



The Four Sons

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According to Jewish ritual, the story of the Exodus from Egypt at Passover should be adapted to the psychology of four typical children. The first is clever, the second is impudent, the third a simpleton, and the fourth "such that he doesn't even know how to ask". And each must be answered in order, according to his tastes and measure of understanding.

The clever boy wrinkles his high forehead, gazes searchingly with his big eyes and wants to know what really was the matter. Why did they first love his forefathers in Egypt, welcome them with open arms, and then begin persecuting and tormenting them, and, so queerly they kept on persecuting and tormenting them and throwing the baby boys into the rivers, but wouldn't for anything let them go. What was the explanation, Daddy? - asks the clever boy.

You see, my son, the philosophy of the Exodus from Egypt is contained in two sentences of the Eternal Book. These two phrases are like 'A' and 'Z' in the alphabet, the beginning and end of your forefather's welfare in Egypt. You may also compare them to the poles of an axis, round which the whole question of the Jews in Egypt turns. And not only in Egypt. When you grow up and read many books it will become clear to you that in all the wanderings of your people, at every stage there is this 'A' and 'Z'. Every stage begins and ends in exactly the same way, as in Egypt, that the poles between which your tribe is tossed by fate, have neither moved nor changed.

What then are these phrases? One you will find in the Book of Genesis, in the story of how Joseph brought his brethren to Pharaoh and the advice he gave them beforehand. Joseph was a clever and crafty man, true son of his father Jacob, the same who had deceived his own father, his brother and his father-in-law so cleverly that the anti-Semites - as you will learn in your time - call him "the first and original Kike". Don't be ashamed of this, by the way, for if Jacob could deceive, he could also fight - as he fought with God himself all night long until dawn and remained unconquered - and could also love, when he served as a serving-man for fourteen years for the woman he



loved. He was a bold fellow, a jack-of-all-trades, merchant, fighter, knight and judge, rapacious and noble, cautious and daring, calculating and generous - a real person, a grand man with great virtues and great faults, with a soul that was as variegated as a rainbow or a many-stringed harp. His life was and has remained the most interesting of all the poems that ever were and you must read it very often and learn from it. Learn how to love and fight and deceive, for this world is like a thieves' den and you must be able to wield every weapon both of defence and attack.

His son Joseph, too, was clever and shrewd. He knew all about Egypt, what the Egyptians lacked, and, above all, he knew the hearts of Pharaoh and his people. And so he gave his brethren, who were begging for permission to live in Egypt, this advice - say that you are cattle-breeders. And then he added a phrase, which you must learn by heart, my son, for the whole wisdom of our wanderings is hidden in it - 'For every shepherd is an abomination unto the Egyptians'.

You will find the second phrase in the Book of Exodus. Many years had passed, four hundred according to some people, less according to others, but anyhow Joseph and his brethren and the pharaoh who had known Joseph had been dead a long time. A new king was on the throne who thought that Joseph's descendants had increased too abundantly. It was then that he pronounced the second phrase which you also must learn by heart, for in this phrase every halt and every resting place of your people in their wanderings comes to an end. Whenever this phrase is uttered they must once again pack up their belongings and move on. The new Pharaoh said: 'Let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply.'

In these two phrases, my son, the philosophy of our wanderings is really contained. You ask how? Why did Joseph tell his brethren to call themselves shepherds if shepherds were an abomination in the eyes of the Egyptians? And this is just it. The Egyptians thought cattle breeding beneath them, but they had a great many head of cattle and they were very fond of cheese. That is why they needed cattle-breeders. Pharaoh himself, when he heard what the sons of Jacob told him by Joseph's wise advice, was very glad and at once commanded that they should be appointed overseers of his droves and herds. And probably everyone was very glad in Egypt that kind people had been found that will do for us what we ourselves do not like doing.

What happened, then, between the times of the first phrase and the second? Why had the descendants of the Canaanite shepherds become so burdensome? Was it that they



had really resolved not to breed any more cattle in the whole of Egypt? On the contrary. There was a great deal of cattle and it was greatly treasured by the Egyptians - tradition says that the Egyptians found the cattle murrain one of the most grievous of all the plagues. What was the trouble then? You don't understand? My son, if you knew the history of our later wanderings, you would understand the reason for this coolness easily enough. It seems that by this time the Egyptians themselves took to cattle-breeding. At first they were shy and ashamed, making at first a few, timid efforts, and then having learned from the Jews they took heart, took a liking to the business and found one fine day that there were far too many Jews, without whom they could do very nicely. Of course, not all at once. Pharaoh would not allow all the Jews to leave, as then a certain portion of the Egyptian cattle might have been left unattended. But, little by little, dying out slowly and gradually, that is something quite different, something pleasant to look forward to, and without any possible inconvenience. By that time, you see, the native population would have been able to undertake the whole of that part of the national industry that had lain in the strangers' hands. And so, "Let us deal wisely".

