

"THE SECOND SON"

a sermon preached by

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"The Wicked Son — what does he say? 'What does this service mean to you?' (Exodus 12:26).

We infer: to you, not to him. Because he excludes himself from the community, he denies what is fundamental. You should, therefore, blunt his teeth, saying, 'This is done because of what the Lord did unto me when I came forth out of Egypt' (ib. 13:8) — unto me, not him.

Had he been there, he would not have been redeemed."

— THE HAGGADAH

IN the gallery of rogues whom we meet as we leaf through the pages of the Haggadah, there appears one who has been unjustly maligned throughout the ages. He is the second of the Four Sons, or types of Jew. In keeping with the traditional instinct of our people for the defence of the wronged and injured, I plead for him this morning. I submit that the *Rasha*, the so-called "Wicked Son," does not properly belong in the same company with such villains as Pharaoh, Laban, or the Angel of Death. He is not the scoundrel we have imagined him to be.

My advocacy of an enlightened and sympathetic attitude towards the *Rasha* is not based on mere fancy. It issues from a profound concern with the future of our people. For I am convinced that when the *Rasha* is properly understood, and his psychology and motivation taken into account, he will be found to be representative of large numbers of our fellow Jews. And our approach to this type, and the problems he raises, may well determine the destiny of the American Jewish community.

Let us begin our case by calling attention to this difficulty: the *Rasha* is here out of place. He is, so to speak, in the wrong crowd. The other three of the Four Sons are categorized according to intelligence. The *Chakham* is the wise one, the highly intellectual type. The *Tam* is the simple son, the man of average intelligence. The *She-eino Yodeia Li'sheol*, he who cannot even ask, is at the bottom of the scale of intelligence. Yet the Second Son, the *Rasha*, is measured not by an intellectual standard, but by an ethical one. He is "wicked" — we categorize him according to piety instead of wisdom. How indeed does the *Rasha* fit into the Haggadist's classification of the Four Sons?

Our answer lies in understanding that there are two types of *Rasha*. The first type is the one we usually have in mind when we apply the harsh epithet to a cruel, heartless, malicious person. He is the G-dless, rebellious, self-hating Jew. He is consciously assimilationist and will even, for instance, fulminate against the efforts of Jewish rescue organizations to save the pitiful remnants of Romanian Jewry from certain destruction. He is the classical *Rasha*, par excellence.

But this *Rasha* is not at all the one the Haggadist had in mind. He is no longer a "Jewish" type. He is beneath contempt on this lovely and sacred night of Passover. We neither accept his questions, if he asks them, nor do we offer him any answers. He is not one of the "sons" with whom the Torah concerns itself.

The *Rasha* of the Haggadah is the second type. He has nothing in common with the first except name. He too seems to reject the discipline of Judaism and the insights of its heritage, but his motivation is radically different. He openly violates many sacred Jewish institutions, yet he is "proud to be a Jew." He may dismiss Jewish observances as medieval anachronisms in a Space-Age, yet he vigorously asserts his Jewish identity. He is generally a good-natured, sympathetic soul, and is in his innermost heart precious Jewish. He is a *Rasha* without *rishut*, without evil. Perhaps, in his case, we should translate not "Wicked Son" or "Evil Son," but "Mistaken Son."

Indeed, here lies the answer to our question. The waywardness of the Haggadah's *Rasha* is to be traced not to evil intent but to a lack of understanding; not to malice but to ignorance; not to wickedness but to a fundamental mistakenness. The failure of the *Rasha* is intellectual, not moral. He has not learned, he has not been taught, he does not understand. The *Ben Rasha* may sound like a real *Rasha*, but in reality he is a *Ben*, a "son," a child, one who is religiously immature and spiritually underdeveloped because he has not grown up in Torah. He is the opposite not of *Tzaddik* (pious one) but *Chakham* (wise one). In the scale of wisdom represented by the Four Sons, the *Rasha* is he who, although well endowed with natural intellectual gifts, has failed to make use of them or misused them in his Jewish, religious life.

This special kind of lovable *Rasha* is fairly common nowadays. Large numbers of American Jews, so far from the fullness of a Torah-life, can surely not be described as the *Chakham*-type, for wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord.

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A community which has so prospered, which has achieved such fame and prestige, and whose sons have attained distinction in such a variety of fields, can surely not be categorized as *Tam*, much less as *She-eino Yodeia Li'sheol*. Certainly it cannot be characterized as *Rasha*, if by that we mean the conventional image of the vicious, G-dless, Jewish anti-Semite. We dare not level such an accusation against Jews who have demonstrated an almost unparalleled charitableness; who have helped so gallantly in the establishment and development of the State of Israel; who have constructed and supported so many synagogues and educational and philanthropic institutions. But they can, I believe, be identified with the Second Son, the Haggadah's *Rasha*, as we have described him.

Even a cursory examination will lead us to appreciate the similarity of the typical non-observant American Jew with the Second Son. He still asks questions. He retains an interest in Jewish life. He identifies himself as a "son" in the Jewish family. The trouble is that he asks like an outsider instead of an insider. And why does he seem to stand apart, outside the orbit of the Torah life? Is it because of his philosophic convictions? Certainly not. The Jerusalem Talmud has interpreted the question of the *Rasha* in an almost contemporary vein: "why do you burden us with these troublesome observances every year?" The Second Son is not a metaphysician. He merely likes his comfort and his convenience and does not want to be bothered. *Shabbat* and *Kashrut*, Passover and Sukkot — these are burdensome. And that is why he removes himself from the community — not from the contemporary, organized Jewish community. That not! He supports the U.J.A. and buys Israel bonds and even builds synagogues. But he excludes himself from the historic community of Israel, from the *Knesset Yisrael* which was born in Egypt and weaned at Sinai, and which includes the dead, the living, and the unborn. It is this holy community of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and Rabbi Akiba and Maimonides and the Baal Shem from which he has excluded himself — because it is too inconvenient to observe *mitzvot*!

