

**"THE WISE
AND
THE FOOLISH"**

*The First and Third
Sons of the Haggadah*

**A SERMON PREACHED BY
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One of the most popular and beloved of all the passages of the Haggadah is the one about the Four Sons. The Haggadah divides people into four categories: the *Chakham* or Wise Son, the *Rasha* or Wicked Son, the *Tam* or Simple Son, and the one who is not intelligent enough even to ask.

We are all acquainted with the questions that are asked and the answers that we are instructed to give to each of them. In this respect, the author of the Haggadah follows one of the earliest Talmudic works, the *Mekhilta*. To the question of the *chakham* or Wise Son, *mah ha-edot ve'ha-chukim ve'ha-mishpatim asher tzivah ha-Shem Eloheinu et'khem* — what are all these laws that the Lord our G-d has commanded us — the answer is: *v'af ata emor lo ke'hilkhot ha-pessach, ein maftirin achar ha-pessach afkoman*. This means, teach him the laws of Passover, from the beginning of the talmudic Tractate *Pesachim* dealing with these laws, until the very last Mishnah which concerns the *afkoman*. The *tam* or Simple Son asks a much simpler question: *mah zot*, "what is this all about?" The answer is correspondingly simple: *be'chozek yad hotzianu ha-Shem mi-mitzrayim*, "with a strong hand did G-d take us out of Egypt."

Remarkably, while most sources give these answers, there is one source that reverses them. The *Yerushalmi* or Jerusalem Talmud switches the answers given to the *chakham* and *tam*. Thus, according to the Jerusalem Talmud, to the Wise Son's question "what are the laws that G-d commanded us?" we are to answer: G-d took us out of Egypt with *chozek yad*, a strong hand. And to the Simple Son's question *mah zot?*, we are to give the answer of Halakhah or Jewish law — which in our Haggadah is reserved for the Wise Son.

And then the Jerusalem Talmud adds, as a kind of afterthought, the law: *lo yehei omed me-chaburah zu ve'nikhnas le'chaburah acheret* — do not leave the group or family with whom you are partaking of the Passover meal to join some other group at another Seder.

What is the reason for this reversal by the Jerusalem Talmud? Is it not more appropriate to give the halakhic answer to the Wise Son, and the answer about G-d's "strong hand" to the simple and naive son?

I believe the order of the Jerusalem Talmud does make sense if you accept that there is a prophetic element in it. The Jerusalem Talmud was probably thinking of a surrealistic period when the man who is really a *chakham* will come to be regarded as a *tam*, and when the individual who is in reality a *tam* will achieve the popular acclaim due to a *chakham*. In other words, the Jerusalem Talmud was thinking of days such as ours.

For indeed, has there not been a confusion of roles and titles? We live in an age when countries dominated by a small, fanatic, militaristic clique promenade as "peace-loving democracies," while the only enlightened, democratic

country in the Near East, one which needs peace for its very survival, is condemned as an "aggressor" and "bastion of imperialism." Do not words lose all meaning, and does not semantics become a shambles, in such an age?

Who is it who is applauded as a *chakham*, and who is it who is dismissed as an incongruous *tam* in our times? Is the learned author regarded as *chakham* and the ignorant Jewish entertainer a *tam* — or is it perhaps reversed? Who is acknowledged the superior, wiser man: the devoted scholar who can barely make a living, or the shrewd operator who can make a successful killing? Who is ridiculed as a *tam*: the man who is monogamous and moral, or the one who follows the fashion of our Kinseyan society? Who is heralded as a *chakham* in the circles in which most of us move: the principled person who will refuse to speak ill of another and runs the risk of discoursing on subjects boring because unconnected with scandal, or the "inside-dopester" who has all the latest information, right or wrong, about every potential sensation and who trafficks in rumor and *rekhlut*? Look at the heroes of our younger generation — you will discover them in the ballparks, not in libraries; in Hollywood and Rome, not Jerusalem — and you will have sufficient proof that we have veered from the Haggadah and have fulfilled the *Yerushalmi's* wry foresight of a world where the Wise are confounded with the Simple.

