

"QUESTIONING TRADITION"

In the revolutionary times in which we live, all tradition is called into question, whether religious, social, political, or academic.

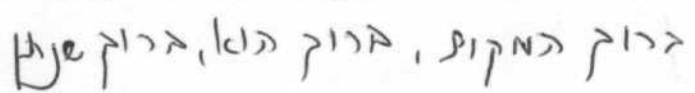
It is therefore no surprise that this challenge affects Judaism, which places great value on tradition as such. This emphasis is especially noticeable during Passover, and most especially on the Seder night. The Seder is full of tradition; every action, every motion, manifests centuries of sacred recollection. Minhag is even more evident, during the Seder, than Din. For instance: the washing of the hands before the karpas and the korekh are a memory of ancient Temple tradition. The inclining on the left side is an ancient Roman custom, the sign of aristocracy when the Seder was formulated, which no longer is practiced nowadays; but it is a tradition, and a lovely one and an important one.

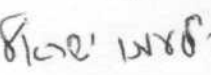
The "do your own thing" generation is probably quite unhappy with such a ceremonial meal overladen with apparently irrelevant customs, whether din or minhag. They question tradition, and they no doubt reject or at least challenge the entire Seder procedure and the traditionalism that it symbolizes. I have no doubt that last night and tonight, in thousands of Jewish homes where the Seder is performed, many a young man or woman, part of the "now" generation, will participate with an inner perplexity and impatience: What does all this mean for me anyway?

Well, how shall we react to this questioning of tradition? How shall we orient ourselves toward this new phenomenon in Jewish and general life?

First, let us never be perturbed by questions. They are characteristic of an alert and intelligent mind. As Jews, we welcome not only questions of inquiry, but also those of challenge. The "Four Questions" are known, in Yiddish, not as die fier shaylos, quests for information, but as die fier koshes -- four challenges or refutations.

But perhaps more important, we should remember that it is not by any means a new phenomenon. Every "new" generation questions the old -- and that is as it should be. Indeed, the very questioning of the tradition is itself -- a tradition! Skepticism wasn't born on the American campus in the 1960's. In fact, if we read the Haggadah carefully, we will observe that the questioning of the tradition has become encapsulated in one of the major sections of the Haggadah, and has become a familiar and delightful part of the Seder ritual for at least 2,000 years.

It is my feeling that the questioning of tradition, and the traditional response to the traditional questioning, are what constitutes that famous passage concerning the Four Sons, or types. The text begins with: 

 -- the giving of Torah, the tradition of Israel -- and it is challenged. We have here four attitudes to tradition, in

question and answer form, which deserve to be remembered, and have, indeed, been perpetuated through the Haggadah. For each of the four poses a challenge to tradition and elicits a response which is enlightening and edifying.

The sons ask: What is the value of tradition?

The question of the Wise Son presupposes and anticipates the answer given to him. He has already categorized the mitzvot into edot, hukkim, and mishpatim, and our response is, quite naturally, ke'hilkhoh ha-pesah. Tradition assumes meaning and significance when it is transformed into halakhah. When I participate in the tradition not only because of its historical value, not only because of sentiment, but because this is my response to the Living God of Israel, because this is the way I sanctify ordinary life, because this is the way I discover significance in the trivial details of life and elevate them from the picayune to the sacred and the pure -- then I know the value of tradition for my own life. Tradition is not a symbol on the order of the American flag, or a celebration like July 4, or a social or political sacrament. Tradition is my way of orienting to my God, it is that which sensitizes me spiritually, which opens me to eternity and the timeless, which quickens with mystic fervor and holds the promise of ecstasy and a glimpse into the unknown and the ineffable. Tradition is not even a matter of commemorating the past, but of using the past as a pretext for living in the present meaningfully.

The point is evident in the commentaries of the greatest Jews of all generations, from Rashi and Ibn Ezra through R. Velvete Brisker, in their comments on the verse: <sup>ג</sup>אֶחָד מֵעֵשֶׂת הָאֲרָצוֹת <sup>א</sup>אֶחָד מֵעֵשֶׂת הָאֲרָצוֹת. The apparent meaning of that verse, according to the common-sensical interpretation, is that I eat matzah and maror because God took me out of Egypt, i.e., these foodstuffs are symbolic of the redemption and the exodus. But the syntax of the verse does not support this interpretation. What it does say is: God took me out of Egypt in order that I might eat matzah and maror! Clearly -- it is not halakhah that recapitulates history, but history that prepares the way for halakhah. Tradition, for the Jew, is not a sentimental recollection of the past, but the long process of preparing for a spiritually meaningful future by consecrating the present. The answer to the Wise Son's questioning of tradition is the wisest of all responses: the existential view of the sacred tradition, expressed in halakhic living.

