

QUESTIONS ARE THE ANSWER

R. Miriam-Simma Walfish

Pesah is known of as “a night of many questions,” reflecting the central role questions have played in the Seder ritual since Rabbinic times. The Mishnah, for example, states that, after the pouring of the second glass of wine, “the son inquires of the father” (Mishnah Pesahim 10:4). Upon closer examination, however, the types of questions our rabbis mandated are perplexing. That same *mishnah* goes on to stipulate that if the child does not have *da’at* (knowledge) the father teaches them what questions to ask. This mishnah filters into our Haggadah as the scripted Mah Nishtanah that the youngest participants in the Seder recite in a sing-song, not as questions that stem from true curiosity.

Even more starkly, the Talmud describes a tale of a young Abaye, sitting at the Seder of his teacher and adoptive father Rabbah. Rabbah has the servants take the table away, at which Abaye exclaims, “We still haven’t eaten and yet they come and pull the table from before us?!” “Wonderful!” answers Rabbah, “פסרתן מלומר מה נשתנה” - You have exempted us from the obligation to recite the Mah Nishtanah!” (Pesahim 115b). Here, Rabbah frames the asking of questions as a ritual obligation, one that can be discharged by asking a question that seems random.

Another quirk of questions on Seder night is that the Talmud requires questions even of those dining alone: “one asks themselves” (Pesahim 116a).

These modes of question-asking can feel superficial or unsatisfying. What is the purpose of asking the same ritualized questions every year? If a parent removes the table—or makes some other change to the meal that has no symbolic significance—is this really a recipe for meaningful conversation about the themes of Seder night? And if someone sits alone, how can it possibly be meaningful to ask themselves questions, to create a conversation of one?

R. Yitzhak Hutner¹ suggests in one of his essays about Pesah (Pahad Yitzhak, Pesah #47) that the centrality of question-asking for its own sake is a feature—not a bug—of the Seder experience. In fact, he says, there is a theological significance to the mode of questioning itself, regardless of who is involved in the conversation, whether the questions are on-topic or not, or even if those questions lack satisfying answers. Rav Hutner suggests that we look to the Torah, where God acts and communicates with humanity through various kinds of speech to uncover the theological significance of the mode of questioning. Specifically, he notes that God creates the world using ten instances of the root “אמר - to say”² and subsequently reveals Torah to us in the “עשרת הדברות - the ten statements.” While the words “saying” and “stating” might sound synonymous, there is a qualitative difference between them:

וכאן הוא עומק ההבדל בין שם אמירה שנתייחד לבריאת עולמות, ובין השם דיבור שנתייחד למתן תורה. דהלא נתפרש לנו דדיבור הוא לשון קשה, ואמירה היא לשון רכה. ומובן הוא ופשוט, דקושי-הדיבור ורכות-האמירה אינם תלויים בהרמת הקול או בחריפות הביטויים, אלא שהחילוק תלוי בהמגמה הפנימית של הביטוי. דאם המגמה הפנימית שלו היא להנהיג את הזולת, הרי מגמה זו מטביעה בו את תכונת הקושי, והביטוי יוצא ובא לעולם בתור דיבור. ולעומת זאת במקום שאין מגמתו של הביטוי הנהגת הזולת, הרי חסרון-מגמה זו מטביעה בו את תכונת הרכות, והביטוי יוצא ובא לעולם בתור אמירה.

And here is the depth of the difference between the noun amirah (saying), designated for creation, and the noun dibbur, (stating), designated for revelation. We have discovered that dibbur is hard speech, and

amirah is soft speech. Of course it is obvious that the hardness of dibbur and the softness of amirah are not dependent on the volume of the voice or the sharpness of the phrases; rather, the distinction lies in the inner intention of the expression. For if its inner intention is to lead the other, then this intention imbues the quality of hardness, and the expression comes into the world as dibbur. However, when the inner intention is not leading the other, then this lack of intention imbues the quality of softness, and the expression comes into the world as amirah.

Rav Hutner goes on to suggest that the different words that the Torah uses to describe God’s speech reflect a progression in our relationship with God. God creates the world for its inhabitants out of *hesed* (love), and the speech God uses to do so is ten sayings (*ma’amarot*), from the root אמר. This אמר speech, which characterizes the creation mode of relationship, is soft, almost nurturing in quality. It signifies the relationship that God has with humanity at the moment of our birth: full of *hesed*, unconditional love, a love not contingent on human action. It is a one-sided *hesed*, in which God gives and we—whether we deserve it or not, whether we know it or not—receive. After the Exodus, though, God’s relationship to the world is shaped by creation’s counterpart, revelation, which requires that we take on a more active role. Revelation signifies the start of a new relationship with God, one that is grounded in the reciprocal nature of *berit* (covenant). Speech is central to the encounter at Mount Sinai too, but this time it is not the soft אמר speech but the harder, declarative דבר speech of the ten statements/commandments that takes center stage.

