

The Four Questions (?)

תשפ"ג / The Freehof Institute of Progressive Halakhah, 2023

It's one of everybody's favorite *seder* moments. The youngest child at the table sings *mah nishtanah*, the Four Questions. Check that: we should say the *so-called* Four Questions because, well, we've got some questions about the Four Questions. Like: are they really "questions" at all? And: are there really *four* of them? These are good questions, and as usual in the study of *halakhah*, the questions may be better than any answers we might give them. Still, we ought to try. So let's begin with the text of the *Mah Nishtanah* – the Four "Questions" – from the *hagadah shel Pesah*.

מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות -

- (1) שֶׁבֶּכֶל הַלַּיְלוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין חֲמֵץ וּמִצָּה, הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה - כֵּלּוּ מִצָּה?
- (2) שֶׁבֶּכֶל הַלַּיְלוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין שָׂאֵר יִרְקוֹת, - הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה מְרֹר?
- (3) שֶׁבֶּכֶל הַלַּיְלוֹת אֵין אָנוּ מְטַבֵּילִין אֶפְּיֵלוּ פֶּעַם אַחַת, - הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה שְׁתֵּי פְּעָמִים?
- (4) שֶׁבֶּכֶל הַלַּיְלוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין בֵּין יוֹשְׁבֵי וּבֵין מְסֻבִּין, - הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה כִּלְנוּ מְסֻבִּין?

Why is this night different from all other nights?

- (1) On all other nights, we eat *hametz* and *matzah* – why tonight only *matzah*?
- (2) On all other nights, we eat all kinds of vegetables – why tonight *maror*?
- (3) On all other nights, we do not dip our food into liquid/sauce even once – why tonight do we dip twice?
- (4) On all other nights, we eat either seated or reclining – why tonight reclining?

True, your *hagadah* probably doesn't number the questions; we've added the numerals for convenience. And yes, it looks as though there *are* four questions. We've purposefully translated them that way, because that's the standard translation, the one we're familiar with, reflecting the way we understand this piece of *seder* liturgy: namely, these are the child's questions to the parent about the *shinuyim* (*shinuyim*), the "differences" the child notices about the *seder* meal that distinguish it from all others.

Except... that's not the function that the *mah nishtanah* plays in its original source, *Mishnah P'sahim* 10:4. That chapter of the Mishnah describes the *seder* meal¹ step by step.

מזגו לו כוס שני, וכאן הבן שואל אביו. ואם אין דעת בבן אביו מלמדו :
מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות -

- (1) שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין חמץ ומצה הלילה הזה כולו מצה.
 - (2) שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין שאר ירקות, הלילה הזה מרור.
 - (3) שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין בשר צלי שלוק ומבושל, הלילה הזה כולו צלי.
 - (4) שבכל הלילות אנו מטבילין פעם אחת, הלילה הזה שתי פעמים.
- ולפי דעתו של בן, אביו מלמדו.

¹ As we'll see, it reflects the Mishnah's understanding of the *seder* as it was observed during the days of the Temple.

The second cup of wine is poured, and at this point the child asks his father. If the child does not have sufficient intelligence to ask, the father teaches him:

Why is this night different (or: how different is this night) from all other nights?!

(1) On all other nights, we eat *ḥametz* and *matzah* – tonight, only *matzah*.

(2) On all other nights, we eat all kinds of vegetables – tonight, *maror*.

(3) On all other nights, we eat roasted, stewed, or cooked meat – tonight, only roasted.

(4) On all other nights, we dip our food into liquid/sauce once – tonight, twice.

The father instructs the child in a manner appropriate to the child's intelligence.

Mah nishtanah, then, was not originally a text (let alone a song) declaimed by the child. Nor is it necessarily a list of questions, which is why we haven't punctuated it with question marks. It was the father's recitation *to* the child, stating the differences in tonight's meal that the child could (or should) have noticed. The father recites this passage, moreover, *only* "if the child does not have sufficient intelligence" and has not asked a question of his/her own. That question need not point out one of the four differences that the father recites here. For example, as Rashi tells us in his comment on the *mishnah*:²

וכאן הבן שואל את אביו – כאן צמזיגת כוס שני הבן שואל את אביו: מה נשתנה עכשיו שמוזגין כוס שני קודם אכילה?

And at this point the child asks his father – at this point, when the second cup is poured, the child asks his father: why is this meal different, that we're pouring a second cup before we eat?