It is in Religion more than in any other field where taste and instinct, rather than knowledge and learning, are expected to be sufficient to qualify one to pass judgment. How many laymen would write prescriptions or criticize the type of fuel used in rockets or condemn a philological opinion, unless he had some good training in the particular field? In any enterprise other than Religion, the man who is a *tam* would never arrogate to himself the authority of a *chakham*. Not so with Religion! Here, the more one knows, the less does he opine and, contrariwise, the less one knows, the more certain and smug are his prejudices.

Allow me to recall to you one particularly poignant example of the *tam* turned *chakham*.

It is almost a year now that *Commentary*, one of the most serious monthly Jewish magazines, published a symposium on the Jewish religion by so-called "Jewish Intellectuals." This has been so widely discussed that it really deserves no repetition. And yet, as time goes on, the more one thinks of it the more amazing does it all appear. Here were presented a series of opinions by people with Ph.D.s in everything from English Literature to Biochemistry, passing final and irrevocable judgment on the very complex and profound Jewish tradition. It is a tradition and a discipline in which brilliant people spend their lives and do not begin to plumb its depths. Yet here were people, most of them outstanding *am ha-aratzim* in things Jewish, whose combined Jewish education probably falls

short of that of an average fifth grade day-school student, pontificating dogmatically and speaking with sure knowledgeability about matters far beyond their ken. And this disgusting display of transcendental ignorance was authoritatively presented by the journal of the American Jewish Committee as the opinion of "Jewish Intellectuals!" Franz Kafka and George Orwell together could never had portrayed as topsy-turvey a world as this! A choice collection of *tams* in Jewish religion, and accepted by the world as *chakhamim*, as "Jewish Intellectuals" no less! No wonder the results are so negative for Judaism.

This is what our age has come to. The *tam* has become a *chakham*. A disc-jockey of Jewish birth regularly interviews actors and comedians of Jewish descent, and asks them for their opinion about Kashruth, Shabbat, and other Jewish institutions. They, poor souls, are convinced that they have become oracles — and so the *tam* speaks in the accents of the *chakham*. And the conclusion is no more favorable for Torah and Judaism than the pronouncements by the "Jewish Intellectuals." Evidently the only qualification for a man to speak with authority about Judaism and Jewishness, is that he be utterly ignorant of them.

O how right were the Sages of the Jerusalem Talmud! With what insight they depicted our own day! For the *tam* has been crowned with the halo of the *chakham*. To this kind of pseudo-*chakham* one cannot give the answer of Halakhah, the answer of the Haggadah. To him, one must give the answer of *chozek yad* — the strong hand of Almighty G-d. What does this mean? Abarbanel points out that this does not refer to the strength and power of G-d as revealed in destroying the enemy. Rather, it implies the pressure and influence that G-d brought to bear upon those Jews in Egypt who were reluctant to leave their exile and preferred to remain as Egyptianized Jews. So for the really Simple Sons of our own age: we cannot teach them or convince them with Jewish law or Judaism. Those are trivial details that detract from expertise on Judaism. For them we must only hope and pray that the good Lord, in His own time, with *chozek yad*, will demonstrate to them the truth of Torah and the merit of loyalty to our sacred Jewish traditions. The answer of *be'chozek yad* is a hope and a prayer, not a program of action.

And if the *tam* poses nowadays as *chakham*, then by the same token, the *chakham* is disdained as a *tam*. I use the term *chakham* not as an honorific title for one who is gifted with superior intelligence, but as one who has the spiritual wisdom to live in concert with G-d and in harmony with the teachings of His Torah. *Reshit chokhmah yirat ha-Shem* — "The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord." It is the Orthodox Jew who has kept faith with that Torah and that tradition. It is he who has not allowed his principles to suffer erosion, and the Halakhah to be compromised. And yet, is this loyalty and fealty acknowledged as

wisdom? Decidedly not. The *chakham* is, more often than not, regarded as a *tam*—or, as the Jerusalem Talmud uses the term, *tipesch* — a fool. There are large circles where a truly observant Jew is regarded as a relic of antiquity. He is looked upon as one of those insects that has surprisingly defied the ravages of time and survived unchanged when, by the laws of biology, it should long have been extinct. He may be considered quaint and charming, or oppressive and authoritarian — but certainly not a *chakham* whose life is relevant, meaningful, and instructive. He is a *tam* who does not quite “belong.”

