

Rabbi Bukiet on the Haggadah

Adapted by Dovid Zaklikowski

The Salted and Purified Rebuke

What is a culture, an art and, many will claim, a talent?

The passion of rebuke.

We *all* have something to say about what everyone else is up to. We are quick to criticize and rebuke our friends, neighbors, educators, and leaders.

There is a huge industry, in fact, surrounding the phenomenon of discussing what other people are doing: Talk Radio. The *New York Times* recently reported that opinion-based news shows on stations such as FOX and MSNBC trump the old fashioned news on CNN. Most of these conversations center on public officials' actions, their policies, and gaffes.

The Torah teaches us to rebuke our fellows for their wrongdoings, as stated in Leviticus (19:17), "You shall surely rebuke your fellow." Discrete rebuke, with the intention of bringing about change in the rebuked individual, has always been part of Jewish practice.

The Passover meal celebrated in Jewish homes across the globe, known as the *Seder*, is divided into fifteen steps. The order of these steps contains many lessons for our daily lives. One of these lessons involves the appropriate way to rebuke our fellows.

Towards the beginning of the *Seder* are some interesting, and seemingly bizarre, customs. We ritually wash our hands, referred to as "purification," or *Urchatz* in Hebrew. We then have a piece of a vegetable, known as *Karpas*, dipped in salt-water. Then we take the middle of our three thin *matzahs* and break it in half, known as *Yachatz*. The smaller half of the *matzah* is returned to the *Seder* plate, while the larger half is hidden until the end of the night, when it is eaten prior to the Grace after Meals.

One of the reasons for breaking the *matzah* is because *matzah* also commemorates the bread of the poor—thin cracker bread. As slaves in Egypt, the Israelites would eat this broken and cheap bread.

Yet the order of the *Seder* is peculiar. Why don't we break the *matzah* earlier, prior to the washing of the hands and the dipping of the vegetable? Shouldn't the entire *Seder* be over this broken *matzah*, which holds so much meaning for the Passover experience?

The broken spirit represented by the broken *matzah* could refer to any individual who is down because of a mistake or wrongdoing. The breaking of the *matzah* is also a symbol for rebuking—the breaking of the spirit.

As individuals, we sometimes silently enjoy putting down the other so that we could be elevated at their expense. Our intention, in these cases, is not goodly; nor will it make a difference in the person we are rebuking.

When coming to rebuke another, we must first wash our hands. We need to purify ourselves spiritually, thus removing any personal agendas which would result in damaging rebuke.

We then need to dip that satisfaction we might've received, symbolized by the good vegetable, in saltwater, to remove, to erode, the egotistic layers which cause us to put down others. The salt reveals the essence of good in us, the kinder source in our hearts.

Only then, when there is no other reason beside goodly intention, should one rebuke.

When rebuke is given in this way, coming from the heart, from the depth of good, it will surely enter the heart of the other, and bring about meaningful improvement.



Why Ask the Four Questions on Passover?

Why are the four questions asked as part of the Passover *seder* service?

The common answer is that the questions are asked to involve the children. But why couldn't this custom to involve the kids be done in the *Sukkah* hut or during another holiday?

On Passover we celebrate our freedom from slavery. A slave is allowed no independent will, no opinion, and cannot question authority or voice his thoughts. With freedom the Jewish nation was given the possibility to ask, to question.

The idea of Passover in our personal lives is about becoming free from our internal constraints. Only by probing what Judaism is, asking and seeking more, can one become free from his or her current state, and reach a higher spiritual level.

Asking of the four questions symbolizes that quest.



Why the Emphasis on Telling the Passover Story?

We read in the *Haggadah* text, from which the Passover *seder* service is conducted, "Everyone who discusses the exodus from Egypt at length is praiseworthy."

Why is such a strong emphasis placed on every person to tell the Passover story? Couldn't we simply sit around the table, relax, lean back in our chairs, and enjoy our current state of freedom?

We read in the verse (Exodus 10:2), "And in order that you should tell into the ears of your children and grandchildren... and you will [all] know that I am your G-d."

The verse does not say, "And the *person* will know that I am your G-d." It is written in form of inclusionary, "And *you* will [all] know."

When one relates the story, one not only relates it for the sake of the other person. By telling the story, it comes to life for both the one who is telling the story and the one who is listening.

