

How Do We Engage the “Wicked” Child Differently?

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(5-10 minutes) **Read and discuss the question of the “*rasha*” or “wicked” child.**

One person at the table reads aloud the question of the “*chacham*” (“wise child”), and another reads the question of the “*rasha*” (“wicked child”). Ask everyone to identify the differences between the words of the *chacham* and those of the *rasha*. Invite participants’ perspectives on the intentions of the “*rasha*” and the response of the “parent.”

Listening Exercise.

The following activity is adapted from an exercise in Compassionate Listening™, created by The Compassionate Listening Project. (<http://www.compassionatelistening.org>). This exercise invites participants to bring special attention to the three layers of meaning that comprise every human communication. The most apparent layer is the “facts” – the words that are spoken, the second is the “feelings”, and the deepest layer is the “values” – what makes the content personally meaningful for the speaker. Listening intentionally for these three distinct layers results in deeper understanding of the multiple dimensions of meaning in all human communication.

(1-2 minutes) **Instructions:** Divide all seder participants into pairs. One person in each pair is invited to play the role of the “*rasha*,” asking the question using the words of the Haggadah and elaborating on the question in his or her own words. (You are welcome to imagine a contemporary version of the “*rasha*” (rebellious adolescent, obnoxious student, someone of a different ideological world view, etc.) The other member of the pair, role-playing an adult at the seder, is instructed to listen for the three layers of facts, feelings, and personal values to the “*rasha*” or “wicked” child.

Round One (7-8 minutes)

(2 minutes) The seder leader invites the “*rasha*” to speak for two minutes, with the “adult” listening in silence.

(2-3 minutes) The “adult” in each pair shares aloud what he or she understood of the (1)facts, (2)feelings, and (3)values that the “*rasha*” expressed. After listening to what the “adult” has to say, the “*rasha*” may respond.

(3 minutes) For the next two-three minutes, the seder leader asks the “adult” to reach out to the “*rasha*” with respect and curiosity, asking the “*rasha*” to share more about his or her perspective. The “adult” continues to listen empathically, and the “*rasha*” responds in this different kind of conversation.

Round Two (7-8 minutes)

If desired, the seder leader can ask the members of each pair to reverse roles and do the exercise in reverse.

Discussion (5-10 minutes)

The seder leader invites everyone to discuss how this conversation was different from the one in the Haggadah.

- How do these principles and practices apply to difficult conversations in our own lives?
- What makes it hard to shift from the harsh tone of the conversation in the Haggadah to the caring and fruitful tone of the constructive conversation we just had?
- What would help us to bring more of this tone and practice into our own conversations?

Additional Resource:

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' article, "What Does This Avodah Mean to You" found in "Torah To-Go" from the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, Yeshiva University Center for the Jewish Future, April 2014. pp. 43 to 48. Rabbi Sacks states:

"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 behavior of adults."

He goes on to say that the sages found something that seemed "dissident" in the question and looks at three sources for interpretations on what is dissident and comes up with three main answers:

according to the Haggadah itself, the rasha is setting himself apart by using the term לֹא according to R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, *Meshekh Chochmah* to Exodus 13:14, the Exodus text says, "And when your children **say** to you." By linking the Rasha's question to the reading in Exodus, the Rasha's question is interpreted as not really asking a question. Rather, he is making a statement. In other words, he's asking a dismissive, rhetorical question. According to the Talmud Yerushalmi the interpretation of what the Rasha means by

הזאת is הטורח הזה, what is all of this effort/hard work about. “Why is being Jewish such hard work?”

Interestingly, by the end of the article (and Rabbi Sacks makes reference to other contemporary sources and to Avot 5:23, “According to the effort is the reward”) it becomes clear that the responder to the question has listened carefully to the feeling, topic and “what’s important” components of the question of the “*rasha*” and instead of brushing off the question begins his answer:

“My child, you ask a good question and I respect you for your honesty. You are telling it the way you see it. It is important that you speak what is in your mind. 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... as 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 G-d — with absolute and ultimate seriousness.”

He concludes the answer to the “*rasha*” by saying:

“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.”

This activity was originally developed for classroom use by Joan Vander Walde, Director of the Pardes Rodef Shalom Schools Program. The idea for the activity was inspired by a listening exercise presented by Tracee Ford of Community Mediation Maryland at the March 2016 Pardes Culture, Community and Conflict Seminar.