The Four Children

1. The Haggadah offers us educational advice about intergenerational storytelling. The midrash of the Four Children invites us to distinguish different character types and to suggest different approaches to our offspring. Consider the artistic interpretations of the Four Children, and compare and contrast them.

BLESSED be God
Blessed be He
Blessed be the Giver of the Torah to the people Israel
Blessed be He.

THE TORAH alludes to Four Children:
One Wise, One Wicked, One Simple,
One Who Does Not Know How to Ask.

2. The Rabbis turn the commandment of “v’heegadta” (you shall tell) into a mitzvah of dialogue – with give and take on both sides. Successful dialogue means that each side, and especially the side anxious to “pass on the message,” be keenly attentive to what the other is saying and feeling – to the particular personality and his or her needs.

Istvan Zador, Four Children (Budapest, 1924)
Education Through Dialogue

A Reminder for Parents
Thus far the Haggadah has given guidelines to the parent who is full of earnest enthusiasm to pass on an historical and cultural “message” to the younger generation. If ever there was an event which appeals to the parent’s desire to bring their youth-culture-centered children to appreciate the old values of cultural and ethnic pride and identification, the Pesach Seder is it!
Here lies a dangerous pitfall for the parent-educator. The leader of the Seder is likely to concentrate on the text of the Haggadah without sufficiently taking into consideration the audience – the younger generation – and their level of interest. Absorbed with the sales-pitch, the salesperson often forgets the customer!

“The Four Parents:”
Children Label Their Parents

IN THE DAYS of the patriarchal regime, we allowed ourselves to categorize our children harshly, accepting only one as positive – the wise one.
The simple, the wicked and the one who knows not how to ask questions had to swallow hard and hide their sense of being insulted . . .
Now in our days no child is identified as “the offspring of the parent” and often the parent is identified as “the parent of that child.” We have arrived at an era not of patriarchy or matriarchy but the rule of children. In our age it is then miraculous that our dear, delightful children don’t divide us up and categorize us. At the best, we would be rated “naive or simple minded parents” or “parents who don’t know how to respond to a question.” (Israel Eldad, “The Victory of the Wise Son”)

The Pitfalls of Labelling

I INSTINCTIVELY recoil from static stereotypes that label persons simplistically. Therefore, I choose to interpret the midrash of the four children as a diverse set of strategies for addressing four different facets of each and every child. Each personality combines these facets in different ways. For example, the wise and the rebellious facets can be combined for evil. Then the cunning mind is used to inflict pain on one’s parents. Alternatively, the combination can produce a revolutionary chalutz (pioneer) seeking not just to undermine the traditional order but to create new frameworks of meaning. This requires an intelligence which is not conservative like the traditional “wise child” but which looks beyond the horizon, beyond the existing laws and their pat rationale.
(Yaariv Ben Aharon, Kibbutz author)

Questioning Our Wisdom

The truly wise question the wisdom of others because they question their own wisdom as well, the foolish, because it is different from their own.
(Rabbi Leopold Stein, Journey into the Self
(Germany, d. 1882)
The Four Children as a Screenplay

1. A simple reading of the Haggadah’s midrash of the four children can obscure the fact that it provides the script for a dialogue. Let each character in the dialogue be played by a different Seder participant.

2. The cast is as follows: - Narrator - Each of the four children - Four parents who answer.

3. The reading goes as follows:

Narrator: What does the wise child say?
Wise Child: “What are the testimonies, the statutes, and the laws which Adonai our God has commanded you?” (Deut. 6:20).

Narrator: You must tell some of the laws of Pesach (from the Mishna, for example):
1st Parent: “We do not proceed to any afikoman (dessert or after dinner celebrations) after eating the Pesach lamb” (Mishna Pesachim chapter 10).

Narrator: What does the wicked child say?
Wicked Child: “Whatever does this service mean to you?” (Exodus 12:26).

Narrator: This child emphasizes “to you” and not to himself or herself! Since the child excludes himself or herself from the community and rejects a major principle of faith, you should “set that child’s teeth on edge” and say:
2nd Parent: “It is because of this, that Adonai did for me when I went free from Egypt” (Exodus 13:8).

