The Four Children

כְּנֶגֶד אַרְבָּעָה בָּנִים

1. ***The Haggadah*** *offers us educational advice about intergenerational storytelling. The midrash of the Four Children invites us to distinguish different character types and to suggest different approaches to our offspring.*
Consider *the artistic interpretations of the Four Children, comparing and contrasting them.*

2. ***The Rabbis*** *turn the commandment of "ve-heegadta" (you shall **tell**) into a mitzvah of **dialogue** — with give and take on both sides. Successful dialogue means that each side, and especially the side anxious to "pass on the message," be keenly attentive to what the other is saying and feeling — to the particular personality and his or her needs.*

BLESSED be God,
Blessed be that One.
Blessed be the Giver of the Torah to the people Israel,
Blessed be that One.

THE TORAH alludes to **Four** Children:
One Wise or Thoughtful,
One Wicked or Rebellious,
One Simple or Innocent,
One Who Does Not Know How to Ask.

בָּרוּךְ הַמָּקוֹם,
בָּרוּךְ הוּא.
בָּרוּךְ שֶׁנָּתַן תּוֹרָה לְעַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל.
בָּרוּךְ הוּא.

כְּנֶגֶד **אַרְבָּעָה** בָּנִים דִּבְּרָה תוֹרָה:
אֶחָד חָכָם
וְאֶחָד רָשָׁע
וְאֶחָד תָּם
וְאֶחָד שֶׁאֵינוֹ יוֹדֵעַ לִשְׁאוֹל.

Istavan Zador, Four Children (Budapest, 1924)

Education Through Dialogue

A Reminder for Parents!

Thus far the Haggadah has given guidelines to the parent who is full of earnest enthusiasm to pass on an historical and cultural "message" to the younger generation. If ever there was an event which appeals to the parent's desire to bring their youth-culture-centered children to appreciate the old values of cultural and ethnic pride and identification, the Pesach seder is it! Here lies a dangerous pitfall for the parent-educator. The leader of the seder is likely to concentrate on the text of the Haggadah without sufficiently taking into consideration the audience — the younger generation — and their level of interest. Absorbed with the sales-pitch, the salesperson often forgets the customer!

Prague, 1526

'The Four Parents:' Children Label Their Parents

IN THE DAYS of the patriarchal regime, we allowed ourselves to categorize our children harshly — accepting only one as positive — the wise one.

The simple, the wicked and the one who knows not how to ask questions had to swallow hard and hide their sense of being insulted . . .

Now in our days no child is identified as "the offspring of the parent" and often the parent is identified as "the parent of that child." We have arrived at an era not of partiarchy or matriarchy but the rule of children. In our age it is then miraculous that our dear, delightful children don't divide us up and categorize us. At the best, we would be rated "naive or simple minded parents" or "parents who don't know how to respond to a question."

(Israel Eldad, "The Victory of the Wise Son")

The Pitfalls of Labeling

I INSTINCTIVELY recoil from static stereotypes that label persons simplistically. Therefore, I choose to interpret the midrash of the four children as a diverse set of strategies for addressing four different facets of each and every child. Each personality combines these facets in different ways. For example, the wise and the rebellious facets can be combined for evil. Then the cunning mind is used to inflict pain on one's parents. Alternatively, the combination can produce a revolutionary chalutz (pioneer) seeking not just to undermine the traditional order but to create new frameworks of meaning. This requires an intelligence which is not conservative like the traditional "wise child" but which looks beyond the horizon, beyond the existing laws and their pat rationale.

(Yariv Ben Aharon, Kibbutz author)

The Four Children as a Screenplay

חָכָם וְרָשָׁע

1. ***A simple reading*** *of the Haggadah's midrash of the four children can obscure the fact that it provides the script for a dialogue. Let each character in the dialogue be played by a different seder participant.*

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

3. ***The reading*** *goes as follows:*

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)*

Narrator **What does the wicked child say?**

Wicked or Alienated Child "Whatever does this service mean to *you*?" *(Exodus 12:26)*

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:

Second Parent "It is because of this, that Adonai did for ***me*** when ***I*** went free from Egypt." *(Exodus 13:8)*

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

חָכָם מַה הוּא אוֹמֵר?

