

The Meaning of Afikomen

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“Don’t fill up on bread, it will spoil your dinner!” How many of you remember hearing those words from a parent or some other adult when you were sitting at a restaurant, hungry, maybe a little impatient waiting for your meal to be served? The server comes by with a wonderful basket of warm bread, squares of butter wrapped in gold foil or maybe whipped in a ramekin like a pale yellow flower. You’re so hungry, you can smell the fresh baked bread, you just want to devour the whole basket, because you know they’ll bring you more, but someone tells you to slow down, don’t overdo it, save your appetite for the main course. A friend of mine recently told me a story of going to a real mom and pop Italian restaurant, where there wasn’t even a menu. You ate whatever they were serving that’s it. He said the focaccia was out of this world and when he asked the waitress for more she actually said no! He said, why can’t I have more, and the waitress said, because you have a lot of other food coming. No discussion.

Of course every formal Jewish meal also begins with bread. *Lechem kovei’a se’udah*, the Gemara says, bread is the food that establishes a meal. No matter what comes next, if you eat bread, it is a mitzvah to recite *Birkat Ha’Mazon*, the full Grace After Meals. If you eat other foods, but not bread, a shorter *bracha achrona* or final blessing is said. But there is one Jewish meal where bread is not only eaten at the beginning, but also at the end. Where you are supposed to save room after the main course, even after dessert, to eat a little more bread as the final course of the meal. And that meal is the Passover seder. The bread I am referring to is not focaccia or biscuits or buns...but matzah. Matzah by the way is also bread...we say the same *bracha...Ha’motzi lechem min ha’aretz*, and we recite *birkat hamazon* after eating it. At the seder, the part of the matza that you broke hours earlier during *Yachatz* reappears, typically after having been found by a child eager for a present or a reward. That matza of course is called afikomen. Now by this point in the seder it’s pretty late, and there’s so much excitement about where the afikomen was hidden and who found it and what the prize is that we might forget that we actually have an obligation to eat that afikomen...we have to end our seder meal by eating

more bread. Some believe that's why the afikomen is hidden in the first place...so that it is not accidentally eaten earlier in the meal, leaving you with nothing at the end!

But I have a question...You may remember that during the four questions, the *Chacham*, the wise child is supposed to be instructed “*ain maftirin achar ha'pesach afikomen.*” You should teach him that “we do not conclude the Pesach meal with afikomen.” This is one of those bizarre lines in the Haggadah that many people either pass over (!) or read and don't think much about. This line actually comes directly from the Mishnah. ‘NO afikomen after the meal.’ To unravel this mystery, we have to know what the word *afikomen* really means. It almost certainly comes from the Greek word *epikomen*, which was a post-dinner party in Greco-Roman culture. After a classical Greco-Roman symposium of eating, drinking, and discussion, there would be a roving party from one house to the next, with drinking and revelry and more eating, and more drinking...and that is what we are supposed to teach the wise child not to do after the Passover meal. If you want to stay up all night talking about the many meanings of the exodus from Egypt like those five rabbis in B'nai Brak did...go for it! But drinking parties and revelry did not quite fit the mood of the evening.

But how do we get from raucous afikomen parties, to our *farshtunkenah* piece of broken matzah hidden inside a decorative bag and searched for by all the kids in the family? Well, as Greco-Roman culture faded away and Jews moved into Ashkenaz, into European lands and beyond, *afikomen* took on a new meaning. From that point on afikomen became a symbolic food, like so many of the other foods we eat at the seder. Afikomen is now meant to remind us of the way our ancestors finished their seders when the Temple still stood. Full bellies notwithstanding, they managed to eat one more item, *the Korban Pesach*, the roasted meat of the Passover sacrifice. According to the book of Exodus they ate it like a canape: the meat, along with *Maror*, on top of matzah: *basar...tzli esh u'matzot al-merorim yochluhu*. Nowadays we don't have the korban Pesach, that sacred, roasted meat, but we do have the matzot. And as we near the end of a night of singing and talking and asking and answering and explaining and delving into the many layers of this great story, we take that last piece of matza and let it be the last taste in our mouths for the night. Please, when you get to the afikomen, do it mindfully. Put it in your mouth and let the matza dissolve on your tongue. And as it does, allow yourself to be transported to Passover seders long ago and in places far from our dining rooms...let that flavor connect us with so many

generations of our people who have told and retold this great story year after year, gaining hope and inspiration from the story of a people who left the shackles of slavery behind, embracing a new life, a new future, and a new purpose in the world.

But the afikomen is not only about the past, it is also about the future. The part of the seder when we eat this final piece of matzah is called *Tzafun*, or ‘hidden.’ Some people say that *tzafun* refers to the hidden matzah. But I don’t think that makes sense, because by the time we eat the afikomen, it has already been found. What is hidden, or not yet revealed to us are the various moments and miracles between now and whenever we can truly say *l’shana haba’ah biyrushalyim*, which is a proclamation that the world has finally been redeemed, and that we are free from everything that plagues us and enslaves us. When we may once again be able to actually taste the Korban Pesach again!

We may not be able to see how we get to where we are today, with all the *tsurris* in the world, the rise in antisemitism, the tumult in Israel...but even though we may not see every step along the way, the path is there, and will be revealed over time. Martin Luther King once said that ‘faith is taking the first step even when we don’t see the staircase.’ That is what *tzafun* is about as well. Believing that *Eliyahu Ha’Navi* will come with good news! Believing that the world can and will be a better place. Believing that, as we sing in *Chad Gad Ya*, that the *Malach Ha’mavet*, the angel of death will ultimately be vanquished by the *Kadosh Baruch Hu*, the Holy One of Blessing.

So don’t only fill up on (unleavened) bread at the beginning of the seder...save a little room for it at the end of the seder too. May it connect us to all the came before us, and all that our people have in store for us in the future. Wishing you all a *chag kasher ve’sameach*!