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## Our Children and the Instruction Manual

One of the more famous passages in the Haggada is the section of the “Arba Banim” (“four sons”), which delineates four prototypes of children. The Haggada tells us how we are to respond to the bright child (“Hacham”), the cynical, resentful child (“Rasha”), the simple, unsophisticated child (“Tam”), and the mentally challenged child who cannot even ask a question (“Eino Yode’a Li’sh’ol”). All children belong to one of these groups, and the Haggada gives instructions for how to speak to each at the Seder.

Curiously, this section is introduced with an exuberant, seemingly spontaneous declaration of praise to God: “Blessed is the Almighty, blessed is He! Blessed is He who has given the Torah to His nation, Israel!” How are we to understand this sudden outburst of praise? Why does this exclamation introduce the section of the four sons?

The experience of “Sa’ar Gidul Banim,” the aggravation entailed in childrearing, is something that every parent, without exception, endures. No matter what kind of children a parent has, and no matter what kind of person he or she is, raising children is a daunting, often overwhelming challenge. No parent is spared from the frustrations and difficulties of raising children. It is natural for parents to occasionally ask themselves, “Why me? Why was I stuck with such problematic children? Why am I the one forced to spend the day driving around to specialists and therapists?” As the pressure and stress mount, it is normal for parents, as human beings, to entertain such thoughts.

Pesah, however, is the day when we reinforce our belief and conviction in divine providence, in God’s absolute control and authority over the world and over our lives. As we prepare to discuss the four sons, and we bring to mind our own struggles with our children, we exclaim, “Baruch HaMakom Baruch Hu!” We say, “Thank you, God, for our children!” On Pesah, the festival of providence, we remind ourselves that our children have been given to us by God, that He, in His infinite wisdom, has decided that these souls should be entrusted with us. And we are thankful for His decision. Even if at times during the rest of the year we feel overburdened and exasperated by the challenges of parenting, on Pesah we feel grateful and appreciative for the blessing of children, even with the difficulties entailed.

In fact, a bit later in the Haggada, we cite a verse (Yehoshua 24:4) in which God declares, “I gave Yishak Yaakov and Esav.” Indeed, God gave Yishak a wicked child, Esav. Even the difficult children are a gift from God, and must be recognized as such.

For the same reason, we exclaim, “Blessed is He who has given the Torah to His nation, Israel!” The Torah is our instruction manual for life, and therefore the instructions for successful parenting are found there, as well. God gave us the grueling job of parenting, but also gave us the instruction book – the Torah. Of course, one must delve into the Torah to

extract those lessons; they are not presented in a clear, straightforward manner. But the instructions are there, and we need only to invest the time and effort to find them.

Perhaps the most central and fundamental instruction for parenting is found in the Book of Bereshit (18:19), where God lauds Abraham's commitment to raising children: "I love Him, because he will instruct his children and his household after him..." The word "Aharav" ("after him") in this verse likely holds one of the most important keys to successful parenting: realizing that the children follow the parents' example. Instead of focusing on raising children, we must focus on raising ourselves. Setting a positive example, and conducting ourselves in accordance with the values we teach our children, are far more effective than sermons and lectures. In fact, the Torah records only one conversation that Abraham had with his son, Yishak. He taught not by words, but by actions. Yishak's education came from observing his saintly father and spending his childhood in the presence of spiritual greatness.

On Pesah, we thank God for our children, and we thank God for the guidelines He has given us for raising them. By studying these guidelines, and by showing our children a living example of a Torah life, we will help ensure that they will embrace our religious values and be a source of pride to us and all Am Yisrael.

Chag Sameach,

Rabbi Eli J. Mansour