The child should ideally ask questions out of natural curiosity about the *shinuyim* in the *seder* meal, some of which are undertaken precisely and solely in order to elicit those questions. As we read in *B. P'saḥim* 115b:

למה עוקרין את השולחן? אמרי דבי רבי ינאי: כדי שיכירו תינוקות וישאלו. אביי הוה יתיב קמיה דרבה, חזא דקא מדלי תכא מקמיה. אמר להו: עדיין לא קא אכלינן, אתו קא מעקרי תכא מיקמן? אמר ליה רבה: פטרתן מלומר מה נשתנה.

Why do we remove the table/tray?³ The school of R. Yannai say: so that the children will see [this unusual event] and ask questions.

Abaye was sitting before Rabah [at the *seder*] and saw the tray removed from before him. He (Abaye) said: we haven't eaten yet; why are they removing the tray? Rabah said to him: "you have exempted us from reciting *mah nishtanah*."

² To be perfectly pedantic about it (since Rashi never wrote a "commentary to the Mishnah"), this is Rashi's comment to the *mishnah* as it appears in *B. P'saḥim* 116a.

³ Heb. שולחן, "table." This obviously doesn't refer to a dining table but rather to the individual trays that sat in front of each participant in the meal. The custom to "remove the tray" (or to lift up the tray) appears in many traditional *hagadot*.

Rabah (teacher) and Abaye (student) were both leading scholars of the third and fourth generations, respectively, of Babylonian *amora'im* (late 3rd-early 4th centuries C.E.). This vignette, dating apparently from Abaye's early childhood, supports the suggestion that *mah nishtanah* was a text that the *seder* leader would recite to the child if, and *only* if, the child did not ask an appropriate question of his own. In this case, Abaye's question, piqued by his curiosity over the removal of the tray, was sufficient to exempt Rabah from the need to recite the passage.

We see, then, that *mah nishtanah* is not only a recitation by the father or *seder* leader rather than the child, but also that it is not absolutely required: if children ask questions of their own, we need not recite *mah nishtanah* at all. The 13th-century Italian halakhic composition *Shibolei Haleket*⁴ preserves this understanding of the function of the passage.

מה נשתנה הלילה הזה. פירש רבינו ישעיה זצ"ל זה נתקן עבור מי שאין לו מי שישאל שאילו היה לו בן [חכם] שהיה שואל לא היו צריכין לאומרו. כי הא דאביי הוה יתיב קמיה (דרבא) [דרבה] ... אמר ליה (רבא) [רבה] פטרתן מלומר מה נשתנה. אבל במקום שאין לו מי שישאל חייבין לשאול זה את זה. ואפי' שני תלמידי חכמים הבקיאין בהלכות הפסח.

“How is this night different?” R. Yeshaya di Trani writes that this section was established only for those who have no one to ask questions. For if he had an [intelligent] child who could ask his own questions, there would be no need to say this, as we read in the story of Abaye sitting before Rabah (*B. P'sahim* 115b)... who said: “you have exempted us from reciting *mah nishtanah*.” However, when there is no one [i.e., no children] to ask questions, those in attendance must ask each other. This is true even for two scholars who are expert in the laws of Pesah.

If it was expected that the child would ask spontaneous questions based upon the *shinuyim* that she or he observes at the meal, then the text of *mah nishtanah*, the father's recitation of the *shinuyim* that the child should have noticed, must refer to differences that the child can actually perceive. That explains why *mah nishtanah* no longer contains a reference to “roasted meat” (the *mishnah's* question #3). We no longer offer sacrifices, so the child would not be expected to notice this difference at the table. It also explains why the Babylonian *amora'im* have problems with the Mishnah's formulation of the “question” concerning *tibulim*, “dipping.” We read in *B. P'sahim* 116a:

מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות שבכל הלילות אנו מטבילין פעם אחת, הלילה הזה שתי פעמים. מתקיף לה רבא: אטו כל יומא לא סגיא דלא מטבלא חדא זימנא?

“On all other nights, we dip our food into liquid/sauce once – tonight, twice.”

Rava objects: isn't it enough to say that on all other nights we don't dip even once?

Rava's critique of the *mishnah's* text is rooted in a major cultural difference between Bavel (Babylonia), where he lives, and Eretz Yisrael, where the Mishnah took shape. At formal meals in Eretz Yisrael, it was customary to eat food by dipping it into sauce or condiment. The difference at the *seder* is that a second course of dipping – what we call *karpas*, parsley or other

⁴ Ch. 218, *seder pesah*.

green vegetable – was added to the meal. Hence: “on all other nights, we dip ... once – tonight, twice.” In Bavel, where dipping was not the custom, the child would never say that “we dip once on all other nights.” Rava therefore emends the text of the *mishnah*:

אלא אמר רבא, הכי קתני: שבכל הלילות אין אנו חייבין לטבל אפילו פעם אחת, הלילה הזה שתי פעמים.