"מָה הָעֵדֹת וְהַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים, אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶתְכֶם?" (דברים ו,כ)

וְאַף אַתָּה אֱמָר לוֹ כְּהִלְכוֹת הַפֶּסַח: "אֵין מַפְטִירִין אַחַר הַפֶּסַח אֲפִיקוֹמָן." (משנה, פסכים פרק י')

רָשָׁע מַה הוּא אוֹמֵר:

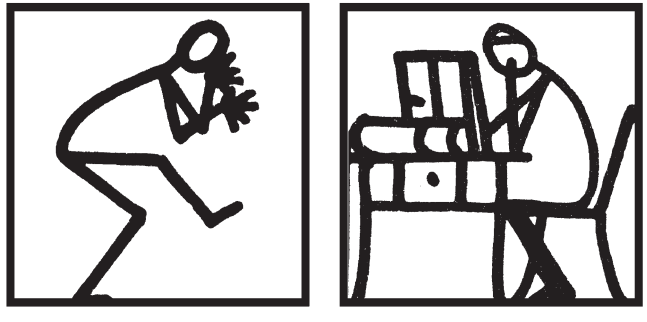
"מָה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם?" (שמות יב,כו)

"לָכֶם" – וְלֹא לוֹ.

וּלְפִי שֶׁהוֹצִיא אֶת עַצְמוֹ מִן הַכְּלָל – כָּפַר בָּעִקָּר.

אַף אַתָּה הַקְהֵה אֶת שִׁנָּיו, וֶאֱמֹר לוֹ: "בַּעֲבוּר זֶה, עָשָׂה יי לִי, בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרָיִם."

"לִי" – וְלֹא לוֹ. אִלּוּ הָיָה שָׁם, לֹא הָיָה נִגְאָל.



Otto Geismar, the Wise Child and the Wicked Child, 1927

Siegmund Forst, 1958

Beating the Bounds: Producing Wicked Children

THE PASSOVER CELEBRATION is aimed at the child in all of us, allowing us to open our imaginations, to rediscover the lost elements of wonder, pleasure, and hilarity that are captured in this event. Having children at the seder can help make this happen.

If we make our children unhappy, they will remember Passover, but not fondly. In the British Isles, there is a custom of taking sons out every year to "beat the bounds." Today they use the stick as the boundary markers, but they used to beat the boys at the site of those markers to ensure that they would remember the limits of ancestral property. Beating our ancient heritage into our children's psyches may make them remember, but it is probably the reason so many people remember ritual and ceremony as intrinsically unpleasant.

(Ira Steingroot, Keeping Passover)

'Who is truly Wise?'

THE WISE CHILD of the Haggadah is portrayed as a knowledgeable, believing and obedient child. This child formulates long complex questions, distinguishes multiple categories of laws, and accepts the God who commanded "us." But let's beware of this stereotyped, academic brainchild. Is this child truly wise?

- **Don Isaac Abrabanel, "The Smart Alec":** "This 'wise-guy' child is arrogant in his 'wisdom.' He shows off the distinctions he can make between types of mitzvot. *'But you teach him the subtleties down to the last detail in the Mishna.'* Let the 'smart-alec' who appears wise in his own eyes see that there is still much for him to learn.

  "There is twice as much wisdom in these laws as in the question. Let the wise grow in wisdom and in humility."

- **Israel Eldad, "To Know When to Ask":** "No! The wise child does not derive his title from the pretense to know-it-all. One who thinks he possesses wisdom already, does not ask at all. 'One who does not even know how to ask' has a negative trait, typical of the know-it-all. The truly wise child asks genuine questions, not cynically and mockingly like the rebellious child and not superficially like the simple child. He seeks the essence of things, *'What is the true nature of the laws, testimonies and statutes that God has commanded us?"*
- **The Chassidic Seer of Lublin:** "In my judgment, it is better to be a wicked person who knows he is wicked, than a righteous one who knows that he is righteous. Worst of all is to be a wicked person who thinks he is righteous."

(Menachem HaCohen, Haggadah of HaAm)

The Wicked Child — An Unfair Description?

The "wicked" child expresses a sense of alienation from our Jewish heritage. In this age of liberalism and democracy, of pluralistic tolerance for many cultural expressions, should a person who expresses such a feeling be condemned as "wicked" or "evil"?

