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Pesach: 4 Sons, 4 Rabbis, 4 Paradigms

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The *Haggadah* contains two sets of four questions: the classic Four Questions, the *Mah Nishtana*, that gets *maggid* underway, and the four questions posed by the four sons, each of whom has a different orientation to the *seder*.

The Torah refers to 4 children: one wise; one wicked; one simple; and one who does not know how to ask.

כָּנָגְד אַרְבָּעָה בְּנִים דְּבָרָה תּוֹרָה: אֶחָד חָכָם, וְאֶחָד רָשָׁע, וְאֶחָד תָּם, וְאֶחָד שְׂאִינֹ יוֹדֵעַ לְשַׁאֵל.

Between these two sets of questions lay a few stories involving rabbis engaged in the *mitzvah* of the evening, *sipur yetziat mitzrayim* (the telling of the Exodus).

It happened that R. Eliezer, R. Joshua, R. Eleazar b. Azaryah, R. Akiva, and R. Tarfon were reclining in Bnei Brak and were discussing the Exodus throughout the night...

מעשה ברבי אליעזר ורבי יהושוע ורבי אלעזר בן עזריה ורבי עקיבא ורבי טרפון שהיו מסובין בבני ברק, והיו מספרים ביציאת מצרים כל אותו הלילה...

This is followed by a statement from R. Eleazar b. Azaryah:

Behold I am about seventy years old, and I had never convinced anyone that the Exodus should be mentioned at night until Ben Zoma expounded it from a verse, as it says: "So that you will remember the day of your going out from Egypt all the days of your life" (Deut. 16:3). "The days of your life"— daytimes. "All the days of your life"— nighttimes...

הרי אני כבן שבעים שנה ולא זכיתי שתאמר יציאת מצרים בלילות עד שדרשה בן זומא: שנאמר, למען תזכור את יום צאתך מארץ מצרים כל ימי חייך (דברים טז:ג). ימי חייך—הימים. כל ימי חייך—הלילות...

Then, immediately preceding the four questions of the four sons, the *Haggadah* reads:

Blessed is the Omnipresent, blessed is He. Blessed is the One who gave the Torah to his people, Israel, blessed is He.

בְּרוּךְ הַמְּקוֹם, בְּרוּךְ הוּא, בְּרוּךְ שֶׁנָּתַן תּוֹרָה לְעַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּרוּךְ הוּא.

A grand theological declaration is made.

This whole bridge leading up to the four sons is intriguing. What is the meaning of this theological prelude? In what way, if any, does it serve as an introduction to the kinds of wise, wicked, simple, and inarticulate questions that follow? Might the rabbinic stories or characters introduced beforehand shape our read of these enigmatic inquiries?

I'd like to suggest that we investigate these four questions by way of another set of four. Four rabbis who famously enter the *pardes*, some of whom feature in the preceding paragraphs, namely Rabbi Akiva and Ben Zoma.

The relationship between these two sets of four has been suggested by the 15th century *posek* the Rashbatz, R. Shimon b. Tzemach Duran (1361-1444), among others. Much more recently, Yehudah Kurtzer, in his book *Shuva: The Future of the Jewish Past*, indicated a similar connection.

Let us turn to the story of the four rabbis. Tosefta Chagigah 2:3 reads:

Four entered into the *pardes* [orchard] – Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher [Elisha b. Abuyah] and R. Akiva. One looked and died. One looked and was stricken. One looked and trampled the shoots and one went up in peace and came down in peace [R. Akiva]. Ben Azzai looked and died – regarding him the verse says *Grievous in God's eyes are the death of his faithful ones* (Psalms 116:15). Ben Zoma looked and was stricken - regarding him the verse says *If you have found honey, eat what you need, [lest, surfeiting yourself, you throw it up]* (Mishlei 25:16) Elisha looked and trampled the shoots - regarding him the verse says *Do not allow your mouth to cause your flesh to sin ...* (Kohelet 5:5).

ארבעה נכנסו לפרדס בן עזיי ובן זומא
אחר ור' עקיבא
אחד הציץ ומת אחד הציץ ונפגע אחד
הציץ וקיצץ בנטיעות ואחד עלה בשלום
וירד בשלום. בן עזיי הציץ ומת עליו הכת'
אוי יקר, בעיני ה' המותה, לחסידיו
(תהילים קטז:טו). בן זומא הציץ ונפגע
עליו הכת' אוי דבש מצאת, אכל דרך
פן-תשבענו, והקאתו] (משלי כה:טז)
אלישע הציץ וקיצץ בנטיעות עליו הכת'
אומ' אל תתן את פירך לחטיא את בשרך
וגו' (קוהלת ה:ה).

