

# The Wise Child הַחֶכֶם

חֶכֶם מַה הוּא אוֹמֵר:

"מַה הָעֵדוּת  
וְהַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים,  
אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶתְכֶם?"

וְאִךְ אַתָּה אֹמֵר-לוֹ כְּהִלְכוֹת הַפֶּסַח:

"אֵין מִפְטִירִין אַחַר הַפֶּסַח אֶפִיקוֹמָן."

Narrator:

What does the wise child say?

Wise or Thoughtful Child:

"What are the testimonies,  
the statutes, and the laws  
which Adonai our God has  
commanded you?" (Deuteronomy 6:20)

Narrator:

So, you teach the child all the  
laws of Pesach, till the last one:

First Parent:

"We do not conclude the eating  
at the Pesach Seder with the  
afikoman."

(Last Mishna in Pesachim, Chapter 10)

**NOTE about the Parents' Answer:**

Actually today we do conclude the Seder with the afikoman, the matza we hid. But then, in the days of the Mishna, "afikoman" meant in Greek the custom of making after-dinner celebrations. The Rabbis prohibited that kind of "afikoman."

This is, as you see, a sophisticated answer, fitting a wise child.



Otto Geismar, 1923

The midrash of the four children provides the script for a dialogue. Let each character in the dialogue be played by a different Seder participant.

The cast is as follows:  
Narrator / Each of the four children / Four parents who answer.

Look at the parent or child to whom you are speaking. Try to add facial expressions, hand gestures and tone of voice to portray your character.

The truly wise question the wisdom of others – because they question their own wisdom as well; the foolish – because it is different from their own.

Rabbi **Leopold Stein**, *Journey into the Self*, Germany, 19<sup>th</sup> C.

## THE WISE CHILD'S REAL QUESTION

"What are the statutes and decrees and laws which Adonai our God commanded you?" (Deuteronomy 6:20)

The wise son's question is a *real question*. On one level, it asks for information, it questions the meanings of a detailed list of laws. What makes [the wise child's question] a *real question*, however, is not its encyclopaedist categories of laws, but precisely the awkward word, *etchem* – "commanded you." This is awkward because it seems akin to the wicked son's terminology – "What is this ritual to you?" The wise son, too, asks a disturbing question, in which he opens up a distance between his father and himself.

The father and his generation were there; he was not. This distinction between generations is always true.

The wise son, however, articulates his question with exquisite care: ... "which *our* God commanded you." As Rashi says, "He does not exclude himself by the word, "you," because he says, "*our* God." "*Our God*" is the expression of relationship, of responsibility for the Other. He is both inside and outside, committed to God and His commandments, but not directly present at the original site of commandment.

**Aviva Zornberg**, *The Particulars of Rapture*



The Four Daughters by Michel Kichka, 2006

# The Wicked Child הרשע



רשע מה הוא אומר:

Narrator:

What does the wicked child say?

"מה העבדה הזאת לכם?"

Wicked or Alienated Child:

"Whatever does this service mean to you?" (Exodus 12:26)



'לכם' - ולא לו.

Narrator:

This child emphasizes **"you"** and not him or herself! Since the child excludes him or herself from the community and rejects a major principle of faith, you should set his or her teeth on edge and say:

ולפי שהוציא את עצמו מן הכלל - כפר בעקר.

ואף אתה הקהה את שניו ואמר לו:

Second Parent:

"It is because of this, that Adonai did **for me** when I went free from Egypt."

(Exodus 13:8)

"בעבור זה עשה יי לי בצאתי ממצרים."



'לי' - ולא לו.

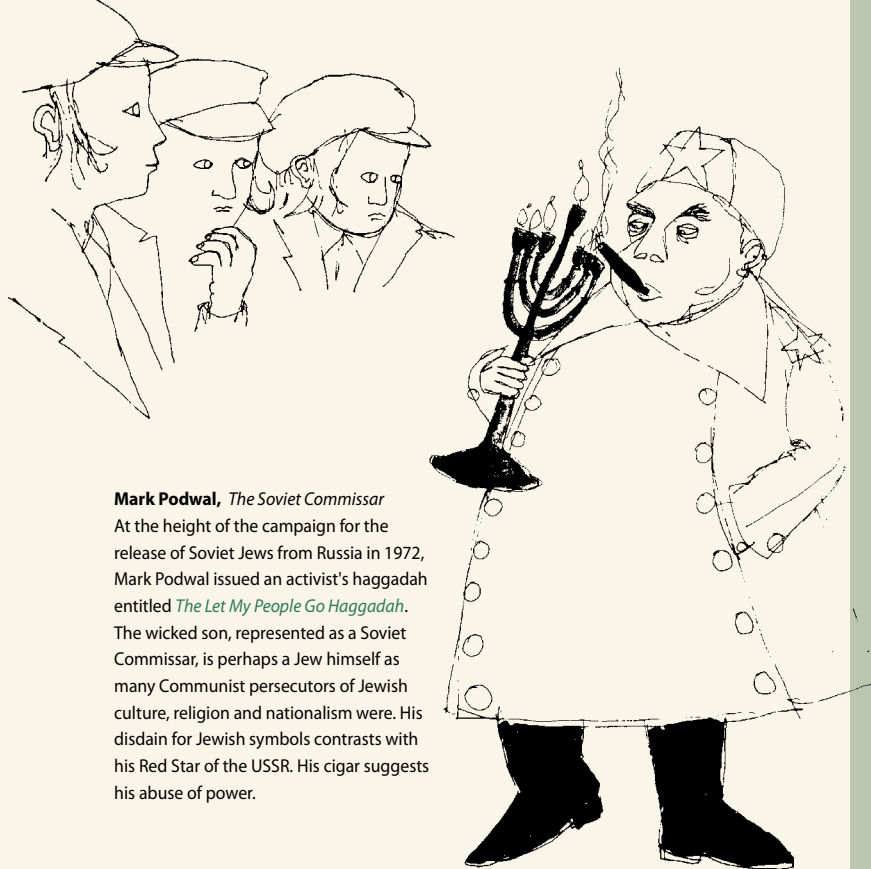
Narrator:

**"Me"** and not that one over there! Had that one been there, s/he would not have been redeemed.

אלו היה שם, לא היה נגאל.



