

Answering the fifth question: Why only four cups of wine?

by rabbi judah dardik

Tzav/Shabbat HaGadol

Leviticus 6:1-8:36

Malachi 3:4-3:24

The seder is a meal of many questions, and at times fewer answers. The course of the evening includes familiar holiday components like Kiddush on wine or grape juice, Hamotzi (on matzah in place of challah bread) and a festive meal. It also includes unusual components such as extra hand washing, breaking matzah and dipping vegetables in salt water. The Talmud in the 10th chapter of Pesachim explains that this is a night of inquiry, and these latter practices are there for the primary purpose of generating curiosity and prompting questions.

Accordingly, a major feature within the evening is the asking of the scripted “four questions” that are often posed by a young person. The child (or whoever is young enough at heart to ask) asks about the bitter herbs, and gives us a chance to discuss the bitterness of slavery. They inquire about matzah, about dipping, and about leaning gently to the side as we eat this meal while we take the opportunity in turn to discuss the way in which each one reminds of us the Exodus and what it means to be free.

Yet there is an omission that goes unquestioned regarding the cups of wine. There are four of them, each for a stage of the evening. The first cup is for Kiddush; the second accompanies the telling of the story of the Exodus; the third in honor of the meal and its [Birkat HaMazon](#) (grace after meals); and the fourth relates to the Hallel (praise) we sing to HaShem at the conclusion of the seder.

What we fail to challenge, however, is that the traditional source offered for having four cups alludes to a fifth as well! In describing the redemption from slavery promised to the [Jewish People](#), the Torah utilizes five distinct phrases. “I am Hashem and I will take you out ... and I will rescue you ... and I will redeem you ... and I will take you to me as a people ... and I will bring you to the land.” (Ex. 6:6-8)

The cups of wine are linked to these terms of redemption: taking out, rescue, redemption, taking as a people and bringing to our destination. Yet although we find five verbs detailing the exodus from Egypt, there are only four cups. What happened to the concluding stage of redemption? Shouldn't we drink to that as well?

The Lubavicher Rebbe offers an insight that may be relevant here. He suggests another “four that should be five;” namely: the fifth child. The Hagaddah speaks of the wise child, the wicked child, the simple child and the child who doesn't know how to ask. The Rebbe notes that there is a fifth child — a child who isn't [at the seder](#). A child so far from Jewish connection that he or she didn't know or didn't want to participate tonight.

Every year at Passover, we each come to a personal crossroads. I am now free. What do I do with freedom? Unencumbered by restrictions and obstacles, do I focus on myself, or on that which is beyond the self? On that which looks easy, or on that which is challenging but more lasting and meaningful?

HaShem has taken my people out of slavery with a fifth phrase of redemption indicating we were meant to arrive at a destination. But where am I going? As I sit here at the seder, can my tradition offer me any insight into these questions?

This then, may be the reason the fifth question about the cups of wine isn't asked — we don't have the answer yet. We can't answer the question about the cups, about full redemption, because the answer about which direction our freedom will lead us is still unfolding.

As we arrive at another Passover, we are still living and answering that question day by day. We are taught that what makes the wise child of the Hagaddah so special is that he or she saw the seder as an invitation to delve into 3,300 years of wisdom in a search for understanding.

There may in fact be a fifth cup on the table. It is the cup of Eliyahu, the one who heralds of a better future. It is the cup that is poured but not consumed as we ponder the fifth phrase — and consider where our freedom best leads us.

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