I am happy to note, therefore, that we have been “discovered.” Recently a known Jewish writer devoted half an article to a description of Modern American Orthodoxy which he called “An Unknown Jewish Sect.” He was truly amazed by it. He was surprised by the fact that American Orthodox Jews can really speak English and even have a desire to write seriously in that language. Finally we have been discovered to be something other than *tam*. After seventy-five years of Yeshiva University, fifteen years of the Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists, and an ever-growing number of prominent Orthodox Jews and Jewesses who have distinguished themselves in every field of endeavor from literature to finance and science to education — an informed Jewish commentator is astonished that we are not completely an unenlightened lot! As our grandmothers would have said, *antdekt Amerika!* The American Orthodox Jew is not really and completely a *tam*. But imagine how many others there are who have not yet had their eyes opened to this amazing piece of intelligence!

We who prefer to remain loyal to our Torah and Tradition, even though we may not always be granted the status of *chakham* by the society in which we live, shall continue to ask questions which we think are relevant. The answer to our questions is still in the nature of *v'af ata emor lo ke'hilkhot ha-pessach, ein maftirin achar ha-pessach afikoman*. It is in *hilkhot ha-pessach*, in the Talmud, in the Torah, in Halakhah, in the treasury of Jewish wisdom of the past, that we shall be able to find the guide-posts which lead us into a Jewish future. It does not matter that we do not always satisfy the standards of status imposed by contemporary society. We agree with the teachings of one of the great Rabbis of all times who said, “better that I be known as a fool all my life than as an evil person for one moment before the Lord.” We American Orthodox Jews are convinced that we do not face an either/or choice. We do not believe called upon by G-d to abandon either our Jewishness or our modernity. We do not believe that we must choose one of two painful alternatives: either *Neturei Karta* or assimilation; either withdrawal into an all-Jewish ghetto, or the annihilation of our identity in our non-Jewish milieu. We can and will remain loyal Jews and progressive moderns at one and the same time. This, to us, is the essence of being a *chakham*, though others may regard it as the frivolous and futile efforts of a *tam*. We believe with fervent faith that it is possible to live in and combine

both worlds, the one of science, the other of the spirit; the one of culture, and the other of Halakhah; the one of satellites, the other of *sugyot*; the one of outer space, the other of inner space; the one of technology, the other of Talmud.

Of course, no one relishes being considered a *tam* — a relic, a curiosity, an impertinence — when in his heart of hearts he knows that he is living wisely. Sometimes, therefore, the observant Jew is tempted to leave his Torah way of life on the margins of society and taste of the other, seemingly easier and more carefree existence. Why not live like a *tam* and be hailed as a *chakham*, instead of striving to be a *chakham* and be regarded a *tam*?

When the loyal Jew chafes in this kind of solitude, the answer of the *Yerushalmi* is a consoling restraint: *ein maftirin achar ha-Pessach afikoman*. After partaking of the Passover meal, one must not eat dessert. After committing yourself to a life of divine Seder, of Halakhah, of a dedication to a transcendent purpose in life, do not submit to the passing temptation to look elsewhere for your *afikoman* or dessert, for ways of conduct that appear momentarily luscious and delicious but leave you unsatisfied and with a bad taste in your heart and soul. After living as a genuine *chakham*, the moral life of Torah, of *hilkhot ha-pessach*, do not forfeit your faith for the ephemeral *afikoman* of the *tam*.

In the words that the Jerusalem Talmud adds: *Lo yehei omed me-chaburah zu ve'nikhnas le'chaburah acheret*. Do not take the crucial step of leaving your *chaburah* or group of loyal Jews with its lofty way of life prescribed at Sinai, in order to enter the larger, seemingly more popular, easier, and more enticing *chaburah* of those who are oblivious of the Presence of G-d and who know not the *hilkhot ha-pessach* of Jewish life.

On this Passover, our prayer is: May G-d protect the *chakham* from being treated like a *tam*. But more than that, may He spare all of us from the *tam* who has illusions of being a *chakham*.

In the words of the Psalmist: *Edut ha-Shem ne'emanah, machakimat peti*. The laws of G-d are trustworthy, they make the *peti* — the *tam* or Simple Son — truly wise, a *chakham*. *Pikudei ha-Shem yesharim, mesamchei lev*. The precepts of the Lord are right, they make the heart happy.

May all of us, all Israel and all the world, rejoice and be happy as all men turn to G-d, to His Torah and His precepts, and achieve true wisdom.