The *pardes* is most frequently interpreted as a place of esoteric, mystical vision. Four great rabbis ascend toward a world in which divine secrets are revealed. The results of this encounter with mystery are decidedly not good though. Three out of four "look" (הציץ) upon the grandeur and are scarred. Ben Azzai dies. Ben Zoma goes mad. Elisha b. Abuyah, soon to be named *Acher* (the Other), "tramples the shoots." He leaves behind his commitment to the ways of the Torah. Only R. Akiva, who does not look, emerges unharmed. Questions abound: What happened in the *pardes*? What went wrong? What could have caused such extreme reactions? Why would Acher leave and why would the others (excluding Rabbi Akiva) have lost it, in one or another?

Many stories developed, in both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, to offer color and cause for such disturbance, particularly Elisha's. Perhaps the challenge of theodicy gripped him, suggests the Jerusalem Talmud. Witnessing a man ascend a ladder to perform the life-extending *mitzvah* of sending away a mother bird only to die upon his descent: Perhaps that injustice overwhelmed Elisha. Or perhaps he watched as the tongue of R. Yehudah the baker, a tongue which had spoken much Torah, got paraded around in the mouth of a dog. "This is the Torah and this is its reward?!", he exclaimed in horror. "זו תורה וזו שכרה" (Jerusalem Talmud Chagiga 2:1). Moshe himself recites these very same words of outrage and confusion when he envisions another injustice, the ultimate torture of R. Akiva (see BT Menachot 29b). (Though he exited the *pardes* in peace, R. Akiva did not exit the world similarly.) It seems that the concerns of *Acher* are perhaps not so other after all. And

yet he is doomed for life on account of his unwillingness to abide a Torah that did not account for the discordant realities of the world.

The tradition from the Babylonian Talmud is a lot more esoteric and complicated.

Acher trampled the shoots. Regarding him Scripture says: *Do not allow your mouth to cause your flesh to sin.* What does it refer to? — He saw that permission was granted to Metatron to sit and write down the merits of Israel. He said: It is taught as a tradition that on high there is no sitting and no competition, and no back, and no weariness. Perhaps, — God forbid! — there are two divinities! [Thereupon] they led Metatron forth, and punished him with sixty fiery lashes, saying to him: Why didn't you stand up when you saw him? Permission was [then] given to him to strike out the merits of *Acher*. A voice from Heaven went forth and said: Return, backsliding children — except *Acher*. [Thereupon] he said: Since I have been driven forth from that world, let me go forth and enjoy this world. So *Acher* went off in a bad way. He went and found a prostitute and propositioned her. She said to him: Are you not Elisha ben Abuyah? He tore a radish out of its bed on the Sabbath and gave it to her. She said: It is another [*Acher*]. (Babylonian Talmud, Chagigah 15a)

אחר קיצץ בנטיעות, עליו הכתוב אומר אַל תִּתֵּן אֶת פִּיךָ לַחֲטִיא אֶת בְּשָׂרְךָ וְגו' (קוהלת ה:ה)
מאי היא? חזא מיטטרון דאתיהבא ליה רשותא למיתב למיכתב זכוותא דישראל, אמר: גמירא דלמעלה לא הוי לא ישיבה ולא תחרות ולא עורף ולא עיפוי, שמא חס ושלום שתי רשויות הן. אפקוהו למיטטרון ומחיוהו שיתין פולסי דנורא. אמרו ליה: מאי טעמא כי חזיתיה לא קמת מקמיה? איתיהבא ליה רשותא למימחק זכוותא דאחר, יצתה בת קול ואמרה +ירמיהו ג'+ שובו בנים שובבים - חוץ מאחר, אמר: הואיל ואיטריד ההוא גברא מההוא עלמא ליפוק ליתנהי בהאי עלמא. נפק אחר לתרבות רעה. נפק אשכח זונה, תבעה. אמרה ליה: ולא אלישע בן אבויה את? - עקר פוגלא ממישרא בשבת ויהב לה. אמרה: אחר הוא. (בבלי חגיגה טו.)

Upon entering the *pardes*, Elisha encountered Metatron, one of the highest angels in God's divine court doing something an angel should not do—sitting! In so doing, Metatron violated the tradition that Elisha had inherited, one that stated that angels only stand. Elisha's Torah, so to speak, bumped up against the Truth, and he was left to mediate that impossible gap. In the conflict between tradition and reality, between what he learned and what he saw, *Acher* sided with what was before his eyes.

