

Questions about **QUESTIONS**



Just what makes the wicked son so awful?

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

IN THE JEWISH WORLD, THE FOUR SONS AND THEIR questions are even more famous than the Fab Four. Each of the questions that gets attributed to a different son comes straight out of the text of the Chumash:

The Chacham (Wise Son): “What are the testimonies, ordinances, and laws that

Hashem, our G-d, has commanded you?”

The Rasha (Wicked Son): “What is this avodah (service) to you?”

The Tam (Simple Son): “What is this?”
The fourth son doesn’t actually ask a question. The answer given to the son referred to as **The Sh’eino Yodei’a**

Lishol (The Son Who Doesn’t Know How To Ask a Question) comes from a verse that implies that the father is giving an answer to his son without actually referencing any question having been asked previously by the child: “And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, ‘It is because of this that Hashem did for me when he took me out of Egypt.’”

But, if we look up each of these questions in the *Chumash*, there's no indication whatsoever given regarding the type of person who is actually asking these questions. It simply speaks of 'your child' or 'your children' in generic terms. So, how did our Sages decide to attribute each of these questions to such disparate personalities?

It's easy to understand why they saw the question of the *Tam* as being, well, simple. The way the question is phrased reveals the limited aptitude of the one asking it, as such a question – "What is this?" – could be applied to literally anything and any situation. So too, in just the opposite way, we see how the question attributed to *Chacham* shows how he possesses a higher level of intelligence by the fact that he can distinguish between the different commandments that Hashem gave to us – referring to them in his question as, "testimonies, ordinances, and laws".

“IN THE JEWISH WORLD, THE FOUR SONS AND THEIR FOUR QUESTIONS ARE EVEN MORE FAMOUS THAN THE FAB FOUR.”

So what exactly did our Sages see in the question, "What is this *avodah* to you?" that lead them to attribute it to the *Rasha*? What was really so bad about it? The answer given in the *Chumash*¹ certainly doesn't hint to anything unusual or even nefarious about the question or the children asking it: "You will say to them [ie. your children], 'It is the Pesach offering to Hashem, Who passed over the houses of the *Bnei Yisrael* (the Children of Israel) in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, and He saved our houses and the people bowed and prostrated themselves.'" In fact, Rashi explains that the reason the people bowed and prostrated themselves was because of the good news contained here regard-

ing their impending redemption and their coming into the land of Israel (mentioned in the prior verse, not quoted here) and because of the good news that they would have children!

But, if we look in the Haggadah, we see that our Sages were quick to take the *Rasha* to task for the way the question is phrased, emphasising that he said "to you", which implied that his question about the *avodah* and what it was all about didn't apply to himself. There's just one small problem...if we look carefully at the question attributed to the *Chacham*, he appears to make this same fatal mistake, saying "commanded you", implying, like the *Rasha*, that his question also didn't apply to himself.



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In fact, to avoid this very obvious problem with the *Chacham's* question, we find a different text for the Four Sons contained in the *Talmud Yerushalmi*, the Jerusalem Talmud. The text found in the *Yerushalmi* actually changes the question of the *Chacham* – going so far as to edit the actual text drawn from the *Chumash!* – changing the ending of the question from “commanded you” to “commanded us”, thereby seemingly “solving” the dilemma. (The *Baruch She'amar* finds another way to redeem the question of the *Chacham*, noting that the *Chacham* alone mentions the name Hashem and, in so doing, includes himself with the entire nation of Israel, stating in his question the words, “our G-d”.)

But it really doesn't solve anything, as we've still failed to answer satisfactorily our original question: why did our Sages see fit to ascribe this particular question, “What is this *avodah* to you?” to the personality of the *Rasha*?

To understand this, we need to look back at the context in which each of these questions occurs in the *Chumash*. The question attributed to the *Chacham* is preceded by the phrase, “When your son asks you tomorrow, saying...” So too, the question attributed to the *Tam* is preceded by

the phrase, “When your son will ask you at a later time², saying...” But what precedes the question attributed to the *Rasha* is entirely and noticeably different: “And it shall be when your children will say to you...” Notice the difference?

Each one of the questions attributed to these three sons begins with the Hebrew word *mah*, ‘what’, clearly indicating that they are each asking a question. But the Torah informs us regarding the statements attributed to the *Chacham* and the *Tam* that they are actually asking something – that what follows after these introductions are actual questions from them: “your son will ask you”.

