

Ma Nishtana

Source Sheet by Tammy Jacobowitz

Source #1: Mishnah Pesachim 10:4

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** about the Exodus. 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**.

משנה פסחים י"ד'

(ד) מִזְגוּ לוֹ כּוֹס שֵׁנִי, וְכֵאֵן הֵבִן שׁוֹאֵל אָבִיו, וְאִם אֵין דַּעַת בְּבֶן, אָבִיו מְלַמְדוֹ, מֵה נִשְׁתַּנָּה הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה מִכָּל הַלַּיְלוֹת, שֶׁבְּכָל הַלַּיְלוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין חֶמֶץ וּמֵצָה, הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה כָּלוּ מֵצָה. שֶׁבְּכָל הַלַּיְלוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין שְׂאֵר יִרְקוֹת, הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה מְרוֹר. שֶׁבְּכָל הַלַּיְלוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין בֶּשֶׂר צֵלִי, שְׁלוּק, וּמִבְשָׁל, הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה כָּלוּ צֵלִי. שֶׁבְּכָל הַלַּיְלוֹת אָנוּ מִטְבִּילִין פֶּעַם אַחַת, הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה שְׁתֵּי פְעָמִים. וּלְפִי דַעַתוֹ שֶׁל בֶּן, אָבִיו מְלַמְדוֹ. מִתְחִיל בְּגִנּוֹת וּמִסִּים בְּשִׁבַח, וְדוֹרֵשׁ מֵאַרְמֵי אוֹבֵד אָבִי, עַד שֶׁיִּגְמַר כָּל הַפְּרָשָׁה כְּלָה:

Source #2: Pesach Haggadah (Maggid)

מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות? שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין חמץ ומצה, הלילה הזה – כלו מצה. שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין שאר ירקות – הלילה הזה (כלו) מרור. שבכל הלילות אין אנו מטבילין אפילו פעם אחת – הלילה הזה שתי פעמים. שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין בין יושבין ובין מסבין – הלילה הזה כלנו מסבין.

Source #3: Exodus Ch. 13

(1) The LORD spoke further to Moses, saying, (2) “Consecrate to Me every first-born; man and beast, the first issue of every womb among the Israelites is Mine.” (3) And Moses said to the people, “Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt, the house of bondage, how the LORD freed you from it with a mighty hand: no leavened bread shall be eaten. (4) You go free on this day, in the month of Abib. (5) So, when the LORD has brought you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which He swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall observe in this month the

following practice: (6) “Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival of the LORD. (7) Throughout the seven days unleavened bread shall be eaten; no leavened bread shall be found with you, and no leaven shall be found in all your territory. (8) And you shall explain to your child on that day, ‘It is because of what the LORD did for me when I went free from Egypt.’ (9) “And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead—in order that the Teaching of the LORD may be in your mouth—that with a mighty hand the LORD freed you from Egypt. (10) You shall keep this institution at its set time from year to year. (11) “And when the LORD has brought you into the land of the Canaanites, as He swore to you and to your fathers, and has given it to you, (12) you shall set apart for the LORD every first issue of the womb: every male firstling that your cattle drop shall be the LORD’s. (13) But every firstling ass you shall redeem with a sheep; if you do not redeem it, you must break its neck. And you must redeem every first-born male among your children. (14) And when, in time to come, your child asks you, saying, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall reply, ‘It was with a mighty hand that the LORD brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage. (15) When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD slew every first-born in the land of Egypt, the first-born of both man and beast. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD every first male issue of the womb, but redeem every male first-born among my children.’ (16) “And so it shall be as a sign upon your hand and as a symbol on your forehead that with a mighty hand the LORD freed us from Egypt.”

