



# What Does This Avodah Mean to You?

*Lessons about Jewish identity from the "wicked" son's question*

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One of the most dazzling insights of the sages was to connect the dots – the three places in the Torah where children are spoken of as asking questions, and the fourth where we are commanded to “teach your child on that day” – and turn them into the series of vignettes known as the *arba banim*, the four children of the Haggadah, one wise, one “wicked,” one simple and one not yet able to ask.

Most fascinating and perplexing is the *rasha*. Today we would probably call him the rebel, the sceptic, the delinquent. I for one find it hard to describe any child as a *rasha*, hence the quotation marks. One puzzle is simply this: what is wicked or subversive about the question, “What is this service to you?” (Ex. 12: 26). It seems straightforward. The child wants to know why his parents are doing what they do. That is what most inquisitive children want to know about the behaviour of adults.

The Torah itself does not treat the child as a rebel or the question as a provocation. The passage continues: “You must answer, 'It is the Passover service to God. He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians, sparing our homes'” (Ex. 12: 27). This is a straightforward answer to a straightforward question. Nonetheless, the sages heard something discordant and dissident in the text, leading them to conclude that something is not quite right. What was it? To this, there are three main answers.

The first is the approach taken by the Haggadah itself. On this reading, the key word is *lakhem*, “to you.” “To you,” he says, not “to him.” Famously the text continues, “By setting himself apart from the community, he denies an *ikkar*, a fundamental principle of faith.” What exactly the

fundamental principle is that the *rasha* denies is a question worthy of study in its own right, but one thing is clear. For the Haggadah the discord lies in the word *lakhem*.

R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk offered a second interpretation. He noted that the biblical text at this point says, “And when your children *say* to you ...” (Ex. 12: 26). This is unusual. The normal verb introducing a question is *lishol*, not *leimor*, “to ask” not “to say.” To ask is to seek an answer. To say is to express an opinion. Hence, concluded R. Meir Simcha, what makes this child different is that he is not asking a genuine question but a rhetorical one. He seeks not to learn but to dismiss. He asks but is not interested in the answer. On this view the key word is *yomru*.

The Talmud Yerushalmi, though, takes a different view again. It understands the question of the *rasha* to be, “What is all this effort [*torach*] that you undertake each year?” According to one reading of the Yerushalmi the child is asking about all the effort involved in preparing the korban pesach (Shibbolei haLeket). According to the Ritva he is asking about the Haggadah itself: why delay the meal with so much talking, so many questions, answers and explanations? What is clear, though, is that for the Yerushalmi the key word is *avodah*. When the child says *Mah ha-avodah ha-zot lakhem*, he is not asking, “What is this *service* to you?” but rather, “What is this *hard work* to you?” This is a deep insight. I will argue that it goes to the very heart of the Jewish condition today.

To understand the power of the Yerushalmi’s reading we need to go back to a passage at the opening of the Torah’s narrative of slavery. Here is the text in the Kaplan translation:

The Egyptians started to make the Israelites do labour designated to break their bodies. They made the lives of [the Israelites] miserable with harsh labour involving mortar and bricks, as well as all kinds of work in the field. All the work they made them do was intended to break them. (Ex. 1: 13-14)

And here it is in Robert Alter’s translation:

And the Egyptians put the Israelites to work at crushing labour, and they made their lives bitter with hard work with mortar and bricks and every work in the field – all their crushing work that they performed.

What these translations fail to convey – inevitably, because of the literary conventions of English – is that these two verses contain the word *avodah* in one form or another *five times*. Translated more literally, they read:

The Egyptians made the Israelites *labour* with crushing rigor. They embittered their lives with hard *labour*, with mortar and bricks and all kinds of *labour* in the field: all the *labour* they *laboured* for them was crushing.

In total, the word appears seven times – a significant number – in the first two chapters of Exodus. So the Torah intends us to hear, as the motif of the Israelites' suffering in Egypt, the word *avodah* in its dual sense of hard work and slavery. Hence our surprise when, during Moses' epiphany at the burning bush, we hear God saying:

"I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship [*ta'avdun*] God on this mountain."  
(Ex. 3: 12).