The *Rasha* on the other hand isn't asking anyone anything; on the contrary, he's making a statement – “your children will say to you” – a statement which, without considering the context in which it appears, can easily be misconstrued as a question. After all, he begins with the word ‘what’. And, taken out of context as it is in the Haggadah, it's easy to mistake his “question” for being a genuine one. But the *Rasha* isn't actually asking anything; his manner of phrasing is purely a rhetorical device, what we would call in our day a rhetorical question, a question which doesn't seek or expect an answer,

but instead serves to put across the opinion of the person asking it, just as the *Rasha* intends to do here.

Another clue that the *Rasha* is not asking a question can be seen by the answer that our Sages chose to give him. They chose to give the same answer to the *Rasha* – “It is because of this that Hashem did for me when He took me out from Egypt” – as they did to one of the other four sons, none other than The *Sh'eino Yode'ia Lishol* (The Son Who Doesn't Know How To Ask a Question). The implicit message: just as the response to The *Sh'eino Yode'ia Lishol* isn't answering a question that he had previously asked, so too the response to the *Rasha*, likewise, is not answering a question – because the *Rasha* wasn't asking one!

It also helps to have a look at the way the *Rasha's* “question” is emphasised and elaborated upon in the alternate text of the Four Sons that we find in the *Yerushalmi*, which differs significantly from the way the question is asked and answered in the text of the Haggadah and which makes it entirely clear that the *Rasha* is not asking anything – that his question is entirely rhetorical as its context in the *Chumash* implies – and his entire point is to deride what he sees before his eyes, which is what, in fact, actually makes it quite obvious that he is indeed a *Rasha*.

After stating the original question from the *Chumash*, “What is this *avodah* to you?” the *Yerushalmi* then adds to the “question” of the *Rasha*: “What is this burden with which you bother us each and every year?!” The *Rasha* isn't interested in knowing anything about the seder or in asking anything, he just wants to express how he feels about the whole thing. How does he feel about the seder and everything related to it? It's an incredible nuisance and he's had more than enough of it over the years, and is quite tired of it. He has nothing but disdain for what he's witnessing in front of his eyes.

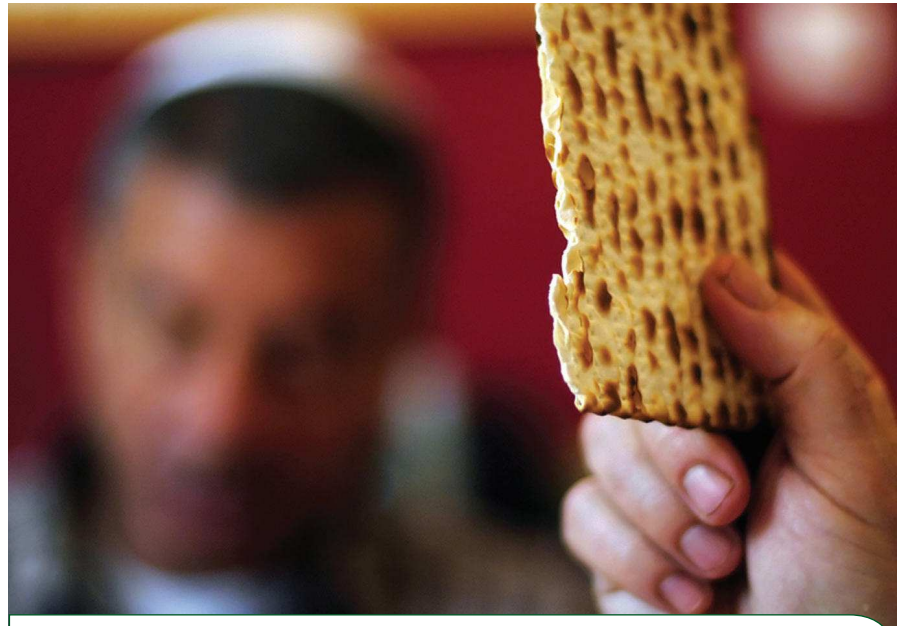
It's for precisely this reason that our Sages saw in his question – or, more precisely, the context of his question – that such an attitude personifies a *Rasha*, a person who



“ WHAT IS THIS BURDEN WITH WHICH YOU BOTHER US EACH AND EVERY YEAR?! ”

has no interest in what we do as Jews. He's not asking anything. Instead, he's ridiculing what he sees. He knows little to nothing and, as a result, has even less to add to the conversation. He has no interest in learning anything, happy to remain blissfully ignorant, but strongly opinionated.

What's perhaps most shocking is the answer that our Sages chose to give to the *Rasha*. After all, one of the hallmarks of Judaism – especially when compared to other religions – is how much questions are welcomed. Jewish children who receive a Torah education are literally trained to ask questions and generally rewarded and praised when they ask especially good ones. So why not just ignore the tone and attitude in the *Rasha's* question and answer him! Our Sages say that, since the *Rasha* is a *kofer b'ikur* (one who denies fundamental principles – ie. Hashem) and has taken himself out from the congregation, it's not appropriate or worthwhile to enter into a debate with him; it's better simply to blunt his teeth and leave it at that.



