

Four Questions

In order to elicit the retelling of the Passover story, the youngest person at the Seder table asks four questions about what sets the Seder night apart from all other nights. If the youngest child cannot do it, then one of the older children tries. If none of them can do it, then the mother does it. If she can't do it, then one of the men does it.¹

According to the Mishnah, the four questions are asked as follows:

They then mix him the second cup [of wine]. And here the son asks his father (and if the son has not enough understanding his father instructs him), 'Why is this night different from other nights? For on other nights we eat seasoned food (i.e. – dipped vegetables) once, but this night twice; on other nights we eat leavened or unleavened bread, but this night all is unleavened;² on other nights we eat flesh roast, stewed, or cooked, but this night all is roast.' And according to the understanding of the son his father instructs him. He begins with the disgrace and ends with the glory; and he expounds from *A wandering Aramean was my father*...until he finishes the whole section.³

Today, the four questions vary slightly in content and order. They also begin with the generic question: "Why is this night different from all other nights?" or worded a little differently, "How different is this night from all other nights." However, the specific questions are as follows:

1. On all other nights we may eat either leavened or unleavened bread. Why on this night do we only eat unleavened bread?
2. On all other nights we eat all kinds of herbs. Why on this night do we only eat bitter herbs?
3. On all other nights we are not required to dip our vegetables even once. Why on this night must we twice dip our vegetables?
4. On all other nights we dine sitting upright or reclining. Why on this night do we all recline?

A brief comparison between the two sets of questions shows the slight variations alluded to above. For example, the first question in the Mishnah has become the third question of modern times with a slight variation in content. The second question in the Mishnah has become the first question of modern times. The question that some texts add as indicated in the footnotes has become standard in modern times as the second question.

The biggest difference between the Mishnaic instructions and the four questions of today is the fourth question. In the Mishnah, this question has reference to the Paschal lamb eaten during the meal. However, today this question has reference to the manner in which the celebrants dine. Why the disparity? The reason is directly

¹ Klein, Mordell ed. *Passover* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973) 68-72

² Some texts add "on other nights we eat all other manner of vegetables, but this night bitter herbs."

³ *Mishnah*. Pesachim 10:4

correlated to the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. Because the Paschal sacrifice was no longer a part of Passover, there was no reason to keep the last question. However, in order to keep the number of questions at four, a very significant number in Judaism and Passover,⁴ a new question was introduced. Undoubtedly there were several reasons why reclining was chosen as the topic for this question. One possibility is that reclining reminds celebrants of their ancestors' former slavery and subsequent freedom. This leads nicely into the general reply to the four questions.

As noted in the excerpt from the Mishnah above, the reply is to “begin with the disgrace and end with the glory.” As is typical in Judaism, there are differing points of view on how to fulfill this directive. Samuel, head of the Nehardea Academy, preferred the opening passage to be: “We were once slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt” while Rav, head of the Sura Academy, advocated the passage, “Our forefathers were idol worshippers.”⁵ The primary difference between these two responses is that the first focuses on a physical bondage while the second focuses on a spiritual bondage.⁶ Some Jews prefer to include both in their response so that the Passover story becomes a reminder of both physical and spiritual deliverance.

The core of the reply to the four questions is a midrashic commentary of Deuteronomy 26:5-8. Of course, each haggadah differs in the depth to which it comments on these verses. However, some haggadoth add to this core by explaining the purpose behind each practice questioned in the four questions. According to Rabbi Morris Silverman,⁷ the succinct answers are as follows:

1. We eat unleavened bread because, when our ancestors were told by Pharaoh to leave Egypt, they had no time to bake bread with leaven.⁸
2. At the Seder, we eat bitter herbs to remind us of the bitterness our ancestors experienced when they were oppressed by their Egyptian taskmasters.
3. We dip the green vegetable into salt water because our ancestors departed from Egypt in the springtime when plants turn green and come to life. The salt water reminds us of their sweat and tears.⁹ We dip the bitter herbs into the sweet charoseth because our ancestors endured the bitterness of slavery by sweetening it with the hope of freedom.
4. As a sign of freedom, we lean to the left when we partake of wine and symbolic food. In antiquity, slaves ate hurriedly, standing or squatting on the ground, while royalty, nobility and the

⁴ For example, four cups of wine, the analogy of the four sons, four pieces of matzah after the middle of the three matzot is broken, and the four fringes on the tallit and the tzitzit.

⁵ *Talmud*. Pesachim 116a

⁶ Silverman, Rabbi Morris, ed. *Passover Haggadah: New Translation with explanatory notes and original readings* (Hartford: Prayer Book Press, 1959) 10, 14

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Exodus 12:34, 39

⁹ It is noteworthy to point out that it is customary to twice dip the parsley into the salt water. The salt water not only represents the tears and sweat of the Israelites, but it is also a token or sign of their covenant with God. The sacrifices in the Temple were sprinkled with salt as a token of this covenant. The reason for dipping twice is to remind the celebrants of the two main promises made by God as part of His covenant with Israel – namely, physical deliverance and spiritual deliverance.

wealthy in Egypt, Persia, Rome and other empires, dined on couches. To indicate that the ancient Israelites were now free, they too reclined while eating.

In Mishnaic times, the four questions were recited after the meal so that everyone had already experienced the unique characteristics of Passover. This would have been helpful to someone experiencing the Passover for the first time. However, at some point in time, and nobody really knows when, so it probably happened gradually, rabbis decided that the Haggadah should be read before the meal to encourage the children to stay awake and be attentive.¹⁰ Therefore the questions have been moved to just before the meal but they have remained unchanged except for what has previously been noted.

¹⁰ Klein, Mordell ed. *Passover* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973) 68-72