

Who Knows 13?

Questions for The Seder Table

Rabbi Scott N. Bolton, with thanks to Rabbi Lee Buckman



(See question 12 for why a Mark Rothko colorfield painting begins this article. Or – bonus question – what is the relationship between Passover and this Rothko painting?)

Wishes for a sweet, engaging Pesah seder! I hope that these questions spark meaningful thoughts and discussions at your seders.

QUESTIONS:

1. The seder has several organizing principles. One is that texts before the meal relate to past history ("we were slaves in Egypt"), and texts after the meal refer to future aspirations (rebuilding the Temple, asking God to "pour out Your wrath on our enemies," l'shana haba'ah). What are other ways to think about the organization of the seder? What other rituals or liturgies do we have that focus on the past then on the future?
2. The kiddush describes two nation-defining experiences: creation and exodus. In 1956, Rabbi JB Soloveitchik identified two defining experiences for modern Jews: the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. He says we must be defined not only by Egypt and Auschwitz, our shared fate, but also by Sinai and Israel, our shared destiny; for we are a people with a mission and message. What is our message or mission? Fill in the blanks and discuss: Egypt, _____, Auschwitz AND Sinai, _____, Israel.
3. The seder is modeled after the Greek symposium where one reclined, drank wine, dipped hors d'oeuvres, and discussed big ideas such as freedom. The seder is similar except we invite kids; Greeks didn't. We do things to arouse the children's curiosity (dipping twice, pouring a second cup of wine, reclining, splitting a matza and hiding it, fun songs at the end). If we wanted to have a

good discussion about freedom, wouldn't it make more sense to do it as the Greeks did, i.e. without kids? What if we do not have children around our tables? The rabbis said that someone must ask him or herself and give answers! One way of interpreting that requirement is to let go of pediatric understandings of religion, God and history. How can we achieve that in our lives?

4. The earliest version of something approximating a haggadah is found in the tenth chapter of the Mishna Pesachim. There, it says that we should differentiate the way we tell the story of Pesach based on the child's inclinations, age, intellect. Four times, the Torah says that "you shall tell your child" the story of the exodus. That's how we arrive at the midrash of the four children. Imagine a visual depiction or find illustrations online. How would you depict the four children or which artistic representation do you find most engaging?

5. The haggadah says that "in every generation, a different enemy rose up against us to destroy us." Do you think this will always be true? Is there any hope?

6. The haggadah developed and expanded over a period of 1,500 years. The 15th century invention of the printing press led to the standardization of the text for a few hundred years. Then, in the 19th-21st centuries, many communities created their own -secularists, chasidim, survivors of Auschwitz, kibbutznikim, social justice advocates, traditionalists. Keeping to script or revisions typically reflected something that was going on in the Jewish world and reminded us that the exodus wasn't just an event but also a symbol. Why did you choose the haggadah you are using for your seder? What does the exodus story symbolize for us today, in our time?

7. Dayenu was added to the haggadah about 1,000 years ago. Review its full version in your haggadah. Originally it was considered optional. Why do you think it took hold and became a standard part of the haggadah?

8. When we eat the Hillel sandwich, we say that it's a reminder of something (the pesach sacrifice) that was offered in the Temple. Often, reminders of Temple times are meant to evoke sadness (e.g. fasting on Tisha B'av). How do you feel about the Temple rituals? When we consider that our ancestors' spiritual lives were different from our own and worship in the Temple was a social, aesthetic, ritual event in which visceral experiences defined religious life, how might that influence our perspective about the experiences they sought? What do you think our ancestors thought about when they brought sacrifices and made journeys to the Temple in Jerusalem? How do their thoughts and feelings parallel our own spiritual and religious lives?

9. For most of Jewish history until the printing press, people didn't own books. They were handwritten, costly, and took a long time to produce. The question is: How did people do a seder without a haggada? After all, we recite the haggadah only once a year, and it's not led in synagogue by a chazan, but at home. We don't know the precise answer to the question. However, it may be that people had mnemonics or improvised or just mimicked what the family had always done. What's a tradition that's likely unique to your family seder?

10. As important as freedom is, the Torah asks us to take our experience of slavery and learn something from it. For example, the Torah says "love the stranger because you were a stranger in the land of Egypt." Slavery is the bitter; freedom the sweet. What are some bitter experiences in your life that you have learned important lessons from?

11. The “*haseva*” *mah nishtana* question (leaning) is a later addition to the kushiyot (4 questions) and asks about a ritual practice that relates to a theoretical, conceptual aspect of Pesah – freedom. Which are the other foods we should ask about? What other aspects of our ritual practice should we explore for meaning?

12. What’s a way to deepen our experience of the mitzvah of matzah? It is not that we just eat the symbolic foods of the seder. They are gateways, from the tastes to the way they are eaten. In our home we bless over our matzah and try to eat at least half a board (think more like a Rothko rectangle or semi-circle, human and with rough edges, we break off a big piece and eat it). I close my eyes and chew, and chew, and chew. The taste reminds me of Pesah’s past. The dryness brings me to a desert experience. The chewing draws me back further into history...this is what our ancestors ate on their way out of Egypt? Their matzah was probably softer than our crunchy, cracker-like matzah, by the way! But flour, water and less than 18 minutes – the halakhic amount of time flour and water can sit together and not rise.

What does matzah, as a symbol mean to you? It says in the haggadah that “in every generation a person is required to see him or herself going out of Egypt.” Is matzah the best vehicle for that? What is the food that really reminds you of the Egypt experience? Going out of Egypt? What ritual actions associated with Passover are your favorite? Most mysterious?

13. The laws of Pesah are many, and the details of the seder were important to our Sages. What mitzvah, which mitzvot, could we take on in a more serious, detailed way this coming year after

“getting out of Egypt” and reclaiming our part in the Jewish People’s story?