



Why are These Questions Different...

Parshat Tzav, Leviticus 6:1- 8:36 | By Mark Greenspan

“Shabbat Ha-gadol” by Mark Greenspan (pp. 201-202) in *The Observant Life*

Introduction

For many families one of the highlights of the *seder* night is the *Mah Nishtanah*. Parents and grandparents wait with anticipation to hear their children and grandchildren recite the so-called “Four Questions.” For many this is the true test of a religious school: can my child recite the four questions with proficiency? Yet there is more to the four questions than...four questions. What’s really going on here? Are these really questions? Why is this passage recited by children? And why did our ancestors choose to single out these four ‘differences’ from the *seder* when there were so many other differences that could have been highlighted? Why do we recite the *Mah Nishtanah* at the very beginning of the *seder* before we drink all four cups of wine or even take a bite of *matzah*? Add to these queries the fact that the order of the four questions is not the same in Ashkenazic and Sephardic *haggadot* and that there were originally only three questions in the mishnaic version of this passage! There are so many questions and so little time! As we celebrate *Shabbat HaGadol* take the time to open a *haggadah* and review the text in preparation for Passover eve. This is a great place to begin making the *seder* more meaningful!

Haggadah: How different this night is from all other nights!

For on all other nights we eat leavened bread and *matzah* – this night we eat only *matzah*.

For on all other nights we eat all kinds of vegetables - this night we eat bitter herbs.

For on all other nights we do not dip even once – this night we dip twice.

For on all other nights we eat either sitting or reclining – this night we all recline.

The Torah Connection

Why is this night different from all other nights?

On all other nights we do not even dip once; tonight we dip two times.

On all other nights we eat leavened or unleavened bread; tonight we eat only matzah.

On all other nights we eat all types of vegetables; tonight bitter herbs.

On all other nights we eat and drink either sitting or reclining; this night we all recline.

Sephardic and Italian Version of the *Mah Nishtanah*

They pour a second cup of wine for him. And here the son questions his father. If the son has insufficient understanding to question, his father instructs him: Why is this night different from all [other] nights? On all other nights, we eat leavened and unleavened bread, but on this night, we eat only unleavened bread. On all other nights, we eat all kinds of vegetables, but on

this night, we eat only bitter herbs. On all other nights, we eat meat roasted, stewed or boiled, but on this night, we eat only roasted meat. On all other nights, we dip vegetables once, but on this night, we dip twice. And according to the son's intelligence, his father instructs him. He begins answering the questions with shame and concludes with glory, and expounds from "My father was a wandering Aramean" until he completes the whole passage.

-M. P'sahim, 10:3

In the Mah Nishtanah, which mentions some of the things that are 'different' on this night, we mentioned eating matzah, bitter herbs, dipping twice and leaning. We don't mention the Passover offering which our ancestors ate on this night, nor do we mention the four cups of wine, nor the numerous times we wash our hands. Why do we ask specifically about matzah, maror, dipping and leaning?

We make mention of those things that remind us that we are free, like royalty and the King's advisors and we make mention of other things that are the exact opposite, that remind us that we were slaves, humiliated and ashamed. "On all other nights we are not obligated to dip even once but tonight we dip twice," we do this because tonight we are treated like free people and people of upper class as is exemplified by the fact that we eat our food with all types of appetizers. Dipping is the practice of royalty. On the other hand we can eat any type of bread or matzah we want but tonight we must eat matzah, the bread of affliction, which is the food of slaves and laborers as has been mentioned. Similarly, on all other nights we can eat whatever vegetables we want but tonight we must eat maror, and it must be raw so that it is a sign of slavery and great poverty. And yet this we also lean, a sign of leisure and freedom. Eating while leaning and in a leisurely manner is a sign of honor. Matzah and maror are symbols of slavery while dipping and leaning are symbols of freedom and leisure. We mention them all at the seder to draw attention to the contradictory nature of this evening. There are two symbols of each because of the principle, that two witnesses are needed to testify in any manner. The Passover offering and the wine do not testify to these matters.

