

Pesach 5776 Day 2:

Hiding and Stealing

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Do you hide or do you steal? (No, I'm not asking on behalf of the IRS) I'm talking about your Afikomen. The source of the customs is the Talmud in Pesachim 109: Chotfin Matzah B'leil Pesachim. Literally: Matzah is grabbed at the Seder. There are two customs as to what this "grabbing" means: Hiding and stealing. Both practices come to 1) keep the children interested (and at the Seder we're all children) and 2) keep the piece of matzah safe and uneaten until after the meal for Afikomen.

Hiding the matzah is the nicer custom, the one easier to understand. It teaches children the importance of seeking – for answers and for the Afikomen.

And yet the custom for children to steal the Afikomen, only to ransom it back at the end of the Seder is quoted by a number of Halachic sources, including: Chok Yaakov (472, in Beir Heitiv 473:20), *Noheig K'Tzon Yosef*- collection of the customs of the Frankfurt Jewish community, Rav Yaakov Emden, and (perhaps most importantly) The Weinstock Family. In our house (as I did when I was young) when the adults get up for Rachtza, the children hang back and make their move. As the seder cannot end without eating the Afikomen, the children have the upper hand to ransom back the Afikomen bags for a prize that is mutually agreed upon by both parties.

Some Rabbis express shock and dismay that stealing in any form would find expression in a Seder custom. After all, why would we want our children to "steal"?! What kind of chinuch is it to encourage children to do something that is referred to as stealing?

I come today to defend the custom of stealing the Afikomen, based on the lingering lessons that we can learn, regardless of what your personal family minhag may be.

Chasam Sofer explained that the custom to steal the Afikomen serves as a reminder of one of the miracles that occurred the night of the Exodus that finds no other commemoration or symbolic reminder:

But to all the children of Israel, not one dog will whet its tongue against either man or beast, in order that you shall know that the Lord will separate between the Egyptians

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and between Israel.

In Ancient civilizations, dogs served as a means of protection. If one's guard dog does not bark, then the household is vulnerable to thieves and other criminals. As the Egyptians were wailing due to the death of their firstborns, a miracle occurred and the dogs of Egypt remained silent. To recall this miracle, we encourage the children to (pretend to) steal the Afikomen in commemoration of that night of the Exodus when the dogs went silent and the thieves were able to rob without any reservations.

A Chasidic tradition (quoted in the name of R' Zev of Strikov) suggests that the custom to steal the Afikomen recalls an event even earlier than the Exodus (yet alluded to in the Hagadah when we speak about Yaakov and Eisav). Parshat Toldot tells the story of how Yitzchak wants to give blessings to his sons towards the end of his life. Yitzchak plans to bless his eldest son Eisav first, and so he tells Eisav to hunt him some game so that he can bless Eisav satisfied and in good spirits. Rivkah overhears this plan and tells Yaakov to engage in trickery in order to "steal the blessings." Rivkah tells Yaakov: (27:9)

Go now to the flock, and take for me from there **two choice kids**, and I will make them tasty foods for your father, as he likes.

טלף נא אל הצאן וקח לי משם שני גדדי עזים
טבים ואעשה אתם מטעמים לאביך כאשר אהב:

Rashi notes:

Now did Isaac's menu consist of two kids? But [the explanation is that] he sacrificed one as a Paschal offering, and one he made into tasty foods. [This is found] in Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer (ch. 32).

שני גדדי עזים: וכי שני גדדי עזים היה מאכלו של יצחק, אלא האחד הקריב לפסחו והאחד עשה מטעמים. בפרקי דרבי אליעזר (פרק לב):

The custom to steal the Afikomen commemorates Yaakov's stealing blessings meant for Eisav- and this event occurred on Pesach (centuries before the Exodus).

A connection between Yaakov's theft of the blessings and Pesach in general and the Afikomen in particular runs deep.

When Yitzchak realizes what Yaakov did he tells Eisav

And he said, "Your brother came with cunning and took your blessing." :להוֹיֵאמֹר בָּא אָחִיךָ בְּמַרְמָה וַיִּקַּח בְּרַכְתְּךָ:

The Gematriya of the word “*B’Mirma*” is 287- the same as the word *Afikomen*.

Furthermore, Onkelos translates the word “*B’Mirma*” as “*B’chachma*”- with wisdom. At the seder we address four types of children, one of them being the Chacham- the wise child. The Hagadah tells us to be expansive in our explanations to the Chacham, but mentions one halacha in particular that should be associated with Chochma/ Chacham:

Eyn Maftirim Achar Pesach Afikomen (One should not consume any food after eating the Afikomen)

Is there a common lesson in the story of the dogs and that of Yaakov’s trickery that can serve as a lingering lesson for the Afikomen?

The pasuk in Parshat Bo contrasts the loud wailing of the Egyptians with the silence of the dogs. Dogs get agitated when their owners start screaming and wailing, and they respond by whimpering and barking. Dogs who do not growl or bark during the night of Makkat Bechorot clearly do not have Egyptian owners.

The dogs roaming in the streets of Egypt are silent because they recognized that their true owner is Haszhem, and therefore there is no reason to bark.

Pesach commemorates God’s national deliverance of Bnei Yisrael and the founding of the Jewish Nation. As we consider what God means to our nation as a whole, it is important to also be aware of the personal God, the God that is involved in my life, and your life, and every individual’s life.

A need for God awareness is also a lesson that emerges from Yaakov’s theft of the blessings. The question often asked on this story is: how could Yitzchak possibly have thought to give the blessings to Eisav?! One approach is that Yitzchak had hoped that Eisav and Yaakov would enter into a partnership: Eisav would be involved in the mundane physical world and Yaakov would be exclusively devoted to spiritual pursuits. By mere fact that Yitzchak’s plan does not come to fruition we see that such an arrangement is untenable. Not only because Eisav was not a worthy partner for Yaakov; but also because such an arrangement would shortchange Yaakov and his descendants. It would cause Yaakov’s descendants to live in a world that is bifurcated; one in which activities and situations are neatly divided between kodesh and chol, between the holy and the mundane. Rivkah and Yaakov understood that Jews live in a more

complicated yet holistic world in which there are no clear divisions between the physical and the spiritual.

We just experienced two seders: if you take the approach of a neatly divisible life experience, then how do you describe the Mitzvot of Achila at the Seder, or the 4 cups of wine or even the traditional foods that grace each family's unique seder table? Physical or spiritual? Mundane or holy? Obviously it's a package deal. We are called upon to sanctify our world by bringing an awareness of God's Presence into all aspects of our life.

Yaakov could not tolerate a situation in which elements of God's world and real life existence would not be accessible to him. So he took the blessings that allowed him to live an integrated and holistic existence- even if it required a little subterfuge- even theft.

Those of us with the custom for our children to steal the Afikomen and even those of us that don't have that custom should internalize these lessons of Chotfin Matza. If the dogs during the Exodus were aware of their true Master, then on this holiday of Pesach we must work on our awareness of God in our personal lives- and teach our children to cultivate a personal relationship with Hashem And if Yaakov was determined to find God in all aspects of his life (not just in the synagogue but in school, at the workplace, while on Chol Hamoed trips) then we must strive to do no less.

Let us recall and absorb the lessons that emerge from the custom of stealing the Afikomen – A personal relationship with God and an awareness of his Presence in all our life circumstances. If we do so, then indeed the taste and lessons of the Afikomen will linger with us well after Seder and beyond.