

Mah Nishtana: The importance of question – March 30, 2013

Isidor Rabi was a Jewish scientist who in 1944 won the Nobel Prize for physics. And it is told that once a journalist asked him, why he had become a scientist and not a doctor, a lawyer or a merchant like the majority of the young Jewish immigrants from his neighborhood. And he answered with the following words: "Actually, it wasn't me who decided I would be a scientist, it was my mother, because every time the other kids arrived from school, their mothers would ask them: Son, What did you learn in class today? But my mom was different, she used to say: "Issi, Did you ask a good question today?" And that difference, to learn how to ask good questions, made me become a scientist".

Asking good questions, and not so much having answers to all of them, is something that requires a high level of maturity and also much more originality, than answering questions that others have formulated. And this is something that is rooted in our tradition. Because if we open a page from the Talmud at random, we will soon realize that Judaism is like offering a reward to whoever is demanding his or her right to ask.

But asking good questions not only gives you the possibility of enhancing your knowledge: It is also the starting point of any search of meaning in life. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who was one of the most important Jewish thinkers of the twentieth's century, said that we can define Judaism as an answer to the essential questions that Jews have in their lives: What is the purpose of life, why hunger and sickness exist or why there are people who suffer. And those questions are essential for our identity because when they don't exist, it is almost impossible to expect from Judaism to be relevant and meaningful. One of the problems that we have these days, is that we live so many changes in few time, that we are losing our skills to be surprised: Nothing seems incredible today, from the marvels of technology to the worst demonstrations of cruelty by human beings. We feel we have seen it all.

But then, fortunately, the wisdom of our old and rich tradition comes in this season of the year, to remind us that we must awake in our children this sense of wonder, and teach them to ask good questions about what Judaism is about. We read the Haggadah which much more than a book it is like a script for a small family play: It is a dialogue between parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, which begins precisely with surprises, amazement and questions: "Mom, Dad, Why is this night different from the others?" It's the Mah Nishtana, the four questions.

And almost all the elements of the Seder were thought in a way to arise the curiosity and the amazement of the children. Set in the Kehara there are foods completely different than the rest of the year. There are many

traditions which are different from what we do in a regular Shabbat or Holiday: in a regular festival: We wash our hands without a blessing, we eat vegetables at the beginning of the dinner, and we even break the bread before the blessing. And, as you know, we hide a piece of Matzah, the Afikoman, in order to have our kids awake and participating until the end of the Seder. Everything is thought of in advance to surprise children and make them ask their own questions. The Seder is a powerful reminder for us that if we don't manage to achieve our children's interest in Judaism, we could be risking their commitment for a Jewish life in the future. We can read the whole Haggadah, from the beginning to its end the night of Pesach, but if we are not successful in awakening their interest, our Seder probably will become for them an old and boring ritual, and then we will lose our best opportunity to strengthen their Judaism, and to light in them the passion for being a Jew.

For the next year, let's invest time before the arrival of Pesach, not only on preparing supper and cleaning the house, but also on preparing our Seder in order to assure our children's participation and mostly, having them asking good questions. If we are successful, we will have accomplished the most important part of the mission that our tradition request from us on Pesach.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach!