

# “THE FOURTH SON”

## *The Art of Asking*

*A sermon*

*preached by*

RABBI NORMAN LAMM

on the first day of

Passover 5726 — April 5, 1966

THE JEWISH CENTER

New York City

One of the intriguing and fascinating characteristics of Passover is that it is the season of questions. The Halakhah prescribes questioning as a month-long preparation for this festival: "we must ask and expound the laws of Passover thirty days before the holy day." Indeed, the Rabbi who receives many *she'elot* (religious questions) before Passover considers himself fortunate. The highlight of the Seder itself is the asking of the Four Questions. All of the Seder is composed of strange rituals, "so that the children may ask questions" when their curiosity is aroused. Moreover, according to R. Hayyim of Brisk, one of the most eminent Halakhic scholars of all times, a major difference between the commandment of mentioning the Exodus from Egypt every day of the year, and that of relating the Exodus on Passover, is that during the rest of the year we declare the fact of the Exodus in a simple narrative manner, whereas on Passover we do so in a question-and-answer form.

Indeed, to ask a question is a profoundly human act. Recently a research scientist wrote that while it is true that computers are far more efficient than the human brain, providing answers more accurately and quickly, nevertheless, only a human being knows how to *ask* the right questions! It is the asking, rather than the answering, that constitutes the human creative act.

Not only is it human, but it is also essentially Jewish to ask. The Hebrew word *darosh* means not only to interpret, and not only to preach, but also — to ask. Thus the traditional Hebrew term for a school is *bet ha-midrash*, which is usually translated as "the house of interpretation," but which more literally implies: "the house of questioning." Indeed, the traditional Jewish manner of study is to ask a question first. When we read, for instance, a comment of Rashi, we first ask ourselves: what troubled Rashi? What implicit question occasioned his explanation? An interpretation is merely an intellectual fact, but an *answer* — that is humanly satisfying as well, because it is the response to a question.

Naturally, a great deal depends upon what and how we ask. There are right questions and there are wrong questions, and they reflect on the type of people who ask the questions. We can differentiate between personalities in the Bible by the kind of questions they posed. For instance, Abraham asked the right question: "Shall the Judge of all the world not do justice?" It was a sharp and scathing question that issued from a sublime soul. Compare to that the question asked of Moses and Aaron by the rebellious Korah: "why then do you raise yourselves above the congregation of the Lord?" In other words: why do not I have the reins of leadership instead of you? This question manifests only the base power-ambitions of a person without principles.

Rebecca asked a great question when she thought that she would die before giving birth to her children, thereby failing to perpetuate the blessing of Abraham: "If so, why do I exist?" She sought to define her purpose in life. How different was the question of her son Esau: "Of what use is my birthright to me?" He reduced to a question of mere usefulness the prerogatives of priesthood which belonged to the first-born. What a terrible question!

Joseph revealed himself to his brothers: "I am Joseph; does my father yet live?" This was a marvelous question; it expressed the vital concern of a devoted son for his father. Compare to that the question of his brother Judah when he counselled selling Joseph instead of killing him: "What do we gain by killing our brother?" A brother's life is discussed as a matter of profit and better business!

This test of character is no less relevant and trustworthy today. A wrong question often asked by young people is: "What is the world going to give me?" The right question would be: "What does the world expect of me?" The wrong question is: "What are my rights?" The right question that should be asked is: "What are my duties?" The right question that a right-thinking person always asks himself is: "What should I?" The wrong question, one that reflects upon an immature and underdeveloped character, is: "Why can't I?" The late President Kennedy reminded us of the difference between the two when he urged us to ask not what our country can do for us, but what we can do for our country.

This indeed is the difference between the Wise Son, the *Hakham*, and the Wicked Son, the *Rasha*, of the Haggadah. The Wise Son asks for information as to his obligations and duties. The Wicked Son shrugs his shoulders and asks: *Mah ha-avodah ha-zot lakhem?*, "what do you need all this for?" In fact, the *Rasha's* question is not a question at all! It is merely an expletive phrased interrogatively. It is a smug harangue with a question mark appended as an afterthought. It is an impertinent perversion of punctuation.

