

A central aspect of the Passover seder is the passage describing the four children – one wise, one wicked, one simple and one who does not even know how to ask. Obviously we are supposed to see the wise child as the best and the wicked child as the worst. Or are we?

The traditional understanding of the wicked son revolves around the idea that the wicked child asks “What are all these things to you?” The “you” here is seen as meaning “for you and not for me” and that the wicked child is separating himself or herself from the rest of the Jewish people. But is the wicked child really so wicked?

For one thing if that were true one might expect the order to be different. The wise ones would be first and the wicked one last. But instead the wicked one comes second and the one who does not know how to ask a question comes at the end. This suggests that perhaps the children are not ordered according to moral status at all but according to the nature of their questioning. For the Rabbis, questioning was an essential part of what it meant to be a Jew. To ask significant questions with a background of wisdom and knowledge and a sense of reverence for tradition is, for the Rabbis, the highest goal. But second only to that is the wicked child, who asks difficult questions, questions people don't want to ask but should, questions that maybe those with the greatest knowledge of tradition would never think of asking.

Perhaps the wicked child is wicked, but the Rabbis value what he brings to the table and, in a way, encourage us to embrace the positive aspects of what that child brings to the table. The Rabbis note in Pirkei Avot (5:17): “Any disagreement which is for the sake of Heaven shall eventually endure and any disagreement which is not for the sake of Heaven shall eventually not endure.” Sometimes the difference between the two is not clear. The same can be said for questioning. The Rabbis seem to be saying that the difference between the wise child and the wicked child is not as great as we might think. The difference is not in whether they ask difficult questions but whether they do so for the sake of building up or tearing down. And perhaps the Rabbis include the wicked child right after the wise one in order to remind the wise to ask the difficult questions they might not otherwise ask.

In an article in the online Slate magazine Miriam Krule notes in fact that she prefers the wicked child, arguing with respect to the child's question that: “it sounds less evil to me than sensible. The idea of searching for meaning in practices, and understanding their motivations, is a natural one. Challenging the reasons behind tradition, and the logic underlying the holiday's restrictions, can only lead to greater understanding and more honest practice. Whereas the smart son merely asks for, and receives, the law, the wicked son asks for the reasoning underlying those

laws.”

Reform and Conservative Judaism are based on the idea that questioning tradition is not undermining it but engaging with it. The right kind of questioning leads to creativity and dynamism, a willingness to wrestle with the tension between tradition and modernity that, like any argument for the sake of heaven, will endure and help Judaism to endure. In order to have a discussion for the sake of heaven we must be willing to question. And so, while we should always strive to be the wise child, perhaps we should also be willing to learn from the wicked child and be willing to question for the sake of heaven.

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