Rather, says Rava, here is how the *mishnah* should read: “On all other nights, we are not required to dip our food into liquid/sauce once – tonight, twice.”

This emendation does solve the problem that Rava points out, but it creates another problem:

מתקיף לה רב ספרא: חיובא לדרדקי? אלא אמר רב ספרא, הכי קתני: אין אנו מטבילין אפילו פעם אחת הלילה הזה שתי פעמים

Rav Safra objects: is this thing we do to grab the attention of children⁵ to be called an “obligation?” Rather, says Rav Safra, here is how the *mishnah* should read: “On all other nights, we do not dip our food into liquid/sauce even once – tonight, twice.”

Rava speaks of *tibul* (dipping) as a ritual requirement or obligation (חיוב; Aramaic חיובא). But Rav Safra notes that dipping is really a pedagogical device, one way among others that we try to arouse the children’s curiosity so that they will ask questions. He therefore corrects Rava’s emended text, removing the reference to “obligation” and leaving us with the version that is recited today.

In the 14th century, the Spanish liturgical commentator R. David Abudarham could write:⁶

וכשאומר הא לחמא עניא עוקרין הסל או הקערה מעל השולחן כדי שיכירו התינוקות וישאלו מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלים מה שלפנינו בקערה ועכשיו היא מסולקת מלפנינו.

When we recite “This is the bread of affliction” (*ha laḥma anya*) we lift up the basket or the plate from the table so that the children will see it and ask: “Why is this night different from all other nights? On all other nights we eat that which lies before us on the plate, but now it is taken away from us.”

As Abudarham testifies, the custom from Mishnaic times continues: the adults perform a “strange” action to entice the children to ask their own questions. Notice, though, that in his version the children express this supposedly natural and spontaneous question in a stilted manner: *mah nishtanah halayla hazeh*, etc., as though the children have studied the Mishnah and memorized its language! This probably testifies that by Abudarham’s day the *mah nishtanah* had in fact become a piece of formal liturgy, familiar to all and recited as a matter of course, even when the children did ask questions of their own. Such, at any rate, is the impression we get from Rambam in his 12th-century *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Ḥametz Umatzah* 8:2:

⁵ See Rashbam *ad loc.*, s.v. חיובא לדרדקי: we do this (i.e., dipping) so that the children will see it and ask questions.”

⁶ *Sefer Abudarham, Hagadah shel Pesah*.

ומוזגין הכוס השני וכאן הבן שואל, ואומר הקורא מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות?

The second cup of wine is poured, and at this point the child asks.

And the reader says: “Why is this night different (or: how different is this night) from all other nights?!”

Mah nishtanah is still recited by the leader of the *seder* and not by the child. On the other hand, the leader recites it *even though* the child has asked a question of her or his own.⁷ *Mah nishtanah* has become a rubric of formal liturgy, a fixed part of the *seder* ritual, and is no longer a backup measure for the father to recite in case the child does *not* ask questions.⁸ Formality became the norm in Ashkenaz as well. *Sefer Maharil* (Germany, 14th-15th centuries) declares that *mah nishtanah* should be recited הכל בניגון יפה לשבח לאדון הכל, “as a beautiful melody in praise of the Master of all.” The liturgical passage was now, as it is today, a song, a special part of the *seder*; it had long since ceased to be the father’s response to a child who doesn’t know how to ask.

On final point: how many “questions” are there in *mah nishtanah*? If you say “four,” you may be right... but not necessarily. See, for example, the version of the *mishnah* preserved in Talmud Yerushalmi *P’sahim* 10:4:

מזגו לו כוס שני וכאן הבן שואל אם אין דעת בבן לשאול. אביו מלמדו –
מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות –
(1) שבכל הלילות אנו מטבילין פעם אחת והלילה הזה שתי פעמים.
(2) שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין חמץ ומצה והלילה הזה כולו מצה.
(3) שבכל הלילות אוכלין בשר צלי שלוק ומבושל והלילה הזה כולו צלי.
ולפי דעתיה של בן אביו מלמדו.

The second cup of wine is poured...

Why is this night different (or: how different is this night) from all other nights?!

(1) On all other nights, we dip...

(2) On all other nights... *ḥametz* and *matzah*...

(3) On all other nights... roasted, stewed, or cooked meat...

