

# Is There Such a Thing As Asking Too Many Questions?

## Independent

According to our creation story, the serpentine trickster posed the first question ever asked: “So, God said you shouldn’t eat from *any* of the trees in the Garden, huh?” That prompted First Woman to respond: “We *can* eat from the fruits of the trees in the Garden. Only in regards to the tree in the *middle* of the Garden did God say not to eat from it...” Questions are important not only for stimulating discussion but for jump-starting the dynamics of creation. Until the serpent introduced the concept, nothing had stirred. Creation had been absent of flavor, zest, spice and meaning. The human mind had slowly begun to atrophy, lacking stimuli for kindling thought and response. Likewise, without the freedom and encouragement to question, which is so much a part of the Judaic mindset, Judaism itself would have gone catatonic a long time ago. Why, then, was the serpent penalized? Because, while questioning is vital to our life force, it can just as easily *drain* us of our life force if it conceals hidden agendas and unscrupulous attitudes. We see this in the Haggadah, where we read about the not-nice child questioning the Seder rites with a tone of mockery and personal challenge as opposed to a sincere quest for learning.

*Rabbi Gershon Winkler, Walking Stick Foundation, Thousand Oaks, CA*

## Humanist

Nu? Is it possible to ask too many questions? Isn’t that how we find things out? And shape our ideas and opinions? Maybe we come to a conclusion, but what if we find more information to modify it? Are facts fixed for all times? Aren’t scientists constantly making new discoveries? As Jews, do we really believe that the world was created 5770 years ago? Or, in the face of archaeological evidence to the contrary, that the Exodus took place as described? Or that Jewish culture hasn’t changed in each generation? In fact, didn’t the early rabbis teach us to turn the text over and over, always looking for new truths? And, inevitably, can’t we expect that future generations will develop a form of Jewish expression that we can’t possibly anticipate just as our ancestors couldn’t have envisioned our form of Judaism? Don’t we want our children to be critical and independent thinkers? Don’t we ask them to distinguish between myth and fact? Don’t we even challenge them to have the courage and chutzpah to question ancient teachings and not accept them automatically simply because they come from long ago? Nu? Isn’t there always room for one more question?

*Rabbi Peter Schweitzer, The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, New York, NY*

## Renewal

When I was a child coming home from school, my parents never asked me, “What did you learn today?” Perhaps they knew that the obligatory childhood answer is “Nothing.” Instead, each day

they asked, “What questions did you ask today?” The paradigm of praising questioning has deep roots in our tradition. In the Jerusalem Talmud, Moses, perhaps weary of the process of questioning and answering, approaches G-d and says, “Master of the universe, reveal to me the final truth in each problem of doctrine and law,” to which the Lord replies: “There are no pre-existent final truths in doctrine or law; the truth is the considered judgment of the majority of authoritative interpreters in every generation.” Moses cannot get a final answer and must continue the process of questioning and exploring! We also learn in the Passover Hagaddah that the wicked child is wicked precisely because of the way he “asks.” The other three children initiate conversation and relationship through shared discussion, but the wicked child simply embeds his exclusion in his comment. All questions are welcome, but how we ask them determines not only the response but the relationships we create in the process.

*Rabbi Chava Bahle, Makom Shalom, Chicago, IL*

## Reconstructionist

Besides being People of the Book, we are also People of the Question Mark. Our answers are ever-evolving, ever-tentative, just as science emphasizes working hypotheses over fixed facts. Open-minded questioning lies at the heart of the Jewish enterprise. We should never fear the slippery slope to which questions lead; our entire lives are lived on such slopes. Our FAQ's really are our mark on the world. Consider our greatest creative leaps forward: Abe and Sarah asking about the oneness of existence and finding God, rabbinic Judaism boldly recentring our tradition around study, prayer and good deeds around 100 CE, or Maimonides' philosophical revolution circa 1100. All came when everything was on the table. The last few hundred years have seen a certain ossification (in halacha anyway), which is abnormal in our rich history. Now, again, we are asking new questions that will yield yet untold advances. Mordecai Kaplan knew this; the title of his 1956 book *Questions Jews Ask: Reconstructionist Answers* says it all. And when I first opened today's Reconstructionist Haggadah, I literally wept in gratitude that it is about leading not one Seder but four (long and serious, short and kid-friendly, feminist and interfaith) from the same book. Its title? *A Night of Questions*.

*Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb, Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation, Bethesda, MD*

## Reform

It is commonly thought that one of Judaism's contributions to the world is the Talmudic acceptance of questioning and resulting wide-open discussions. When God instructs Abraham to go to Sodom to announce that the city will be destroyed, Abraham challenges God: “What if I find only 50 righteous people?” God engages in dialogue with Abraham, so much so that Abraham is able to finally ask, “What if I find only 10 righteous people?” Hillel teaches: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?” Hillel's questions push us to consider our relationship to humanity, our place in the world and our moral obligations. Asking questions opens our minds to new understandings of Judaism. Our questions give us deeper understandings of who we are. Our questions demonstrate our commitment to engaging in conversation with fellow Jews and with God. Our questions give articulation to the spiritual

struggles we each undergo, just as Jacob wrestled with the angel and was given the name Israel for prevailing in his struggles. Our questions help us solidify our values. It is our ethical and spiritual obligation to ask questions and to seek answers.

*Rabbi Laura Novak Winer, Union for Reform Judaism, Livermore, CA*

## Conservative

Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, the legendary teacher at Yeshiva University, a great philosopher and Talmudist, usually began each class by asking for questions on the assigned text. Once when none of the students asked a question, Rav Soloveitchik walked out saying: “No questions? No class.” Learning begins with questions and requires courage to expose one’s ignorance. However, Jewish tradition recognizes some instances when questions are asked for a reason other than to learn. In the Talmud, a non-Jew came to Shammai saying that he would convert to Judaism if Shammai could teach him the Torah while standing on one foot. Shammai drove the questioner away while Hillel converted the man by telling him, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary. Go and study it.” Hillel’s patience is admirable, but Jewish tradition is sympathetic to Shammai, who was bothered by the questioner’s mocking tone. Similarly, in the Haggadah, the wicked child’s question is answered abruptly on the assumption that the child is distancing himself from Judaism. I believe it is best to assume good intentions, because one never knows when a curt response might alienate someone who is genuinely interested in learning.

*Rabbi Amy Wallk Katz, Temple Beth El, Springfield, MA*

## Modern Orthodox

Don’t you know that the first time God addresses a specific human being (Adam) in the Torah, he asks a question? “*Ayeka?* (Where are you?)” The first time God addresses a murderer, he asks, “Where is your brother Abel?” The first time that Abraham addresses God, he asks, “...What can you give me seeing that I am going to die childless?” Isn’t this because the great principle of Jewish faith is that we are to imitate God? Don’t you know that Moses, our greatest leader, found his calling by asking a question: “Why doesn’t the (burning) bush burn up?” Aren’t the Torah’s stories all about giving us great human role models to learn from? As we try to understand the implications of the Holocaust (and of Israel and of Jewish life after the Shoah)—especially Jewry’s affirmation of life and moral responsibility—don’t you realize, as Elie Wiesel says, “[A response] is not a lesson; [it] is not an answer. It is only a question.”? Don’t you know that a good question is always more evocative and instructive than a good answer? So why ask: Do Jews ask too many questions?

*Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, New York, NY*

## Sephardi

Judaism was founded on questioning and it is through questioning that Judaism continues to thrive. Had Abraham not questioned the conventional primitive religions of his time, civilization as we know it would not exist. The Passover Seder is purposefully structured to stimulate questions of participants and guide them toward answers. Most importantly, the greatest commandment in our religion, that of the study of Torah, is enriched, energized and made meaningful through an endless process of passionate questioning in search of truth. Of course, not all questions contribute equally to our intellectual and moral development. Some people raise questions only to attack, tear down or humiliate; others do so to demonstrate the real or imagined superiority of their intelligence. Such questions, rather than helping us to appreciate the beauty of a greater and more majestic reality, serve instead to aggrandize ourselves in the eyes of others. All questions that are inspired by sincere curiosity and a real thirst for knowledge deserve to be asked. This doesn't mean that a satisfying answer will always be available, but to dismiss or ignore worthy questions would be an abdication of our religious obligation to honestly seek the truth.

*Rabbi Joshua Maroof, Magen David Sephardic Congregation, Rockville, MD*

## Chabad

Many of us believe that we will have an opportunity after our stint on earth to stand before a great mahogany desk in the sky and demand from G-d, "If You are so kind and omniscient, why were You silent?" And then G-d will show us the view as He sees things and all will be answered. Perhaps. Perhaps not. Perhaps at the end of all things, at the core of all wisdom, at the very essence of all being lies not an answer but a question, perhaps many questions—and who knows, perhaps this question is one of them. And if so, perhaps G-d will simply counter our question with yet another and ask, "So what did you do to answer this question?" And if we will say, "I did nothing, because I saw you did nothing," then He will ask yet another question. He will say, "So this that you asked, was it a question? Or was it just another answer?" For that is the only bad question: the one that is not a question at all, but merely an inexpensive excuse to shrug our shoulders and scurry back into our holes, to do nothing.

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