The Four Marx Brothers  
by Richard Codor, 1981



**Mark Podwal**, *The Soviet Commissar*  
 At the height of the campaign for the release of Soviet Jews from Russia in 1972, Mark Podwal issued an activist's haggadah entitled *The Let My People Go Haggadah*. The wicked son, represented as a Soviet Commissar, is perhaps a Jew himself as many Communist persecutors of Jewish culture, religion and nationalism were. His disdain for Jewish symbols contrasts with his Red Star of the USSR. His cigar suggests his abuse of power.

## THE ARROGANT CHILD

This child is not asking a question like the others but **making a statement** as it says in the Torah: "When your children come to tell you: What is this service to **you**?" (Exodus 12:26) The tone is arrogant and the intent is to ridicule the ceremony. Instead of asking "why," the child asks sarcastically: What is this service for? This tiresome, bothersome Haggadah ruins the festive atmosphere and postpones the meal!

Rabbi **Shimon Chavillo**, Italy, 17<sup>th</sup> C

## ASKING THE UNASKABLE QUESTION

"Thinking again?" the Duchess asked, with another dig of her sharp little chin. "I have a right to think," said Alice sharply, for she was beginning to feel a little worried. "Just about as much right," said the Duchess, "as pigs have to fly."

**Lewis Carroll**, *Alice in Wonderland*

In many social worlds asking certain questions would be considered traitorous, bait for the enemy. Such questions no one is permitted to ask. In my first year at Yeshiva, a fellow student asked such a question. He wanted to know whether the whole received tradition, written and oral, had actually been given at Sinai. The rabbi's answer was "**Well, where do you think you are, young man?** The Reform rabbinical seminary?" Like the "wicked son" at the Passover Seder, the questioner was responded to in anger and disdain.

Certain questions demonstrate that the questioner is marginal to the community. He would have never made it out of Egypt. They mark one as an outsider precisely because insiders don't ask this sort of question. And such threatening questions are not unique to traditional environments. They can be asked in the boardroom, in the university classroom, and in the halls of state. One infraction might be ignored, but repeated commitment to asking an inappropriate why is an invitation to social marginalization and potentially to eviction from the community.

Rabbi **Steve Greenberg**, *Wrestling with God and Men*

## WHO ARE YOU CALLING "WICKED"?

The very term "*rasha*"— is difficult to translate: "wicked" and "evil" are very harsh, uncompromising terms for a child. "Rebellious," "mischievous," "recalcitrant," "chutzpadik," "impolite," "*vilde khaya*," "naughty," "troublesome," "difficult," "problematic" or "alienated" are also possible.

What would you suggest? What different kinds of children are portrayed by the various translations? Do you think the harsh parent described in the Haggadah would behave differently had the label been different?

# The Simple Child

# הַתָּם

תָּם מַה הוּא אוֹמֵר:

"מַה זֹאת?"

וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו:

"בְּחֹזֶק יָד הוּצֵיאָנוּ יי מִמִּצְרַיִם, מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים."

Narrator:

**What does the simple child ask?**

Simple or Naïve Child:

**"What is this?"** (Exodus 13:14)

Narrator:

**And you say to that child:**

Third Parent:

[Let me tell you an awesome tale.]

**"With a mighty hand Adonai  
brought us out of Egypt,  
out of the house of bondage."**

(Exodus 13:14)





## LOOSE CONNECTIONS

The simple child who is clueless about Judaism may have a "loose connection." The Jerusalem theater-educator Joyce Klein once directed a musical play about Israeli teenagers who have an undefined sense of Jewish identity, an amorphous question with no firm answer. She was inspired by a house call by her Israeli electrician who was summoned to fix her flickering light fixture. While standing on her dining room table examining the short circuit and the frayed wires, he pronounced his diagnosis: "You have a problem: Loose connections!" Then he began to philosophize: "Actually all of us Jews share that problem of loose connections, poor communication among people and a disrupted flow of energy between our past and our future." Joyce turned that insight into a performance in which a teenager is asked: "What connects you to the Jewish people?" "Perhaps holidays? Holocaust? Israel? Family? Ethics?" "I don't know," shrugged the teenager.

*Can you answer that simple yet profound question? To what do you connect?*



## BACK TO ALEPH BET

When a child learns the shapes of the Hebrew letters for the first time, there is a *fresh revelation* in Heaven concerning these letters. And this fresh revelation, occurring in Heaven through the child's learning of the letters, is drawn downwards, so the child draws down upon himself a fresh revelation as to the meaning of the shapes of the letters.

*This is not the case with adults, who are too familiar with the shapes of the letters. When we look at them we are not learning anything new, so we do not have God teaching us anything directly.*

When the Talmud describes "children" who explain the mystical meanings in the shapes of the letters, it is actually referring to holy people who can still *approach the text as children*. They bring out new revelations even in the shape of the letters, and not just in the meaning of the text. They can still learn like children, and so are able to look at the *alef* and *beth* and *gimmel* and ask, "Why is the leg of the *gimmel* stretched out toward the *dalet*?"

Rabbi **Kalonymus Kalman** of Pieasezna, the Hasidic Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto

## BEWARE OF SOPHISTICATION

One must keep one's distance from people who are wise in their own eyes and think they know great wisdoms of how to serve God. For all these are great foolishness and are not needed in order to worship the Creator. For the main thing is purely naivete, simplicity, and faith in God...even though simple ones must be sure not to act like fools. One can achieve great happiness through naivete, faith and complete simplicity.

Rebbe **Nahman of Bratzlav**, Ukraine, 19<sup>th</sup> C.