The Israelites will know that they have left Egypt and slavery when they arrive at the mountain and there engage in *avodah* to God. *The same word is used to describe slavery and freedom, bondage and liberation, Egypt and exodus.* That, according to the Yerushalmi, is the point the *rasha* is making. "What is this *avodah* to you? Nothing has changed. There we were *avadim*, here we are *avadim*. There we had to work for a master, here we have to work for a Master. There it was hard, here it is hard. All that has changed is the master's identity. There it was Pharaoh. Here it is God. But we remain *avadim*. Tell me, dear father, how we are better off now than we were. Why is being Jewish such hard work?"

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As I write, the Jewish world has been reflecting on the Pew Report on American Jewry, showing that outside Orthodoxy the outmarriage rate has risen to 71 percent. 32 percent of young Jews describe themselves as "of no religion." Less than a third of American Jews belong to a synagogue. 48 percent cannot read Hebrew.

More interestingly from a sociological standpoint, the report confirms an unusual feature of American Jewry. There used to be a saying in Yiddish: *Vi es kristels zich, azoy yiddles zich*. Jews adapt to the coloration of the surrounding society. If non-Jews are religious, Jews tend to be religious. If they are secular, Jews tend to be secular.

America is different. Taken as a whole, the population of the United States is one of the most religious in the world, but the Jewish community is significantly less so. 56 percent of the general population, but only 26 percent of Jews, describe religion as an important feature in their lives. 69 percent of the general population believe in God; only 34 percent of Jews. 50 percent of the general population attend a place of worship monthly; only 23 percent of Jews. This is a longstanding phenomenon: it was already remarked on by sociologists in the 1960s. But it remains a striking anomaly.

Let me suggest one possible explanation. Throughout a century of reflection on how to sustain Jewish identity in an open, secular society, the case has often been made that we need to make Judaism easier. Why make the barriers so high, the demands so steep, the laws so rigorous and demanding? So, one by one, the demands were lowered. Shabbat, kashrut and conversion were all made easier. As for the laws of *tehorat ha-mishpacha*, in many circles outside orthodoxy they fell

into abeyance altogether. The assumption was that the less demanding Judaism is to keep, the more Jews will stay Jewish.

To show that this is a fallacy, I once asked a mixed group of observant and non-observant Jews to list the festivals in order of difficulty. Everyone agreed that Pesach was the hardest, Shavuot the easiest, and Sukkot somewhere in between. I then asked, which festivals are kept by the greatest number of Jews. Again, everyone agreed: Pesach was kept by most, Shavuot by the least, with Sukkot in between. There was a pause as the group slowly realised what it had just said. It was counterintuitive but undeniable: *the harder a festival is, the more people will keep it*. The proof is Yom Kippur, by far the most demanding day of all, and by far the best attended in synagogue.

This is not an isolated phenomenon. Those familiar with the work of behavioural economist Dan Ariely, for example, will know of the experiment he performed in which he invited a group of people to make origami shapes. Their work was then demonstrated and participants and bystanders were asked how much they would pay for them. On average, the people who made the models were willing to pay five times as much as were the bystanders. He then did a second experiment, similar to the first but with one difference: this time there were no instructions as to how to make the models. The task, in other words, was even harder. This time the makers were prepared to pay even more. His conclusion? The tougher the challenge and the more skill and time we have invested into it, the more we value it. The sages said this long ago. *Lefum tza'ara agra*: according to the effort is the reward.

A host of recent studies of outstanding achievement, among them Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*, David Shenk's *The Genius In All Of Us*, Geoffrey Colvin's *Talent is Overrated*, Matthew Syed's *Bounce* and Daniel Coyle's *The Talent Code*, have shown precisely this, that high achievement is the result of tireless dedication (at least 10, 000 hours of it) and deep practise. That is why people strive to get into the great universities, or win an Olympic medal or a Nobel Prize. It is also the phenomenon that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow" or "peak experience," the point at which a challenge tests us to the limits, calling for total focus. To be sure, there are some challenges that are simply too hard and leave us feeling overstressed and inadequate. But in general we value most highly what tests us most deeply.

Sometimes of course the opposite is true. We appreciate the one-click buy, the one-stop shop, the instant communication and the computer search that takes microseconds. *But this applies when we are seeking convenience, not when we are seeking meaning*. If what we are looking for in a religion is convenience, no one in his or her right mind would recommend Judaism. But if we are looking for meaning, no religion has ever been more profound.

