

Wicked Smart

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Last evening, we were rushing to get ready for the seder and my son Zac was in no mood to go. He gets that way when you tell him he has to wear fancy pants.

He'd been out playing all day and he needed a shower. I told him he had to take a quick one because we were running late.

Remembering the passage from the Haggadah that "in every generation, each individual should feel as though they came out of Egypt personally," I decided to make this a fun teaching moment.

"You have to take a fast shower," I said. "We're leaving Egypt tonight and we've only got a few minutes to get ready. Hurry!"

Zac was having none of it.

"I'm not in Egypt, Dad," he said, not without some snark. "I'm in my house on Long Island in New York! So why do I have to hurry?" Again, with snark.

"Well," I said, "it's true that physically you're in New York, but *spiritually* you're in Egypt."

To which my 9-year-old responded, without missing a beat: "Spiritually I'm in HELL!"

Oy, I thought. Isn't there something in the Haggadah about four kinds of children or something? I wonder which one this kid is shaping up to be. The one who...pushes back and fights you on everything you say?

Yep, they call that one the "Rasha." It means "wicked," but that's rabbinic name-calling at its worst. Some later commentators realize this, too.

Rabbi Barukh HaLevi Epstein, author of the Barukh She-Amar commentary on the Haggadah, describes the Rasha not as wicked, but as "an intellectual who is annoyed by the ritualistic aspect of the Jewish tradition." Like Zac (and countless adults I know), the Rasha demands to know why we can't just summarize the story in 5 minutes and then eat.

Rabbi Benjamin David Rabinowitz, in his Ephod Bad commentary, says that the Rasha "will only observe a commandment if he knows the reason for it."

The Sages who wrote the Haggadah called this child "wicked" because he insisted on asking questions and understanding the "why" of a practice *before* committing to do it.

To them, this attitude was obdurate, antagonistic, and contemptible because it subverted the order and hierarchy traditional religion seeks to enforce.

Better, they believed, to be like the Chacham (the "wise" child) who does whatever she is told: although the wise one asks questions, she does so, ultimately, only to know how to comply.

The Rasha, by contrast, isn't going to comply unless and until you can convince him that doing so is worth his

while. If, in earlier times, this was a sign of wickedness, in today's world it is an indicator of critical thinking.

When it comes to Passover and just about everything else, my son has a rejoinder for every argument and he never runs out of questions. At 9 years old he is already quite skilled at identifying and exploiting loopholes, pointing out contradictions in his parents' reasoning, and rhetorically pinning us into a corner.

I'm not going to lie: it is exhausting. But he makes it abundantly clear that he has a sharp and quick mind—and that, in response to my insistence on order and compliance, he will forever ask "Why?"

I am very proud of him.

And I am proud of all those people like him who, in the many and varied spheres of their lives, know that "because I said so" shuts down critical thinking rather than encouraging it, and who insist on analyzing and understanding first, before they decide whether or not to comply.

People like that make the world better. And they make old-fashioned, goodie-two-shoes, compliant "wise" children like me better.

Some may call them wicked. But I call them wicked smart.