## LOVE QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS LIKE LOCKED DOORS

Be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the *questions themselves* like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language. Do not now look for the answers. They cannot now be given to you because you could not live them. It is a question of experiencing everything. At present you need to *live* the questions now. Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself experiencing the answer, some distant day.

**Maria Rainer Rilke**, *Letters to a Young Poet*, Austria, 1922

# The Child Who Does Not Know How to Ask

## נְשֵׂאֵינוּ יוֹדֵעַ לְשַׁאֵל

וְנִשְׂאֵינוּ יוֹדֵעַ לְשַׁאֵל

**אַתָּה פִּתַּח לוֹ,**

שְׁנַאֲמַר: "וְהַגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ  
בְּיוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר,

בְּעֵבוֹר זֶה עָשָׂה יי לִי

בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם."

Narrator:

As for the child who does not know how to ask,

**you should prompt the child.**

The Torah says: "You shall tell your child on that day."

[Don't wait for the child to take the initiative. Start the story, your story, and hopefully this silent child will listen, absorb and identify with you].

Fourth Parent:

"It is because of this, that Adonai did

for me when I went free from Egypt."

(Exodus 13:8)



## WHERE DID YOU GO? OUT. WHAT DID YOU DO? NOTHING

The title of Robert Paul Smith's classic book *Where Did You Go? Out. What Did You Do? Nothing* captures the withdrawal and boredom that adult questions so frequently evoke in children. Both on the street and in the classroom, adults assume that it is their right to engage children in questions: *How are your parents? What grade are you in now? What caused the destruction of the Second Temple? Who was the first Jew?* and the ubiquitous, *What did you do on your summer vacation?* Parents who speak this way regularly find that their children respond as if to an interrogation and consequently tell as little as possible. Children are placed on the defensive. Tension is raised which stands in the way of thinking and communication.

The child who does not want to communicate is perhaps the Fourth Child. This child may not ask because the child wants to avoid painful conversations with the parent. If that child neither asks nor answers but sits silently as the parents lecture, then he or she avoids greater embarrassment and tiresome interrogation. Perhaps that child has been silenced by those in authority, probing and testing for faults. Questions are often threats to authority or ways to assert authority. They play on a field of power relations between parent and child, ruler and subject. That is why they often lead not to dialogue or exploration of knowledge but to rhetorical putdowns and defensive shutting down of information exchanges. The fourth child sidesteps these battles.

Based on **Joseph Lukinsky** and **Lifsa Schachter**

## A THUNDEROUS SILENCE

Open up the children who have not learned to ask. Lead them on the path to becoming a questioning personality, one who inquires about the way of the world. Open them up so they can formulate their own questions. **For without questions your ready-made answers remain inert and there is no common ground between you.** The silence of the child can be thunderous. The silence of the one who does not know how to ask may be the result of not having found an appropriate address to express queries. Deeply meaningful silences can issue forth secrets that resound throughout the whole world. Model for the child; show them adults who know how to ask of themselves questions. As the Rabbis said: "If the child and the spouse are unable to ask, let the parents ask themselves" (T.B. Pesachim 115a). Then there is a good chance that the child will learn to ask as well.

**Yariv Ben Aharon**, kibbutz author and educator



The Four Books by David Wander, 1988

## IN PRAISE OF THE UNQUESTIONING PERSONALITY

No! I don't agree with the advice of the Haggadah here. The Haggadah says open the child up to critical thinking. In my judgment the parent should be silent. Just kiss this child on the forehead for faithfully maintaining loyalty to those sanctified traditions. The love of knowledge, the philosophical quest is important, but the supreme wisdom is to accept the treasures of the past without second guessing, without evaluating their historical origins and their pragmatic utility. It is essential to cherish and preserve that kind of respectful wisdom and not to tarnish it with unnecessary talk.

