

**Rabbi Fredda Cohen**  
**Kitah Zayin**  
**Questions for the Seder Table**  
**Lesson #23**  
**March 2015**

**Topic #1 – Questions: Old and New**

*Why is this night different from all other nights:*

*On all other nights we eat matzah or bread: why on this night, only matzah?*

*On all other nights we eat various kinds of vegetables: why on this night only vegetables?*

*On all other nights we need not dip our vegetables even once: why on this night two times?*

*On all other nights we eat either sitting or leaning: why on this night only leaning?*

***-Haggadah liturgy***

“Each Pesah, the four questions asked by the youngest child are exactly the same. Why do we ask them year after year? Because as we grow and change, our questions take on new meaning, and the answers to them differ. Because as we grow and change, we understand that there is no one right answer. Because as we grow and change, a different one among us may be asking the questions for the first time...

There are many different versions of the Four Questions, which were never meant to be anything more than examples of questions that could be asked. The Talmud tells a story to emphasize this point. A student, Abaye, was at the seder of his teacher Rabbah. Some time during the early part of the seder, Rabbah had all the dishes, including the seder plate, cleared from the table. ‘Why are you clearing the seder plate from the table when we haven’t even eaten the meal?’ Abaye asked. (Some Haggadot instruct us to remove the seder plate here in order to provoke this very question.)

According to the Talmud, Rabbah responded that Abaye’s question was the equivalent of the Mah Nishtanah, which now did not need to be recited (Talmud Pesachim 115b). So we learn that the goal of the evening is to ask questions, particularly new and different questions.”

***-A Night of Questions: A Passover Haggadah, Reconstructionist Press***

1. How has the meaning of the seder changed for you over the years?
2. What is the significance of the Four Questions for you?
3. Do your families have their own rituals or customs that make your seder uniquely yours?
4. As we learned in Rabbi Fredda’s class, the Mishnah tells us that the seder is an educational experience which is supposed to prompt questions from the children to the parents. The Four Questions were intended to be used only if the children could not come up with their own questions. We know that questions are as important as their answers in that they allow for our minds to grow. What questions do you think are important?

## **Topic #2: Anger, Aggression and Ambivalence**

*These are the ten plagues that God brought upon the Egyptians in Egypt. They are: blood, frogs, lice, beasts, cattle plague, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, death of the first born.*

### ***-Haggadah liturgy***

“A primary dynamic of Pesach can be found in the ambivalence the tradition embodies around feelings of anger and aggression that the story of the Exodus calls forth. As we read in Exodus 15 of the salvation of Israel and the simultaneous destruction of the Egyptians, these contrasts become vivid.

In what the Torah records as the Song of/at the Sea, we note that there is no ambivalence on the part of the poet: ‘Horse and driver [God] has hurled into the Sea...they went down to the depths like stone...they sank like lead in the majestic waters...who is like You among the celestials, Adonay?’ We sense no moral ambiguity, no emotional self-consciousness and no measure of regret at the utter destruction of the enemy.

Later rabbinic tradition could not rest content with this text as it stands. The rabbis who created the Haggadah and defined the ritual requirements of the Seder also crafted midrash to explore and expand the Exodus narrative in ways that domesticate this unrestrained celebration of the destruction of the enemy.

For example, at the Seder when we recite the ten plagues, it is customary that we remove one drop of wine or juice from our cup for each plague. Insofar as innocents suffered as the price of our going free, our celebration is diminished, and we cannot consume a full cup, or so go most explanations in modern Haggadot.

The tradition of removing drops of wine as a nod in the direction of innocent Egyptians is ratcheted up a notch in the midrash that is also often cited in those same modern Haggadot: The very moment the Israelites passed through the sea and the Egyptian troops pursued them happened to be when, in the rabbinic imagination, the angelic choir began to sing praises to God. In the midrash, God silenced them saying, ‘My creatures (the Egyptians) are drowning, and you would sing.’”

