



Bo: Questionable Questions

As the story goes, Rav Chaim Volozhin (1749 – 1821), founder of the Volozhin Yeshiva, and the progenitor of the modern day yeshiva, was once approached by a student who had left the yeshiva. The *Haskalah* movement, an outgrowth of the Enlightenment, was in full swing, and many young, impressionable yeshiva students were struck by the lure and culture of modern studies.

Upon meeting Rav Chaim, the former yeshiva student announced “I have many questions.”

In turn, Rav Chaim asked him, “Did these questions come to you when you were in yeshiva or after you left?”

The boy responded, “What difference does it make? I have questions.”

Rav Chaim countered with an enigmatic answer “If these questions had troubled you before you left yeshiva, they are indeed genuine questions, and for questions I have answers. However, if these questions only began troubling you after you left yeshiva, then they aren’t questions; they are answers. For answers, I have no answers.”

Questions and answers are a subject addressed in this week’s parsha, Bo. It is well-known that there are four verses in the Torah which instruct us to recount our nation’s exodus from Egypt to our children. Each of these instructions are worded slightly differently. The *Pesach Maggadah* links each of these instructions to the four sons: the *chocham*, the wise son, the *rasha*, the wicked son, *tam*, the simpleton, and *eino yodeya lishoel*, the son who does not know how to ask. A powerful lesson in Jewish education becomes apparent; we don’t educate our children uniformly. Every child can be different and therefore requires their own customized educational approach.

R’ Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (1843–1926) in his work on the *Chumash, Meshech Chochma*, points out that aside from the son who doesn’t ask, the instructions to the parent begins with the child asking a “*shalleh*”, an inquiry which the verse says he presents “*loimor*”, deliberately. The exception is the *rasha*. The *rasha* asks but the verse does not call his question a *shalleh*; nor is his question deliberate, “*loimor*”.

R’ Meir Simcha of Dvinsk explains. The *rasha* is not looking for answers. His question lacks integrity. He doesn’t ask a *shalleh*, rather the verse tells us “when your son says, ‘what are these services you are engaged in?’” he implies that he is not looking for answers but rather he is searching for more fodder to feed his preconceived notions; he is looking to mock and scorn. We recognize, his question is not sincere. Therefore, we don’t give him a satisfactory answer. We respond, “you would never have been redeemed” As R’ Chaim taught, “for answers we have no answers.”

There is a lesson here for all of us. How often do we engage in open-minded debate where we welcome a change in our perspective? When we ask, are we asking sincerely, are we honestly seeking answers?