



THE FOUR QUESTIONS

What Makes This Night Different?

ארבע הקושיות



QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

1. Do the questions of the Haggadah read differently this year?
2. How do you feel this seder night is different from previous seder nights, if at all?
3. What is giving you a sense of community this year?

By Shalom Orzach

AN EXPLORATION THROUGH JEWISH TEXT

We often refer to the Four Questions that play a central role in the Pesach Seder. A closer look however will reveal that we are actually asking five questions. The first question is in its guise as an introduction, posing the most profound question of all: “*Why is this night different from all other nights?*” In fact, this is the real question, and the other four are derivatives of it.

This first question is an invitation and it ingeniously enables us to perform a fundamental obligation, that of the commandment to:

זכור את היום הזה אשר יצאתם ממצרים (שמות י"ג, ג)

“Remember *the* day that you left Egypt” (Exodus 13:3)

Our capacity to remember rests on vesting the event with a meaning that makes it different and unique. When things resemble one another, when there are no meaningful distinctions, that is, we forget, or perhaps more poignantly we *forgo* the particularity of the moment.

The phrase *mah nishtanah* (מה נשתנה), the opening of the Four Questions, is itself curious. It speaks not only of difference but also of deference, awe. Rabbi Soloveitchik teaches us that this process of amazement and explanation, of intrigue and elucidation, is the foundation of the Haggadah. This is the source of procurement of knowledge. It is the question of questions.

The first and too often overlooked question of Mah Nishtanah, creates that *chavruta* (חִבְרוּתָא), meaning friendship, companionship, community. A party of slaves that at the beginning of their journey to freedom shares their food are now a people able to invite the poor to join their meal. Again Rabbi Soloveitchik reminds us the term *am* (עַם), a people, is from the word *im* (עִם), meaning “with,” denoting togetherness and solidarity. This and so much more is captured in the Big Ask of Mah Nishtanah.

Yet this year the questioning reverberates all the more powerfully and may lean more to disquieting proclamation, as we declare in Ha lachma anya, “This is the bread of affliction...” which preempts the reciting of Mah Nishtanah:

הַשְּׁתָּא הָכָא, לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בְּאֶרֶץ דִּישְׂרָאֵל. הַשְּׁתָּא עַבְדֵּי, לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בְּנֵי חוֹרִין

“Now we are here, next year we will be in the land of Israel; this year we are slaves, next year we will be free people.”

This is supposed to be nostalgic, not a reflection of our modern reality with the existence of the State of Israel! Perhaps as opposed to asking, we may wish to amend the opening by *מה נעשה* מַה נַעֲשֶׂה... הלילה הזה... What will we be doing differently tonight?