

## **Afikoman: The Missing Piece That Our Life Depends On**

Rabbi Elisha Wolfin



Dear Friends,

We've been discussing the Afikoman in our house for the past two weeks. Since becoming a father I have come to realize that the festive search for the Afikoman does not begin around the Seder table. The entire pre-Passover vacation is spent in toy and book stores, in search of the perfect Afikoman - the big prize for staying up so late and behaving so well, while the adults babble away in Aramaic.

Following a few days of existential shopping dilemmas my son finally nailed IT, purchased IT, brought IT home, all wrapped up, and placed IT in the closet. I checked off the "Afikoman" item on the "to do" list, and breathed a sigh of relief.

But then... Oy! It became eminently clear the following morning that this was not really IT. Luckily, there was an exchange slip. So the existential shopping search resumed.

The first week of vacation has ended, a new exciting IT awaits in the closet. And we are ready to sit around the holiday table, recline to the left, sip from the wine, and ponder the meaning of freedom.

For over one thousand years the Seder experience was a fascinating storytelling gathering around a bonfire, totally child-centered, with the elders of the tribe fulfilling their duty to tell the younger generation all about the Exodus, while the Pascal lamb was roasting. The more stories, the better.

The Temple is no longer. The lamb are no longer roasted on Erev Pessach. The elders no longer share their memories and retell their stories and accounts. Even they don't always understand what is read around the Seder table. The only two parts which have remained child-centered are the Ma Nishtana - sung in sweet, high-pitch voices after weeks of rehearsals - and stealing the Afikoman.

Children who do not have ADHD - and there are fewer and fewer of these - garner compliments from the adults for their amazing ability to sit at the table. The rest - like my son - spend the evening having fun just running around, while constantly gazing across the table, at the broken Matza, that lies there, totally unaware of its value, and scheming the steps ahead. At some point it will be stolen, hidden, and will resurface again only after rigorous, albeit fun, negotiations. The kids will then doze off to sleep, while the adults continue with the Seder (which they could not do without the Afikoman safely returned).

Ah, the Afikoman tradition... what a brilliant invention. What a shame it is reserved for kids only.

But is it? Is there an expiration date on the right to play hide and seek with broken Matzah?

In fact, what exactly is this odd custom?

The Mishna and Gemara are full of discussions about its meaning - both the custom and its strange name. The Halacha states that "One may not add/eat an Afikoman after the Pascal offering" (Pesachim 10:8). Some say that "Afikoman" means dessert in Greek, therefore it is forbidden to eat dessert after eating from the Pascal offering. Others said "Afi" means after, and "Koman" means parade, suggesting that it is forbidden to go out parading in groups to visit other seders at the end of the evening and eat from the Pascal offering of another family. There are other interpretations as well, and many more have been added over the years.

There are even those who claim that Shel Silverstein's book "*The Missing Piece*" is really about the Afikoman!

I would like to suggest, that indeed, the Afikoman is the ultimate *missing piece*. At the start of the evening the head of the Seder breaks the middle Matza in two, reminding us that there is brokenness in the world. The Afikoman is one of the two broken pieces, becoming *the Missing Piece of the Broken Matza*.

Brokenness is one thing - we Jews are all too familiar with that notion, as so much seems broken in our lives and in the world around us - why add missing-ness to it? What *is* missing in our lives?

Well, it's hard to tell. More often than not we don't quite know what is missing. If we did - that is, REALLY did - we would go ahead and find it or create it, and then it would no longer be missing. We have an inkling as to what may be missing in our lives, more like a vague ache... We might even attribute it to all kinds of things, such as never having enough money, companionship, fun, vitamins... you name it.

But over time we discover that the missing piece wasn't the money, or the companionship, and not even the vitamins. We are left with an uncomfortable realization that the missing piece is as thin as matzah and as fragile. Sometimes also as tasteless.

So invisible is the missing piece, that the entire Afikoman section in the Hagaddah is called "Tzafun", which means "hidden", or "concealed". The Seder leader is actually asking the children to reveal to him what is hidden! Maybe the children know something he doesn't. In great haste, a moment before they too forget, he begs them to kindly reveal to us, the adults, some of the secrets of existence, so that all may be able to move on - with the Seder and with our lives.

These past few weeks we have been studying the writings of Rav Kook at Veahavta. Throughout his writings, Rav Kook points in the direction of the missing piece, that which is concealed, without which not only our Seder is incomplete, but also our lives. That "missing piece", so to speak, is God, of course, but we - religious and secular alike - don't really know how to pursue or seek it. In our search, Rav Kook tells us, we make all the mistakes in the world. We ask the wrong questions. The result is existential despair.

We *need* to NOT know what the missing piece is, for if we knew, it would no longer be IT. If you can name it, then it is not the missing piece!

No wonder it took my son so much time to search for the Afikoman prize in the stores. He too, like all humans, mistakenly thought that what he really wanted was X. At first he was delighted with it, but when X was in his possession, he realized that it doesn't really deliver - it did not bring him the joy he was really seeking. So his mind rushed for Y. I know what will happen tomorrow morning... Shortly after he unwraps Y he will realize that it too is not IT, and he will seek Z, or maybe even consider X again.

In fact, almost all of our shopping sprees are a replay of this journey.

So, if IT is not X, nor Y, and not even Z, then what is the Afikoman that we are after? What is the missing piece?

Rav Kook's understanding of this missing piece, so to speak, is that it is the essence of life, the life within life, the source of all life. He also says that defining it is impossible, so it will have to remain elusive.

Adults abandoned the Afikoman game and left it for the kids, not because they stopped longing for the missing piece. The longing never ceases. They just got jaded. With so much X, Y, and Z stuffed in our closets, we became disillusioned about the possibility of ever finding the missing piece. The children, thank God, haven't, and that's why we love watching them play hide and seek with the Afikoman. Deep inside we know that they are playing hide and seek with God, with life, with the essence of it all.

May you negotiate your Afikoman at the Seder as if your life depends on it!

Because it does!

And have a very happy Pesach,

Elisha

P.S. If you want to get a glimpse of what that essence of life is that Rav Kook writes about, consider joining our Monday morning class in English, which will resume after Pessach.