א וַיִּדְבֹר ה', אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. ב קִדְשׁ־לִי כָל־בְּכוֹר פֶּטֶר כָּל־רֶחֶם, בְּבִנְי יִשְׂרָאֵל--בְּאֲדָם, וּבַבְּהֵמָה: לִי, הוּא. ג וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָעָם, זָכוֹר אֶת־הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר יֵצְאתֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים, כִּי בַחֲזֶק יָד, הוֹצִיא ה' אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה; וְלֹא יֵאכַל חֶמֶץ. ד הַיּוֹם, אַתֶּם יֹצְאִים, בַּחֲדָשׁ, הָאָבִיב. ה וְהָיָה כִּי־יִבְיָאֵף ה' אֶל־אַרְצְךָ הַכּוֹנֵנִי וְהַחֲתִי וְהָאֲמֹרִי וְהַחַיִּי וְהַיּוֹסִי, אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְתָּיךָ לֵמֹת לָךְ, אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב, וְדָבָשׁ; וְעַבְדְּתָ אֶת־הָעַבְדָּה הַזֹּאת, בַּחֲדָשׁ הַזֶּה. ו שִׁבְעַת יָמִים, תֹּאכַל מִצַּת; וּבַיּוֹם, הַשְּׂבִיעִי, חֵג, לֵה'. ז מִצּוֹת, יֹאכַל, אַת, שִׁבְעַת הַיָּמִים; וְלֹא־יִרְאֶה לָּךְ חֶמֶץ, וְלֹא־יִרְאֶה לָּךְ שְׂאֵר--בְּכָל־גְּבֻלָּךְ. ח וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ, בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר: בַּעֲבוּר זֶה, עָשָׂה ה' לִי, בְּצֵאתִי, מִמִּצְרַיִם. ט וְהָיָה לָּךְ לְאוֹת עַל־יָדְךָ, וְלִזְכָּרוֹן בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ, לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה תּוֹרַת ה', בְּפִיךָ: כִּי בִיָּד חֲזָקָה, הוֹצֵאתָ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם. י וְשִׁמַּרְתָּ אֶת־הַחֻקִּים הַזֹּאת, לְמוֹעֲדָה, מִיָּמִים, מִיָּמָה. יא וְהָיָה כִּי־יִבְיָאֵף ה', אֶל־אַרְצְךָ הַכּוֹנֵנִי, כַּאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לָּךְ, וְלְאַבְתָּיךָ; וְנִתְּנָה, לָּךְ. יב וְהִעֲבַרְתָּ כָל־פֶּטֶר־רֶחֶם, לָּהּ; וְכָל־פֶּטֶר שִׁגְר בְּהֵמָה, אֲשֶׁר יְהִי לָּךְ הַזֶּכֶר--לָּהּ. יג וְכָל־פֶּטֶר חֶמֶר תִּפְדֶּה בְּשֵׂה, וְאִם־לֹא תִפְדֶּה וְעַרְפָּתוֹ; וְכָל בְּכוֹר אֲדָם בְּבִנְיָה, תִּפְדֶּה. יד וְהָיָה כִּי־שְׁאַלְךָ בִּנְךָ, מַחֲר--לֵאמֹר מַה־זֹּאת: וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו--בַּחֲזֶק יָד הוֹצִיאָנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם, מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים. טו וְהָיָה, כִּי־הִקְשָׁה פְרַעֲה לְשַׁלַּחְנוּ, וַיַּהֲרֹג ה' כָּל־בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, מִבְּכוֹר אֲדָם וְעַד־בְּכוֹר בְּהֵמָה; עַל־כֵּן אָנֹכִי זֹכֵר לָּהּ, כָּל־פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם הַזֶּכֶרִים, וְכָל־בְּכוֹר בְּנֵי, אֶפְדָּה. טז וְהָיָה לְאוֹת עַל־יָדְךָ, וְלְטוֹטְפַת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ: כִּי בַחֲזֶק יָד, הוֹצִיאָנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם.

Source #4: The Jonathan Sacks Haggadah, Magid, Four Questions

It can be said that this question, “Ma nishtana?” embodies a bigger and deeper question about the Jewish people: Why are we different from all other nations – in our faith, in our mitzvot, in our suffering, in our spiritual achievements, in our exile, and in our redemption? There is no complete answer to this question. Only by contemplating the Exodus from Egypt and the election of Israel can we understand that this is a divine matter; we are capable of understanding part of it, but we will never understand it all. This same question spurs us on, toward infinitely deeper and more sublime understanding. Perhaps this is why the Torah instructs us to tell the story of the Exodus and of Israel’s singularity using questions and answers: the ideological basis of Jewish peoplehood lies in a question that opens us to an endless profusion of ideas. If we do not impart the Torah and the story of the Exodus to the children, no new questions would be asked and we would be unable

to continue rising higher.