**Zeev Jabotinsky**, founder of the Revisionist Zionist Movement (later the Likud)

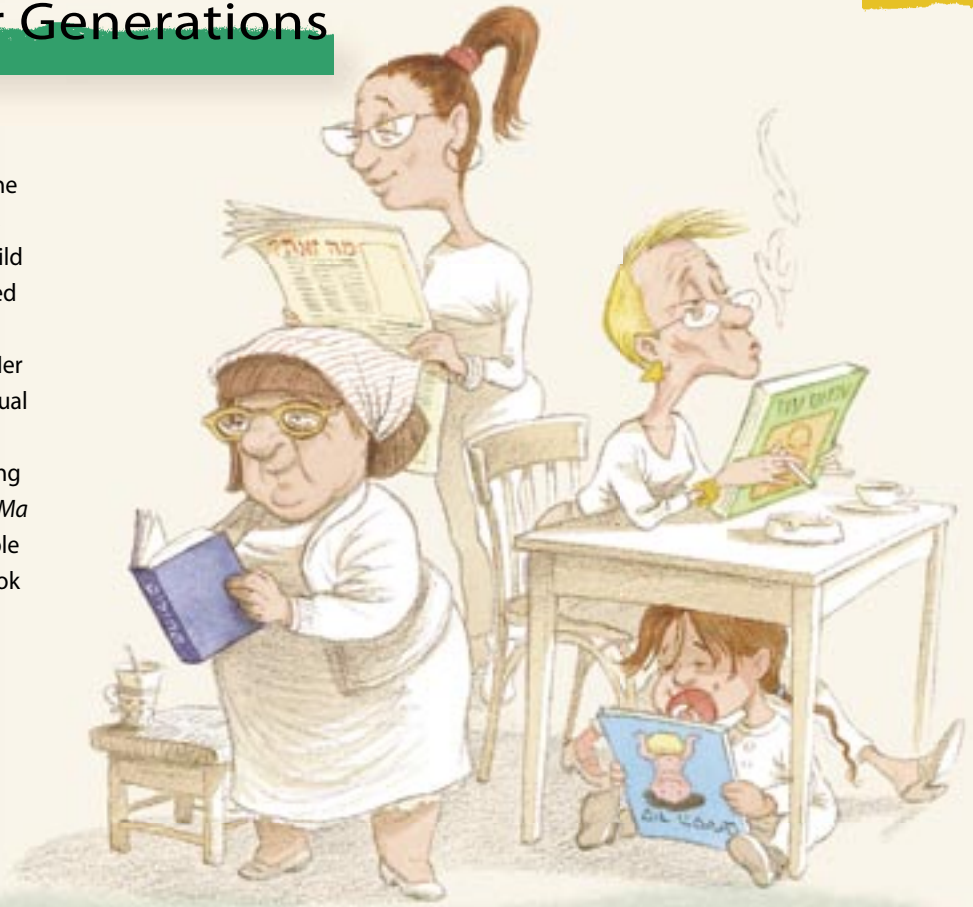


# Four Generations

## FOUR GENERATIONS IN ISRAEL

While the Haggadah urges us to create dialogue and continuity from parent to child, the ideological changes in Jewish life over the last 100 years in Israel have often involved revolting against one's parents' ideals in belief, in dress and even in body image. Each child is identified not by what they ask but what they read. The so-called wise child, the stereotype of the pre-Zionist ultra Orthodox, is a woman not concerned with a slim figure or stylish eyeglasses. Her daily reading is Psalms. The rebellious child is the Zionist intellectual reading the modern novelist Amos Oz. The simple child is of the third generation, which lacks knowledge and ideology. Her reading matter is a newspaper that says in the words of the Haggadah – "Ma Zot - What is this?" Last and still least is the little girl under the table who does not know how to read. She holds her potty training book upside down. Its name – *Pot of Pots* – is a pun on the Biblical love songs read on Pesach – *Song of Songs*.

Illustration by **Michel Kichka**



## FOUR GENERATIONS IN NORTH AMERICA

One might identify four generations – since the great emigration of Eastern European Jews to the New World began in the 1880s. The first generation of immigrants is the **WISE** child who knows and feels comfortable with Jewish tradition. The second generation is the **REBEL** who in the name of progress and Westernization rejects their parents' Judaism after having imbibed it at home. The third generation is assimilated. There is little knowledge and little resentment, but there is still **SIMPLE** curiosity about the customs of their grandparents. Finally, a fourth generation, without

knowledge or even mild acquaintance, is born. They **DO NOT KNOW HOW TO ASK**. They might be called "orphans in history" lacking any of the resources of Jewish wisdom against which to struggle and from which to draw personal meaning.

As a child, growing up on Manhattan's East Side, I lived among Jewish WASPs. My father had changed his name from "Cohen" to "Cowan" when he was 21. So I was brought up to think of myself as a "Cowan" – the Welsh word for stonecutter, not a "Cohen" – a member of the Jewish priesthood. My family celebrated Christmas and always gathered for

an Easter dinner of ham and sweet potatoes. Though they never converted to Christianity my parents sent me to an Episcopal prep school with a mandatory chapel service. In those years, I barely knew what a Passover Seder was. I didn't know anyone who practiced "archaic" customs such as keeping kosher or lighting candles Friday night. When I fell in love and married Rachel, a New England Protestant whose ancestors came here in the 17th century, it didn't matter in the least that we were formally an interfaith marriage. I had become an orphan without a history.

**Paul Cowan**, *An Orphan in History*, courtesy of his wife, Rabbi Rachel Cowan, Institute for Jewish Spirituality.

# Four Biblical Daughters

Rabbi **Einat Ramon**, Schechter Rabbinical Seminary, Israel

The Torah speaks of Four Daughters: one possessing wisdom of the heart, one rebellious, one naïve and one who cannot ask questions.

## **MIRIAM, the daughter possessing wisdom of the heart, what does she say?**

According to the Midrash, young Miriam confronted her father Amram who had vowed to refrain from procreation because of Pharaoh's decree to destroy all male newborns (Talmud Bavli, Sotah 12).

"Father, your decree is harsher than Pharaoh's. He will destroy all the males, but you will destroy all the females and males. The decree of the wicked Pharaoh may or may not be fulfilled, but your decree will for sure be realized." Miriam's father heeded his daughter. SO we will follow in her steps with drums and dancing, spreading her prophecy among the nations.

## **TAMAR, the rebellious daughter, what does she say?**

Tamar was accused of adultery. She had been married to two of Judah's sons who died without producing offspring, so Judah was obligated to give her his third son in marriage so she could give life to her heirless husbands. But Judah refused, so Tamar dressed as a prostitute, Judah solicited her and without realizing it made his daughter-in-law pregnant, thus guaranteeing the tribe's survival. However Judah sought to have Tamar burned as a prostitute.

"Father-in-law," said Tamar, "recognize" the tyranny of man's rule over women and the hypocrisy of double standards. She rebelled against authority and Judah admitted: "*She is more righteous than I.*" SO we can enjoy no freedom until we have challenged unjust ways (Genesis 38:26).

## **RUTH, the simple and pure daughter, what does she say?**

"Naomi, my mother-in-law: *Wherever you go, I shall go, and wherever you rest your head, there I will rest mine. Your people are mine, and your God my God*" (Ruth 1:16).

SO we must demonstrate simple and ingenuous loyalty.

## **THE BEAUTIFUL CAPTIVE, the daughter who cannot ask, who will speak for her?**

The Torah permits a soldier conquering an enemy to take a woman captive as a wife, but only after she has been allowed to mourn the loss of her mother and father. Only her silent weeping is heard, as it says, "*and she wept for her father and mother*" (Deuteronomy 21:13).

SO we will be her mouthpiece and she will be our judge. So we will return her to her mother's house and we will "*proclaim liberty in the land for all its [enslaved] inhabitants*" (Leviticus 25:10). The silent weeping that erupts from this dark reality is a call to action for the cause of freedom and liberty of every man and woman born in the image of God.

## STARTER CONVERSATIONS: THE PARENTS' FOUR QUESTIONS

The Haggadah suggests various types of children that ask questions of their parents. Tonight let us reverse the process and ask our children about **how they feel and think**.

