

Tales of the Afikoman
(Yizkor, eighth day of Pesach 2005/5765)
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Habits are learned so easily. Last Saturday night, my children taught their young cousins how to search for the afikoman. They were rewarded for their efforts with a collection of age-appropriate trinkets: batting gloves, doll clothes, accessories, and sticker books. By Sunday night one glove and 62 stickers were missing, and the kids were all searching again. Even better stuff the second night. Monday evening we were setting the table for dinner and my nieces were eager to put on their pretty dresses and search for the afikoman again. In just two nights it has become indelibly imprinted: Dinner at Auntie Leslie's house means afikoman, and afikoman means really cool presents.

For others, afikoman means dessert, although it is a most curious dessert. We conclude our festive Seder meal with a bite of what may well be the most tasteless food substance in history.

Today, at this hour, we can consider the afikoman a metaphor for ourselves. (I am not calling anyone here flat and tasteless); I would suggest that individually and communally our lives unfold along the same lines as this middle matza, singled out to teach the lesson of Pesach.

When we first see the afikoman it is lifted up and honored. This will be the pivotal ingredient to our Seder. But very early in the evening, in a ceremony called yahatz, this middle matza is taken away from the others and broken in half. No bracha sanctifies this ritual, no explanation is offered. A piece of the matza is hidden away. It disappears for most of the meal, but we cannot conclude our Seder without it.

In a later ceremony called tzafun, that which has been hidden away is revealed. The afikoman which earlier represented the Israelite people, broken and longing for God to redeem us from bondage, now symbolizes our Ultimate Redemption still to come; when all that is broken and depleted will be restored to wholeness.



We are so delighted at the return of the afikoman that we reward those who helped reveal it, and we conclude our Seder with the taste of liberation in our mouths.

Of course, in between the rituals of yahatz and tzafun is the greater part of the Seder. The eating and drinking, the learning, the singing, the laughing. After the matza is broken, and before it is restored we tell the story of our past redemption and we ready ourselves should tonight be the beginning of the Ultimate Redemption. In between the breaking and the healing is Life.

We like to think of ourselves as whole and strong, and pivotal to the universe. But by now most of us know better. We have learned that we are fragile. We break easily. We lose someone we love and we feel as though a piece of our very selves has been torn away.

The reality is that for many of us at Seder time is a sort of scrambling to put together what feels like a family. Our parents or siblings and cousins are spread across the globe, or no longer living, so we invite friends; we look for people who don't have a place to spend the Seder and we construct pseudo-families: We eat together and sing together, and if we do it right, by the end of the Seder we feel we really are family.

We relive and retell the story of our missing piece: How we first met and fell in love. Or stories of our parents' tender devotions. The irreplaceable intimacies of a sibling or treasured friend. Even the heartache of a child who filled our life but is with us no more.

And we look forward to the future when we will be made whole again. When phantom pains no longer torment us, when we find our missing piece. For some of us the sense of completion will be heralded by a personal Messiah, the anointed leader of all Israel who will usher in an era of peace and redemption from all sorrow. Others of us will feel whole again in less dramatic measure. Bit by bit we will gather the crumbs of what we have lost. Bit by bit we will regain our strength, our connection to others, our sense of where we belong in the world.

And for those of us who will be redeemed from our brokenness bit by bit, crumb by crumb, the laws of the afikoman are especially instructive. For we learn that all

of us, those in the center of things, no matter how important, how strong, all of us have been broken and are searching for our lost piece.

And we learn the virtue of patience. We may feel broken and incomplete for a long time. But it will not last forever. Whether we are physically reunited with those we have lost, or fill in the emptiness in other ways, we may again have lives that are full and complete. Surely redemption will come, even if bit by bit; if only we can be patient with ourselves.

Finally we learn from the rituals of the afikoman that in between the breaking of our hearts and the redemption that makes us whole again, is the rest of life; the eating and the singing and the learning and the new connections we forge. When we retell our story, when we hear someone else's story, when we reach out and share a meal, and share our lives, we all take one step to reclaiming what has been hidden from us.