• Hold a brief discussion on the topic. Would a different characterization be more appropriate to our contemporary sensibilities — such as "the rebellious one," "the skeptic," "the arrogant — chutzpadik?" Is "setting his teeth on edge" the best strategy to deal with such a person?

• Role-Playing: try to "get inside" the personality of the so-called "wicked" children and their parents. Describe the feelings of each one in this tense confrontation described in the Haggadah.

***Suggestion:* Have the younger participants at the seder describe the feelings of the parent, and have those who are already parents describe the feelings of the child.**

The Four Children Continued

Narrator **What does the simple child ask?**

Simple or Naive Child "What is this? *(Exodus 13:14)*

Narrator And you shall 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)*

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)*

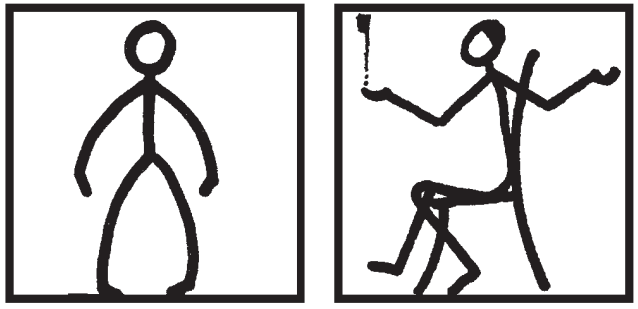
תָּם וְשֶׁאֵינוֹ יוֹדֵעַ לִשְׁאוֹל

תָּם מַה הוּא אוֹמֵר?

"מַה זֹּאת?" (שמות יג,יד)
"וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו:
"בְּחֹזֶק יָד הוֹצִיאָנוּ יי מִמִּצְרַיִם, מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים."

וְשֶׁאֵינוֹ יוֹדֵעַ לִשְׁאֹל?

אַתְּ פְּתַח לוֹ,
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר,
בַּעֲבוּר זֶה עָשָׂה יי לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרָיִם." (שמות יג,ח)



Otto Geismar, 1927

"You shall tell your child" *(Exodus 13:8)*

"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]. *(Mekhilta)* "***This***" implies that the parents must point at the matza and maror, using them as visual aids to tell the story. *(Rabbi Simcha of Vitri)*

וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ

"וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ" – יָכוֹל מֵרֹאשׁ חֹדֶשׁ?
תַּלְמוּד לוֹמַר "בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא." (שמות יג,ח)
אִי "בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא," יָכוֹל מִבְּעוֹד יוֹם?
תַּלְמוּד לוֹמַר "בַּעֲבוּר זֶה" –
"בַּעֲבוּר זֶה" לֹא אָמַרְתִּי, אֶלָּא בְּשָׁעָה
שֶׁיֵּשׁ מַצָּה וּמָרוֹר מֻנָּחִים לְפָנֶיךָ.

