

We All Ask “Mah Nishtana”

The Mah Nishtana is one of the most famous Jewish recitations. What is its deeper meaning?

The Age Old Tradition

The four questions, a script well known by every Jewish preschooler, are recited according to common custom by the youngest member of the household. By Chassidim, however, it's customary that the entire family, young and old ask the four questions.

Another part of the custom widely accepted is that we preface the questions with “Father, I would like to ask you the four questions.”

The story is told that once a child coming home from school was asked by his father if he'd already learnt the four questions. In response the child proudly began reciting the questions, “Mah Nishtana...” He was interrupted by his father “Wait, what happened to the ‘Father I'd like to ask’ part?” “Our teacher didn't teach that part to us,” explained the child.

The following morning, the father who was, in fact, the Rebbe of a respectable Chassidic dynasty, approached the teacher and inquired as to why he'd not taught the proper preface to the Mah Nishtana. “That part is not part of the original text,” explained the teacher, “so I didn't want to require the children

to learn it.”

“Are you, then, wiser,” the father demanded “than all other Jewish teachers? You have no understanding whatsoever as to why our ancestors established this custom. Why would you change a custom which you don’t understand?”

Why The Spiritual Night?

When we question “Mah Nishtana,” why is this night different, we’re not only directing our questions to our biological father, but at our Father in Heaven as well. “What makes this night different from all other nights?”

Day and night personify two different stages, two eras in Jewish history; the periods in which the Jews were settled in the Holy Land with the Beis Hamikdash in all its glory, is represented by “day,” a time of sunshine, symbolic to the visible shine of G-dliness. Night, of course, represents the times of exile. Darkness prevents a person from seeing the correct path; he’s uncertain whether he’s taken the correct steps or has, G-d forbid, strayed from it. He has no warning of any obstacles or hitches he may be approaching. Such is the case, spiritually, for a Jew during times of exile. He cannot identify the proper way to serve his Creator; the path of truth is hidden from him.

Scripture states “The assembly of Israel slumbers in exile.” The Jewish nation is in a state of sleep. The main indication that a person is asleep is that his eyes are closed. The power of sight is the most essential power in a person, referring to the sight both of the physical eyes, as well as that of the “intellectual eye.” For example, when someone says, “I see you are in

error," he's not seeing something physically wrong, it's sight of the intellectual eye. The verse says, similarly, "The eyes of a wise man are in his head, yet a fool walks in darkness." Sight allows for wisdom, while darkness brings about foolishness. This is the true meaning of exile.

The next general indication that someone is asleep is the lying down, so that the head and feet are on the same level. What is its significance in spiritual terms? When a person stands upright, his mind is the highest part of his structure, followed by his heart etc. This expresses the fact that the mind has constant control of the heart. When a person is asleep, however, the authority of the mind stops; the mind and heart are on the same level, just like an animal.

In addition, we dream during our sleep. Dreams of impossibilities or perhaps dreams of things of the past, or even the future. Nightmares, as well, from which the person wakes up afraid and shaken. In any case, they are things short of present reality.

So is the situation in exile. What occurs with the Jewish people can be nothing more than a dream, against practical reality. How can it be that G-d's chosen nation should suffer so immensely? How can those who've earned the name "children of G-d" go through such intense trials and tribulations? As the Baal Shem Tov said, "the Jewish people are to G-d like an only son born in his father's old age." It must be an illusion.

So, together we (will) sit on the first night of Pesach, young and old alike, and we together ask of our great father in heaven,

“Tatte, Father,” why is this exile different from all other exiles? The exile in Egypt was only 210 years, the Babylonian ending after 70. So, our demand here tonight is; Father in heaven, when will this night end? When will we wake up from this dream?

And this is a question that is relevant for every individual.