

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted March 27, 2003 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

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Exciting Developments in Long-Term, Intensive Talmud Study at Maqom!

About one year ago, I offered those who study Talmud with Maqom the option of working with me on a one-on-one basis to do research and create articles about rabbinic literature that would be posted [here](#) at Maqom. With this article, that project is bearing its first fruit. I hope you enjoy reading Rabbi Louis Rieser's research and the papers that have yet to come.

--Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, Ph.D.

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THE FOUR QUESTIONS AND THE NATURE OF RABBINIC LITERATURE

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In the Seder, we find a wealth of rabbinic texts which show the sages' talent for continually reshaping tradition to make it a path by which one can live. This mishnah is probably one with which you're familiar.

They mix a second cup [of wine] and here the son asks his father. And if the son is not learned enough, his father teaches him [to say the following]: How does this night differ from all other nights? For on all other nights we eat leavened and unleavened bread [but] tonight we eat only unleavened bread? For on all other nights we eat various vegetables [but] tonight [we eat] bitter herbs? For on all other nights we eat meat roasted, cooked or boiled [but] tonight we only [eat] roasted meat? For on all other nights we do not dip one time [but] tonight we dip twice? (M. Pesachim 10:4)

This mishnah, with one important change, is included in the haggadah. These are the "four questions" to be asked on Pesach. The setting is at a seder while the Temple still stood. Individuals would buy "shares" in a lamb and form a party to go to Jerusalem and have seder together. While one of the party would go to the Temple to have the lamb slaughtered the rest would tell the story of the exodus. The lamb would be cooked on a special grill made of clay and the last thing one ate at the seder would be one's portion of this lamb. In this setting, the question about roasted meat only makes sense.

However, the mishnah was redacted in 200 C.E., by which time the Temple had not been operating for 130 years. Tosefta (redacted in 220 C.E.) has no commentary on this mishnah. The Yerushalmi transforms the questions into kinds of inquiry:

The Torah alludes to four types of children: one who is wise, and one who is wicked, one who is simple and one who does not know how to ask.

What does the wise child ask? What are the statutes, the laws and the ordinances which Adonai our God has commanded us?" (Deuteronomy 6:20). You should inform this child of all the laws of Pesach, including the ruling that nothing should be eaten after the afikomen.

What does the wicked child ask? "What does this ritual mean to you?" (Exodus 12:26). To "you" and not to "him". Since he removes himself from the community by denying God's role in the Exodus, set his teeth on edge [i.e., shake him up] by replying, "This is done because of what Adonai did for me when I went out of Egypt" (Exodus 13:8). "For me". Not for him. Had he been there, he would not have been redeemed.

What does the simple child ask? "What is this all about?" You should tell him, "It was with a mighty hand that Adonai took us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 13:14).

As for the child who does not know how to ask, you should open the discussion for him, as it is written, "And you shall explain to your child on that day, 'It is because of what Adonai did for me when I went free out of Egypt'" (Exodus 13:8). (Y. Pesachim 10:4, 37d)

No explicit change is suggested in the questions. The issue is simply side-stepped.

Discussion Questions:

1. Arguably, this is the best known mishnah in Jewish life. Almost everyone, at some point, learned the four questions. How might we bring this facet of learning to the seder? Can you think of other mishnayot to add to a Jew's general repertoire of learning, besides the other mishnahs that make up the Pesach Seder in M. Pesachim chapter 10?
2. The four sons are as compelling, and well known, as the four questions. Can you match up the Mishnah's questions and the Yerushalmi's sons? Which would go with which? How would it help people to know that this passage is a direct quotation from the Yerushalmi?
3. The Bavli (B. Pesachim 116a) goes further and implies that any question about the topic of slavery, freedom or the Exodus serves the purpose of the Four Questions. Indeed, this is why the parsley is dipped at the beginning of the seder. Anyone used to eating in an observant home would expect handwashing, a blessing and motsi. Here, there is no blessing over the handwashing and we eat parsley. In reality, you could do almost anything that would ignite the curiosity of those at the seder. What creative thing might you want to try?
4. As always, ask yourself what Egypt you are freeing yourself from this year. Have a wonderful Pesach and please remember how much Mishnah, Tosefta, Yerushalmi and Bavli you know!