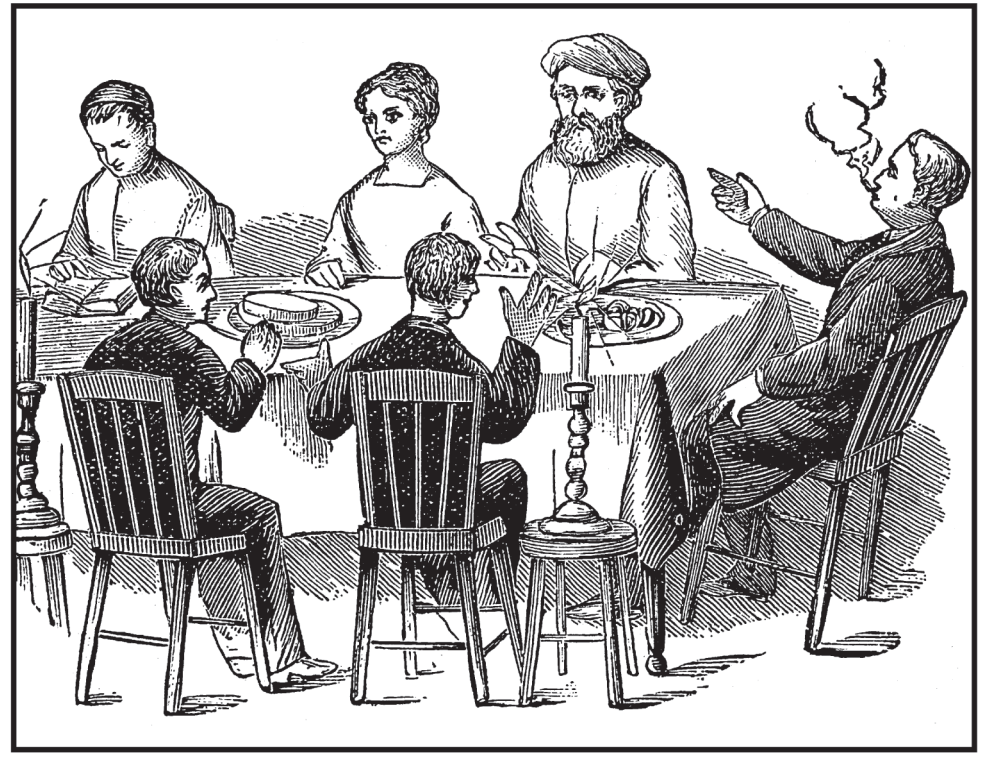
The Contemporary Four Children

Which famous person today would be the best representative of the "wise child," of the "wicked child," and so on? Suggest candidates and discuss their suitability.

A Child's Perspective

Ask the younger children to describe the behavior of "a bad child" at the seder.

- ***What might be causing such behavior?***
- ***Do they approve of the parent's response in the Haggadah?***
- ***How would they handle the situation?***
- ***Why do they think the "silent child" asks no questions?***
- ***How might that child be coaxed into greater involvement?***



The Immigrant Family *Chicago Haggadah, 1879*

Beyond Labels

I DO NOT VIEW labels as static pigeonholes. I believe in the power of the educational act to release locked up potentials. For example, **one who does not know how to ask** may be silenced by the rules of society. The silence may hide an exceptional, sensitive child whose questions are choked. A parent can "open the child up," remove the obstructions, enable personal growth and break stereotypes.

(Yariv Ben Aharon, Kibbutz author)

Bridging the Generation Gap

The inter-generational dialogues in the Torah explicitly refer to parents who participated in the Exodus addressing their children who have grown up in freedom in the Land of Israel. The parents have undergone an experience of slavery and redemption which is totally foreign to the reality of the younger generation. The gap in experience causes difficulties in the inter-generational dialogue.

Invite the seder participants to discuss the following:

