

Connect 4: Why the Haggadah does what it does with fours

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How many things happen in fours in the Haggadah! Besides the obvious ones—four cups, the four questions and the four sons/children—there are the four times we do something ritually with matsah, and the four times we explain Exodus 13:8. And we start telling the story four times before we actually get going (*Ha lachma, Avadim hayinu, Mit'chilah* and *Arami oved avi*). AND we transform the three *matsot* into four at *Yachats*.



The number four corresponds to the four verbs for redemption used in one verse, but it means much more than that. The secret of fours in the haggadah is that each symbol or motif is transformed from a symbol of slavery into a symbol of freedom in four steps. For example, matsah starts out as a symbol of slavery (*ha lachma anya* or the poor bread we ate in Egypt אֲכָלוּ אֶבְהֶתְנָא). Then it becomes a symbol of redemption from Egypt (*matsah zo al shum mah* "For what reason do we eat matsah? Because our ancestors didn't have time to let the dough rise..."). Then it becomes the bread of freedom that we ate when the Temple was standing (the "Hillel sandwich" לֶחֶם חֵלֵל), and finally it is the *afikoman*, the hidden part, the missing piece that completes the whole, the invisible, which is greater than what's visible – this is the bread we will eat when Messiah comes.

As we transform the meaning of matsah, we move it (and ourselves) from slavery to freedom. Of course, matsah means all of these things, but by putting them in a specific order, we create a transformation. That's the real secret of the seder, and that's why it's called a seder.

This principle also applies to the four times we quote the verse "Because of this which Adonai did for me in taking me from Egypt" וְהַגְדַּת לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא. At first the verse is used to exclude others, but by the end we use it to fully include ourselves. The one who is transformed is the teacher. Here are the times it's quoted:

1) to reprimand the "wicked child" *: רָשָׁע מָה הוּא אוֹמֵר? מָה הָעֶבֶדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם? לָכֶם - וְלֹא לוֹ. וְאַף אֶתְּהָה הַקֹּהֶה אֶת שִׁנּוּי וְאָמַר לוֹ: בְּעֶבְרִית זֶה עָשָׂה יי לִי בְּצִאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם.

2) to open up to the one who doesn't know to ask: וְשִׂיבֵנוּ יוֹדֵעַ לְשֹׂא לוֹ - אֶת פֶּתַח לוֹ, שְׁנֵאמֶר: וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר, בְּעֶבְרַת זֶה עָשָׂה יי' לִי בִּצְאָתִי מִמִּצְרָיִם.

3) to explain why we tell the story at night on the full moon: יָכוֹל מֵרָאשׁ חֹדֶשׁ, תִּלְמֹד לֹמֵר בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יָכוֹל מִבְּעוֹד יוֹם, תִּלְמֹד לֹמֵר בְּעֶבְרַת זֶה - בְּעֶבְרַת זֶה לֹא אִמְרָתִי אֲלֵא בְּשָׁעָה שִׁישׁ מִצָּה וּמְרוֹר מְנַחִים לְפָנֶיךָ

4) to remind us that we ourselves left Egypt: בְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר חֵיב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת עַצְמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרָיִם, שְׁנֵאמֶר: וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר, בְּעֶבְרַת זֶה עָשָׂה יי' לִי

Another less obvious meaning of one of the fours of the haggadah: we usually think that the four children are in some kind of decreasing order of virtue or intellect, with the wise one being the best. But it can actually be seen as the opposite: the "wise one" is at the bottom, unable to penetrate the meaning because he cannot see more than the rules. The response he gets, "explain to him the laws until 'we don't add after the Pesach offering an *afikoman*'", represents an acceptance of the fact that this one is not ready to reach towards redemption.

The wicked one has entered the gates, understanding that *avodah*/service must mean something more, though he/she is too full of ego to easily partake. The simple one and the one who doesn't know to ask have reached higher states, and one might even say that the one who doesn't know to ask is closest to enlightenment and redemption.

But each of these is no more than a symbol for who we each are at different times. If we truly reach the level of "in every generation one must see him/herself as if he/she left Egypt" – which comes when all four children, i.e. all parts of ourselves, are brought together into the experience – then we have attained the purpose of the seder. *Chag Kasher uM'shachrer, Chag Sameach!*

See also "[The Mystery of Charoset: A lesson about leaving trauma](#)".

Here are links to my .mp3 files from the 2004 Beit Midrash Ruach v'Lev sessions on "Unlocking the Mysteries of the Haggadah" at Chochmat Halev in Berkeley CA.

[Part 1](#) – the obvious fours of the haggadah, what they mean, and a list of hidden fours.

[Part 2](#) – the first two meanings of matzah, the true meaning of "seder", and transforming the symbol of matsah.

[Part 3](#) – the second two meanings of matzah; redemption and the *afikoman*. (**unedited**)

[Part 4](#) – the transformations of the verse "*Ba'avur zeh...*"; psychological dimensions; beginning of discussion of the four sons/children (last section incomplete). (**unedited**)

* "Wicked" is a problematic English term, because it's derived from Wiccan. But I haven't settled on a better one. "Evil" is too harsh. "Froward" is too frumpy/freaky. "Rebellious" is possible but not related enough to the Hebrew. So for now, it's still "wicked".