

The Fifth Question

Rabbi Ari Ellis

The Ma Nishtana is among the many highlights of the Pesach Seder for many of us. Whether it's young children singing it for their first time or parents proudly listening to their own child ask the questions, it's certainly one of the most exciting parts of any Seder.

In his commentary to the Haggadah, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks tells a story about Isadore Rabi, winner of a Nobel Prize in physics. When asked why he became a scientist, he replied "My mother made me a scientist without ever knowing it. Every other child would come back from school and be asked, 'What did you learn today?' But my mother used to ask: 'Izzy, did you ask a good question today?' That made the difference. Asking good questions made me a scientist."



Rabbi Sacks explains that Judaism is not a religion of blind faith. For a people that has 613 commandments, Rabbi Sacks points out, that until modern times, there was no Hebrew word for obey. Rather, the Torah uses the word "Shemah" which means: "[1] to listen, [2] to hear, [3] to understand, [4] to internalize, and [5] to respond." As Jews, our ultimate responsibility is to seek to understand HaShem's will to the best of our abilities.

Freedom encompasses more than just physical freedom. Freedom of thought and freedom of expression are equally if not more significant. Only those who seek to control others or impose their beliefs on them, fear questions and engage in censorship. But those who are confident in their faith embrace questions. They welcome the opportunity for debate and discussion in order to learn and grow and embrace other viewpoints.

Perhaps that is why the Rabbis adopt the asking of questions as we celebrate our freedom. And it's not just any questions. The Ma Nishtana and its four questions appear in the Mishnah of Masechet Pesachim. Three of those questions are familiar and appear in our Haggadah. But one of them is different. "On all other nights, we eat meat roasted, stewed or boiled, but on this night, we eat only roasted meat."

That question was substituted in the Haggadah with "On all other nights we eat either sitting or reclining, but on this night, we all recline." As the Korban Pesach was no longer offered after the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash, that question was not as poignant as it once was. The Rabbis insisted that our questions and our discussions around the Seder table be meaningful and relevant.

And in that spirit, I invite you to add your own "fifth question" to your Seder this year. Don't just read through the Haggadah, use it as a jumping off point for a meaningful and relevant discussion. Ask provocative questions about slavery, about freedom, and about the exodus from Egypt. And resolve to do your part to help bring the world from sorrow to joy and from darkness to light so that every human being can live a free and dignified existence.

Chag Sameach!