The breakdown in the capacity to ask has affected some of our youth currently rebelling on campuses throughout the country. The Berkely campus revolt began with an authentic question: "What is the role of the student as a human being in the bureaucratic educational machine which threatens to devour every shred of human personality?" But soon after the question was asked there appeared easy, permissive, vulgar answers — too many for a genuine intellectual movement. Even the questions that were subsequently asked were of the kind that have now become the stock-in-trade of what might be called "professional youths," people who immaturely expect to go through life whining, "why can't I?" and "what are you going to do for me?" One can only pray that out of this will some day emerge dedication to the service of a higher cause, in which the paramount question is: "What can I do for you?"

The real, genuine *question* is a *quest*: a searching and a groping and a yearning. The wrong question represents not an openness to the universe but a closing into oneself, not a groping but a grasping.

Indeed, Judaism's great problem today is not the *Rasha* who asks the wrong questions, but the Fourth Son, the *she'eno yodeia li'she'ol*, who asks not at all. He is the one who troubles me both Jewishly and humanly. The stereotype of the rabbi of two generations ago once feared questions, and supposedly administered a well placed slap to the youngster who embarrassed him with annoying questions. There then came a time when rabbis were scandalized by wrong answers

and dangerous solutions. Today rabbis are profoundly disturbed because a generation has largely stopped asking — and even amongst Orthodox Jews there is usually a paucity of the proper questions. Asking has become a lost art.

Because the Fourth Son is so significant in contemporary life, it is worth analyzing his difficulties. Why does he fail to ask questions? Usually we attribute his silence to ignorance. Most of the illuminated Haggadahs picture the Fourth Son as a foolish, unintelligent youngster. But I doubt that the Haggadah really meant that. Were it so, he would never understand what we tell him in the Haggadah. Indeed, four centuries ago R. Shelomoh Alkabetz, the eminent poet, mystic, and author of the *Lekhhah Dodi*, pointed out that the Fourth Son was not a fool at all, and that there are far more complex reasons why he asks no questions. For purposes of understanding this Fourth Son in our contemporary context, I would divide this category into three classes.

First are the *unconcerned*, the morally apathetic and drowsy. They are the slumberers whose spiritual sensitivities have suffered a slow strangulation, and whose aspirations for a more sublime existence and a loftier life have been lulled into an insufferable silence.

Then there are the *embarrassed*, those who are shy and do not ask for fear that their questions will reveal their ignorance. In my own experience I meet such people often — men and women who are highly intelligent, who feel intuitively that Judaism has something very real to offer them, but are apprehensive about entering an Orthodox synagogue. They are afraid they will be overwhelmed, not knowing when to stand or sit, or when to pray silently or aloud. They are afraid to risk the embarrassment of asking. Would that such people took to heart the Sages' teaching that "one who is shy will never learn," for only by asking can one gain knowledge.

As a teacher, I grieve at the compulsive note-taker who gives me back every word on a test. I give him an "A" but it breaks my heart, because he is a dull spirit who shines only in a kind of academic stenography. Give me any time the student who comes without pen or paper, who has naught but contempt for examinations, but who excels in asking, who confounds his teacher and perplexes his professor, whose sharp questions probe and reveal every weakness in my lecture. I bless him, even out of my frustration.

Then there are the *assimilated* who no longer know how to formulate the Jewish questions. No, they are not at all fools; some of them are exceedingly brilliant people of great insight, but they lack the background with which to ask the most elementary Jewish question. Yet this group, as well as the others, contains countless souls who yearn and grope and long for a touch of divinity, for some hint of Jewish purpose in their lives, for the gentle tug of Torah, for a holy tremor of the nearness of God.

These are the "Fourth Sons" of our generation. We must never treat them with contempt, for they are precious and sacred souls. But how shall we address them? The Haggadah itself shows us the way.

