



Super Sunday Introduction

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'Izzy, Did You Ask a Good Question Today?'

To the Editor:

Isidor I. Rabi, the Nobel laureate in physics who died Jan. 11, was once asked, "Why did you become a scientist, rather than a doctor or lawyer or businessman, like the other immigrant kids in your neighbourhood?"

His answer has served as an inspiration for me as an educator, as a credo for my son during his schooling and should be framed on the walls of all the pedagogues, power brokers and politicians who purport to run our society.

The question was posed to Dr. Rabi by his friend and mine, Arthur Sackler, himself a multitalented genius, who, sadly, also passed away recently. Dr. Rabi's answer, as reported by Dr. Sackler, was profound: "My mother made me a scientist without ever intending it. Every other Jewish mother in Brooklyn would ask her child after school: 'So? Did you learn anything today?' But not my mother. She always asked me a different question. 'Izzy,' she would say, 'did you ask a good question today?' That difference - asking good questions - made me become a scientist!"

This world of "Ready, Fire, Aim" would be a far better place if all the world's leaders, starting in particular with our President, hearkened to this wisdom. It's time to stop giving answers before we understand the questions.

- 1) The Gemara asks: Why does one remove the table? The school of Rabbi Yannai say: So that the children will notice that something is unusual and they will ask: Why is this night different from all other nights? The Gemara relates: Abaye was sitting before Rabba when he was still a child. He saw that they were removing the table from before him, and he said to those removing it: We have not yet eaten, and you are taking the table away from us? Rabba said to him: You have exempted us from reciting the questions of: Why is this night different [ma nishtana], as you have already asked what is special about the seder night.

- 2) MISHNA: The attendants poured the second cup for the leader of the seder, and here the son asks his father the questions about the differences between Passover night and a regular night. And if the son does not have the intelligence to ask questions on his own, his father teaches him the questions.

The mishna lists the questions:

- Why is this night different from all other nights?
- As on all other nights we eat leavened bread and matza as preferred; on this night all our bread is matza.
- As on all other nights we eat other vegetables; on this night we eat bitter herbs. The mishna continues its list of the questions. When the Temple was standing one would ask: As on all other nights we eat either roasted, stewed, or cooked meat, but on this night all the meat is the roasted meat of the Paschal lamb.
- The final question was asked even after the destruction of the Temple: As on all other nights we dip the vegetables in a liquid during the meal only once; however, on this night we dip twice.

And according to the intelligence and the ability of the son, his father teaches him all or part of these questions. When teaching his son about the Exodus, he begins with the Jewish people's disgrace and concludes with their glory. And he expounds from the passage: "An Aramean tried to destroy my father" (Deuteronomy 26:5), the declaration one recites when presenting his first fruits at the Temple, until he concludes explaining the entire section.

- 3) Ultimately, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, Reish Lakish, died. Rabbi Yoḥanan was sorely pained over losing him. The Rabbis said: Who will go to calm Rabbi Yoḥanan's mind and comfort him over his loss? They said: Let Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat go, as his statements are sharp, i.e., he is clever and will be able to serve as a substitute for Reish Lakish. Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat went and sat before Rabbi Yoḥanan. With regard to every matter that Rabbi Yoḥanan would say, Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat would say to him: There is a ruling which is taught in a

baraita that supports your opinion. Rabbi Yoḥanan said to him: Are you comparable to the son of Lakish? In my discussions with the son of Lakish, when I would state a matter, he would raise twenty-four difficulties against me in an attempt to disprove my claim, and I would answer him with twenty-four answers, and the halacha by itself would become broadened and clarified. And yet you say to me: There is a ruling which is taught in a baraita that supports your opinion. Do I not know that what I say is good? Being rebutted by Reish Lakish served a purpose; your bringing proof to my statements does not. Rabbi Yoḥanan went around, rending his clothing, weeping and saying: Where are you, son of Lakish? Where are you, son of Lakish? Rabbi Yoḥanan screamed until his mind was taken from him, i.e., he went insane. The Rabbis prayed and requested for G-d to have mercy on him and take his soul, and Rabbi Yoḥanan died.

Rabbi Sacks Quotes

1) The Chief Rabbi's Haggadah (Essays) p. 105

"In Judaism, to be without questions is not a sign of faith, but a lack of depth."

2) The Chief Rabbi's Haggadah (Essays) p. 106

"To ask is to grow."

3) The Chief Rabbi's Haggadah (Essays) p. 106

"Questioning is at the heart of Jewish spirituality."

4) The Chief Rabbi's Haggadah (Essays) p. 106

"To ask is to believe that somewhere there is an answer. The fact that throughout history people have devoted their lives to extending the frontiers of knowledge is a compelling testimony to the restlessness of the human spirit and its constant desire to go further, higher, deeper. Far from faith excluding questions, questions testify to faith – that history is not random, that the universe is not impervious to our understanding, that what happens to us is not blind chance. We ask, not because we doubt, but because we believe. "

5) To Heal a Fractured World p. 25

"To be a Jewish child is to learn how to question."

6) The Great Partnership p. 37

"The responsible life is one that responds. In the theological sense it means that God is the question to which our lives are an answer."