

# The Four Sons at the Seder Table



*A Discussion Guide and Presentation for Your Passover Seder*

## Opening

Before we read the *Arba Banim* — the Four Sons — let's pause for a moment.

The Haggadah doesn't ask us to find the right child. It asks us to find our child — wherever they are. Every person at this table tonight has been all four of these figures at some point. Maybe more than once. Maybe this year.

A note on the translations: The standard English renderings — wise, wicked, simple, silent — are familiar but not the only readings. Tonight we'll use some alternative translations that invite us to see these four figures a little differently. The *chacham* becomes the **scholarly** son. The *rasha* becomes the **sinful** son. The *tam* — usually "simple" — becomes the **complete** son. Each translation comes with a story.

Let's meet them.



## The Scholarly Son (חכם — *Chacham*)

**What he asks:** *"What are the testimonies, statutes, and laws that God commanded you?"*

He asks from Deuteronomy — the book that retells the law as the people stood on the edge of Canaan, forty years after the Exodus. He is not asking an abstract question. He is asking a practitioner's question: now that we are finally about to observe these rituals properly, in the Land, what exactly do we do?

He has done the preparation. He has the vocabulary. He wants depth.

**The answer we give him:** Everything we know about Pesach — all the way to the fine print.

**A thought on translation:** *Chacham* is usually translated "wise" — but "scholarly" may be closer. This son is not simply intellectually gifted; he is engaged in the kind of detailed, halakhic questioning that the rabbis themselves practiced. He is a student preparing to become a practitioner.

### The question for your table:

*The scholarly son asks about laws, statutes, and judgments — the technical architecture of the commandments. Is that the most important question? What would you add if you could rewrite his question?*



## The Sinful Son (רשע — *Rasha*)

**What he asks:** "What does this service mean to *you*?"

One word — "you" instead of "us" — changes everything. He has stepped outside the circle.

**The answer we give him:** "Because of what God did for *me* when I left Egypt — for me, not for you. Had you been there, you would not have been redeemed."

It is a sharp answer. On purpose.

**But notice:** He is still at the table. He asked. He showed up.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote: "*Sitting next to the wise child, the rebel is not fated to remain a rebel.*"

**A thought on translation:** *Rasha* is usually rendered "wicked" or "evil." But another translation — "sinful" — sharpens the charge in a specific way. This son isn't merely rebellious or unpleasant. He has made a theological error: he is treating Judaism as nothing more than ritual worship, and dismissing everything else. Judaism is a civilization — ethics, community, family, study, history. To reduce it to "this service" and then ask "what is it to you?" is to commit a sin of narrowness.

**And can he come back?** This is a genuine question. For most transgressions, *teshuvah* (repentance) is always possible. But turning your back on the community itself — declaring yourself an outsider — may be uniquely hard to reverse. This is why the Haggadah answers so sharply.

**The question for your table:**

*Is there a difference between someone who rejects Jewish practice and someone who rejects the Jewish community? Which is harder to come back from?*

**A thought to share:** The Haggadah is recited over the *second cup of wine* — the cup associated with the sinful son. The entire heart of the seder is poured out for him. He is not an afterthought. He is the reason we tell the story the way we do.



## The Complete Son (תם — *Tam*)

**What he asks:** "*What is this?*"

Three words. Genuine curiosity, no framework, no agenda. Just: what is happening here?

**The answer we give him:** "*With a strong hand God took us out of Egypt.*"

Simple question. Simple, honest answer. A perfect match.

**Notice the word:** *Tam* in Hebrew doesn't just mean simple. It means *whole, unblemished, complete*. This child may not have the vocabulary of the Wise Son — but there is no pretense in him either. The Chassidic tradition says the *Tam* represents pure faith: no sophistication, but no cynicism either.

**The question for your table:**

*When was the last time you asked a question you were embarrassed to ask — because it seemed too basic? What would it look like to make this a table where no question is too simple?*



**The One Who Does Not Know How to Ask** (שאינו יודע לשאול — *She-eino Yodea Lish'ol*)

**What he asks:** *Nothing.*

He has no question because he doesn't know he has one. He is the opposite of the complete son — not wholehearted engagement, but a total blank slate. He is waiting to be completed.

**The instruction we receive:** *"You shall open for him."*

Not: wait. Not: teach when he's ready. **Open.** Begin the conversation. Make the first move.

And open broadly. "Not only are you going to tell the story — you are going to open up the whole of Judaism for your child. The Pesah story is only the beginning."

**A note on the Hebrew:** The word for "you" in this instruction — *את* (*at*) — is feminine. Some read this as an instruction to the *mother*: this most silent, most vulnerable child needs the more relational, open approach.

**The question for your table:**

*Who at this table — or in your life — is the one who doesn't ask? Not because they don't care, but because they don't have the words yet? What would it look like to open the whole of Judaism to them, not just answer one question?*



**The Fifth Child: The One Who Is Not Here**

Many Haggadot today include a fifth image alongside the four sons: an empty seat. This is for the children of the Shoah and other tragedies who never had the chance to ask their questions, or lost that ability. For the Jews in places today who cannot celebrate openly. For the members of our own families who have drifted too far from the table to find their way back.

*A moment of silence.*



**A Thought to Carry Through the Seder**

The Four Sons are not a ranking. They are a family portrait — and perhaps, a self-portrait.

*"Perhaps there is a bit of each of the children in all of us. We need to nurture the scholar in us, subdue the sinfulness in us, continue on the path of completeness, and finally we need to learn how to ask the right questions."*

The Haggadah does not tell the scholarly son to find better company. It seats him next to the sinful one. It includes the one who can't form a question. It matches its language to whoever is listening.

That is the obligation of every parent, teacher, and seder leader: not to demand the right question, but to offer the right answer — the one this child, this person, this moment needs.

*Chag kasher v'sameach — a kosher and joyful Pesach to all.*



## Quick Reference Card for the Seder Table

Son (Goldwasser translation)	Question	Key Word	Our Answer	Lesson
Scholarly (Chacham)	"What are all these laws?"	Depth	All the laws of Pesach	Rigor feeds scholarship
Sinful (Rasha)	"What does this mean to you?"	Exclusion	"For me, not for you" — sharp correction	Don't reduce Judaism to worship
Complete (Tam)	"What is this?"	Wholeness	The Exodus story, directly told	Observance needs the why
Silent (She-eino Yodea)	(Silence)	Potential	You open for him	No one is left behind

*Prepared for Passover — Sources: Sefaria, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks Legacy, TheTorah.com, Chabad.org, HUC Library, JTS  
Translations and commentary in this guide draw in part on Philip Goldwasser, The Goldwasser Family Haggadah (© Philip Goldwasser)*