“Me” and not that one! Had that one been there, he or she would not have been redeemed.

Embarassing your Parents

This difficult child is determined to embarrass us, the parents (in the midst of the Seder before all the guests). He implies that the wine and lambchops are only for our culinary pleasure when he says pointedly, “This service is for you” (not for God). (Don Isaac Abrabanel, Spain, 15th C.)
The wise child of the Haggadah is portrayed as a knowledgeable, believing and obedient child. This child formulates long complex questions, distinguishes multiple categories of laws, and accepts the God who commanded “us.” But let’s beware of this stereotyped, academic brainchild. Is this child truly wise?

- **Don Isaac Abrabanel, “The Smart Alec”:** “This ‘wise-guy’ child is arrogant in his ‘wisdom.’ He shows off the distinctions he can make between types of mitzvot. ‘But you teach him the subtleties down to the last detail in the Mishna.’ Let the ‘smart-alec’ who appears wise in his own eyes see that there is still much for him to learn.

  There is twice as much wisdom in these laws as in the question. Let the wise grow in wisdom and in humility.”

- **Israel Eldad, “To Know When to Ask”:** “No! The wise child does not derive his title from the pretense to know-it-all. One who thinks he possesses wisdom already, does not ask at all. ‘One who does not even know how to ask’ has a negative trait, typical of the know-it-all. The truly wise child asks genuine questions, not cynically and mockingly like the rebellious child and not superficially like the simple child. He seeks the essence of things, ‘What is the true nature of the laws, testimonies and statutes that God has commanded us?”

- **The Chassidic Seer of Lublin:** “In my judgment, it is better to be a wicked person who knows he is wicked, than a righteous one who knows that he is righteous. Worst of all is to be a wicked person who thinks he is righteous.”

(Menachem HaCohen, Haggadah of HaAm)

The “Wicked Child” – An Unfair Description?

- The “wicked” child expresses a sense of alienation from our Jewish heritage. In this age of liberalism and democracy, of pluralistic tolerance for many cultural expressions, should a person who expresses such a feeling be condemned as “wicked” or “evil”?

  - Role-Playing: try to “get inside” the personality of the so called “wicked” children and their parents. Describe the feelings of each one in this tense confrontation described in the Haggadah.

  **Suggestion:** Have the younger participants at the Seder describe the feelings of the parent, and have those who are already parents describe the feelings of the child.
The Four Children Continued

Narrator: **What does the simple child ask?**

Simple Child: “What is this?” (Exodus 13:14).

Narrator: And you shall say to that child:

3rd Parent: “By a mighty hand Adonai brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”

Narrator: As for the child who does not know how to ask, you should prompt him, as it is said: “You shall tell your child on that day, saying:”

4th Parent: “It is because of this, that Adonai did for me when I went free from Egypt” (Exodus 13:8).

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**The Parent of the Silent Child**

The child does not ask because he is afraid of making a mistake. He does not know how to phrase his question and lacks confidence. Therefore, the parent should try to lead him into a conversation, to encourage him, to strengthen him, to strengthen his confidence. (Marc Angel, Sephardic Haggadah, p. 30)

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**“You shall tell your child”** (Exodus 13:8)

The Rabbis wondered about: “You shall tell your child on that day: ‘It is because of this, that Adonai did for me when I went free from Egypt.’”

Could this verse mean that you should begin to tell the story at the beginning of the month (in which the Exodus occurred)?

No, for the verse explicitly states “on that day” (of the Exodus).

Could that mean that we start when it is still daytime?

No, for the verse explicitly states: “because of this.” “This” refers to matza and marror laid before you (only on Seder night). (Mekhilta)

“This” implies that the parents must point at the matza and marror, using them as visual aids to tell the story. (Rabbi Simcha of Vitri)
The Contemporary “Four Children”
Which famous person today would be the best representative of the “wise child,” of the “wicked child,” and so on? Suggest candidates and discuss their suitability. Or suggest animals to symbolize the Four Children. (See p. 29.)