And why does our Second Son forfeit this precious heritage because of such trivial considerations? Because, the Haggadist tells us, *kafar be-ikkar*, he has denied that which is fundamental. He is not a heretic. He believes in G-d. But out of an acute and amazing religious ignorance he clings religiously to the secondary while dismissing the primary and fundamental as unimportant! He enshrines the secondary and even trivial, the *tafel* — how well American Rabbis are aware of some of our people's deep-seated loyalties to local customs which have no real source in either our Law or Tradition. Yet they will peremptorily reject the *ikkar*, true fundamentals, in favor of the subordinate principles. The scale of values has been inverted. Ignorance of Judaism has distorted the Second Son's perspective. So thoroughly uninformed is the *Rasha*, so pitiful is his failure of *Chokhmah* or Jewish wisdom, that his whole sense of proportion is out of balance.

Maimonides must have had the same thing in mind when he authoritatively declared in his Code of Jewish Law that *mi she-eino lo be-mishneh velo be-mikra velo be'derekh eretz, harei zeh be'chezkat rasha*: one who has no relation with Talmud or Bible or *derekh eretz* may be presumed to be a *Rasha* (*Hil. Eidut*, 11:1). This does not mean that one must necessarily be an accomplished scholar to avoid characterization as a *Rasha*. It does mean that one must have some relationship with Jewish learning, some interest and connection with the sources of Jewish life and Tradition. If one does not have any kind of association with or training in these classical sources, and in addition is devoid of *derekh eretz*, of elementary manners and a measure of humility, then he is dubbed *Rasha*. The eminent physician has given us the correct diagnosis of the Second Son, of the contemporary Haggadah — *Rasha*: his religious and spiritual inadequacy stems from an insufficient diet of Torah study aggravated by a lack of *derekh eretz*, the typical American disdain for scholarship and irreverence towards ancient wisdom. And the cure: large doses of study taken regularly over long periods, preferably lasting a life-time.

The *Rasha*, therefore, must never be treated with disdain or enmity. We must approach him with understanding and sympathy. "Blunt his teeth," the

Haggadah tells us. Argue with him, debate with him, teach him, educate him. Show him that his scale of values is completely distorted, that the argument from convenience is unworthy of an intelligent person. Dull the sharpness of his complaint by demonstrating the valuelessness of his prejudices. Teach him that questions about Judaism can be meaningfully answered only when they are asked with the reverence of an "insider," and not with the flippancy of an "outsider" to the Tradition. *V'af ata hak'hei et shinav*, bring your *ata*, your own self and personality into this dialogue. Teach by example. Establish friendly, warm, personal relations with him based upon a mutual personal respect and affection. Sooner or later he will realize that *ilu hayah sham lo hayah nig'al*, that had he been there he would not have been redeemed," that the survival of Jewry — a desire he shares with all Jews throughout the ages — can never be attained through such an attitude; that if all Jews took his attitude — the posture of an "outsider," rejecting the fundamental for the trivial, excluding himself from the historic community of Tradition — our doom as a people and a communion would be sealed.

There are those who, in their zeal for Torah, are ready to exclude the Second Son from the Jewish family. They are willing to write off large numbers of our fellow-Jews — of this *Rasha*-type — and regard them as outside the fold. Such misguided zeal is doomed to well-deserved failure. Not only is it a dangerous attitude policy-wise, but it is an offense against the whole spirit of Torah. One commentator on the Haggadah explained it as follows: the passage on the Four Sons is preceded by the statement *Barukh ha-makom* . . . "Blessed is G-d, blessed is He; blessed is He Who gave the Torah to His people, blessed is He." Four times do we say *Barukh* or "blessed" — corresponding to each of the Four Sons. There is a blessing to be found in each of the four types of Jew — including the *Rasha*. Indeed, "blessed is He Who gave the Torah to His people Israel" — if instead of fulminating and excommunicating and excluding we will teach G-d's Torah to G-d's people, and thus overcome the tragic lack of *Chokhmah*, then we will have derived an even greater blessing. Learning, learning, and more learning — that is to be our answer to the problem of *Rasha*. That is the way of blessing for our people.

We have lost all too many Jews in our days to afford ourselves the questionable luxury of reading even more out of our ranks. Instead we must proceed with the confidence that no Jew who has truly plumbed the depths of Torah and heard in it the whisper of G-d's voice can ever knowingly desert it; that no Jew who has ever really perceived the beauty of Jewish living and encountered the mystery of the Creator in the context of its Tradition can ever remain indifferent. We must believe with all our hearts that it is a rare Jew who is a *Rasha* in the conventional sense; that most who appear so do so out of ignorance of Torah, as a result of insufficient religious education and stunted spiritual growth. Them we must welcome as one welcomes a long-lost brother, for despite their waywardness, we share together one fate, one people, one G-d. In that confidence must we proceed with the herculean educational tasks confronting us.

Perhaps all we have said can best be summarized in the answer given by the Baal Shem Tov in the charming and profoundly significant tale told of this saint, the founder of Hasidism. A man whose son had left the fold of Judaism and deserted the ways of his father came to the Rabbi with tears in his eyes to complain of his bitter lot. With choked voice he asked, "Rabbi, I have done everything in my power to keep him righteous and observant. What more can I do now?"

The Baal Shem answered in three words — three words that deserve to become the foundation of Orthodoxy's philosophy and orientation in the modern world. He answered, "*Love him more.*"

That is the key to the problem of the Second Son. Not denunciation but education. Not contempt but sympathy. And more than sympathy and understanding, and certainly more than mere tolerance — *love him more.*