That is how it has always been since then. When you come to study the history of our wanderings, you will find that everywhere it has been the same. It always begins with "Every shepherd is an abomination unto the Egyptians", and the disgraceful profession is gladly left to us.

The Egyptians had their own likes and dislikes, and it was cattle-breeding that they did not care for. While, for instance, the nations of Europe disliked other things - for a very long time they would not have anything to do with trade. The rabble ploughed the land, and the gentry passed their time in wine drinking and brigandage on the highways where they robbed the traveling merchants. Robbing merchants was considered quite respectable but to be a merchant was thought most disgraceful. It was this that was "an abomination unto the Egyptians". And this "abomination" was left to us as our portion, and that how gladly. We were given privileges and were protected against the nobles and the populace. From time to time they would rob and burn us, but later on they would again placate us by giving us privileges. A German scholar called Sombardt, who made a special study of all this, has said that economic progress moved from European country to country with the Jews and that it was the Jews who gave the world international commerce without which the greatest capitals



would to this day have remained the dirty backwaters they once were, that it was the Jews who developed credit and banking, who fitted Columbus out on his voyage of discovery to America. And while they were doing all this, while they themselves were gaining their thousands and putting millions into Pharaoh's ever-greedy pockets, the Europeans were looking on, learning, trying out the business themselves, getting used to it, taking heart and beginning to like the "abomination". And then of course, they suddenly noticed that there were rather too many Jews. "Let us deal wisely"... When the boy has learned his lesson the tutor is sacked. So it was with your forefathers in every country. The others accept them, patronise them, take what they need from them, and then would begin to "deal wisely with them, lest they multiply".

You must not think, my son, that the word "abomination" is to be understood literally. Very often Egyptians fight shy of shepherds, not because they really think herding an abomination but because they don't know or are afraid of burning their fingers. Then they are very pleased if a stranger comes along who is master of the trade and isn't afraid of burning himself and rescues the chestnuts out of the fire for them. That was what happened for instance in several revolutions. In 1848 the first to deliver a revolutionary speech in Vienna was the Jew Fischgoff, while the King in Berlin was issuing proclamations to the effect that it was only the Jews that were in revolt. And it was true enough that when the dead were being buried there was a lot of funeral work for the Rabbi there. But then the Egyptians were very kind to us then. But later, that generation of the Egyptians died out and their children again found there were too many of Joseph's descendants, the same who had so recently burned their fingers with hot chestnuts...

So it was, so it is, so it ever will be

The second boy is "impudent" - there he sits - lolling back in his chair, crossing his feet and grinning ironically - and asks - what are all these funny customs and memories of YOURS? All this silly old nonsense should have been forgotten long ago!

In answer to his mockery tell him that there were plenty like him even in ancient Egypt. They met their people's every hope with grinning and preferred to cling to the side of Pharaoh. The Bible has kept the memory of one of them green. When the young Moses took the side of a Jew whom an Egyptian was beating and killed that Egyptian, another Jew saw him and was indignant. On the next day he or one of his



ilk began showing his teeth at Moses, "Who made thee a prince and a judge over us?" And later another of the same tribe reported to Pharaoh that there was this dangerous mountebank who was busy trying to change the will of the Hebrews. In those days the world was very simple, there was no public opinion, and that is why the denouncer went straight to the palace. In our time, he would probably - as a respectable person - try other ways and blacken Moses' character not before Pharaoh in person but before the collective Pharaoh of the cultured public opinion of Europe. The oppressor's murder he would keep dark like a respectable person, but he would let his wrath come down on the psychology that influenced Moses to pay attention only to this attack of the Egyptian on the Jew out of all the innumerable injustices admittedly committed daily in Egypt. Was there not a multitude of slaves in Egypt generally? Why should such a man as Moses use up his energy for the emancipation of a handful of shepherds, and not for the reform of the whole of Egypt? And were is it that he is calling them? Out of Egypt? Goodness me! Isn't it simply sinful to leave this rich country, where everything is in such plenty - bread and flesh-pots, and onion and garlic and many papyri all covered with wise hieroglyphs - while Moses' kinfold were paupers without culture or possessions? "What is all this nonsense of YOURS?" This sort of person asked Moses and Aaron ironically, grinning up at them as he sat with his legs crossed, lolling back.