The question of the Wicked Son is quite deceptive. It is formulated in the style of a question, but -- he does not really ask anything at all. His sentence is declaratory, not interrogative. It is a verbalized sneer mistakenly concluded with a question-mark instead of an exclamation-point. No inquiring mind informs the Rasha, who has already dismissed all possible answers. Our Rasha, whose challenge is: <sup>א</sup>מָה הַיְחָדָשׁ הַזֶּה: What does all this mean to you? -- has already announced that he is a drop-out from

the historical continuum of the Jewish people. The Rasha simply cannot understand the value and the meaning of a historical process, because he is only one small part of it; and the Rasha, by his nature, must have the entire universe centered on himself. What value is the ancient past or the remote future, if he is not there to participate in it? The Rasha rejects tradition not because of any intellectual doubt he entertains or any intrinsic defect he may discover in it, but because to locate yourself in and perpetuate tradition, you must relate to its context, to Torah and Israel -- and the Rasha is one who constitutionally cannot relate. His self-involvement, his inability to relate to others -- the essence of his rishut -- makes him an outsider to Jewish tradition: lakhem ve'lo lo. His view of tradition, therefore, is ahistorical, and that is why our response to him is למה תשאל - not really an answer, just as he really asked no question. It is useless to parry his "questions" with rational "answers," אם תשאלו את ה' ותענו because by excluding himself from the history of Israel, no answer can be meaningful to him. Our reaction must therefore be to "blunt his teeth," to try to break through his rigidity, the invisible wall around him that keeps him separate, alien, and unable to relate.

Do not be angry with the Rasha. Pity him. His ahistorical orientation to tradition, the result of a dehumanized personality that distorts his sense of reality, has excluded him from the oldest surviving community of the human race, and one in which in our days

there has quickened the pulse of hope and which aspires to the greatest destiny known to any people. The Rasha, the drop-out from historical continuity, is so very much involved in himself, that he elevates his narcissism from a psychological infirmity to a religious philosophy. He is clever, but not wise, and his stylized ignorance may be sharp but not deep, cute but nothing that really counts. Anyone who casually dismisses all the past and all tradition has revealed an emptiness which cannot be engaged in true dialogue. Tradition, as R. Saadia Gaon pointed out, is for a community what memory is for an individual, and a people without tradition is like the victim of amnesia -- he cannot really know who he is.

Furthermore, the chief victim of his cavalier attitude is - himself.

Two of the wisest students of human culture and civilization in our days, Will and Ariel Durant, wrote the following in their The Lessons of History:

Out of every hundred new ideas, ninety-nine or more will probably be inferior to the traditional responses which they propose to replace.

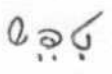
No man, however brilliant or well-informed, can come in one lifetime to such fullness of understanding as to safely judge and dismiss the customs or institutions of his society, for these are the wisdom of generations after centuries of experiment in the laboratory of history.

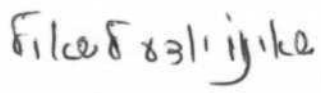
And then, the Durants continue about the importance of tradition and traditional moral restraints which are now being cast away by so many, and their words are especially pertinent for the young:

A youth boiling with hormones will wonder why he should not give full freedom to his sexual desires; and if he is unchecked by custom, morals, or laws, he may ruin his life before he matures sufficiently to understand that sex is a river of fire that must be banked and cooled by a hundred restraints if it is not to consume in chaos both the individual and the group.

Our poor Rasha, having off-handedly dismissed tradition, will find himself in ever-greater difficulties. He is a spiritual amnesiac, whose normal inhibitions will fail him when he needs them most.

The third son, the Simple One, or Tam, presents a special case. Notice the answer we give him to his questioning of tradition: *הנה פה הנה* . We give him a "reason" for the tradition. Apparently, that is all he wanted when he questioned. The Tam is our well-known, old friend, the pseudo-intellectual. He is the one who is convinced that his own superior intellect, trained, perhaps, in textiles or insurance or the market or the junk business, but otherwise undisciplined, is the source of all wisdom for all the ages. If you can convince his majestic, infallible intelligence, which imperiously presides over the trial of human wisdom through the centuries, you will have won him over. Do not confuse him with all your complicated religious jargon or philosophical semantics or historical references. Give him a simple answer to all his questions, and make it short and concise. He demands a businessman's common-sensical answer to the deepest and most complicated questions of all humanity. He simply does not understand that the performance of

