

Four Sons

The Mishnah directs that “according to the understanding of the son his father instructs him.”¹ This injunction has led rabbis to create an exposition on four types of sons and how each should be instructed. The reason for there being four sons is that rabbis found four different versions in the Torah of the command for a father to tell his children the Passover story.² These versions correlate as follows to the questions of the four sons:

1. The wise child asks: “What is the meaning of the testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments which the Eternal, our God, hath given?” = Deuteronomy 6:20-24
2. The wicked or selfish child asks: “What mean you by this service?” = Exodus 12:26-27
3. The simple child asks: “What is this?” = Exodus 13:14-16
4. This son is incapable of asking a question. = Exodus 13:8

In each case, the response given in the Torah is indicative of the manner in which a father should instruct his children, based on their understanding. The responses are as follows:

1. We should instruct this child in all the laws and customs of Passover.
2. It is obvious that this child does not want to be included in the celebration or the community, so we answer harshly, “We celebrate Passover because of what the Eternal did for each of us. If you had been in Egypt, you would not have been thought worthy to be redeemed.”
3. We answer simply that “with a mighty hand the Eternal brought us forth from Egypt and from the house of bondage.”
4. Because the fourth child doesn’t have the capacity to ask a question, we must explain that we observe Passover in order to remember what the Eternal did for us in delivering us from Egypt.

The context of each passage is important to understanding why each response is the way it is. First is the passage used for the wise son. This is found in Deuteronomy, or the repetition of the law. It is appropriate that the son in this case is asking about all the laws pertaining to Passover. He most likely is one of the devout who read the laws in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Because of his diligence and desire to learn the law, he is rewarded with a repetition of the law in Deuteronomy, or in the case of Passover, a repetition of the law by his father.

The passage used for the wicked or selfish son appears in the context of Moses instructing the Israelites on what they must do to be passed over by the final plague. It concludes with the observation that “the people bowed the head and worshipped.” This serves to indicate that all of the Israelites humbly believed Moses and followed

¹ *Mishnah*. Pesachim 10:4

² Kaplan, Mordecai M. *The New Haggadah* (New York: Behrman House, 1942)

his instructions, thereby ensuring the safety and deliverance of their families. Yet this also serves as a warning to the wicked son because if he were present in Egypt, he would have been too proud, wicked, and selfish to follow the commandments of God through His prophet and he “would not have been thought worthy to be redeemed.”

The passage used for the simple son lies in the context of Moses instructing the Israelites on what to do once they reach the land of Canaan. Therefore, he is referring to a generation that did not experience the slavery or deliverance from Egypt. They would not feel a direct experiential connection with Passover. Even though this generation would not disrespect Passover the way the wicked son does, they would also not understand it very well. Thus they would ask very matter-of-factly, “What is this?” They would need to be reminded of what great things God had done for their parents.

Lastly is the passage used for the son who is incapable of asking a question. The fact that out of the three passages, this one contains no question, only a dictum to instruct one’s son, indicates that the son could not, or at least did not, ask a question. This is most likely due to his inability to see any difference in Passover night to all other nights. While he is not wicked, he is dull, undiscerning, and ignorant. The response for him is simple to match his understanding.

In addition to its prominent role in the Seder, the four sons has also been a highly popular subject for Passover illustrations. Every haggadah depicts the four sons in different ways. A comparison of such depictions provides an interesting commentary on changing attitudes throughout the years.

The wise son is often drawn with a long beard, poring over books. The wicked son is depicted in various poses; in some editions he is a soldier, in others a boxer, in others a clean shaven hatless businessman. Thus, the illustrated haggadoth provide material for an interesting study of the professions that were considered unsuitable for Jewish boys in different places and at different times.³

³ Klein, Mordell ed. *Passover* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973) 74