"Blunt his teeth" says the ritual of the Passover concerning this son. But I doubt if his teeth can be blunted. He is too well armed, for nothing is more unvanquishable than indifference. Nothing can touch him, once he says of his own people, "you", you can give him up. He will jeer at you and he has got plenty of material for jeering. It is not difficult to mock the defeated, especially if he belongs to them and knows all the wounds and weak places. There are enough bumps on our heads, our backs are well bowed, our hands tremble from age-old terror, our dress is poor and old-fashioned - if you want to, you will find enough material for laughter, annihilatingly comparing our poverty with the wealth of Egypt. It is true, indeed, that this our sonny is hardly one of the family in Egypt, but it is even truer that it is not the great man who despises his poor relation to anything like the same extent as does his lackey. He will go on grinning at you with all his teeth, and nothing that you can do will blunt them.

And, indeed, you should not blunt the teeth of this son. Let him go on his way with strong teeth. Poor fellow, he will need them in the encampment of the triumphant



whither he is drawn. He will have to crack hard nuts there, and the hardest will be the nut of contempt. Often and often will he have to take kicks in answer to loving speeches, be spat upon in answer to his flattery and he will have to clench his teeth and take everything meekly. And at the end of his life, when he sees that all of his days have been passed in hypocrisy and lies before people and his own heart, and that even if his heart has believed the lie, it had deceived no one else for a single moment, then perhaps your prodigal son will throw himself down in despair, will tear his hair and will bite the ground with the same teeth with which he is now mockingly grinning at your sacraments. Let him keep his teeth - he will need them both for his false smiles and to gnash in helpless fury.

The third boy is the simpleton. His eyes are honest, clear and direct. He is not of those who inquire, discover and excavate contradictions. For him the world is simple and indisputable. He loves to believe and worship with the simple faith of the primitive man. Sampson was this sort of simpleton - he loved fighting, joking and jesting, getting up to mischief and setting puzzles, eating well and drinking deeply and was so trustful that after being thrice deceived he again slept on Delilah's breast. Our modern simpleton son certainly lacks Sampson's full-blooded joyousness - the times are different - but fundamentally the type is the same - an artless, single-minded trustfulness.

"Daddy" he says, and planting his elbows and pressing his chest on the table, he stretches out his neck and turns to you as to a stream on a thirsty day, believing already everything you will tell him, for he wants to believe, "Daddy, when will a better time come?"

Then tell him gently and simply about everything that is happening now in the great illimitable Diaspora. Tell him how in a thousand different places, the newly scattered temple of the undying people is being raised by a thousand hands. Tell him how gradually the hitherto scattered national will is being unified before our eyes, how again a real people is being created, pertinacious, egoistic, exclusive like all healthy nations. Tell him of the fall of the pulpits one after another where so recently national suicide had been preached. Tell him of the Jewish youth of the Berlin and Vienna universities - of those sons of the Germanised shop-keepers, how they proudly wear the Jewish colours on their breasts:



WHITE - like the snow of this land of sadness

BLUE - like the beckoning distance

YELLOW - like our disgrace

Tell him how everywhere, with every day the pride and respect for our own individuality grows with the bitter hatred for renegacy. How both Paris playwright, grown accustomed to his success, and the pauper publican of a Galician village, trembling before the Polish master, have learned to shout to the entire world - I am a Jew! Tell him what wonderful poets are now writing in our tongue, and how beautiful and powerful this tongue is, and what great good fortune for a people it is to possess such a language. And tell him further how gaily the colonist's children are chattering in this language in Palestine. And how gradually, step by step, by great labour, stone by stone, through a thousand obstacles, from the burning sun to the Bedouin's bullet - something new is rising and growing there, a basis for the most grandiose plans and prophecies. Tell this simple and trusting soul all this and much besides. He will accept your words readily and will guard them carefully in his generous heart and from that moment another warrior will be added to our army.

The fourth boy does not know how to ask. He sits at table sedately, does everything proper and it does not even enter his head to ask what it is all about and why. According to the ritual, you should not wait for his questions but tell him of your own accord. I disagree. An inquiring mind is a valuable thing, but there is sometimes a higher wisdom, a higher intuition in that a man takes something from the past without question, without curiosity as to causes or effects. Such wisdom should be safeguarded and not frightened away by needless words.

This is the wisdom of the dull man in the street, that homely wretch who mends shoes, tailors, hawks eggs, buys up old clothes, copies out the Testament scrolls, keeps the smallest of shops, runs errands - in a word, hoes the hard stony row from which as yet he has not been chased away, groans, and on Friday fills the Houses of Prayer. It is he, the famous Silent-Bontsa of Leon Peretw's story, from whose ranks comes the human fodder both for emigration and for pogroms. He agonises but does not die; he falls but does not perish, and carries out the ancestral ritual, with that sub-conscious faith which, perhaps in God's eyes, is worthier than any ecstasy. He belongs to this



dull silent crowd, who "don't know how to ask", he is the core of the eternal people and the chief bearer of its immortality.

According to the ritual, you should tell this son about everything that he does not ask. But I think, let the father too be silent and silently kiss this son on his brow, the surest keeper of the sacrament on which his lips are silent.