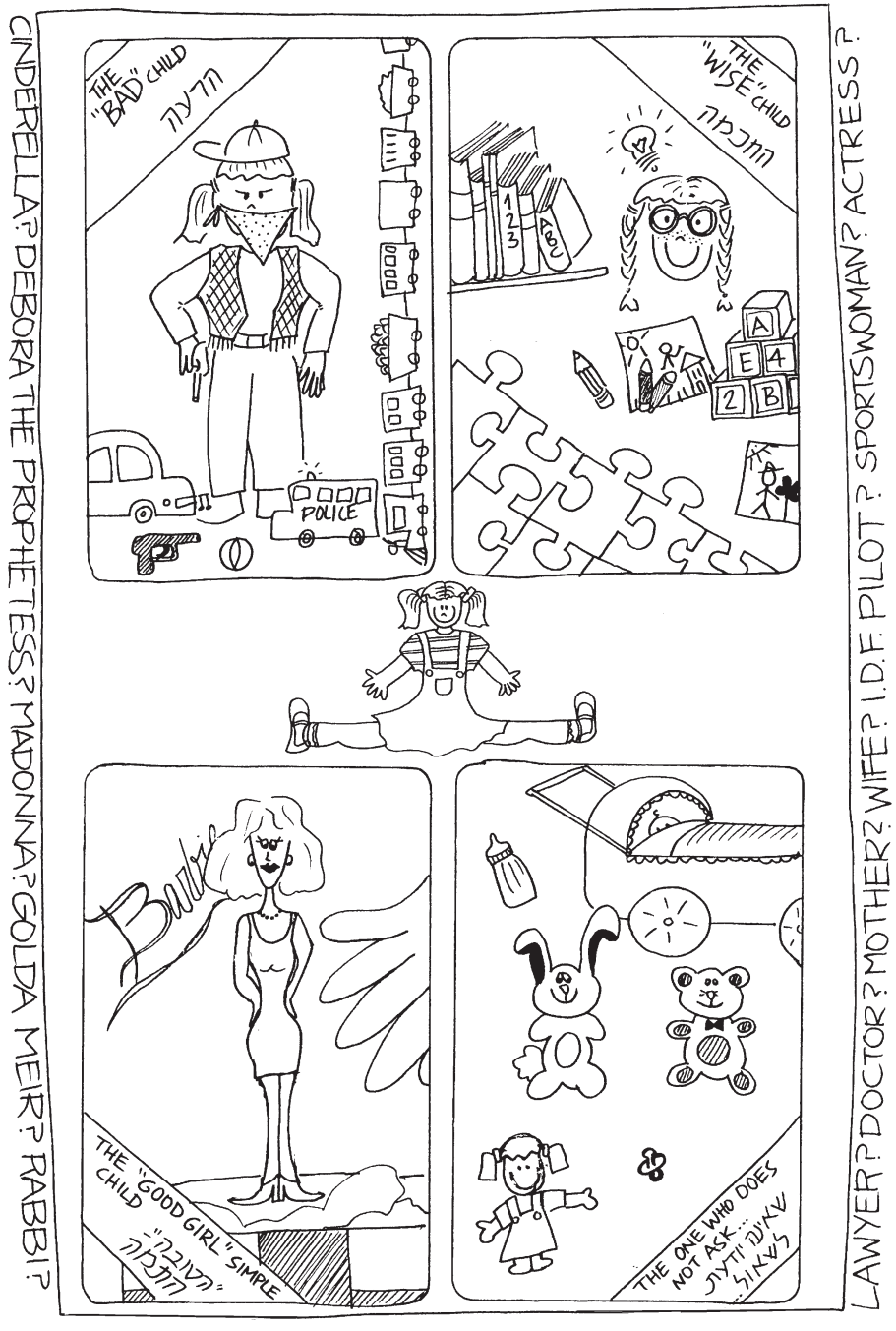
What are the generational gaps among us, the participants of tonight's seder? Go around the table and have people relate a particular experience connected with their generation which might be difficult for a person of a different generation to comprehend.

The Art of the Four Children

1. ***Compare and contrast*** *the artists' interpretations of each of the Four Children (page 56-71).*

2. ***Which portrayal*** *is most surprising? most disturbing? most appropriate?*

3. ***What conceptions*** *of Jewish values and society are implicit in the various depictions?*



The Ideal Jewish Girl?
Tanya Zion, Israel, 1996

Eastern European Types

Arthur Szyk,
Poland, 1939

The Blessing of Diversity

The artist and calligrapher David Moss explains his depiction of the Four Children:

EVERY CHILD is unique and the Torah embraces them all. The iconography that I've chosen here is based on playing cards. As in a game of chance, we have no control over the children dealt us. It is our task as parents, as educators, to play our hand based on the attributes of the children we are given. It is the child, not the parent, who must direct the process. This, I believe, is the intent of the midrash of the four children.

Each child's question appears on his card, and the Haggadah's answer appears below the card. The gold object in each picture denotes the suit of the card. The staves, swords, cups and coins used in Southern Europe developed parallel to the more familiar hearts, diamonds, clubs and spades of Northern Europe. The figures are likewise taken from archaic systems of playing cards which included king, knight, page, and joker or fool.

The king image here represents the wise child wearing the crown of Torah. The knight represents the wicked child. In almost all old haggadot the wicked child is shown as a soldier, sometimes mounted, sometimes on foot. The page is the simple child, and the joker or fool is the child who is not even capable of asking.

Every Child is a Blessing

I got the idea of representing the children as cards, by the way, from the tradition dating from the Middle Ages of depicting the simple child, or the child who doesn't know how to ask, as a jester or fool. I drew a book in each picture and positioned it to reflect each child's attitude to the tradition.