The purpose of retelling the Passover story is not just to read another thriller. It is for the story to become a part of one's daily life. Through telling the story, reviewing it with those at your table, and discussing it with them, you will be able to relive the exodus at your Passover *seder*.



The Wicked Son's Perceptive Question

"The wicked one, what does he say? 'What is this service to you?!' ...You, therefore, blunt his teeth..."—From the Haggadah Liturgy.

The four children are sitting around the Passover table: the wise, the wicked, the simpleton and the one who does not know how to question. Though very different from each other, they are doing the same thing. They are eating, drinking and discussing Passover topics: slavery, freedom and how their father kept the bitter herbs so strong.

At one point, three of the four raise their questions to their parents, to the elders sitting around the table piled with all the traditional Passover foods.

"What this is all about?" one asks. Another asks about the difference between the various sorts of commandments. And then there is the wicked son.

His question: "What is this service to you guys?"

I am a wicked person, he's declaring. I enjoy food, I live in order to indulge in the pleasures of the world. It makes perfect sense for me to be a part of this grand feast... but what does it have to do with *you* guys?

You guys, he explains, should be sitting on the floor meditating in silence. Get rid of the food, get rid of the wine, no need for the herbs! How is all this called serving G-d?

We are instructed to respond forcefully to this question, "blunt his teeth!" For why would G-d have created teeth if it was not for a good purpose?

G-d created teeth so that they too should serve Him. The physical world and its pleasures cannot be divorced from their spiritual purpose. We were created in order to make a dwelling place for G-d here, in our physical reality. We need to engage the world, not shun it.

And that is precisely why the Jewish nation was redeemed from Egypt, to receive G-d's commandments on Mount Sinai. Commandments that encompass the entirety of life; not just the mind, but all our material pursuits too.

So this Passover, let's feast. That's what Passover's all about.



Hillel's Passover Sandwich: A Dose of Positivity

Thus did the [sage] Hillel during the time when the Holy Temple [in Jerusalem] was standing: He would combine [in a sandwich] the Passover offering, the *matzah* and the bitter herbs and eat them together...

Sitting at the festive Passover service, the "*seder*," we eat some bitter herbs to remind us of the enslavement of the Jewish nation in Egypt. The *Haggadah* text, from which we conduct the *seder*, directs us not to recline while eating the bitter herbs even though we do recline while eating the other traditional foods. This is because reclining represents freedom, and bitter herbs are a reminder of slavery.

Now the *Haggadah* shares some history with us:

The great sage Hillel did not eat the bitter herbs separately. Nor did he eat the *matzah* alone. Hillel lived at the time of the Holy Temple, when eating the Passover sacrifice was a part of the Passover obligations. Instead of eating the three foods separately (*matzah*, bitter herbs, meat from the sacrifice) he would make a sandwich combining the three, and eat it while reclining. To commemorate Hillel's sandwich ("*korech*"), Jews do the same today, eating the Hillel sandwich (minus the meat) while reclining.

Symbolized in the sandwich is Hillel's positive approach to all the hardships in his life.

The sandwich is comprised of *matzah* and bitter herbs. *Matzah* is the thin bread that represents the freedom we have been granted, as opposed to being slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt. Inside the two pieces of *matzah* we place the bitter herbs, symbolizing life's hardships.

Hillel viewed the bitter parts of his life, particularly the hardships of poverty that G-d bestowed upon him, positively. So, while his life appeared difficult, he was able to understand that it was G-d's will and ultimately for a good reason. Therefore he placed the bitterness (bitter herbs) inside the freedom (*matzah*) and ate it while reclining.

Two Names Seeking the Good

Passover and the Holiday of *Matzah* are two of the names given to the holiday. G-d refers to the holiday as the Holiday of *Matzah* and the Jewish nation call it Passover.

The *matzah* represents the Jews listening to G-d's commandment to leave Egypt immediately. They were in such a rush that the dough of the bread did not have a chance to rise and instead baked as *matzah* while still being carried on their backs. The name Passover represents G-d jumping over the Jewish homes as he killed the Egyptian firstborns.

G-d looks at the Jewish nation positively, recalling their rush to heed his command, and calls it the Holiday of *Matzah*. The Jews look at G-d positively and recall how He spared their homes, calling the festival Passover.

Adapted by Dovid Zaklikowski (dovidzak@gmail.com) from the written notes of Passover commentary of his grandfather, the venerated scholar and teacher Rabbi Chaim Meir Bukiet, of blessed memory.