A Child’s Perspective
Ask the younger children to describe the behavior of “a bad child” at the Seder.
- What might be causing such behavior?
- Do they approve of the parent’s response in the Haggadah?
- How would they handle the situation?
- Why do they think the “silent child” asks no questions?
- How might that child be coaxed into greater involvement?

Beyond Labels
I DO NOT VIEW labels as static pigeonholes. I believe in the power of the educational act to release locked up potentials. For example, one who does not know how to ask may be silenced by the rules of society. The silence may hide an exceptional, sensitive child whose questions are choked. A parent can “open the child up,” remove the obstructions, enable personal growth and break stereotypes (Yaariv Ben Aharon, Kibbutz author).

Bridging the Generation Gap
The inter-generational dialogues in the Torah explicitly refer to parents who participated in the Exodus addressing their children who have grown up in freedom in the Land of Israel. The parents have undergone an experience of slavery and redemption which is totally foreign to the reality of their offspring.

Discussion #1: What are the generation gaps among us, the participants of tonight’s Seder? Go around the table and have people relate a formative experience which might be difficult for their parents or children to comprehend.

Discussion #2: In the illustration above, who do the characters represent? How do their clothing and body language express the generation gap? Who is the dominant figure at the table?
The Art of the Four Children

1. **Compare and contrast** the artists’ interpretations of each of the Four Children (p. 18-33).

2. **Which portrayal** is most surprising? most disturbing? most appropriate?

3. **What conceptions** of Jewish values and society are implicit in the various depictions? (See the unabridged version of *A Different Night*, p. 174-176, for a commentary on each illustration.)
Eastern European Types

Arthur Syzk, Poland, 1939
The Blessing of Diversity

The artist and calligrapher David Moss explains his depiction of the Four Children:

EVERY CHILD is unique and the Torah embraces them all. The iconography that I've chosen here is based on playing cards. As in a game of chance, we have no control over the children dealt us. It is our task as parents, as educators, to play our hand based on the attributes of the children we are given. It is the child, not the parent, who must direct the process. This, I believe, is the intent of the midrash of the four children.

Each child's question appears on his card, and the Haggadah's answer appears below the card. The gold object in each picture denotes the suit of the card. The staves, swords, cups and coins used in Southern Europe developed parallel to the more familiar hearts, diamonds, clubs and spades of Northern Europe. The figures are likewise taken from archaic systems of playing cards which included king, knight, page, and joker or fool. The king image here represents the wise child wearing the crown of Torah. The knight represents the wicked child. In almost all old Haggadot the wicked child is shown as a soldier, sometimes mounted, sometimes on foot. The page is the simple child, and the joker or fool is the child who is not even capable of asking.
Every Child is a Blessing

I got the idea of representing the children as cards, by the way, from the tradition dating from the Middle Ages of depicting the simple child, or the child who doesn't know how to ask, as a jester or fool. I drew a book in each picture and positioned it to reflect each child's attitude to the tradition.

The text of the Haggadah introduces the four children with a short passage in which the word baruch (blessed) appears four times. I have designed these two pages to correlate each of these four "blessings" with one of the four children: every child is a blessing.

Diversity, how we deal with it, and how we can discover the blessing within it, is perhaps the theme of the midrash of the Four Children.

(David Moss, 20th C. artist, U.S.A. and Israel)
Four Attitudes to the Zionist Dream

Tzvi Livni, Israel, 1955 © Yavneh Publishers
Four Personalities  Paul Freeman, U.S.A, 1960
Clashing Cultures  Siegmund Forst, Europe and U.S.A, 1959
Four Children, Four Musicians

Shraga Weil, (CL 1963 Cat. S-3) © Safrai Gallery
The Four Children as Four Books

David Wander, The Haggadah in Memory of the Holocaust © 1988

Clay Children

Rony Oren, Animated Haggadah, Israel, © 1985 Jonathan Lubell, Scopus Films
Lola, U.S.A, 1920

Nota Koslowsky, U.S.A, 1944

Jakob Steinhardt, Germany, 1923

Dick Codor © 1981