The first thing that the Haggadah teaches us about our confrontation with the Fourth Son is the importance of a proper approach: *At petah lo*, you must begin the conversation, or, more literally: "You open up to him." We must initiate the dialogue with the Fourth Son, make him feel welcome, open up our hearts with warmth and love, never in anger. We will never be able to engage uncommitted Jews in the dialogue that will lead them back to Torah by scolding and reproaching them. The only kind of Jew who will respond affirmatively to rebuke is one who is precommitted to Torah but has accidentally strayed from the path. *At petah lo* means that we must be open-hearted and also open-minded, recognizing sympathetically the complex intellectual problems that cause grief and anguish to our contemporaries, and to us as well. Furthermore, this openness must not be an artificial device; it must issue from genuine friendship and warmth. The author of *Torah Temimah*, in his commentary on the Haggadah, observes that the Haggadah uses the expression *at* for "you," instead of the usual and acceptable *ata*, the male form. His explanation may not accord with scientific philology, but it reveals a beautiful truth: the word *at* is composed of the first and last letters of the alphabet, *Alef* and *Tav*, as if to say: open up to him, the Fourth Son, completely: from *Alef* to *Tav*, from "A" to "Z"!

The next lesson we learn from the Haggadah in approaching the Fourth Son, is to go beyond history, beyond theology, and beyond philosophy, in explaining what Judaism really is. Every religion can boast beautiful concepts, stories, and ideals. If we are to be honest, and we must be, we must emphasize that which is unique to Judaism. And that is: the practical commandments as defined by the Halakhah. We must acquaint members of this silent generation with our practical observances and their paramount significance. Thus the author of the Haggadah instructs us to inform the Fourth Son about our exodus from Egypt, but that this teaching be accomplished *be'shaah she'yesh matzah u-maror munahim le'fanekha*, while the *matzah* and *maror* lie before us! We must stress the actual, practical *mitzvot*. Contrary to Reform, Judaism is more than ethics; contrary to other semi-Reformist groups, there is more to Judaism than an historical faith and Jewish peoplehood. It is all these *plus* — a way of life, a response to the Divine command. There is no Judaism without *matzah* and *maror*, without *tallit* and *tefillin*, without *Shabbat* and *kashrut*. Noble sentiments are not enough; only by living Jewishly does one fulfill his Jewishness. The Fourth Son will only become more confused, and rightly so, if we present to him a Judaism which is not much different from Ethical Culture in a Jewish context, with a few Yiddish expressions added thereto.

Finally, what troubles so many of these silent Jews who have lost the capacity to ask the great questions is: despair. They have discovered Judaism, but they think that it is too late and that they are inadequate to the task of reshaping their lives to the great and noble purposes of our faith. Our response must be to inform them that their predicament is no different from that of our people as a whole. "In the beginning," we read in the Haggadah, "our ancestors were idol worshippers" — just pagans, no different from the people amongst whom they lived.

However, "now the Lord has brought us close to His service." We grew spiritually. The whole story of the Jewish people is one of rising from the very bottom, of emerging from the lowest depths. Any Jew who returns to Judaism today, despite a complete lack of background, recapitulates Jewish history in his adventure and romance with Judaism.

These then are the ways of dealing with the Fourth Son. We must be utterly open-hearted; we must confront him with the demands and glories of Halakhah; and we must give him the assurance that it can be done. This is the way taught by the Haggadah to plant the holy seeds of great questions in the hearts and minds of contemporary Jews.

Allow me to conclude with one final remark about the significance of questions. In one of his addresses to our people, Moses says: "And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul" (Deut. 10:12). The Talmud was amazed by this statement. What does the Lord require of us — *only* to do all these things? "Is the fear of heaven — and the other sublime spiritual demands in the rest of the verse — such a small thing?" The Talmud answers: "yes, for Moses it was a small thing" (*Ber. 33b*).

The usual meaning of this passage is that whereas these requirements are difficult indeed, they are trivial when compared to a man of the spiritual distinction and eminence of Moses. However, I suggest another interpretation. Perhaps these requirements are no simple matter even for a Moses. What the Rabbis meant was that compared to Moses who so well and so profoundly understood the holiness of asking, the sanctity of questions, who was able to live out his life under the ever-present question of *Mah Ha-shem Elohekha sho'el me'imakh*, "what doth the Lord thy God require of thee?" — compared to this kind of man and to this kind of question, any answer no matter how noble becomes unimportant! Even as sublime an answer as the fear of Heaven, the imitation and the love and the service of God — all of these are as nothing compared to the question "what doth the Lord thy God require of thee?" The greatest destiny of life is to ask yourself what God wants of you. It is a far greater accomplishment to have asked oneself that question than, having asked it, to implement the answers.

As we enter into this joyous season of questions, let us strive to reach the heights of asking the right questions. Then, God willing, we will in due time receive the right answers.