-Don Isaac Abarbanel, 1437-1508, Zevah P'sah

The author of Ma'aseh Adonai (a commentary on the Haggadah) asks two questions regarding the Mah Nishtanah. First why did the rabbis obligate the asking of questions so that the participant in the seder must ask himself questions, if there is no one else to do so? And second: Why were these differences mentioned and not others such as the four cups of wine? The telling of the story of the Exodus which we learn from scripture is based on the verse, "You shall tell your son on that day, "It is because of this which the Lord did for me that I went forth from Egypt." (Exodus 13:8). This means that we must tell the story at the time when the matzah and the maror are placed on the table before us. The commentator Rashi explains that the expression "because of this" refers to the fulfillment of the commandments (that is "It is because of these commandments that the Lord took me out of Egypt"). When we see the symbols of the commandments with our own eyes, we are not only supposed to tell the story of the Exodus but we are supposed to explain the significance of the rituals and the symbols for which God took us out of Egypt. The Mah Nishtanah, then, was composed to refer specifically to the commandments of matzah and the maror. The story of the Exodus should be told from the vantage point of the commandments that we fulfill on this night. The first two questions refer to the Torah commandments. Added to these are two other commandments which are specifically rabbinic: dipping and leaning. This is to teach us that we are as careful in observing the rabbinic traditions of Passover as we are in observing the traditions based in the Torah. These two customs were chosen because they occur at the very beginning of the seder.

-Rabbi Yaakov Loberbaum, 1760-1832, Ma'aseh Nissim

Our Rabbis taught: If his son is intelligent, he asks his father, while if he is not intelligent, his wife asks him; but if not, he asks himself. And even two scholars who know the laws of Passover must ask one another.

-BT P'sahim 116b

He begins answering the questions with shame and concludes with glory.” What is ‘with shame’? Rav said: ‘Aforetime our fathers were idolaters’; while Samuel said: ‘We were slaves. Rabbi Nahman asked his slave Daru: When a master liberates his slave and gives him gold and silver, what should he say to him?’ He should thank and praise him,’ replied he. ‘You have excused us from saying “Why is this night different?” observed he. Thereupon he commenced by reciting, ‘We were slaves.’ (

-BT P’sahim 116b

The notion that a question should open the seder is either midrashic in origin or a reflection of the Greco-Roman custom of beginning the symposium’s discussion with a question.

In my opinion, it is likely a combination of both. But the ascription of the question to a child is a reflection of the three places in which the Torah cites a future question that a child will ask his father and is answered in connection to the Exodus... When the rabbis of the Mishnah wished to create a banquet meal to replace the sacrificial ritual lost when the Temple was destroyed, they did so in a form which was recognizable to them as the proper way for conducting a meal, all the while ensuring that they achieved their ultimate goals of studying Torah and recalling the Exodus... The Mah Nishtanah text is not actually a list of questions to be recited by the son or by any other person. Rather, it is clear from the Mishnah and from the Talmudic passages cited... that the Mah Nishtanah is a formal means by which to prompt the child to ask a question should he be unable to do so on his own...

- Joshua Kulp, *Schechter Haggadah: Art, History and Commentary*. (2009, Jerusalem, The Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies)

In the post-Talmudic period two important changes occurred in the recitation of the Mah Nishtanah. The first is that the Mah Nishtanah began to be considered a mandated piece of liturgy and not merely a default text in case a spontaneous question was not asked. For instance the Rambam, Laws of Hameitz and Matzah 8:2 writes: "And they mix the second cup and here the son says, 'How different this night is from all other nights..." The Rambam skips the phrase from the Mishnah, "And if the son is not knowledgeable, the father teaches him," since the Rambam holds that even if the son is knowledgeable and has asked a question, the Mah Nishtanah must still be recited... Rabbinic authorities are not unanimous about who recites the Mah Nishtanah.

- Joshua Kulp, *Schechter Haggadah: Art, History and Commentary*. (2009, Jerusalem, The Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies)

My mother made me a scientist without ever intending to. Every other Jewish mother in Brooklyn would ask her child after school: So? Did you learn anything today? But not my mother. “Tzzy,” she would say, “did you ask a good question today?” That difference — asking good questions — made me become a scientist.