The text of the Haggadah introduces the four children with a short passage in which the word *baruch* (blessed) appears four times. I have designed these two pages to correlate each of these four "blessings" with one of the four children: every child is a blessing.

Diversity, how we deal with it, and how we can discover the blessing within it, is perhaps the theme of the midrash of the Four Children.

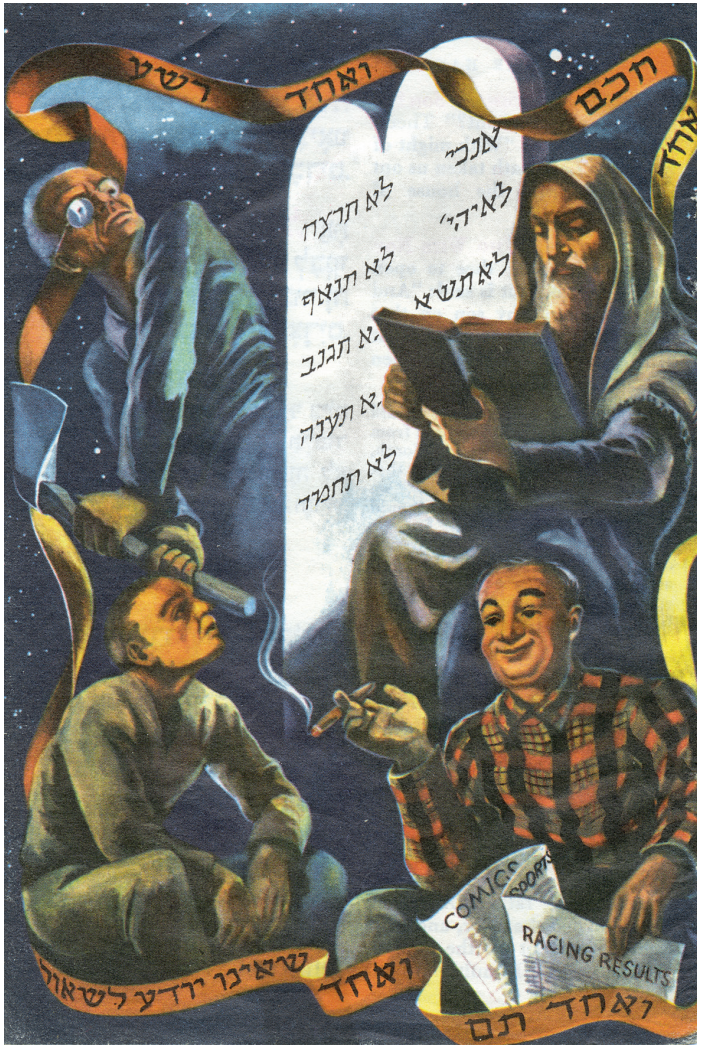
(David Moss, 20th C. artist, U.S.A. and Israel)