WHAT MAKES THIS NIGHT UNLIKE ALL OTHER NIGHTS? *The history of Ma Nishtana is fascinating.* The text itself goes back some two thousand years. It is recorded in the Mishna and was almost certainly the form of words used in Second Temple times. Everything else about it, though, was different. It was said not before the meal but afterward. It was said not by the child but by the parent. And it was not a set of questions but a set of statements. How so?

In Temple times the meal was eaten first. The sanctity of the moment was palpable. Families had traveled from all parts of Israel to bring their sacrifice to the Temple and eat their meal in the precincts of Jerusalem. The questions of the child arose naturally from acts done that night that were done at no other point in the year. If the child was too young to ask, the father would prompt him by saying, *Ma nishtana halayla hazeh*, meaning not “What makes this night different?” but “See how different this night is from all other nights.” He would then enumerate the differences, encouraging the child to ask, “Why?”

One of the most remarkable achievements of the sages was to preserve the continuity of Jewish life through a series of tragedies – the destruction of the Temple, the end of the Paschal sacrifice, and the loss of the entire atmosphere of collective celebration in Jerusalem. The narrative was moved from after the meal to before it, so that words would do the work of place: the Jewish people no longer had Jerusalem, but we still had the story. **And instead of children asking spontaneously, each in his or her own words (the “four sons” of the Haggada), the Ma Nishtana became a standard formula that every child could learn. Old words took on a new function. A ritual once celebrated in the vicinity of the Temple became a ceremony that could be observed throughout the world without losing its original character. Everywhere Jews gathered to celebrate Pesah became a fragment of Jerusalem. The city, the land, and the sacrificial order lay in ruins, but the words remained.**

One thing achieved by turning *Ma Nishtana* into a formula was that now there was no division of children into the wise, the wicked, the simple, and the child unable to ask. In a beautiful and deeply characteristic gesture, custom ordained that every child should ask in the same way, using the same words, so as not to put any child to shame. All Jewish children are precious and we do not distinguish between them.

Source #5: Peninei Halahka

It can be said that this question, “Ma nishtana?” embodies a bigger and deeper question about the Jewish people: Why are we different from all other nations – in our faith, in our mitzvot, in our suffering, in our spiritual achievements, in our exile, and in our redemption? There is no complete answer to this question. **Only by contemplating the Exodus from Egypt and the election of Israel can we understand that this is a divine matter; we are capable of understanding part of it, but we will never understand it all.** This same question spurs us on, toward infinitely deeper and more sublime understanding. Perhaps this is why the Torah instructs us to tell the story of the Exodus and of Israel’s singularity using questions and answers: the ideological basis of Jewish peoplehood lies in a question that opens us to an endless profusion of ideas. **If we do not impart the Torah and the story of the Exodus to the children, no new questions would be asked and we would be unable to continue rising higher.**

פניני הלכה, פסח ט"ו:ג'ה'

אפשר אולי לומר, כי בתוך שאלת 'מה נשתנה' מקופלת שאלה גדולה ונוראה על כל עניינינו של עם ישראל, שמדוע נשתנה מכל העמים, באמונתו, במצוותיו, בייסוריו, בהישגיו הרוחניים, בגלותו ובגאולתו. זו שאלה שאי אפשר לענות עליה תשובה שלימה, ורק על ידי ההתבוננות ביציאת מצרים ובבחירת ישראל נבין כי זהו עניין אלוהי, שאת חלקו ביכולתנו להבין ואת כולו לעולם לא נבין. וכך השאלה הזו דוחפת אותנו מעלה מעלה, להבנה יותר עמוקה ויותר גבוהה עד אין סוף. אולי לכן הורתה התורה לעסוק בליל פסח בסיפור יציאת מצרים וסגולת ישראל בדרך של שאלה ותשובה, כי בסיסו הרעיוני של עם ישראל מונח בשאלה הפותחת אותנו לשפע רעיונות אין סופיים. ובלא העברת התורה והסיפור לילדים, לא יתעוררו שאלות חדשות ולא נוכל להמשיך להתעלות.

Source Sheet created on Sefaria by Tammy Jacobowitz