

As the introduction to these texts tell us, the Torah speaks of these four contrasting children. There are three verses where we can see children asking questions of their parents, revolving around the Pesah celebration. The first is in Exodus 12:26, the second Exodus 13:14, and the third in Deuteronomy 6:20. The source for the fourth son is Exodus 13:8, where the parent tells the child without a question being offered. It is most interesting to note that the answers given to the children are not what is offered in the Torah text. The Rabbis were skilled at taking Torah verses out of context and mixing them up to fit what they were trying to teach. The question of the scholarly son is found in Deuteronomy. That in itself is significant, because this book is the “retelling” of the law when the Israelites were ready to pass into the land. It is now 40 years later and except for the first Pesah in Egypt these rituals have not yet been observed. Once they go into the land they will have Pesah. The scholarly son wants to know what to do when that time comes. This son is the quintessential rabbinic scholar who takes the ritual and delves into it as much as possible to find out what to do. The answer the Torah gives is not what is given here. The Torah says, “You shall say to your child, ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and God took us out with a strong hand. God gave signs and great and terrible wonders to Egypt, Pharaoh and his entire household before our eyes. And he took us from there in order to bring us to give us the land that God swore to our fathers. And God commanded that we do all of these laws in order to fear God, to bring us good all the days and to give us life as this day...’” This is a perfect answer for the question in context with getting ready to enter the land. Here in our Seder, we do not need such a complex answer, so the Rabbi’s chose to answer with one of the more esoteric laws of the seder, that you cannot add afikoman after you eat the Pesah sacrifice. The sacrifice would have been the final thing eaten at the seder and after that there is to be nothing added. Today we use the matzah called afikoman to symbolize this.

The answer given to the sinful son is very different from what we find in the Torah. In the Torah we read, “You shall say, ‘It is the Pesah sacrifice to God who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when he sent the plague on Egypt, but our houses he saved.’” Again, the answer is direct to the question. For the purposes of the Hagaddah, the answer needs to be changed. Here we are told to chastise the child for excluding himself from the community. The actual answer is the same as that of the fourth son, except here it is said with some anger. God would not have taken him from Egypt had he been there. He excluded himself and so too does God exclude him. The scholarly son is given a response befitting a scholar; the sinful son is given a response befitting a sinner. A good question here would be is it too late for this sinful son? Can he still do tshuvah (repentance) and come back into the fold, or is he too far gone. Removing oneself from the community is quite possibly one of the only ways in today’s society to be truly on the outside. No matter what one does, even eating on Yom Kippur, one can always do tshuvah and come back into the fold. Turning your back on the community though, may be enough to push you over the edge and be totally lost to the Jewish people. This is why the Rabbis said that if he had been there he would not have been redeemed.

The scholarly son, what does he say? What are the testimonies, statutes and judgements that God has commanded you? You should answer him with the laws of the Pesah; You may not add Afikoman after the Pesah.

חֲכָם מַה הוּא אוֹמֵר? מַה הָעֵדוּת
וְהַחֲקִים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים, אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה
יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ? וְאִם אַתָּה אֹמֵר לוֹ
כְּהַלְכוֹת הַפֶּסַח: אִין מִפְּטִירִין
אַחַר הַפֶּסַח אֲפִיקוֹמָן:

The sinful son, what does he say? What is this service to you? To you and not to him. Because he has excluded himself from the community he has denied the essence of Judaism. And you should tell him bluntly, It is because of what God did for me when he took me from Egypt. For me and not for him. If he had been there he would not have been redeemed.

רָשָׁע מַה הוּא אוֹמֵר? מַה
הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם? לָכֶם וְלֹא
לוֹ. וְלִפִּי שְׂהוּצִיא אֶת עַצְמוֹ מִן
הַכָּלָל, כִּפְרָ בַעֲקָר. וְאִם אַתָּה
הַקְהָה אֶת שְׂנִי, וְאֹמֵר לוֹ:
בְּעִבוּר זֶה, עָשָׂה יְיָ לִי, בְּצִאתִי
מִמִּצְרַיִם, לִי וְלֹא לוֹ. אֵלֹהֵי הָיָה
שָׁם, לֹא הָיָה נִגְאָל: