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The Task to Ask

Our religion differs from others in that we encourage questions and as it says **נא לימים** כי שאל נא לימים... inquire now regarding the early days that preceded you..., and **שאל אביך ויגדך**... ask your father and he will tell you...¹ This is what we do at the Seder as we encourage the children to ask questions.²

Indeed, the word **חכמה** is comprised of the words **כח**, the power of questions. The more we inquire, the smarter we can become.³ Indeed, many have become converts and Baalai Teshuva because of the power of the question.

¹ Devarim 4:32, 32:7. See Levush, 473. Someone once said, "In Judaism, to be without questions is not a sign of faith but a lack of depth."

² Orach Chaim 472:16, 473:6, 473:21, Mishna Brura. Concerning the children asking questions on the night of the Seder, the Chida explains (Haggadas Simchas Haregel) since Matza is called עוני because (Pesachim 36a) **לחם שעוני** עליו דברים הרבה (bread upon which we declare many things) and an answer is when you answer someone on their question. The Derech Pkudescha (Mitzva 21, **חלק המעשה אות ב**) writes that Yetzias Mitzrayim gets more enrooted into the child through question and answer.

³ There is a saying, "The only bad question is the one you don't ask."

A woman who was part of a fundamentalist Christian group continuously asked questions about her religion. At a certain point, the minister looked at her with disappointment, sharply telling her, "sister, the Lord wants you to cut off your head and come to Him with your heart." At that point she started looking into Judaism. She found that Judaism was the opposite, as she would ask questions and they would say you can ask even better. Then they would say that fits well with the Rambam but not according to the Raavad.

Isidor Isaac Rabi (1898-1988), who was a Jewish American physicist that won the Nobel Prize in physics in 1944, was asked what made him a physicist as he was from a very simple background. He answered that when all the other children came home from school their mother would ask, "what did you learn in school today" whereas my mother asked, "Izzy, did you ask a good question in school today?"

Sinking

The Greeks didn't want to kill us rather they wanted to take us away from Judaism. This is indicated in the letters of **יון** as each letter that follows is bigger than the previous, as it begins with a **י**, then a **ו**, and finally the **ן** as this is how one drifts away from Judaism. One who goes off the track of Judaism doesn't do so in one shot rather in a series of events that make him drift further and further away. For example, one doesn't start with eating a cheeseburger rather he first uses the bathroom in the non-Kosher restaurant. Then he may get soda. Later, he decides to buy a salad. Next, he is onto the French fries until he finally actually eats the cheeseburger.⁴ In this light we can explain **ופרצו חומות מגדלי** as each breach leads eventually to a defiling of everything. Accordingly, the word **יון** means quicksand as in **מטיט היון**,⁶ since it makes one descend lower and lower.⁷

Now we can grasp on a deeper level why the Greeks prohibited the Mitzvos of **ראש חודש**⁸ **שבת**, **ראש חודש** was given to us so that we now rule over time as in **מקדש ישראל** **עכו"ם** ששבת חייב **והזמנים**. Next is Shabbos in which the law is **מיתה**,⁹ a non-Jew who observes it, is liable to death. Last is **מילה**, which is what makes us distinct.

⁴ In this way we can grasp (Devarim 1:44) **ויכתו אתכם בשעיר עד** **חרמה**: if one moves away from Judaism only a hairsbreadth (שעיר), it could lead **עד חרמה**, complete removal of his Judaism.

⁵ **יונים נקבצו עלי חן** which we sing after lighting the Menora.

⁶ Tehillim 40:3.

⁷ This is what nature is (which is the idea of Yavan—not seeing beyond the external) as see with the fundamental force in the world, gravity, which pulls things down.

⁸ The word **השמונאים** is rooted in **חשמן**. This forms an acronym of **חודש**, **שבת**, **מילה**, **נר הנוכה** since in addition to these three, we got **הנוכה**. Indeed, this is what Chanuka is, **מוסיף והולך**.

⁹ Sanhedrin 58b.

There is an expression, “Idle hands are the devil’s playground.”¹¹ Many problems occur due to boredom.¹² Indeed, the Mishna¹³ states במילה מביאה לידי שיעמום, idleness leads to mental instability.¹⁴ The Rambam¹⁵ writes שאין עריות ממשבת עריות מתגברת אלא בלב פנוי מן החכמה, thoughts of עריות dominate in a heart that is empty of wisdom.

In the time of Noah, the מחרִישה (plow) was invented.¹⁶ This saved them a lot of time. We would think that they would dedicate the time they now saved to Avodas Hashem. However, this was not the case as they caused destruction to the world until the Mabul eventually came. We see a similar pattern nowadays. There is much technology that saves us time affording the opportunity to devote these extra moments to the service of Hashem. Sadly, these opportunities are not utilized.¹⁷

The Mishna¹⁸ states יפה תלמוד תורה...משכחת עון, Torah study is good together with an occupation for the exertion of them both makes sin forgotten. This is because if our day is filled, idleness that leads to sin is avoided. Concerning the many cases of mental illnesses today that require psychiatric help, an elder man once commented that when he was younger “we were too busy making a living to be¹⁹ crazy!”²⁰

The Kotzker Rebbe told his Chassidim that their sins don't bother him as much as that they had time to sin. He would say, "I don't expect my chassidim to have the fortitude not to sin. I expect them not to have time to

We are told that when Yaakov worked seven years for Rachel it seemed to him as a few days.²¹ This seems contrary to nature since when one loves someone, every moment feels like an eternity. The Mishna teaches²² that the day is short and the task is great. Another interpretation: the day seems very short when one has a lot to do. Since Yaakov was busy working, it seemed to him only as a few days because when one is busy, time flies.

Likewise, when dating, it may seem the process takes forever. However, if the dating period is spent preparing for marriage, the dating process goes quicker. This is another reason that it seemed to Yaakov as a few days (it went very quickly) as he was busy preparing for marriage.

We should always make an effort to maximize our time.²³ The Pasuk לא טוב היות האדם לבדו²⁴ can be interpreted as it is not good for man to be alone, to be doing nothing. So, אנעשה לו עזר: we need to create things against this such as having a job, friendships, learning Torah, and so on. This applies all the time but especially in times when we are vulnerable to falter in this area such as Bein Hazmanim and the like. Advice to counter this is offered in the words²⁵ ידיים עסקניות, to be busy.

When Yosef was thrown into the pit, it says וְהוּבַר רֵיק (When he was thrown into the pit, it was empty).²⁶ Rashi quoting the Gemara tells us אֲבָל נְחָשִׁים וְעַקְרָבִים יָשׁוּ בּוֹ (But snakes and scorpions were in it),²⁷ there was no water but there were snakes and scorpions.²⁸ In fact, the Gra informs us אֲבָל נְחָשִׁים וְעַקְרָבִים יָשׁוּ בּוֹ (But snakes and scorpions were in it) forms an acronym for בְּרַב יָשׁוּ בּוֹ (Many were in it).²⁹ Observing an abandoned building, we notice it is filled with snakes, mice, bugs, insects, and so on.³⁰ This is in contrast to a building that is in use.³¹ The Gemara³² relates water refers to Torah. Now we can grasp this in a different way: אֵין בּוֹ מַיִם (There is no water), when there is no Torah, one gets filled up with snakes and scorpions, bad traits.³³ Additionally, if we rearrange the words אֵין בּוֹ מַיִם, we come up with מַיִם בּוֹ יָשׁוּ (Water is in it), Yavan comes, since if there is no Kedusha, it gets filled up with טומאה.³⁴ Let us all merit to fill up our pit with the waters of Torah.

Rabbi Alt merited to learn under the tutelage of R' Mordechai Friedlander Tztz"l for close to five years. He received Semicha from R' Zalman Nechemia Goldberg Tztz"l. Rabbi Alt has written on numerous topics for various websites and publications and is the author of the Sefer, Fascinating Insights: Torah Perspectives on Unique Topics. His writings inspire people across the spectrum of Jewish observance to live with the vibrancy and beauty of Torah. He lives with his wife and family in a suburb of Yerushalayim where he studies, writes, and teaches. The author is passionate about teaching Jews of all levels of observance.

¹⁰ Chida in Rosh Dovid, Miketz.

¹¹ The Mishna states that a troop of gentile soldiers that entered a city and came into a Jew's house: in the time of war, the sealed barrels of wine as well as the opened ones are permitted לפי שאין פנאי לנסך, since there is no time to touch the wine and offer it for idolatrous libations (Avoda Zara 70b). Similarly, in times of old, non-Jews on their day off would persecute Jews.

¹² The adage goes, “If you have nothing to do, don’t do it here.”

¹³ Kesubos 59b. R' Eliezer says it leads to זימה.

¹⁴ See also Avos 3:4. For this reason, the שלטי גבורים says in regard to Hilchos Chanuka that in a place where they are accustomed that women don't work the entire day, we should protest (Mishna Brura 670:5).

¹⁵ Hilchos Isurei Biah 22:21. Just as if one doesn't actively do anything to a garden it will grow weeds, likewise the same is with our thoughts.

¹⁶ Breishis 5:29.

¹⁷ Also see Kesubos 59a. In addition to this, this same technology causes people to waste even more time (besides the other problems that it causes).

¹⁸ AYO 2:2.

¹⁹ It has been said, “No thoroughly occupied man was ever known to be miserable.”

²⁰ Rashi tells us that letters that are enunciated from the same area of the mouth are interchangeable. Since the letters װ and ץ are both pronounced from the teeth, the words שמח (happy) and צמח (to grow) are related. R' Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that one is happy when he is growing. This is analogous to a lobster that sheds its skin, which it does when it feels it must. This is because its skin causes discomfort when it is too small for its body. The same is in our personal lives. When we feel discomfort in the sense that we are not happy with our spirituality, it is telling us we need to grow in spirituality. There is a saying, “Everyone wants to live on top of the mountain but all the happiness and growth occurs while you are climbing it.”

²¹ Breishis 29:20.

²² Avos 2:15.

²³ There is a saying, “Today will never happen again but one good deed will make it last forever.”

²⁴ Breishis 2:18.

²⁵ Shabbos 14a. See Breishis 32:15, Rashi.

²⁶ 37:24.

²⁷ Shabbos 22a. Indeed, the Trop on וישבו (37:25) is known as a זרקה. This is rooted in זרק, to throw, as they threw him into a pit- וישלכו אתו הברה, they cast him into the pit (37:24). Additionally, the shape of this Trop resembles that of a snake. Furthermore, the Chida points out וישבו is a contraction of ויש בו.

²⁸ The Ramban (Vayikra 17:7, s.v. אשר) writes demons are called שִׁדִּים, because they dwell in a desolate (שְׁדוּד) place like the desert.

²⁹ See Mishlei 24:30-31.

³⁰ Baba Kama 82a.

³¹ פנינים משלחן הגרא, Vayeshev, 37:24.

³² Heard from R' Taub. Where is the Gemara of ... מים אין בו... there was no water in the pit but there were snakes and scorpions, found? In the Gemaras speaking about Chanuka, Yavan (Shabbos 22a).