

"BE NOT OTHERWISE"

The Haggadah's Third Son in a New Light

a sermon

preached by

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on

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One of the most famous and beloved parts of the Haggadah concerns the Four Sons, the four types of individual to whom the Seder's story is directed. Yet an analysis of this Jewish typology, this casting of characters, leaves us slightly confused. The four do not seem to be organized properly; they are somewhat disarrayed. Hence, while one of them, the *Rasha*, is a classification of piety and ethical behavior, the other three are categorized according to intellect: the Wise Son or *Hakham*, the Simple Son or *Tam*, and the exceedingly foolish one who cannot even ask, the *She'eino yodeia li'sheol*. Furthermore, why are there two types of unintelligent sons, the *Tam* and the unquestioning one? Since they are both unwise, does it not mean that essentially there are only three sons, not four?

R. Yitzhak Arama, the author of *Akedat Yitzchak*, solves our problem by offering a new definition of the *Tam* and presenting the Haggadah's Third Son in a new light. For while the Jerusalem Talmud clearly declares the *Tam* to be one who is faulted intellectually, calling him a *tipesh* or fool, the *Akedat Yitzhak* maintains that he is not typed intellectually but religiously and ethically. The Four Sons are divided into two classes, he tells us. Intellectually, the *Hakham* and *She'eino yodeia li'sheol* are opposed to each other: the first is Wise, the second Foolish. Then, however, there is the criterion of conduct. Here the *Rasha* and *Tam* are counterposed: the first is Wicked, the second Good. The *Tam* is the opposite not of the *Hakham*, but of the *Rasha*. That *tam* is a complimentary word is seen from the fact that Father Jacob was called *tam* — *Yaakov ish tam* — and that the Talmud's term for an animal that is benevolent rather than dangerous and murderous is — *shor tam*. The *Tam*, then, is not the Simple Son or Foolish Son, but the Wholesome Son, the pious and good and obedient one.

Thus, while the *Tam* is the opposite of the *Rasha*, he is also different from the one who cannot ask. For while the latter is childish, the former is child-like. While the latter is infantile, the *Tam* is simple — and what a noble virtue simplicity is! The *Hafetz Hayyim* and the *Hazon Ish* and others like them were brilliant scholars — but they exuded simplicity. And, to go from the sacred to the secular, Prof. Albert Einstein was not exactly a simpleton; yet how marvelously simple he was in all his ways!

Yet the *Tam* is also different from the *Hakham*. Despite all the praise we heap on this Wise Son, he is not unblemished. For some strange reason, which may go deep into the unconscious of our race, there has always been an instinctive element of suspicion about this *Hakham*. Witness the sarcasm with which we refer to someone as “*der Hakham fun der Mah Nishtanah!*”

Wisdom can, after all, be distorted. One who is only wise is always in danger of having his wisdom degraded, of becoming merely smart; and the smart man often succeeds only in outsmarting himself! One of the brightest men in Biblical history was Korah — and he was trapped in his own shrewdness when he decided to lead the rebellion against Moses. Do you recall Rashi's observation — *Korah she-pikiah hayah mah raah li'shtut zu*, Korah was so bright, what led him into this foolishness? Perhaps even more to the point is the added comment of the Kotzker Rebbe: *mah raah li'shtut zu — li'heyot pikeiah!* What led Korah into this foolish-

ness — of being shrewd! A *hakham* may become merely a *pikiah*, smart; and this is foolish, for then he may outsmart himself.

The *Tam*, the Wholesome or Good Son, may very well be as wise as or wiser than the *Hakham*. There is only this difference: unlike the Wise Son, he has no desire to display his learning before others by asking impressive questions. He is a man without pretenses. He does not wear his *lomdut* or scholarship on his sleeve. And herein, indeed, lies his superiority over the *Hakham*!

Every Saturday at *Minhah* time we recite the verse *adam u-vehehmah toshia, ha-Shem*; we implore the Almighty to help both man and animal. But the Talmud (*Hullin* 5b) had another explanation, maintaining that our prayer refers to one species, men only — the kind of men *she-hen arumin be'daat u-mesimin atzman ki'behemot*, those who are brilliant in intellect and yet act as simple as animals. What marvelous restraint that requires — to possess an acute mind and an abundance of learning, and refrain from exhibiting them to your fellow men!

The crux of the matter is not the possession of intellect, but the relative values one assigns to intellect and goodness. Thus, when Yehudah Halevi pleaded for the superiority of historical experience and personal participation over abstract reasoning, he was stating the case for the *Tam* over the *Hakham*. Furthermore, the ultimate test of both humanity and Jewishness, and the essential guarantee of their survival, lies not in ideal thinking but in real living. The author of the *Ore ha-Hayyim*, who lived during the expulsion from Spain, writes that when Jews were put to the test of choosing between kissing the cross or enduring exile and even death, the sophisticated philosophizers embraced Christianity under pressure, while the masses of men and women and children, usually unsophisticated and unlearned, but who loved God and lived Judaism simply, dared to risk death and exile. He thus confirms the importance of a total view of Jewish living.

In essence, the Hasidic movement represented the emergence of the *Tam*, the reaffirmation of the virtue of simplicity, of inner goodness and kindness and piety, whether or not accompanied by intellectual powers. It was *not* a revolt against scholarship or intellectualism or the study of Torah; certainly Judaism, more than any other religion, places a premium upon knowledge and intellectual attainment. It was a protest against the overemphasis of these virtues at the expense of the inner life of the Jew, his emotions, his heart, his soul. *Temimut* — the act of being a *Tam*, the wholeness of personality, the integration of all experience into a simple love of and submission to God — was considered as superior to the isolated quality of *hokhmah*.