“SO WHAT EXACTLY DID OUR SAGES SEE IN THE QUESTION, “WHAT IS THIS AVODAH TO YOU?” THAT LEAD THEM TO ATTRIBUTE IT TO THE RASHA?”

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That said, our Sages also famously teach in Pirkei Avos³, “Be diligent in Torah study and know what to answer a heretic...” We need to know for ourselves – and, perhaps also and especially, for those who might feel challenged by the so-called “questions” of the heretic – what to answer, but the importance of

answering, as we see from the response given to the *Rasha* in the Haggadah, is not for the sake of the heretic himself, but rather for those around him. We need to know what to answer such a person, but that doesn’t mean we need actually to answer him and engage him in debate. Someone so far gone doesn’t deserve an

answer, but those, who he might negatively influence, do. So we must know what to answer such a person, even if we don’t share that answer with him.

¹Shemos 12:27

²See Rashi

³2:19

THE QUESTIONS (HIGHLIGHTED) ATTRIBUTED TO THE FOUR SONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CHUMASH, AS WELL AS THE ANSWERS GIVEN THERE:

The Chacham – Devarim 6:20-21

“When your son asks you tomorrow, saying, ‘**What are the testimonies, ordinances, and laws that Hashem, our G-d, has commanded you?**’ You will say to your son, ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and Hashem took us out from Egypt with a strong hand.’”

The Rasha – Shemos 12:26-27

“And it will be when your children say to you, ‘**What is this avodah to you?**’ “You will say to them, ‘It is the Pesach offering to Hashem, Who passed over the houses of the *Bnei Yisrael* (the Children of Israel) in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, and He saved our houses and the people bowed and prostrated themselves.’”

The Tam – Shemos 13:14

“And it will be, when your son will ask you at a later time, saying, ‘**What is this?**’ You will say to him, “With a strong hand, Hashem took us out from Egypt from the house of slavery.”

The Sh’eino Yodei’a Lishol – Shemos 13:8

“And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, ‘It is because of this that Hashem did for me when he took me out of Egypt.’”

THE FOUR SONS AS THEY APPEAR IN THE HAGGADAH:

“The Torah speaks about four sons: one wise, one wicked, one simple, and one who doesn’t even know how to ask.

The wise son, what does he say? ‘What are the testimonies, ordinances, and laws that Hashem, our G-d, has commanded you?’ You say to him about the laws of the Pesach (offering): we don’t add afikomen (dessert) after the Pesach offering

The wicked son, what does he say? ‘What is this avodah (service) to you?’ ‘To you’ and not ‘to him’. Because he has taken himself out from the congregation, he denies the fundamental principles (ie. Hashem). You blunt his teeth and say to him, ‘It is because of this that Hashem did for me when He took me out from Egypt.’ ‘For me’ and not ‘for him’; If he was there, he would not have been redeemed.

The simple son, what does he say? ‘What is this?’ Say to him, ‘With a strong hand, Hashem took us out from Egypt from the house of slavery.’

The son who doesn’t know how to ask, you must open up (the discussion) for him. As it says, “And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, ‘It is because of this that Hashem did for me when He took me out from Egypt.’”

THE FOUR SONS AS THEY APPEAR IN THE TALMUD YERUSHALMI (PESACHIM 10:4, 70B):

Rabbi Chiya taught, “The Torah speaks about four sons: the wise son, the wicked son, the foolish son, and the son who doesn’t know how to ask.

The wise son, what does he say? ‘What are the testimonies, ordinances, and laws that Hashem, our G-d, commanded us?’ You say to him, ‘With a strong hand Hashem took us out from Egypt, from the house of slavery.’

The wicked son, what does he say? ‘What is this avodah to you? What is this burden with which you bother us each and every year?!’ Since he takes himself out of the congregation, you say to him, ‘It is because of this that Hashem did for me...’ For me He did; for this man, He would not do. If this man was in Egypt, he would never have witnessed the redemption from there.

The foolish son, what does he say? ‘What is this?’ Teach him the laws of Pesach: we don’t add afikomen (dessert) after the Pesach offering; we don’t stand in this group (for partaking of the Pesach) and then enter into another group; etc.

The son who doesn’t know how to ask? Open up (the discussion) for him first.” Rabbi Yusa says, “We learn in a Mishnah that if the son does not know (how to ask), his father must teach him.”

For a Hebrew version of the above text, visit: goo.gl/MNHFPg, file called **Four Sons** 

Based on the Mesivta Haggadah