-Isador Rabi, Nobel Prize Winning Physicist as quoted in "Great Minds Start With Questions" in Parents Magazine September 1993

Reflections

We begin by pointing out that based on its original context in the *mishnah* the four questions are not questions at all; they are exclamations of surprise. “How different is this night!” not “How is this night different?” We are still left to wonder why the *haggadah* focused on these four differences that this night sets apart from all others. As we look at *Mishnah P’sahim* the *Mah Nishtanah* was quite different from the passage we now recite. First it includes a statement about eating roasted meat (and not boil baked or sautéed). Second it did not

include a statement about leaning at the *seder*. Some scholars believe that originally there were only three statements in the *Mah Nishtanah*: eating roasted meat, *matzah* and bitter herbs. The three statements were then explained later in the statement of Rabban Gamaliel who tells us that anyone who has explained three symbols at the *seder* hasn't fulfilled the obligation: *p'sah, matzah and maror*. It all fits together very nicely when viewed in this way.

Only it evolved over the years. First, leaning at the dinner table was not out of the ordinary at the ancient Greco-Roman symposia so no one would have questioned this practice. It was only later on when people kept on leaning that it became a source of inquisitiveness. Dipping was also a normal practice at a formal dinner (like dipping chips in salsa or humus as a fore spice) - but people only dipped as part of the appetizer and not during the meal so if this was a question then the inquiry would have been why do we dip twice when we normally only dip once. This may have been one of the original statements of the *Mah Nishtanah* but the focal point of this question would have been on dipping *maror* in *haroset* and not dipping in general. Technically our four statements are redundant since we have a question about dipping *maror* and we also have a question about eating *maror*. So three became four and the four statements focused on the changing perception of the *seder* etiquette.

But that doesn't answer the question of why these four statements were singled out. Abarbanel and Loberbaum each offer a different answer to these questions. For Abarbanel the focus of the four statements is the contrast between slavery and freedom; interestingly the two symbols that are commanded by the Torah are understood as symbols of slavery: *matzah* and *maror*. Only later in Rabban Gamliel's statement do we interpret *matzah* as a symbol of liberation. Note that Abarbanel, a Sephardic Jew bases his interpretation on the chiastic order of the symbols and symbolic practices: A- B- B- A- (or dipping/freedom, *matzah*/slavery, *maror*/slavery, leaning/freedom).

Loberbaum understands the first two statements are Torah commandments. *Matzah* and *maror* are what the *seder* is all about for us. The second two symbols focus on the rabbinic aspect of the holiday. Judaism is both a biblical and a rabbinic holiday and the four statements remind us of this.

In Joshua Kulp's fascinating commentary on the evolution of the *seder* we find a discussion of both its biblical and Greco-Roman roots. As he explains the sages integrated the authentic Jewish values of the *seder* with the cultural and social sensibilities of the classical world. The *seder* is structured around the symposia with a focus on family, children, education, and faith. We find in its evolution a powerful example of how we as contemporary Jews must learn to integrate our appreciation and commitment to Judaism with the larger world in which we live.

We end with a quote from the preeminent physicist, Isador Rabi. Although his statement was not written for the *seder* it could very well have been! The *Mah Nishtanah* may not be questions but it is meant to inspire questions. The ability to ask questions is the beginning of freedom. When the child does not have the ability (or the interest) to ask questions then we must coach him/her. And if there is no one there to ask questions then we must challenge ourselves. The *seder* begins not with *matzah* but with a question, with curiosity, and a desire to learn.

Questions to Ponder

1. How does one account for the different order of the statements in *Mah Nishtanah* in the Ashkenazic and Sephardic *haggadot*?
2. Don Isaac Abarbanel and Rabbi Jacob Loberbaum each focus on different reasons for the four symbols and symbolic acts that are included in *Mah Nishtanah*. Which interpretation makes most sense to you? What other explanations can you give for this statement?
3. Read the two statements above from *P'sahim* 116b. They seem to suggest that *Mah Nishtanah* is not a fixed text but an example of the type of things one might point out that are different about this night. What other things could be included in the *Mah Nishtanah*?
4. What questions should we discuss on Passover night? Come up with three issues or topics to discuss, debate, or think about at the *seder* that relate to the themes of Passover.
5. What can we learn from Joshua Kulp about the connection between Jewish tradition and the larger world in which we live? How can we integrate modern American sensibilities into Jewish tradition while remaining true and authentic in our expression of Judaism? What aspects of American culture should be left out?
6. Are all questions good? What limits or boundaries are there in the type of questions or doubts we express when exploring Judaism?

Adapted from Torah Table Talk by Mark Greenspan