The most celebrated ritual across global Jewry is the Pesach Seder. With nearly every type of Jew coming to the table, one of the most famous passages relates to the four children, "one wise and one wicked and one simple and one that does not know how to ask [a question]." Layered with meaning, there are countless interpretations of this ancient passage. While each of these interpretations presents advice in broad strokes rather than being black and white, each is connected and leads towards an approach to the questions posed in providing insight to our Pesach experience and beyond.

Nearly every child has a parent and a teacher. While nature definitely influences the type of person we become, nurturing that nature can be more powerful. One kind of parent/educator is domineering, telling instead of teaching, resulting in a child who is not taken by the treasures of his tradition, feeling alienated and not even knowing how to ask a question. The second type of parent/educator places his universal identity above his particular identity, investing all his energy in broader humanity at the expense of his Jewish community, resulting in a simple son that understands the broader world, but not his unique place within it. The third category or parent/educator does not provide boundaries, allowing the child to grow in his own way and sometimes leading to wickedness because there was no moral compass or sense of meaningful direction. The fourth is the wise role model, resulting in a wise child, for sincerity breeds sincerity and when the child sees the earnest pursuit of wisdom, taught in a palatable way, he often wants to follow suit. The fifth parent/educator is not meaningfully present with the child when it matters most, resulting in the fifth child who is absent from the Seder and other important places.

The phrasing of these four children is strange in its extraneous use of the word “one,” – “one wise and one wicked and one simple and one that does not know how to ask a question.” Perhaps “one” is emphasized before each of the categories because each has a place at the Seder – each person is a world in and of themselves. Moreover, each can be traced within the same single person. While these four approaches sometimes contradict one another, they each provide insight into different stages within each person. Life is by no means a simple process with black and white results; however, the categorization of the four children teaches a lesson to the children just as much as it does to society, educators and parents, encouraging us to think about how we bring up our children and live in the next generation. Ultimately, one-size does not fit all and each person must educate [and be educated] according to his way.

Throughout this journey, each person sits at the table, no matter which stage they are currently leaning towards or how they are labeled. For our community to continue and for each of us to grow, we must keep coming to the table and engage in the important rituals and meaningful conversations the Seder has provided across the generations and will continue to provide every single year!

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