One of the greatest of all Hasidic teachers, the grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, R. R. Bratzlaver, put it this way: *ahar kol ha-hokhmot*, after all this wisdom, one ought to discard all his sophistication and turn to the Lord in order to serve Him *bitemimut u-vi'peshitut gamur*, in utter wholesomeness and simplicity, *be'li shum hokhmot*, without any awareness of being "wise." The greatest *hokhmah* of all, he says, is *li'veli li'heyot hakham kelal*, not to be "wise" at all, for in fact there is no completely wise person in the world, for man's wisdom is still as naught compared to that of the Creator. *Ve'ha-ikkar hu, ki rahmana liba ba'i*, above all, the Merciful

God desires man's heart — not, assuredly in the American Jew's sense of "a good heart" excusing one from living like a Jew, but in the sense of an emotional and spiritual deepening of the experience and practice of the *mitzvot*. Hasidism is unimpressed by intellectual acrobatics. It prefers heart over mind, faith over philosophy, dedication over dialectics, love over learning. The third son, the *Tam*, is thus regarded as even greater than the first, the *Hakham*.

Can such a point of view be accepted today? I believe so. Our society in general suffers from an overabundance of knowledge at the expense of man's wholeness, his self, his integrity. Science reigns supreme, and colleges are impossibly crowded. Knowledge is universally acknowledged as the key to a better job and more convenient society, as power in the world of international relations. All of this is unquestionably true. Yet when the mind and its achievements are so stressed that all else is excluded, that man is considered a machine whose loves and hates and fears and passions and aspirations are trivial — then we have outsmarted ourselves. Then man is in eclipse; he is like a freak child who has an abnormally large head and undersized body and heart.

In our Jewish world, we suffer from a horrendous *am haaratzut*. There is no doubt that we are intellectually anemic. Yet in our attempts to correct the situation we seem to be heading in the way of the *Hakham* rather than the *Tam*. Look in any Jewish bookshop and you will be impressed by new books on so-called "Jewish theology." These are books by a new breed of writers for whom Jewish religious thought is a kind of fascinating game — equivalent to the Israelis' hobby of archeology. For all their sophisticated words about the commitment to Judaism, you will rarely find one of them who comes to "shul" or lays the Tefillin or is careful about Kashruth. I have met readers of this brand of wisdom in all parts of the world — Jews who weigh every word of Buber but have never read through the Bible, even in translation!

Look through the catalogues of adult education institutes of the synagogues and fraternal organizations of our country. You will find that usually the wrong questions are being asked. There is too much *hokhmah* and too little *temimut*. I, for one, would ban all courses which contain the word "and" — such as "Judaism AND Psychiatry," "Judaism AND Civil Rights," "Judaism AND Democracy." Instead I would substitute the simple *Mah zot* of the *Tam* — the "what is it all about" of Shabbat and Kashrut and Family Purity and Jewish ethical law. The answers are *intellectually more profound* than the other kind — and *religiously much more significant!* Let us not forget that it was Solomon, the wisest of all men, the *hakham mi-kol ish*, who taught: *al tit'hakam yoter*, do not be overwise!

The *Tam*, in his way of *temimut*, is not one whit less intellectually competent than the sophisticated *Hakham*. Let us emphasize this again and again. The *Tam*, as the full Jew, is fully cognizant of the value of wisdom, and himself possesses learning in abundance. But he insists upon integrating learning into the the totality of a responsive, religious, reverent personality. To the inquiring college student the *Tam* declares: be not overwise. Religion, especially Judaism, cannot be grasped only by reading and debating, although that is necessary for any intelligent person;

it must, in the final analysis, be tasted and tried. Instead of being a *Hakham* and seeking proof of *God's* existence, be a *Tam* — and offer proof, in yourself and your daily conduct, of the existence of a *man*, a human being, a Jew with a heart and a soul.

We live in a world where, unfortunately, the *Rasha* reigns supreme. It is not enough, in this kind of environment, to emphasize the *Hakham* alone. For while it is true that wisdom is indispensable both to general life and Jewish living, it is equally true that beyond all the complexities and subtleties that tantalize man's mind and confound his understanding there stands the simple and sublime truth of the One God, Author of all. What we need is the *Tam*, one who can include wisdom in his personality and transcend it, who can possess scholarship without displaying pretentiousness, who can develop his intellect and yet, in the moment he turns to his God, abandon his self-consciousness and serve his Maker with wonder and simplicity, with love and faith.

Afilu kulanu hakhamim, kulanu zekenim, kulanu nevonim, kulanu yodim et ha-Torah, mitzvah alenu le'saper bi'yetziat mitzrayim (Haggadah). Even if we all be wise and experienced and understanding and learned in Torah, yet we must engage in the comparatively simple and naive recitation of the Haggadah's story. For all of it is the answer to the *Tam's* simple question. It is the teaching that *be'hozek yad hotzianu ha-Shem mi-mitzrayim*, that God took us out of Egypt with a strong hand; and that we today too must feel gripped by His presence, knowing that God is a good Father whose powerful hand grasps ours and leads us safely through the hills and vales of life, avoiding all the traps and snares, and into the *geulah shelemah*, the complete and final redemption of all Israel; and through Israel — all the world.