

The Four Children

We find The Four Children in the maggid (“telling”) section of the seder, during which we retell the Israelites’ journey from slavery to freedom. We remind ourselves of this redemption story in many ways as we proclaim that the matzah is the “bread of affliction,” ask the 4 Questions, recite the Ten Plagues and sing the song Dayeinu. The Four Children originated in four distinct passages in the Torah that instruct us to teach our children about the story of Pesach. The labels given to these children, as well as their questions, were compiled from the Torah and other Jewish sources over time.

1. The **wise child** asks details about the specific meaning of the laws of Passover observance: “What are the testimonies, the statutes, and laws which Adonai our God has commanded you?” to which we respond with one of the very specific laws of the Passover seder.
2. The **wicked child** asks, “Whatever does this mean to you?” The authors admonish this child as one who is not concerned about the laws personally, but only for others. This exchange reminds us of the importance of not separating ourselves from our community or from traditions that might seem uncomfortable or foreign to us, but rather to engage with them in ways that enable us to connect with our community.
3. The **simple child** asks, “What does this mean?” to which a straightforward summary of the story is given, directly from the Torah: “It was with a mighty hand that God brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage.” (Ex 13:14).
4. The **child who does not know how to ask**, in response to the child who does not know how to ask we are instructed to “open it up” and explain, “It is because of what God did for me when I went free from Egypt” (Ex 13:8).

Reciting, The Four Children reminds us of the Jewish obligation to teach the next generation about this powerful story, and, importantly, not to tell the story in the one way that might be easiest for us. Rather, we should invite our children to be a part of the conversation, strive to meet the children where they are individually, respect the way each one learns and interacts in the world, and respond accordingly and appropriately.