

AFIKOMAN: CONCEALMENT AND DISCOVERY

by Rabbi Beryl Gershenfeld

In most families, the joy of Passover is remembered as a simple drama played out by the children: the stealing of the afikoman. On Pesach even the drowsiest child's attention is riveted to the Seder table and to the afikoman's every movement. From the child's perspective, the afikoman, (his purloining of it and the presents he will receive upon its return) is among the essential happenings and joys of Pesach night.

These are nostalgic memories. However, how do we, as adults, view the afikoman? Is it but a child's amusement? Or does it touch on the main theme of the Passover experience?

The beauty of the Torah lies in its multileveled meanings. From a deeper perspective, therefore, the Seder begins with the creation of the afikoman. We take a matza-the bread symbolizing our spiritual salvation--and break it. Part of it remains before us, and part of it is hidden and becomes the afikoman. The revealed matza, because it is broken in half, represents human incompleteness--we have not yet realized our potential. The hidden part, the afikoman, symbolizes our future growth--it must be sought and found.

The Seder is designed to provoke questions. Jewish law states that even if someone is alone on Seder night, one must still ask the Four Questions: to simply read the Haggadah is not enough.

Why do we ask questions? Because we need answers. Why do we need answers? Because we recognize we are incomplete. Thus the Seder starts the process of searching for completion in our lives.

On Passover the Jewish people became a nation. We must learn to understand our nationhood. On Passover G-d revealed His special relationship with the Jews. On Seder night we try to rediscover and become part of that relationship. Incompleteness to completion. The child asks "Ma Nish Tanah," the four Questions, but everyone must ask in his own way, and search in his own manner. We read of "The Four Sons." Their questions represent four different paths of growth and development. We then study biblical verses that detail the exodus from Egypt. Then, rationally and existentially, through questions and answers, through food (matza and marror [bitter herbs]) and song (Hallel-praises to G-d), we seek to reunite ourselves to the ideas and goal the Torah communicated to us about ourselves, our nation, and our G-d.

Finally, at the end of the Seder, we acknowledge and affirm that the quest was successful. The afikoman is now returned to the table. Having found what was hidden we can enjoy the fruits of our

labors. The joy of discovering self and meaning makes pale the old joys of silver dollars from our parents and grandparents. This is the deeper happiness of Passover.

The Haggadah instructs the Wise Son: "Do not taste anything after eating the afikoman." With this simple advice the Sages touch upon a major lesson of the Seder. This last taste--"the dessert"--signifies the joy of having discovered the hidden. If this pleasure remains fixed in our minds, we will continue to question and grow.

If we learn to appreciate Pesach on this level, then surely next year--months before the Seder--we will join the whispered anticipation and excitement of the children as they prepare to steal, reveal and enjoy the afikoman.

Presented in cooperation with Heritage House, Jerusalem. Visit
www.innernet.org.il.