The Blessing of Diversity.
David Moss,
The Moss Haggadah © 1996

Four Attitudes to the Zionist Dream

Tzvi Livni, Israel, 1955 © Yavneh Publishers

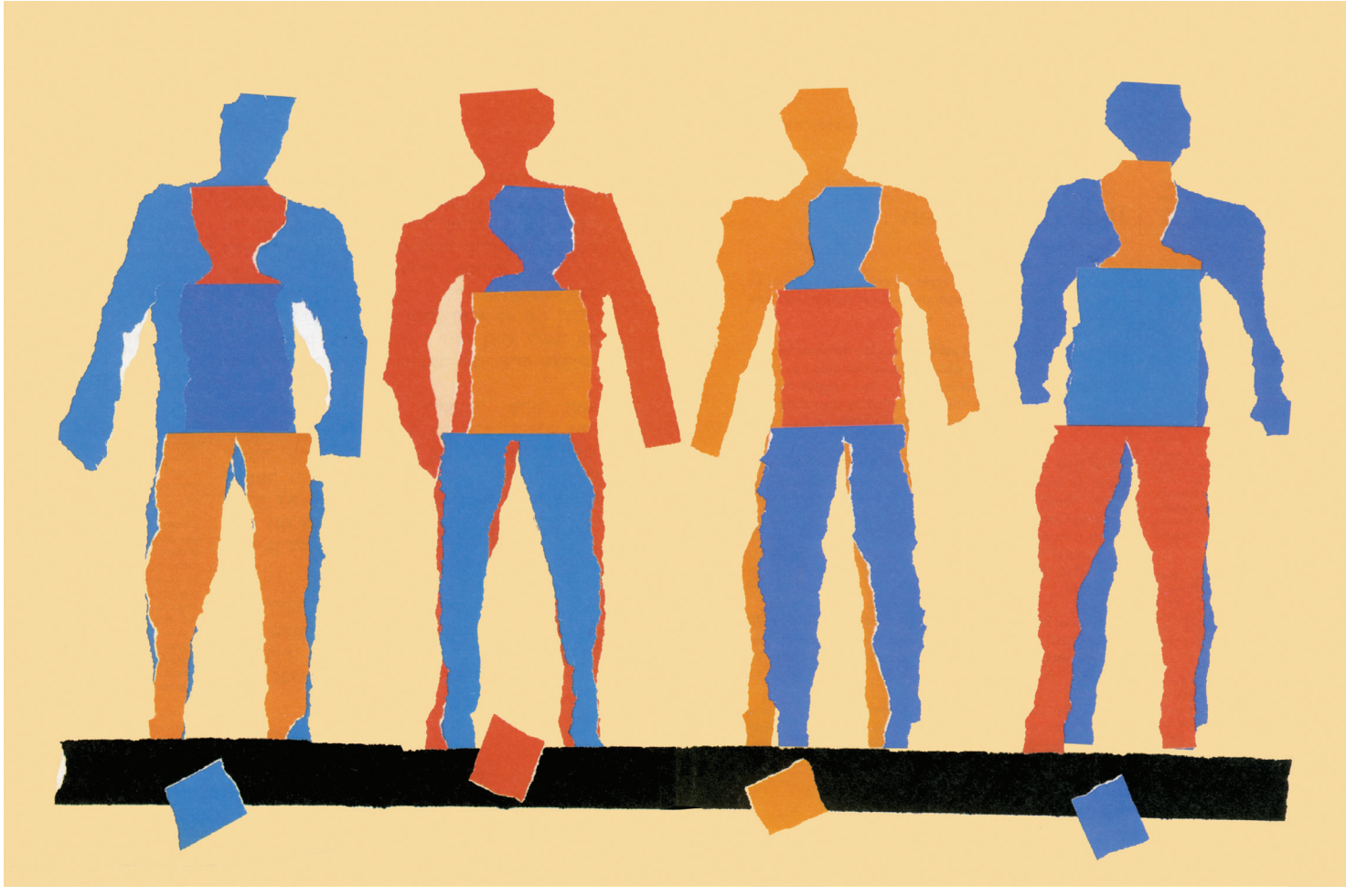
Four Personalities *Paul Freeman, U.S.A., 1960*



Clashing Cultures *Sigmund Forst, Europe and U.S.A., 1959*

Four Children, Four Musicians

Shraga Weil, (CL 1963 Cat. S-3) © Safrai Gallery



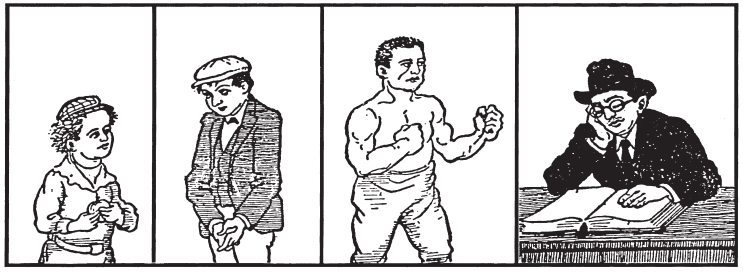
Four Aspects in Each of Us

Dan Reisinger, © 1982, Rabbinical Assembly of America

The Four Children as Four Books *David Wander, The Haggadah in Memory of the Holocaust © 1988*

Clay Children *Rony Oren, Animated Haggadah, © 1985 Jonathan Lubell, Scopus Films*

Nota Koslowsky, U.S.A., 1944



Lola, U.S.A., 1920

Jakob Steinhardt, Germany, 1923

Dick Codor © 1981