Recognizing the way that *Acher's* struggles might presage our own, Yehudah Kurtzer writes:

Akiva's warning [in BT Chagigah 14b] demands dissonance, and asks Elisha to simultaneously hold onto his learning—his previously held knowledge—and to stand facing this jarring reality, and to hold the two together in perilous silence. I would suggest that this is both a virtually impossible task as well as an extremely common and contemporary challenge...But the more dramatic dissonance is a hallmark of the Jewish experience of modernity, the inevitable and unresolved conflict between those things we learn and those things we see, the systems of Jewish belief and the experiences of modern reality. The notion that we would hold, freeze, stand in suspended dissonance seems both impossible and highly desirable—and reflects perhaps the exact "failure" at the core of Elisha's

experience in the *pardes*. The disappointment of this text lies in finding that Elisha is human, but not superhuman. (Y. Kurtzer, *Shuva*, p. 123-124)

Those of us privileged to inherit tradition will often be confronted by its implausibility. We are frequently asked to stand in the gaps between truths we receive and truths we perceive; to sit with cognitive dissonances that threaten our sense of coherence. We are then left with choices.

Like Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma, we might feel compelled to give up on the world, exiting it entirely (Ben Azzai) or unable to see it clearly (Ben Zoma). Like *Acher*, we might feel compelled to give up on Torah. Or like Rabbi Akiva, who does not gaze at the *pardes*, we might either choose to look away from the conflict or to step into it, with balance and confident comfort in the discomfort.

Returning to the *Haggadah*, recall that we meet some of these characters again on Seder night. Elisha has been ostracized and Ben Azzai is dead, but Rabbi Akiva is up late learning and Ben Zoma is teaching about the night. (See above.) He seems to live in the fog of darkness, not quite seeing. They bring us to the four sons, who themselves are introduced with that enigmatic theological statement:

Blessed is the Omnipresent, blessed is He. Blessed is the One בְּרוּךְ הַמְּקוֹם, בְּרוּךְ הוּא, בְּרוּךְ שְׁנֵיתָן
 who gave the Torah to his people, Israel, blessed is He. תוֹרָה לְעַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּרוּךְ הוּא.

What is the place of theology here? I believe it is the grand Truth that the four children are contending with. Like the four rabbis before them, they each offer a challenge to—or an orientation toward—the world they are inheriting and the ways that it rubs up against the world as they see it. Metatron is sitting, so to speak, and they must each navigate that difficulty.

The wise child, the *chacham*, is like Rabbi Akiva, pious, focused, and in this world. He is interested in *mitzvot*, invested in the ways that this-worldly actions can be brought into conversation with the upper realms. He stays firmly within his inherited frame as he manages his internal instability.

The evil child, the *rasha*, is like Elisha, willing to exclude himself from a community whose relationship to Truth he can no longer trust. One who is unwilling to abide any cognitive dissonance cannot stay in community, these stories suggest, and so we say to the *rasha*, as was said to *Acher*, stay out. Yet, harsh as this judgement is, I believe that it is also subtly winks at us. Like *Acher* of the Talmud who, despite the heavenly decree against him, is not completely out of the community (he is still R. Meir's teacher and is also saved after death), so the *rasha*, for all of his wickedness, is still at the table. The *Haggadah* is haunted by the all-too-familiar character.

The last two categories are a bit murkier. The Rashbatz suggests that Ben Azzai is like the simple one, the *tam*, overwhelmed by his naivete or his single-mindedness. Yaacov was an "*ish tam*," after all, and hardly simple. Ben Azzai was known to be obsessed with learning Torah, so much so that he could not marry. He could not put down roots. (See BT Yevamot 63b) He could not fully be in this



world. And Ben Zoma is like the one who cannot question, *she'eino yodea lish'ol*. So damaged was he that he could no longer formulate a question. He was muted into silence.

My aim here is not to map the four sons onto the four rabbis perfectly but to raise the possibility that the four children do not only offer four different approaches to the practice of Pesach, but four different approaches to one of the deepest challenges of the modern world: how to square truths with Truth; how to live with or in the gaps between all that we are taught and all that we cannot help but see. The time of “*vehigadta l'bincha*” is not only a chance to tell our collective story. It is a chance to reflect on the cognitive, existential, and spiritual challenges that emerge when we tell our story that way.

In the words of Kurtzer:

How we tell our stories is the process by which we own the past and, in turn, the means by which we chart the future with confidence and authenticity. The rabbis not only end their story with a saved Elisha, they implicitly tell us that their story and our story are best routed through him. Ben Zoma and ben Azzai are gone, Rabbi Akiva is inaccessible, but Elisha is most closely us—occupying a place of dissonance, struggling with his choices, making those around him struggle with their choices, and ultimately departing and making us feel conflicted as to whether his struggles were his own or ours, whether he failed us, we failed him, or whether no one failed at all. The story becomes one of a loss of commandedness, seeing and its consequences, of love and its sacrifices, and ultimately of return and restoration: not in Elisha’s lifetime, but in how we narrate his story. (Y. Kurtzer, *Shuva*, p. 132-133)



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