



## The Wise and the Wicked

The Torah speaks of four sons: the wise, the wicked, the simple, and the one who does not know how to ask. From time immemorial, archetypes of these sons have been asking questions in every generation, sometimes old ones, sometimes new ones. The wise and the wicked of one generation are not necessarily the same as the wise and the wicked of a different generation. Their brothers in the Haggadah, the simple son and the son who does not know how to ask, also appear in different guises in different periods.

In our generation too, the four sons are asking new questions and need fresh answers. Where can we find these answers? Just as the answers to the original children's questions are highlighted in the Torah, so too are the answers to the new questions. If we know where to look in Torah and *Chazal*, we can find correct and relevant answers to questions from every child in every generation.

### The Wise Son

The Admor of Sochochov (the *Avnei Nezer*) explains that the wise son asks why “the L-rd our G-d commanded you.” Why do we need a command, without which man would still be worthy of doing good? The wise son claims that being commanded harms a person's natural goodness.

Human reason (=wisdom) seeks autonomy. It strives for freedom and independence, and finds it difficult to bend to command. It longs for good, but is interested in choosing freely, without an external command. The Torah's answer to the wise son's question is:

“The L-rd commanded us to observe all these laws, to revere the L-rd our G-d, for our lasting good and for our survival.”

Meaning: the Torah is life – “for our good... for our survival” – and therefore, it would have been worthy to keep the *mitzvot* regardless of having been commanded. However, keeping them because of Divine command adds an important layer: “to revere the L-rd our G-d.” Command creates fear of and connection to G-d.

The big questions the wise sons of our generation ask are about the value and meaning of the commandments. If we don't understand them, or ‘connect’ to them, why keep them? Wisdom is interested in holiness, but not necessarily through command, with Divine authority. On Pesach, we declare that everything starts from the commandments, for without them, there is no true holiness.

### The Wicked Son

“What is this worship to you?” The wicked son sharply feels the dimension of obedience in Torah, the *avodah*, but doesn't understand what the point of that *avodah* is (*Sefat Emet* and *Shem MiShmuel*). Why keep the Torah? What good does it do? He rebels not only against obedience to *mitzvot* but also against the content of the *mitzvot*. He doesn't believe the Torah is beneficial to his life. The wicked one himself recognizes he is different, and removes himself from the community. He feels himself completely alienated from the world of Torah.

Sometimes, the attitude of the wicked son is so extreme that we have no way of communicating with him. There is no point in continuing the conversation. Therefore, there were some (the Gra, for example) who wrote that the response to the wicked son is not addressed to him but to the rest of the sons – “had he not been there, he would not have been redeemed” (third person).

The opinion of the Chassidic masters differed: the answer to the wicked son *is* addressed to him. Why? Because nobody is beyond hope. On the holiday of freedom, we believe there is a possibility to redeem the wicked one from his wickedness, and to free him from the negative outlook to which he is enslaved.

What is the Haggadah's response to the wicked son? “It is because of *this* the L-rd did for me.” With the word “this,” we lay down the historical facts (Ramban). We tell him to look at the historical process of Israel's redemption. The Exodus was not a coincidence; it carries deep significance. Redemption is a merit which places obligations upon us. There is a connection between Jewish history and our destiny on earth. We – and he – are part of something much greater, and much more significant and magically eternal than this or that particular *mitzvah*.

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