

A Year of Encompassing Torah



**Prepared by
Rabbi Steven J. Rubenstein
Temple B'nai Abraham
Beverly, MA
Rabbioli.Steven@verizon.net**

Special Issue

Passover 5768

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

This is how we shall accrue our mitzvah points:

**Barukh atah Adonai,
Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam,
Asher kidishanu b'mitzvotav
v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei torah...**

**Praised are You Adonai, our God,
The Sovereign of all worlds,
Who has made us holy with your mitzvot,
And commanded us to engage ourselves
with words of torah.**

***To be fully engaged with Torah
Is to wrestle with Torah –
To challenge our tradition while loving it,
To question it while celebrating it.***

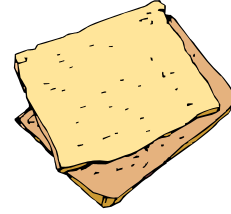
~ ~ ~ ~ ~

**An Added Blessing
For Spiritual Direction**

***"Yihyu l'ratzon imrey fi v'higion libi
lifaneycha Hashem Tzuri v'Go'ali***

May the expressions of my mouth
and **the thoughts of my heart**
find favor before You, G-d,
my Rock and my Redeemer."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~



**Sermon for Passover Day 1 5768
Seeking Out Our Just Desserts
In the Afikoman**

As children, my sisters and I delighted in our search for the *afikoman* that was hidden by our father when he left the dining room to wash his hands. Mom made sure that none of us would leave the room to get an unfair advantage on the others. Some years we needed hints because our dad hid it so well, or we gave up much too early. Often was the case that we would argue over who found it first more vociferously than who would lead the four questions each year and who would end up being the wicked child. Gone are the days when my own children would seek out the precious piece of *matzah* that would allow us to finish our meal and end our *seder* at a reasonable hour. They are getting older, and the price that they demand for its return has increased far beyond what I consider worthy ransom.

Now that I am on the other end of the game we play each year regarding the middle *matzah*, I have often wondered, "Which rabbi of the Talmud was responsible for this *mishigas*?" I would personally like to thank him for keeping me in the poor-house at a time when I should be rejoicing in my freedom from economic ruin!

Through my personal studies of the *Mishna and Tractate Pesachim*, I have learned that "one should not have the *afikoman* after the Passover sacrifice." (10:8) At least, this is what we instruct the smart son in the *Haggadah* when teach him all the laws regarding the holiday. It is obvious from this context that there is something negative going on related to the *afikoman* that has nothing to do with ransoming it for a hefty fee. What I have since learned is that this is the line that has been attributed to the foolish son, according to another Talmud, the *Yerushalmi* or Jerusalem Talmud which is of lesser fame and prominence. It is here that we see how something negative is turned around into a positive.

Here, too, the sages differed in their opinions regarding what exactly is the *afikoman*. One group understood it to be a reference to various kinds of foods that ended the meal. According to the *Tosefta*, a commentary on the Talmud, the *afikoman* consisted of “nuts, dates, and roasted cakes,” which is a far cry from the tasteless *matzah* that we enjoy as the ending treat to our *seder* according to the Babylonian tradition. **Rabbi Yochanan** called the *afikoman* “a variety of sweets.” **Shmuel**, however, explained the *afikoman* in his family tradition was a varied selection of delicacies that included “mushrooms for me and young fowl for Father.” [You gotta like these guys for their culinary interests. How come this did not become the popular opinion of the day?]

Another sage weighed in on the matter. **Rashbam** said that the *afikoman* was not one word, but in fact two words, *afiku minei*, meaning (in Aramaic) “Bring out various delicacies with which to end the meal.” According to the sage, one could not give this order once the *afikoman* was served.... [I like this sage! A man after my own stomach! He knows his priorities.]

There were other sages who thought along an entirely different line of reasoning. Rather than the *afikoman* being something sweet to eat, they understood the *afikoman* to be some sort of social activity that involved entertaining, since it was a Greek and Roman tradition to be treated to music and dance following the meal.

