

D'var Torah on the Haggadah: The "Rasha"

By Joshua Jackson, 6th Grade

The Torah writes about future discussions concerning Judaism between parents and children in four different locations; three times in Shmot (Exodus) and once in Devarim (Deuteronomy). The Mishna (in the original Haggadah text) explains that the Torah is talking about four different types of children, what each child would say to the parent, and what the parent should respond.

The Haggadah describes the child first mentioned in the Torah as a "rasha" (wicked, rebellious, or insincere) because he says:

"מָה הַעֲבֵדָה הַזֹּאת לְכֶם?"

"What is the meaning of this service to you?" He excludes himself by saying "to you", which implies, not to him.

However, the child in the verse in Devarim, identified by the Haggadah as the wise child also says

"מָה הַעֲדָת וְהַחֲקִים וְהַמְשֻׁפְטִים, אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהִי אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶתְכֶם"

"What is the meaning of the testimonies, statutes, and laws which the Lord our God has commanded you?" He also seems to exclude himself by saying "you".

One answer is that the child in Devarim says,

"אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהִי אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶתְכֶם"

the Lord our God has commanded you. He clearly does not mean to exclude himself when he says, "our God." He just means that his parent stood physically at Sinai while he did not.

A second solution can be found by closely analyzing the words that introduce what each child says.

What the "wise child" says is introduced by these words:

"וְיֹתֶה כִּי יִשְׁאַלְבָ בָנֶךָ מִחרָ לְאָמָר..."

"When your child will ask you in the future..."

What the "simple child" says is introduced by...

"כִּי יִשְׁאַלְבָ בָנֶךָ מִחרָ לְאָמָר..."

"When your child will ask you in the future..."

Both children are asking.

Contrast that with words used to introduce the "wicked child":

"וְיֹתֶה כִּי יֹאמְרוּ אֶלְכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם..."

“When your children will say to you...”

This child is not asking in an open minded way. He is just stating his position. His question is rhetorical.

It has also been pointed out that the other children come as individuals (“your child”) while the one identified as “wicked” comes in a group with others (“your children”) Perhaps the “wicked child” knows deep down that he is wrong and feels insecure, so he needs other people with him when he challenges his parents.

I see two important lessons from this analysis. How one speaks can affect the meaning of one’s words, and careful reading of the Torah text can help uncover where the Talmudic rabbis found their ideas.