a mitzvah is an act of love towards a God who transcends his own reason. He is by no means wise enough to appreciate the limitations of his own intellect, to appreciate that the great issues of human life and existence are not always accessible to superficial rational estimation. Give him a "reason" for a mitzvah, and he will be happy and possibly even perform it. Tell him that kashruth will prevent trichinosis, that circumcision somehow prevents cancer, that prayer keeps the Jewish people together, that wearing tzitzit is a sign that you're proud to be a Jew -- etc., etc., etc. -- and our pseudo-intellectual Tam is happy. Why all the Seder ritual, why all the Passover customs? Because God took us out of Egypt with a strong hand. Lo and behold: A "reason!" Our Tam is happy. Indeed, the Jerusalem Talmud was right in calling him not Tam, but --  ! He is a fool because he has foolishly exaggerated the importance of his own piddling intellect, because he imagines that the universe and human destiny and religious philosophy are like a retail business in which simple answers are possible, and anything too complex is an evasion.

The fourth son is the , the one who can not ask. Permit me to take up the cudgels in his behalf. I like him. I feel we have discriminated against him unjustly for too long. He is, of course, far less intellectual than the Wise Son. He is far less intelligent even than the Tam - but perhaps much wiser. And while it is true that he does not ask any question directly, he

is at least more honest than the Rasha who, as we have said, only appears to ask a question, but the appearance is really deceptive. If the *דאס איז נישט א שאלה* asks nothing, it is because he already has his own, benevolent, non-cynical, private, answer -- and although it may not be adequate for most of us, it has a great<sup>deal</sup> to recommend it. Notice what we are to say to this last of the Four Sons: *וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו*. You shall tell your son on that day, etc. It makes little difference exactly what you tell him; the important thing is that he is *בן*, your son. The last son has no intellectual pretensions, unlike the Tam; he has no axe to grind as a drop-out from history, as does the Rasha; and he does not have the spiritual and intellectual equipment to appreciate the halakhic-existential attitude of the Hakham. But one thing he does have: a warm and happy and devoted relationship with his father. He knows that by practicing the tradition, he not only obeys his father, but he relives part of the most beautiful aspects of the life of this father and his father before him and his father before him to the beginning of time. He locates himself in a historical chain of father and son, who related to each other, at least on this Pesach night, with love and warmth and devotion and intimacy and sympathy. He teaches us to cut through our normally ambivalent feelings about parents and past, to recognize that this is something of ineffable value we can transmit to the future, because after all the anger and rebellion and impatience that so often characterize parent-child relations, they

are fundamentally all we have and all we really strive for. He is a person who feels deeply, who is sensitive to human beings, who is full of genuine sentiments, and who finds in tradition security and gentleness and strength and love -- and therefore joy.

None of us falls completely in any of these four categories. Each of us is a composite of two or three or all four types. The great Hasidic teacher, R. Nachman Bratzlaver, once said that there is a little of each of the Four Sons in every one of us. Sometimes one dominates, sometimes another. There are times when, like the Rasha, our hearts turn cold as stone and we feel like drop-outs from the historical tradition of Israel, looking at Jewish tradition like outsiders and aliens. Sometimes, like the Tam, out of the shallowness which is only human, we seek "reasons" which, in our heart of hearts, we know must always remain inadequate. We also possess the capacity of the Fourth Son for love and sentiment and warmth. And above all, we each of us possess, in some measure, the character of the Wise Son as genuinely religious beings who know that our few years on earth are all we have, that life is a task and difficulty a challenge and wealth a trust and health an investment and time a duty. We know that we live in the face of mitzvah, of sacred commandment, that we are ever summoned by the Metzaveh to consecrate our days and weeks and years, and that we must leave the world better, safer, more Jewish, more human than we found it. We have enough hokhmah in us to appreciate that a life of halakhah means

a life that is more eloquent than any polished rhetoric, more inspiring than any heroic gesture, more transforming than any personal endowment; that Halakhah is the way we align ourselves with <sup>"</sup>דקדק. And to recognize this is an act of wisdom. ראשית חכמה וראיה נ

The same R. Nachman Bratzlaver said the following on the passage in the Haggadah that the students reminded their eminent masters that dawn had come, and the time was at hand to recite the Shema: רבא חילון הוה זמן של קריאה שמו של שחרית. The word "שחרית" contains the initial letters of the Four Sons:

ש - שאל  
ח - חבב  
נ - נחמד  
ל - למה

When the dawn of Redemption comes, and all the world will recite the Shema with new fervor and devotion, all Four -- שאל, חבב, נחמד, למה -- will contribute to it and, in turn, find themselves re-deemed, in new appreciation of the tradition of רבא חילון, our Teachers.

In the חילון of this new age of גאון שד"ג, each son, represented in each of us, will look to the tradition of Israel for teaching and instruction, recognizing the giants of the past as רבא חילון, our teachers; and acknowledge as well that our task is now to become the רבא חילון of the future.