Rav comments in the *Babylonian Talmud* that the prohibition regarding the *afikoman* was “that they (the guests at the *seder*) not uproot themselves from their own group to join another group” following the meal. (**Tractate Pesachim 119b**) We recall that the law related to the *korban pesach* (Passover sacrifice) is that it be eaten in its entirety by the family, and none shall be left over for the next day, according to the Torah. His fear is that when a person was finished with his own meal, he might be tempted “to take his utensils” and go eat from somewhere else.

So, this raises the question whether the prohibition of the *afikoman* was a discussion regarding people being tempted to leave the table after eating or dessert, or is it a discussion regarding what ought to be the last taste in our mouth, such as the Passover offering, before

continuing with *Birkat HaMazon, the Grace After the Meal?*

Rabbi Shimeon, in the name of Rabbi Eineini ben Rabbi Sissi adds his own twist to the mixture. He explains that the *afikoman* was therefore “types of singing” – to keep people together in their respective groups. In typical Greek and Roman fashion, the ending to a symposium or banquet often included wine with the dessert, accompanied by extreme revelry that included lewd behavior at times. It is no wonder that the sages prevented the *afikoman*, especially when there were young children at the celebration table.

Rabbi Judith Abrams, who runs an internet discourse on the Talmud, asks her cyber-students how our *seders* would be different -- if we were to have “music, sweets, or savories” at the end of the meal instead of “just some dry *matzah*”!

However, this is not the way in which we have chosen to end our celebratory meal. Instead we do taste the *matzah*, in place of the Passover sacrifice – and nothing comes after it except for an additional two cups of wine. Outside of the wine, the last thing that we taste is indeed the dryness of the *matzah*. We call this part of the *seder*, “*tzafun*,” which means “hidden” to reflect the hidden nature of this night and all the activities that precede in addition to the hiding of the “*yachatz*” from earlier in the *seder*.

Kerry Olitzky helps us to see the spiritual side to this final act of eating in his comments on the Passover *seder*. He claims that the primary lesson of eating the *matzah* at the end of the meal “reminds us that there is a hidden part of the self that yearns to be found and revealed. Towards the end of the evening, when we have sung praises to God, discussed the details of the Passover story, and filled our stomachs with nourishment as well, is when we are most satisfied. It is a time when we are in a place to accept the fact that we are at the closest point to feeling “whole,” to feeling connected spiritually, a point when real change and growth can occur.

How does the Jewish soul find its hidden self? In the secular world there are a number of trends to speak about that include yoga, jogging, therapy, and meditation, to discover the inner self. The Jewish soul, however, finds itself in the joining of others on this journey from slavery

to freedom that we reenact each year. We are commanded to imagine ourselves as if we, too, were preparing ourselves to leave Mitzrayim, which in Hebrew means “*the narrow place*.” On Passover eve, we ingest the tastes of our slavery as well as savor the textured bread that represents our freedom. The two are in essence the same in content. However, like the manna that the Israelites would learn to eat while in the wilderness, how you approached each meal determined whether you nibbled on honey or choked on your own saliva.

In another analogy, Kerry Olitzky claims that even the pre-scored, machine made *matzah* never breaks the way a person plans to divide it. “Sometimes the *matzah* breaks into more pieces than we anticipated.” In addition, it was not easy for our ancestors to break away from the security that their slavery provided them. More so than accepting the taste of the *afikoman*, the real challenge that we face in life is the ability to restore that which has been broken. When we rejoin the hidden piece of *matzah* at the end of the *seder*, it is done with the purpose of making a declaration that freedom is the capacity to bring together the broken pieces of ourselves, and to see and experience, no matter how brief it may be, the idea that we can restore wholeness to the self, and vision what it might be like. Tasting the *afikoman* with this thought allows us to experience the *afikoman* in a new and different way than we have in the past.

On this Passover, may we all enjoy our just desserts as we embrace the two broken pieces of *matzah* at the end of our *seder*, knowing that despite whatever tears we shed on this night, come morning we shall rejoice – in the security and wholeness of our inner selves, in the embrace of those whom we love, and in the hands of a God who has reached out to us with a strong hand and an outstretched arm to draw us near.