

Pesakh VII Sermon 5778  
Liberation and the Four Children

We have a haggadah which features a number of artful representations of the seder's Four Children. My own favorite is one that represents the wise, the evil, the tam and the one unable to ask as the four Marx brothers: Groucho, Chico, Harpo, Zeppo.

At seder we discuss those four types: the *khakham* (wise), the *rasha* (evil), the *tam* (the innocent), and *eino yode'a lishol* (the one unable to ask), and we discuss how each of them responds to the goings-on at seder. Each has a different capacity in taking part in Jewish ritual and communal life, and each has a number of different possible interpretations. One is to view each of these children not as discrete and fixed personalities, but as aspects within each of us. We are all, at times, wise, evil, innocent or unable to grasp what is happening.

Applying the liberation theology of Pesakh to each of these aspects of ourselves, we might find that in any given year we need to escape from the *mitzrayim* of each of them. The *khakham* may want to ask themselves if being known for their devotion, knowledge and piety is always such a good thing. Perhaps they have drifted into being an insufferable know-it-all, or is now too arrogant to listen to what others have to offer, because they see those around them as irredeemable dullards, or has no patience for others or have arrived at a kind of self-satisfied complacency. Once you are wise, after

all, why bother even trying anymore. Maybe the *khakham* in each of us needs to come out of the *mitzrayim* of their wisdom.

The *rasha*, or course, needs to be liberated from their evil. But what is the nature of that evil? Does the *haggadah* get it right when it describes their questions as rejecting their very place within the tradition? Could it be that what we thought was a rejection of ritual, belief or belonging is a desperate cry for better answers? Maybe the *rasha*'s affect is not 'What does this mean to you,' but rather 'Why doesn't this mean more to me?' There is a real difference between casting away a tradition and pleading for it to justify itself. The *rasha* in each of us might need to come out of the *mitzrayim* of being misunderstood.

Many of us know someone who is a *tam*, a pure, innocent person who seems fixed in their unknowing. By dint of intellectual limitations, personality quirk or a choice made not to move from where they are, they are static. The *tam* is a good, simple person who is never expected to offer much different nor expects it of themselves. For them, Pesakh might be a chance to upend those expectations, to actually have expectations. I once knew a man of limited intellect, truly the mind of a child, but who was the most proficient Torah reader I've ever heard. He could learn long passages and know the perfect pronunciation and trop. What if no one ever introduced him to that skill? How many other people who are *tam* have untapped potential to learn, to enjoy, to share a smile? And how many of us pretend to be a *tam*, innocent, pure and therefore exempt

from any expectation of change, challenge or growth? The *tam* within us all needs to be liberated from the *mitzrayim* of abandoned expectations.

There are also times when each of us feels like the *eino yode'a lishol*, like we don't even know what we don't know. How can we dare to even ask a question, at seder or at any time, when we don't know the material, the language, the historical background, the theology? What if we never had the chance to learn, or didn't pay attention when we did, or had other interests and obligations that competed with our Jewish learning as children, teens and young adults; what if we came from a family that was never observant and we just don't know what we would want to? Not everyone attends Ramah, Jewish day school or the seminary, though I fervently wish they could. For every one of us who is *eino yode'a lishol*, at any level, we need to come out of the *mitzrayim* of embarrassment, anxiety or other limitations to embrace the liberation of our minds and souls. There is no end to what Judaism has to offer us; we require only the courage to ask.

Each of us is one of those children, at different times and for different durations. This year, let's all liberate each of them within us.

Hag same'akh.