To get started, imagine you have just overheard a snippet of a parent-child exchange.

Ask a pair of volunteers to read responsively one exchange. Now open the forum to anyone who wishes to step in and speak to or in the name of the child or the parent.

Children begin by loving their parents, after a time they judge them, rarely, if ever, do they forgive them.

Oscar Wilde, 1890

### DEAR CURIOUS CHILD

**Parent:** You are always asking such great questions. You are so curious and eager to learn about Judaism and about your family history. But I have a question or two for you. First, what or **who turned you on to learning?** Second, is it a secret burden to be the family's "good kid"?

**Wise child:** First, Grandma was my inspiration to learn something new every moment. She was so patient – listening to me and looking things up. Together we wondered about the mysteries of the world. Second, I guess I can reveal to you that it is not always easy to be the studious "goody goody." **Sometimes I just want to be ordinary.** I try to sidestep unwanted praise – being spoken about in proud superlatives is embarrassing. I do not want to be a *nakhas*-producing machine. But **I do appreciate your quiet pride in my achievements.**

### DEAR ANGRY CHILD

**Parent:** Okay, maybe I have gone overboard with my "tough love." Perhaps I have followed the Haggadah's parents in excluding their "wicked" child. But I know how **hurt** parents feel because you too have spoken to me at times with such *hutzpah*, putting down "your whole Seder thing." But I do not know how you feel beneath the skeptical façade. Talk to me – I promise not to be judgmental. After all, I too was a rebel against my parents and their Judaism.

**Angry child:** Your Judaism is fine for you, but not for me! You still do not hear me: I do not want to be here, at this table. **This you call the "Holiday of Freedom"?** Huh? Freedom for whom? Not for me! I am here because you make me, and to tell you the truth many of the adults at this table right now feel the same way! **This is your Seder, not mine!**

### DEAR SWEET CHILD

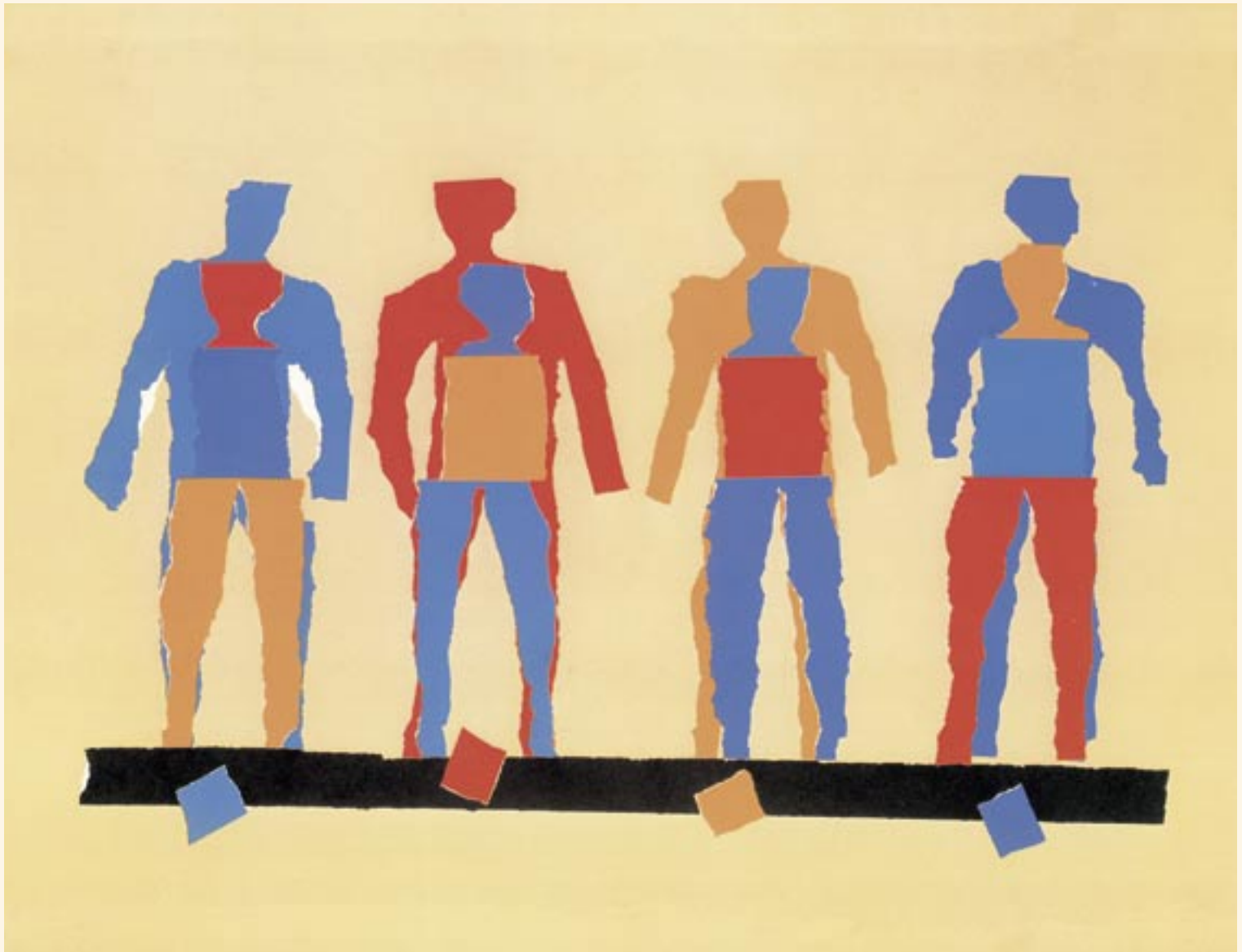
**Parent:** I must tell you what a joy (and a relief) it is to have a child as easy as you. I am always happy to listen to your questions. Still sometimes I worry: will you ever become more critical and independent minded like your older siblings?