### ***–Rabbi Richard Hirsh, Reconstructionist Rabbi***

1. How do we feel when enemies suffer?
2. Should we accept our natural human tendency to hate/marginalize/hurt/disassociate from those with whom we disagree, even those who would wish us harm or actually strive to harm us?
3. Should we honor those negative feelings, and yet respond in a way that is productive and gives dignity to our enemies?
4. Should we attempt to transcend and transform our negative feelings and related expressions of hatred and violence towards others?
5. Rabbi Hirsch suggests that we may feel ambivalent about our behavior towards and feelings about our enemies. Do you agree?
6. What does Judaism expect of us and how does it provide a structure or examples for dealing with this? Give examples.

## **Topic #3: Degradation: Physical and Spiritual**

*We were slaves to Pharaoh. Our God brought us out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. Had God not taken our ancestors out of Egypt, then we and our children, and our children's children would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt...From the beginning, our ancestors worshipped idols. But now we have been brought to God's service. As it is written: "Joshua said to the people: 'Thus said Adonai, the God of Israel: In olden times, your ancestors – Terah, father of Abraham and Nahor – lived beyond the Euphrates and worshipped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from beyond the Euphrates and led him through the whole land of Canaan and multiplied his offspring.'"*

***-Haggadah Liturgy***

“What is the slavery from which Israel escaped [in the Haggadah]? Samuel [3<sup>rd</sup> century CE rabbi] argues that the escape is from physical slavery. Rav [3<sup>rd</sup> century CE rabbi] believes that it was idolatry and spiritual degradation that we escaped. It is hardly accidental that the Haggadah here gives both answers. There can never be complete spiritual freedom without physical freedom, and we cannot maintain physical freedom without spiritual discipline and clarity of mind. Thus we have not yet fully gone forth from Egypt when we have attained freedom. Our journey is complete on when we have a community that reinforces our ability to pursue justice and that act of out of concern for what has ultimate importance.”

***-Rabbi David Teutsch, Reconstructionist Rabbi***

1. What is the physical degradation that the Haggadah is referring to?
2. What is the spiritual degradation that the Haggadah is referring to?
3. Do you agree with the Rabbi Teutsch's statement that physical and spiritual wellbeing affect one another, and you cannot have one without the other? Give examples.
4. Is one worse than the other?
5. What does spiritual degradation mean to you? What about the physical and spiritual degradation of others? How can you help prevent it? How does this affect your sense of justice?
6. How does living in America contribute to your physical and spiritual well-being?

## **Topic #4: Next Year in Jerusalem**

*Now our seder is completed, every requirement is fulfilled. Just as we have been privileged to observe it this year may we continue to do so in years to come. You who are pure, dwelling on high, raise up Your countless people. Soon bring your offshoots strong, redeemed to Zion in joyous song. Next year in Jerusalem.*

***-Haggadah liturgy***

“In a world where Israel is just hours away by plane, this declaration requires more than a commitment to be in Jerusalem physically. It may be easier to have a seder in Israel next year than to bring Jerusalem into our lives every day. As we prepare to leave our seder, we are reminded redemption is two-fold: to join together as a people in a redeemed Jerusalem, and to be truly liberated wherever we are. We may have civil rights but be spiritual slaves. We may be enslaved to wrong ideas or to serving God out of fear, out of habit, and not out of love. ‘I shall enter the heavenly Jerusalem,’ declared God, ‘only after my children enter Jerusalem on earth’ (Zohar 1:1b). We set our sights on the year to come, to work tirelessly for the freedom that we have tasted with the matzah tonight.”

***-Rabbi Barbara Penzner, Reconstructionist Rabbi***

1. If you are an American, what is your connection to Israel, both in terms of your emotional feelings about Israel and a sense of responsibility?
2. Is Israel the Jewish homeland? If yes, why. If no, why not, since we say every year “next year in Jerusalem.”
3. If you are American, how is being Jewish in American different from the experiences of your parents, grandparents and great-grandparents?
4. Do all Jews bear a responsibility to one another, as the Talmud states? How should that responsibility be carried out?
5. In a perfect world without limitations, where would you choose to live?
6. Israeli young adults are required to serve in the military. Should they be? There currently is no requirement for American young adults to serve their country for a period of time? Should there be? If so, in what manner?