

The Four Sons and Devolution

Transcribed From The Lectures Of Rabbi Uziel Milevsky zatzal

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As any student of Jewish history knows, the Egyptian exile marked only the beginning of Israel's three-thousand-year odyssey through a never-ending gauntlet of persecution and torture at the hands of one nation after the next. An oft-repeated question, therefore, is why does the commemoration of the Exodus occupy such a central position in the Jewish calendar? Since the Jewish People have been cast from one exile to the next, why is Passover still referred to as "the time of our freedom?" What kind of freedom is this?

The answer is that the miracles of the Exodus which culminated on Passover comprise the prototype of the Jewish People's ultimate Redemption. In a sense, the miracles which took place in Egypt set a historical precedent which will sooner or later repeat itself. Prior to the Exodus from Egypt, there was no practical indication that Israel would ever be redeemed; perhaps exile would become an integral component of the Jewish psyche for all eternity. With the miracles of Passover, it became clear to all the inhabitants of the earth that the Jewish People were not destined for a permanent state of exile; our identity is thus characterized by a state of redemption.

Yet more often than not, the Jewish historical cycle has consisted not of a transition from exile to freedom, but rather from exile to exile. This movement of our People from one culture to another has too often proven fatal to large segments of the Jewish Nation, which bears the scars to this very day, as we see from the recurring cycle of Jewish Exile.

The Jewish drive to excel

Typically, when Jews make their entrance into a nation, they tend immediately to feel a tremendous drive to "fit in" and excel in those very same pursuits which the host society considers their own unique specialty. If the locals take pride in their superior business skills, then the first-generation Jewish immigrants strive to become superb businessmen; if the locals take pride in their scientific achievements, then the Jews strive to become superb scientists. The Jews' innate ambition to excel stems from Israel's destiny to become a "light unto the nations." This enormous spiritual potential cannot be suppressed — if it is not channeled towards spiritual endeavors, it manifests itself on the corporeal plane as a consuming ambition to excel in every field of worldly endeavor. Soon, the all-consuming yearning to excel can become so overwhelming that the Jew may be willing to sacrifice anything — including his heritage — in order to attain his goal. In a matter of a few generations, the Jew does indeed excel, but this time, to his detriment, he becomes so well-adjusted to his new culture that he totally assimilates and essentially fades away as a Jew.

Who remains in exile? Only the descendants of those Jews who have resisted the temptation of assimilating and have remained faithful to the Torah. This is the only guarantee of Jewish survival.

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Those who embraced Torah still have Jewish descendants today; those who shunned it in the past are no longer a part of Israel.

Let us now analyze the inner workings of each cycle of exile. What type of person immigrates to a new country from the previous locale of exile? As has been explained above, it is a person who adhered to his traditions, since it stands to reason that all those who discarded their heritage assimilated completely and disappeared from the Jewish map.

The Generation of the *Chacham*

These new immigrants are committed to their heritage. They know what mitzvos are, and how to perform most of them; they can pray in Hebrew, and can study Torah. We could safely refer to this first generation of exiles as the generation of the *chacham*, the Wise Son. It is for this reason that the author of the Haggadah mentions the Wise Son first — this "Son" is representative of the first immigrants who enter Israel's latest exile.

The Generation of the *Rasha*

What happens to the children of the *chacham*, the second generation of the new exile? They are in the greatest danger, for they find themselves walking a tightrope between two very different cultures. It is extremely difficult for them to live in both of these worlds at once. They perceive their parents' world as old and primitive in comparison to the fast and exciting world in which they have grown up. They are liable to abandon the old ways of their parents and embrace the trappings of the modern world, thinking, "These ancient laws are not for us! 'What is this service to you?' It means nothing to me!" This is the generation of the *rasha*, the Wicked Son. For this reason, the author of the Haggadah lists him as the second son — he represents the second generation of Jews in exile.

The Generation of the Simple Son

What becomes of the third generation? The children of the Wicked Son have nothing to rebel against — their parents have left no stone unturned. For the most part, they simply do what their parents tell them. From a religious perspective, the most one can expect from them is to ask, "What is this?" They may have faint memories of their grandfather opening up a Jewish book once in a while, or performing some other mitzvah. Out of curiosity they will ask, "What is this? What is the Torah all about?" This third generation of immigrants is defined as the Simple Son. It is for this reason that the author of the Haggadah lists him as the third of the four sons.

The Lost Generation

If the Simple Son receives a Torah education, he still has a chance. If he does not, then his children will become the generation of the Son Who Does Not Know to Ask. Indeed, what have they to ask? Their father knows next to nothing, their grandfather is the rebel, and they don't remember their great-grandfather. All they know is that they are Jewish, but they have no inkling of what it means to be a Jew. The Haggadah warns that this fourth generation is the last generation — there is no Fifth Son, for the children of the Son Who Does Not Know to Ask no longer exist from a Jewish perspective. If a Jew knows nothing more than that he is Jewish, his children will not know even that.

Interestingly, people often remark that almost every Jew they know has at least a great-grandfather who was religious. They are correct — it is rare to find a Jew who has been disconnected from his heritage for five generations. This is precisely what the Haggadah teaches.