**Simple child:** I love you too, but it is not always so simple to be your "simple" child. In many Jewish families kids like me are considered a disappointment. But not all of us can be "the best and the brightest." I cannot read the Hebrew and probably never will. So please do us both a favor and stop asking me to read out loud at every Seder. I see what my siblings have achieved, but I have my own way of doing things. **Please do not compare us, neither positively nor negatively.**

### DEAR QUIET CHILD

**Parent:** Talking comes so easily to me that I don't always understand what is hidden in your head and in your heart. How do I get through to you?

**The child who does not know how to ask:** If I were suddenly to open my mouth I would tell you: Remember, still waters run deep. At this table verbal dueling dominates too often. I would ask you to learn my language in which I am quite articulate. I am comfortable in the physical language of art and dance... Listen to me speaking the language of movement, of music, or color. **Can you learn the eloquence of silence?** You may discover that I too am a "wise" child whose deepest insights can never be reduced to words.



Dan Reisinger, 1982

**"We each have all the four children within us"**

Rabbi **Israel Salanter**, founder of the Musar Movement, Lithuania, 19th C.

# וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ

YOU SHALL TELL YOUR CHILD

"וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר:  
'בְּעֶבְרַת זֶה עָשָׂה יי לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם'."

"וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ" – יָכוֹל מְרֵאשׁ חֲדָשׁ?

תִּלְמוּד לֹוֹמֵר "בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא".

אִי "בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא", יָכוֹל מִבְּעוֹד יוֹם?

תִּלְמוּד לֹוֹמֵר "בְּעֶבְרַת זֶה" –

"בְּעֶבְרַת זֶה" לֹא אִמְרַתִּי, אֶלֶּא בְּשַׁעַה

שֵׁישׁ מִצָּה וּמְרֹוֹר מִנְּחִים לְפָנֶיךָ.

"You shall tell your child *on that day*: 'It is because of this, that Adonai did for me, when I went free from Egypt.'" (Exodus 13:8)

Could this verse mean that you should begin to tell the story at the beginning of the month of Nisan?

No, for the verse explicitly states "on that day" (of the Exodus).

Could that mean that we start when it is still daytime?

No, for the verse explicitly states: "because of this."

"This" must refer to a time when matza and maror are laid before you [only on Seder night].

When is the best time for telling the Exodus story? The answer is implicit in the verse used to answer the fourth child. The best time is Passover night itself, for the parent can use edible and visual aids to tell the story.

A great storyteller uses an animated style and appeals to all of the child's senses. This is how the Haggadah wants the Exodus story to be told.







## COMMUNICATION ACROSS THE GENERATION GAP

*Tomorrow, when your child asks you.* (Exodus 13:14)

Tomorrow's generation is always so unpredictably different than today's. The Torah spoke to immigrants who passed in a mere three generations from slavery in Egypt, to wandering in the desert, and then became farmers and shepherds in the Promised Land. God commanded parents to tell their children stories of what it was like back in the old country, "back when I was a child." But it would also be good for parents to ask their children what is unique about the "tomorrow" generation.

*What are the generational gaps between those at the table?  
How has childrearing changed? Women's roles? Political and  
economic experience? Technology? Jewish life? What can we  
learn from and about one another from these gaps?*

## A LEGACY OF LUGGAGE

Judaism imposes a vital task on the parents: to tell the children their people's story. What the child does with this past, no parent can decree. **Parents provide their children with luggage.** Whether the child will open up the suitcases and use their contents is beyond the reach of parents. They have no right to enter the child's future. Parents must aim at instilling memories that haunt the child an entire lifetime; their bequest is a weight of generations, an awareness that one's biography began with Abraham and Sarah.

Rabbi **David Hartman**, Jerusalem philosopher

Grandfather and grandson prepare for their Exodus from their home in Tbilisi, Georgia, Former Soviet Union, to Israel. Over 2,000,000 Jews from the Former Soviet Union have made this journey since 1990.

Photographer: **Aliza Orbach**, 1991

## YEHUDA AMICHAÏ

My father was a god and did not know it. He gave me  
The Ten Commandments neither in thunder nor in fury; neither in fire nor in cloud  
But rather in gentleness and love. And he added caresses and kind words  
And he added "I beg you," and "please."  
And he sang "keep" and "remember" the Shabbat  
In a single melody and he pleaded and  
cried quietly between one utterance and the next,  
"Do not take the name of God in vain," do not take it, not in vain,  
I beg you, "do not bear false witness against your neighbor."  
And he hugged me tightly and whispered in my ear  
"Do not steal. Do not commit adultery. Do not murder."  
And he put the palms of his open hands  
On my head with the Yom Kippur blessing.  
"Honor, love, in order that your days might be long  
On the earth." And my father's voice was white like the hair on his head.  
Later on he turned his face to me one last time  
Like on the day when he died in my arms and said,  
**I want to add Two to the Ten Commandments:**  
The eleventh commandment – "Thou shall not change."  
And the twelfth commandment – "Thou must surely change."  
So said my father and then he turned from me and walked off  
Disappearing into his strange distances.



# מתחלה עובדי עבודה זרה

FROM SERVING IDOLS TO SPIRITUAL LIBERATION

מתחלה עובדי עבודה זרה היו אבותינו,

ועכשיו קרבנו המקום לעבדתו, שנאמר:

”ויאמר יהושע אל כל העם:

כה אמר יי אלהי ישראל –

בעבר הנחר יִשְׁבוּ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם מֵעוֹלָם

– תִּרַח אָבִי אַבְרָהָם וְאָבִי נַחֲוֹר –

וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים.

וְאַקַח אֶת אֲבִיכֶם, אֶת אַבְרָהָם,

מֵעֵבֶר הַנְּהָר

וְאוֹלַךְ אוֹתוֹ בְּכָל אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן;

וְאַרְבָּה אֶת זְרַעוֹ וְאֶתָּן לוֹ אֶת יִצְחָק.

