A popular section in the Pesach Haggadah is that of the Four Sons, within which is a strange give-and-take involving the rasha. His question is deemed to be outright heresy and is met with a severe response. Whereas the other three children receive straightforward verbal responses, the rasha is treated to two additional components. The Haggadah instructs the responder to “hakheh et shinav” – do something to the rasha’s teeth, and to inform him, in the third person, that had he been enslaved in Egypt he would not have been redeemed. Why is he given these two additional components, what is meant by hakheh, and is there a connection between these anomalous aspects?

Most explanations translate hakheh as to “blunt” or “dull” his teeth. This unusual word may contain the key to the entire response. The anonymous compiler of the Haggadah cleverly inserted his message assuming a knowledgeable readership familiar with our holy writings.

The word hakheh is not the common word spelled with a chaf, meaning hit, but rather the rare Biblical word הָקהָה. It appears in only three places in Tanach: Jeremiah 31:28-30, Ezekiel 18:2, and Kohelet 10:10. From Kohelet an unequivocal definition can be deduced – “blunt.”

The other two verses address the concept of the culpability of one generation for the sins of another, a fundamental issue with seemingly contradictory sources in Tanach. One of the clearest statements of individual accountability is a proverb found in almost identical form in Jeremiah 31:28-29 and Ezekiel 18:2-4, and it is in that context that the word hakheh appears. Jeremiah states: “In those days they shall say no more: ‘The fathers have eaten unripe (sour) grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge (tikhena).’ But everyone shall die for his own iniquity; every man that eats the sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge (tikhena).”

Could the Haggadah’s intention in using hakheh in the response to the rasha be to immediately recall for the reader the verses from Ezekiel and Jeremiah and their parables? It may thus be intended to convey the following message: the rasha had excluded himself from all Pesach rituals, yet he was not worried about his fate. Even if all this is really required he feels he has no need to worry. After all, the people around him are his family, and they are all engaged in performing G-d’s commandments. In his way of thinking, some of that merit would transfer to him. The compiler of the Haggadah therefore instructs “blunt his teeth!” That is, remind him of those “sour grape” verses. Neither guilt nor merit automatically crosses generational lines.

In other words, if you, rasha, were in Egypt and had not been engaged in the proper activity you would not have been redeemed. The merit of your family would not have helped. There is no automatic transference of merit. Each person is responsible for his own deeds and is capable of teshuva. The burden of one’s sins and the suffering one might endure cannot be attributed to previous generations, nor should one sin in the anticipation that the burden of guilt will be borne by subsequent ones. Jews cannot rest on the laurels of righteous ancestors; each generation must establish its own merits and legacy. The exception to the rule of individual accountability is community zechut (merit) and that is why we also inform the rasha that by removing himself from the community he has forfeited that too.

The blunting of the rasha’s teeth is a subtle yet powerful reminder of personal responsibility. This individual accountability cannot only doom him – as he is explicitly told – but can just as readily rescue him, since he is judged on his actions and his actions alone. We are telling him that he is not beyond hope, but it is up to him to rescue himself. The message to the rasha is a powerful message to us as well – each person is given free choice and sinks or swims on his own merit.

1 A complete treatment of this topic can be found in Ari Zivotofsky, Personal Accountability and Blunting the Teeth of the Rasha, Alei Etzion 18 (5778), pp. 155-170, Alon Shvut.