

## **BY THE NUMBERS – a Passover thought**

Built into our calendar, indeed built into our lives, are some significant numbers. Milestones and goals we reach as we grow and age: 13, the age of majority. 16, driving age. 18, voting age. 21, drinking age. And at the other end, three-score and 10. Shakespeare and Pirkey Avot give some dramatically contrasting characteristics to the ages of man, Shakespeare's dryly sarcastic and those in Pirkey Avot straightforward and basically positive. (Check them out in Chapter 5, mishna 24).

Numbers control our economic experience too. 40 hours work, 10 percent commission, 9.25% sales tax (Gevalt!), \$3.09 a gallon (Double Gevalt!), 10% unemployment (Gevalt squared.)

Numbers affect our self-image. 200 pounds? 200 cholesterol? High blood pressure? Low blood pressure? All the way down the line.

Consider how central numbers are to our ceremonies. Hanukkah's number is 8. The 1-day bottle of oil burned for 8 days, so we have 8 candles. And if the kids are lucky they get 8 presents.

Seven is the number for weddings. Seven blessings – sheva brochos – are pronounced under the bridal canopy, and many families repeat those blessings with new dinner guests every night for – you guessed it – 7 nights. Also in traditional ceremonies the bride circles the groom 7 times, a reminder of the 7 days of creation, since the couple is creating something new under that canopy: a new family in the Jewish people.

A minyan for public prayer calls for 10 Jews. One classic comment on Jewish democracy points out that 9 rabbis don't make a minyan – but 10 carpenters do.

The minimum number for a full articulated Grace after a Meal is 3. One or two Jews would pronounce the grace of gratitude in silence.

And now we come to the Passover Seder. Again one number dominates. This time the number is 4. The Torah states 4 Divine promises of freedom given to our people while slaves in Egypt. We commemorate those promises with 4 cups of wine. We begin retelling the Exodus story when a child asks questions. How many? 4, of course, the famous feer kashes.

About halfway through the Haggadah we come to the lesson of the 4 sons – one wise, one wicked, one simple and one who cannot even ask questions. Fascinating, those 4 sons.

How will you handle the 4 sons at your Seder? An artist, illustrating a Haggadah, once depicted the wise son as a rabbi, the wicked son as a soldier, the simple son as a farmer, and the fourth as a baby. Maybe, and maybe not. Let's face it, rabbis are not

always wise and soldiers are not necessarily wicked. Educated farmers are out there too. And an adult might also not know what question to ask.

What distinguishes each of these four offspring of the Jewish people is the differences in their questions. Someone who honestly wants to know the exact meaning of the laws shows some wisdom. In fact the Haggadah quotes him as detailing the different kinds of laws: 1-eydot – principles that are universal, standards of right and wrong that we should know without being commanded, like Don't Murder; 2-khukim – ordinances that believers accept even if they might be inexplicable, like avoiding clothing made of prohibited mixtures of wool and linen called shatnez; and 3-mishpatim – judgments based on logic, like treating other people as you want to be treated. This is the wise son. Of the four, he is the only one who expresses a commitment to those laws even as he asks the question. He says "What are the laws... that our G-d commanded us?" Us is the key word. He is one of us. He might not be a scholar. He might be a bal t'shuva, a returnee, but he is sincerely committed, and seeking more knowledge.

By contrast the wicked son says "What is this service to you?" To you and not to him. Renouncing his connection to his heritage, he brings on the Haggadah's retort. "Set his teeth on edge," it says. Remind him that with that attitude, if he had been in Egypt with his ancestors he would not be redeemed.

Who is the wicked son today? A Jew who commits crimes or moral offenses – a Buggsy Siegel, Heidi Fleiss, Bernie Madoff? A Jew who endangers his people by siding with its enemies – a Noam Chomsky, a Norman Finkelstein? A Jew who joins Jews for Jesus or practices Yoga? Perhaps none of the above. Perhaps he just chooses to deny his heritage because he doesn't know enough about it. Yet he is reclaimable. He deserves an answer, despite his attitude.

The simple son expresses a pure innocent curiosity: "What's this?" The Haggadah gives him an appropriate answer, a bottom-line summary of the Exodus story. Don't burden him with different characteristics of mitzvos. Just include him in this one. Even one mitzvah is worthwhile. A Hasidic rabbi addressing a group of modern-day college students mentioned the 613 commandments – another famous number. A young man asked "613 mitzvos? That's too much; I can't take that on." The rabbi replied "Then don't. Pick one, any one, take it home and do it, make it part of your life. And then come back. I'll give you another one." The simple son in each one of us needs to be answered that way.

Indeed every Jew – perhaps every human being – contains all of these characters. At different times in our lives, we can hopefully be wise, we can unfortunately be evil, we can be simply innocent and/or ignorant. And that brings us to the 4th son – the one who does not know how to ask. What does the Haggadah recommend for him?

Don't wait for him to ask. Open his mind. Tell him the marvelous story. Share the joy and the wonder. Make him feel that you and he were both slaves in Egypt, both rescued, both witnesses to the miracle at the Red Sea. Therefore you are both entitled to celebrate "because of what G-d did for me(us) when I(we) came out of Egypt!"

Some thinkers suggest adding a number 5 to the Seder. A special fifth cup of wine, for example, for Jews who languish in a kind of slavery to an oppressive regime in one country or another – the old Soviet Union, or Iran or Syria – with a prayer for their freedom.

And how about a fifth son: the one who is not at the table. The absent Jew. Seder is family reunion time and where is he? The wicked son might be irritating but he showed up. #5 presents a challenge we have yet to meet.

Outreach programs are making valiant attempts. Among the most effective such efforts is the National Jewish Outreach Program out of New York, with its trademark Shabat Across America/Canada, Passover Across America/Canada, Read Hebrew America/Canada, Crash Course in Basic Judaism, etc. They have already affected some 1.5 million Jewish lives. And they are not the only ones. Every Jewish movement is trying. Some call it Outreach, others call it Kiruv – bringing near. This Passover may these efforts reach new levels of success. Let's help them. Let's bring that fifth son home.

Hag Sameah – a Freylekhn Koshern Pesah!