וְאֶתָּן לְיִצְחָק אֶת יַעֲקֹב וְאֶת עֵשָׂו.

וְאֶתָּן לְעֵשָׂו אֶת הַר שְׁעִיר לְרִשְׁתּוֹ,

וַיַּעֲקֹב וּבְנָיו יָרְדוּ מִצְרָיִם.”



In the beginning our ancestors were **idol worshippers**.

But now God has brought us near to serve Adonai.

The leader:

**Joshua said** to the people: “Thus said Adonai, the God of Israel: Long ago, your ancestors, including Terah, father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates and worshipped other gods. But I took your father **Abraham** from beyond the Euphrates and led him through the whole land of Canaan and multiplied his offspring. I gave him Isaac, and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau... Then Jacob and his children went down to Egypt.”

“Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and brought plagues on Egypt after which I freed you – I freed your ancestors – from Egypt. Now, therefore, serve Adonai with undivided loyalty... Or, if you are loath to serve Adonai, choose this day other gods to serve. But I and my family will serve Adonai.”

All:

In reply, the people declared, “Far be it from us to forsake Adonai and serve other gods!

For it was Adonai our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage, and who performed these miracles before our very eyes...”

Now we too will serve Adonai, for Adonai is our God” (Joshua 24: 1-18).

The Haggadah offers two versions of the Exodus story. The Talmudic Rabbi, Shmuel, emphasized political enslavement (“We were slaves in Egypt”). Now we turn to his colleague, Rav, who tells a story of spiritual servitude.

Rav’s version is drawn from Joshua’s farewell speech to the nation of Israel. Joshua feared that the new generation in Israel might assimilate into the local pagan cultures. So he told them the story of Abraham’s liberation from idolatry. That personal struggle for freedom and enlightenment can be relevant to each of us.



At the Seder the Jews of Djerba, Tunisia, traditionally recount the story of young Abraham rebelling against his father and breaking the idols.

## JEWISH BY CHOICE

We should ask ourselves what to do with our historic inheritance. In every generation, Jews have had to make a decision to remain Jewish. The Jewish people have survived for thousands of years because millions of Jews, over dozens of generations, have made **personal decisions**

to uphold their identity. The Torah, the *mitzvot*, the languages spoken, the collective memory, the ways of life, the creative works – all these were sustained first and foremost by the decision that every Jew made privately: to stay a Jew and not to leave.

## AM FREE OF IDOLS

I had a very difficult childhood. I was stoned. I was called a Christ killer. And yet as a Jew I am never subdued or undone.

As a Jew I am free. I feel enormously grateful to be a Jew. I feel free, facing the whole wide world in my Jewishness. I may not be able to say what God is, who God is, how God is; I can make no definitive statement, no attributive statement about the Source of Being.

But I can say what the Source is not. I'm free of idols, I'm not going to fall for false gods, false ideas. You can see through such a device, you can know an idol instantly, because you have been taught Torah. You know how to make a distinction between reality and illusion, between the actual and the fraudulent.

Judaism is a training toward intellectual freedom and expansiveness and insight. That is how Jewishness, and also the spiritual force of restored Jerusalem and Israel, nourish and support and enliven me. They have helped me come through.

**Cynthia Ozick**, American novelist

Identity has meaning only when it can be abandoned; only when a person is allowed to leave; only when each individual makes the decision, freely, to keep his or her identity and not to change it.

**Amos Oz**, Israeli novelist



## FREEDOM BEGINS WITH IMAGINATION

I think the first thing I smelled in literature was freedom. You could contemplate other realities freely. When you're with a book nobody butts in... So I think that in the beginning, I came to literature because it fed the need for a more capacious environment. As Saul Bellow says, "Look at me, going everywhere!" You didn't have to stay on Leslie Street in Newark. You didn't have to stay in your bedroom at home; you could be anywhere. You could go wherever you wanted and you could be whatever you wanted to be. And that's pretty wonderfully heady.

**Philip Roth**, American novelist

## A FRIGHTENED PERSON CANNOT BE FREE

Contemporary man is an unfree being because he is insecure. Man is a social animal and cares about public opinion. Modern man does all he can in order to win favor in the eyes of the public. Even those who are legally free men, who are not slaves, are in bondage to nature, to society, to restrictive phobias, superstitions, and prejudices.

There is only one way for man to free himself from all his restrictions, from all his fears, from all his phobias. Surrender to God frees man from his serfdom to his fellow man. **Modern man is not free** – a frightened person cannot be free. Terror and fear mean captivity for man.

Rabbi **Joseph B. Soloveitchik**, *Festival of Freedom*

## WHY HAVE YOU CHANGED THE HOLY WAYS OF YOUR FATHER?

Once a young Hassidic rebbe inherited the leadership of his father's hassidim. He immediately made many changes and innovations in the group's practice. The elders hastened to send a delegation of dignitaries to the young rabbi, to talk some sense into him. "Why have you changed the holy ways of your father?"

"On the contrary – I am following directly in my father's path: just as he, upon inheriting the leadership, made many changes from his father's path, so have I!"

There is a delicate balance between continuity and innovation between generations. On one hand, we want to conserve our parents' memory and traditions, their values and stories. On the other, we have over the years made many changes from their way of life – be it by open revolt or in gentle steps.

*What have I changed, and what have I conserved, from my parent's path?*

So show me a person who is not a slave!  
One is addicted to passions, another to  
money, a third to honor and all of them to fear.

Seneca, Stoic philosopher and political leader, Rome, 1<sup>st</sup> C.