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The Yerushalmi does not tell us how to answer the child who asks why Judaism is such hard work, such *avodah*. Speaking personally, this is the answer I would give.

“My child, you ask a good question and I respect you for that. Others may call you a *rasha*, but to me you are not that at all. You are being honest. You are telling it the way you see it. You are right to speak what is in your mind. We cannot empower children to ask questions and then get angry when they ask the wrong questions or the right questions in the wrong way. I cannot give you an answer that will end your doubts, but I can say what I have learned in the course of my lifetime.”

“People are prepared to undergo a long and arduous training to earn a living – to become a doctor or a lawyer or a therapist or an economist. Judaism asks us to undergo an equally long and arduous training in order to live: to be not just a doctor or lawyer or therapist or economist but also a human being who is bigger than his or her specific roles. That is because Judaism takes life – the art of living in the image of God – with absolute and ultimate seriousness.”

“The ancient Egyptians enslaved whole populations to build monumental buildings, pyramids, temples and royal palaces. They saw buildings as the end and human lives – the lives of the labouring masses – as a means to that end. Jews, guided by God, believed the opposite. Buildings are a means to an end. What matters are lives. Lives are holy.”

“The Greeks produced great works of art. Jews believed that life itself is an art. Just as an artist invests time in perfecting his or her craft, so we invest time in perfecting our lives. Ancient Egypt and ancient Greece were great civilizations. They left us imperishable masterpieces of architecture and art. But neither valued life – our lives as individuals possessed of inalienable dignity – the way Jews and Judaism did.”

“Judaism is hard work because freedom is hard work. Pesach is especially hard because it is the festival of freedom. Freedom is threatened in two ways: by individualism and collectivism. Collectivism – worship of the system, the state, the nation, the race – has produced the worst tyrannies of history. That was true not only in the days of Moses. It was true in the twentieth century in the form of fascism and communism. It is true in many countries today.”

“Individualism represents the opposite danger. When individuals put private gain ahead of the common good, a society eventually collapses. That has been true of every affluent society in history. It has a brief flurry of success and then enters a long or short decline. You can tell in advance when a society is about to begin a decline. There is a breakdown of trust. Leaders lack stature. Divisions grow between rich and poor. There is a loss of social solidarity. People spend more and save less. In their focus on the present they endanger the future. There is less discipline and more self-indulgence, less morality and more pursuit of desire. Cultures grow old the way people grow old, and they begin to do so when they are at the very height of their powers.”

“I once asked the non-Jewish historian Paul Johnson who wrote a great *History of the Jews* what had most impressed him in the years he spent studying our people. He replied that in his view no civilization in history had managed as well as Jews had done the balance between personal and social responsibility – the road that avoids collectivism on the one hand, individualism on the other.”

“That is what Pesach is about. It is about my personal experience of freedom: On Pesach we must each see ourselves as if we personally had left Egypt. But it is also about our shared experience

of freedom as we tell the story of our people and hand it on to future generations. Judaism is about the 'I' and the 'We.' Without our willingness to encourage questions, argument, debate, and endless new interpretations of ancient texts, we would lose the 'I.' Without halakhah, the code that binds us together across centuries and continents, we would lose the 'We.' And yes, it's hard work. But I tell you from the depth of my heart that there is no achievement worth having that is not hard work."

What we need in Jewish life today is not ways of making Judaism easier. What costs little is valued even less. We need to find ways of showing how Judaism lifts us to greatness. When that happens people will not ask, *Mah ha-avodah ha-zot lakhem*, "Why all the hard work?" Neither an athlete going for an Olympic gold medal nor a scientist trying a new line of research ever asks that question; nor did Steve Jobs at Apple or Jeff Bezos at Amazon. The pursuit of greatness always involves hard work. The real challenge of our time is to rediscover why Judaism, because it asks great things from us, lifts us to greatness. The rest is commentary.

In 2008 two teenage Americans, Alex and Brett Harris, wrote a book that became a best-seller. It was called, *Do Hard Things*, and subtitled: *A teenage rebellion against low expectations*. We need a Jewish equivalent. That will be the answer to the question young Jews still ask, "What does this *avodah* mean to you?"