We often think of the moment of revelation hierarchically: God commands and we are charged with obey-

1 1906-1980, Lithuania and USA, he is also known as the Pahad Yitzhak after his book by that name.

2 See Mishnah Avot 5:1.

ing. But the covenant of Sinai only works because it is mutual. God's *hesed* after Sinai is predicated on our ability to act, to meet God halfway in this covenant of action. The *dibrot* of revelation therefore usher in a more intensive and active relationship than the *ma'amarot* of creation. No longer are we merely passive recipients of divine beneficence. Instead, Sinai indicates a kind of *hesed* that invites—demands—human action and human response. We now have an active hand in shaping our relationship with God.

So where does question-asking come in? The answer is that the transition from the *hesed* of creation to the *hesed* of revelation cannot happen in one moment. In order for us to be ready to enter into the new level of mutual relationship with God, we needed a different kind of experience and a third kind of speech, one that can prepare us for this shift from one mode of relationship to the other. As Rav Hutter puts it:

הגדת גאולת מצרים באה היא
באופן ביטוי של הדרכה דהיינו
באופן של והגדת לבנך דרך שאלה
ותשובה דוקא.
עשרת המאמרות לא היו זקוקים
למקבל, עשרת הדברות הוזקקו
למקבל וגאולת מצרים היא יצירת
פרצוף המקבל שיהא ראוי לקבל
הדיבור. ועל כן סיפור הגדת גאולת
מצרים באה היא בשני פרצופים
דוקא, פרצוף של שואל ופרצוף של
משיב.

Telling of the redemption from Egypt comes in the manner of training, that is, in the manner of "And you shall teach your child"—by means of question and answer specifically.

The ten ma'amarot needed no recipient, the ten dibrot needed a recipient, and the redemption from Egypt was the forming of the countenance of a recipient who would be fitting to accept the commandments. And therefore, the telling of the Exodus story comes with two countenances: a face of one who asks and a face of one who answers.

The focus on the face, or countenance, is not accidental. At the time of creation, when God's abundance overflowed and nourished the world, God did not need to relate to the recipients of that overflow as individuals. It is as

if before revelation, humans were faceless creatures, receiving divine beneficence impersonally. A covenant, on the other hand, is all about relationship—and relationships, by their nature, require each side to have a face. By asking a question, I express my desire to seek out the face of the other. I signal my readiness to open up a dialogue and enter into deep relationship. Asking questions transforms me from a passive recipient of whatever comes my way into an active acceptor, a person actively seeking out relationship with the other, whether human or divine.

Our question-asking on Seder night is part of reenacting and reliving the experience of the original Seder night, when the Israelites themselves were transitioning between these two modes of relating to God. It is the posture of asking questions that is able to transport us from the mode of creation—passively accepting God's *hesed*—to the mode of revelation—actively stepping up as a full member of the *berit*. This is why the ritualized question-asking at the Seder—even to its absurd extremes—is key to the Seder experience: it places us in the same receptive posture as our ancestors in the Exodus itself, as they prepared to move themselves from creation to revelation. By asking questions at every possible opportunity, not only do we reenact the very same process the Israelites lived through, we practice being people who are expected to ask questions and to receive God's revelation.

What is true of our moving to a more developed and intimate relationship with God through question-asking is also true of our relationships with others. Being prepared to ask questions puts us in a receptive mode, in which we are ready to listen to what others say to us. Inviting input from others shows that we are ready to listen to them, and that we value their perspective as individuals. The Seder gives us an opportunity to practice this skill, even when the questions may seem tangential, or where there may not be anyone else to answer them. Even though the questions themselves may lead nowhere, the act of asking questions leads to somewhere profound and valuable. By experiencing this stance of openness, we prepare ourselves both to enter into a new phase of our relationship with God and also to become more active, em-

pathic, and curious listeners to those around us. In this way, we can extend our *ma'amarot*/creation relationships into relationships of *dibrot*/revelation, in which we can receive and manifest the highest forms of *hesed*. ♦