## BREAK, THEREFORE I AM A JEW

Before I even knew how to read, I could already recite by heart the story of Avraham shattering the idols. The story was a great hit at my kindergarten. Many times, we put on the story of the great idol “boutique” of father Terah with the stupid people who came to buy idols from the brave and “wise son” Avraham who made fun of everybody, shattered the idols and escaped to the forest where he found the true God. The role of Avraham was, of course, my favorite. Why? Not only because of the opportunity to laugh at the stupid grown ups but in the main, because of the license to break, shatter and hit in the middle of this rather prim and proper kindergarten. Avraham is not just “a good Jewish boy” who is simply

following the path laid out for him by God. Each of us loves our rebellious ancestor differently and re-imagines him in our own fashion: The monotheists among us see in our Avram the inventor of monotheism. The rebels among us see in him the father of all young rebels and iconoclasts. The revolutionaries among us see in him the young man who first conceived the idea of building a new world. The yeshiva boys among us see in him someone who left the vanities of this world for a life of learning Torah in the legendary Beit Midrash of Shem and Ever. And the *halutzim* [Zionist pioneers] among us see in him the first young Zionist who left his parents’ home, a promising career and a homeland and went to

redeem the Promised Land.

I break, therefore, I am a Jew. I leave my homeland and my parents’ home, therefore I am a rooted Jew.

Today I am no longer young, but I don’t give up on my obligation to create from within the tradition, and my right to rebel against it from its depths. There is a rich creative life after the death of my childhood God. There is no more complete God than a broken God. It is a great pleasure “to renew our days of old” and to return to our bookshelves filled with broken tablets and shattered idols. It is a great pleasure to make puzzles from all these pieces of ourselves, who have been created – thank God – in the broken image of God.

Ari Elon, Israeli educator and midrash writer



# בְּרוּךְ שׁוֹמֵר הַבְּטָחָתוֹ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל

K E E P I N G   T H E   P R O M I S E

## בְּרוּךְ שׁוֹמֵר הַבְּטָחָתוֹ

לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּרוּךְ הוּא.

שֶׁהַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא חָשַׁב אֶת הַקֵּץ,

לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּמָה שֶׁאָמַר לְאַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ

בְּבְרִית בֵּין הַבְּתָרִים, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר:

”וַיֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָם: יָדַע תֵּדַע

כִּי גֵר יִהְיֶה זֶרְעֶךָ

בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לָהֶם.

וְעַבְדוּם, וְעֲנִו אֹתָם - אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה.

וְגַם אֶת הַגּוֹי, אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹדוּ, דֵּן אֶנְכִי.

וְאַחֲרַי כֵּן יֵצְאוּ בְּרִכְשׁ גָּדוֹל.”

**Blessed is the One who keeps the Promise to Israel. The Holy One** calculated the end of our exile and acted just as promised to Abraham our Father at the **Covenant between the Pieces:** “God said to Abram: You should know that **your seed will be strangers in a land not their own.** The people (of that land) will enslave and afflict them for four hundred years. But that nation, whom they serve, I will judge. Afterwards (your seed) will go out with great wealth.”

(Genesis 15: 13-14)

After recalling Abraham's spiritual journey to God (p. 56) and his ascent to Eretz Yisrael, the Haggadah will recount the descent of his great grandchildren to Egyptian slavery (“The Wandering Aramean,” p. 64). But first the Haggadah reassures us, as God did to Abraham, that there is a Divine pledge to maintain Jewish continuity whatever the ups and downs of history.

## WHEREVER A JEW IS PERSECUTED – THAT MEANS YOU

A Jew, in my vocabulary, is someone who regards himself as a Jew, or someone who is forced to be a Jew. A Jew is someone who acknowledges his Jewishness. If he acknowledges it publicly, he is a Jew by choice. If he acknowledges it only to his inner self, he is a Jew by the force of his destiny. If he does not acknowledge any connection with **the Jewish people** either in public or in his tormented inner being he is not a Jew, even if religious law defines him as such because his mother is Jewish. A Jew, in my unhalakhic opinion, is someone who chooses to share the fate of other Jews, or who is condemned to do so. Moreover: to be a Jew almost always means

to relate mentally to **the Jewish past**, whether the relation is one of pride or gloom or both together, whether it consists of shame or rebellion or pride or nostalgia.

Moreover: to be a Jew almost always means to relate to **the Jewish present**, whether the relation is one of fear or confidence, pride in the achievement of Jews or shame for their actions, an urge to turn them away from their path or a psychological need to stick to their path.

And finally: to be a Jew means to feel that wherever a Jew is persecuted for being a Jew – that means you.

**Amos Oz**, Israeli novelist

## NEXT YEAR...

I remember my grandfather's house, when we lived in Turkey. We would celebrate a big, splendid Passover. When grandfather read *"Blessed is the One who keeps the promise..."* in the Haggadah, he would get up and open the window. He would stick out his head and look left and right, as if he were seeing the view for the first time. Afterwards, he would pull his head back in, sigh, and say to the family: *"Another year in exile..."*

**Yaakov Shneor**, Kibbutz Be'erot Yitzhak



Abraham's Promise: Children like the Stars in the Sky (Genesis 15:5) by **Ephraim Moses Lilien**

## THE GENERATION OF THE EXODUS AND OUR GENERATION

Experience of the world must always be brought to the reading of Torah. This century's history makes it far more difficult to read the opening chapters of Exodus with composure... The parallels between ancient Israelites and ourselves in respect to the demands of history are striking – far more so, in fact, than most of us would wish. Like us, the Children of Israel faced (and had to face down) a reality that was nothing short of terrifying. Pharaoh tried

to erase their existence, and in a variety of ways – culminating at the Sea – attempted to block the Israelites' path to Sinai. Hitler came dangerously close a mere half century ago to annihilating the Jews, killing many of our own ancestors, relatives, and friends in the process. ...The Israelites of course did manage with God's assistance to reach the place of faith and covenant, and if we too get there nonetheless, it is thanks in large part to the fact that we,

like they, have been witness to a remarkable liberation. For me, as for many Jews of this generation, Jewish history has meant above all Holocaust and Israel. The latter does not justify the former. Israel can never make sense of the Holocaust, but it does help me to overcome its impact. Both have been crucial to the formation of my adult Jewish identity.

**Arnold Eisen**, Chancellor, Jewish Theological Seminary