childhood – that end with the words 'And they all lived happily ever after.' We call them fairy stories, fantasies, myths. In the artificial reality they conjure up, the evil dragon is slain, the wicked witch defeated, the curse lifted, the conflict resolved. Judaism has no such stories because it does not believe in myth. In the Jewish narrative, the battle against evil is never complete. The messianic age has not yet come. Until then we live in a universe in which, though there is liberation from Egypt, after Pharaoh comes Amalek, and after Amalek, other tyrants. Injustice must be fought in every generation. The legacy of the exodus is not a world in which 'they all lived happily ever after.' There is no closure, no 'sense of an ending'. Instead there is something more real and at the same time more radical: Shabbat – a world of rest which is temporary but no less utopian, where one day in seven we experience pure, unmediated freedom and gain the strength to continue the journey, take up the struggle.

Beyond myth, there is a second great literary genre which we owe to the Greeks, namely *tragedy*. Tragedy tells the story of human beings, with their aspirations and ambitions, in a world governed by impersonal forces. To be human is to wish, to plan, to dream. But our dreams are destined to crash against the rocks of a reality fundamentally indifferent to our existence. They are *hubris*, and are always punished by *nemesis*. Oedipus and the other great figures of Greek drama fail to defeat the forces of fate, as they were bound to do. Tragedy is the consequence of a vision of the sheer abyss between humanity and the gods. Zeus, like other ancient deities, had no special affection for human beings. They disturbed his peace. They threatened to steal his secret knowledge. The gods of polytheistic cultures tended to be at best mildly irritated