If you’re keeping score at home, that’s *three*, rather than four “questions.” This conforms with a number of manuscript versions of both the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud, as well as with the versions of the *mishnah* preserved by R. Yitzhak Alfasi (Rif) and R. Asher b. Yehiel (Rosh). Other manuscripts have as few as two “questions.” The upshot is that, originally, there was no fixed number of “questions” at all.⁹

⁷ See also the *Hagadah shel Pesah* of R. Yom Tov b. Ishbili (14th-century Spain): ואחר כך מוזגין ואומרים על כוס שני – מה נשתנה וכו’ – “*mah nishtanah* is recited over the second cup,” with no mention of whether the child asks a question of his own.

⁸ Suggesting that Rambam does not regard the passage on *B. P’sahim* 115b (Rabah’s statement to Abaye that by asking a question “you have exempted us from *mah nishtanah*”) as halakhically authoritative. See R. Manoach b. Yaakov (13th-century Provence), *Sefer Ham’nuḥah* on the *Mishneh Torah* on this *halakhah*.

⁹ See Menachem M. Kasher, *Hagadah Sh’leimah* (Jerusalem, 1967), P. 115: ומוכח מזה שבכלל לא היה קבוע חשבון של די קושיות.

Meanwhile, Rambam offers his own version of how the *hagadah* settled upon the number four:¹⁰

- (1) שבכל הלילות אין אנו מטבילין אפילו פעם אחת והלילה הזה שתי פעמים,
- (2) שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין חמץ ומצה והלילה הזה כולו מצה,
- (3) שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין בשר צלי שלוק ומבושל והלילה הזה כולו צלי,
- (4) שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין שאר ירקות והלילה הזה מרורים,
- (5) שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין בין יושבין בין מסובין והלילה הזה כולנו מסובין.
בזמן הזה אינו אומר והלילה הזה כולו צלי שאין לנו קרבן.

- (1) On all other nights, we do not dip our food into liquid/sauce even once – tonight, twice.
- (2) On all other nights... *ḥametz* and *matzah*...
- (3) On all other nights... roasted, stewed, or cooked meat...
- (4) On all other nights, we eat all kinds of vegetables – tonight, *maror*.
- (5) On all other nights we eat while seated or reclining; tonight, we recline.
Nowadays one does not say “tonight we eat only roasted meat,” for we do not offer sacrifices.

This accounts for the four “questions” we recite today. But from where comes #5, “reclining?” Although Rambam asserts here that it originates in the days of the Temple, we find no mention of it in the Mishnah or the Talmud.¹¹ Perhaps, then, it originates as an enactment (*takkanah*) of the Babylonian *geonim*, but we have no record of any such *takkanah*. The *hagadah* text in the *siddur* of Rav Saadyah Gaon (10th century) includes this “question,” suggesting that it is part of the practice in his day, but he makes no mention of its origin. The best we can do is to speculate that the “question” about reclining originated, either in Talmudic or geonic times, as a customary observance (*minhag*), the purpose of which was to replace the no-longer-relevant “question” #3. “roasted meat” and bring the number of “questions” in the *mah nishtanah* back up to four.

So, to recap: the “Four Questions” may never have been questions, certainly not in their original setting. There may not have been four of them. And they were recited by the father, *not* by the child, and then *only* when the child did not ask questions of his or her own. But none of this changes the fact that *questions* are absolutely central to the *seder* experience. As the Torah instructs us,¹² the *mitzvah* of *hagadah*, the telling of the story of the redemption, is not fulfilled simply by narration. The story comes in response to questions that children ask about their parents’ historical experience, an act symbolizing the transmission of national memory from one generation to another. Perhaps this expresses a recognition that the best way to learn and to teach is through the response to questions, to a real desire on the part of the child or student to learn. At any rate, as we read in *B. P’sahim* 116a:

תנו רבנן : חכם בנו - שואלו, ואם אינו חכם - אשתו שואלתו. ואם לאו - הוא שואל לעצמו. ואפילו שני תלמידי חכמים שיודעין בהלכות הפסח - שואלין זה לזה.

¹⁰ *Hilkhhot Ḥametz Umatzah* 8:2-3

¹¹ Kasher, *loc. cit.*, argues that the “question” dates back to Temple times, but aside from his ingenious theory he offers no textual evidence.

¹² See Exodus 12:26, Exodus 13:14, and Deuteronomy 6:20.

A *baraita*: One's child asks the questions, if the child is sufficiently intelligent. If not, one's wife asks the questions. And if not – one asks oneself. Even (if) two Torah scholars who are knowledgeable about the laws of Pesach (are making *seder* with each other) – they ask questions of each other.

Or to put it another way: even though we have questions about the “Four Questions,” it just isn't a *seder* without questions.