

THE *AFIKOMAN*

An Exercise in Mindfulness

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The breaking and hiding of the *afikoman* is one of the Seder's best-known rituals.¹ The actual eating of the *afikoman*, by contrast, coming at the end of a meal following our recitation of and engagement with the story, too often gets short shrift. As the clock ticks later and later, we rush through this under-ritualized ritual, which requires no blessing to be recited (nor any fixed verbal formula for that matter).

Yet the Haggadah makes clear that this ritual is of absolute importance. Citing a *midrash* about four children, it reports that our response to the wise child should be to "introduce to them the laws of the paschal offering: 'One does not engage in *afikoman* after the paschal offering (*ein maftirin ahar ha-pesah afikoman*).'"² When the *midrash* wants to offer a paradigmatic example of the laws of the Pesah ritual, it is the *afikoman* to which it directs our attention.

Despite its significance, the *afikoman's* meaning is not self-evident. In its earliest appearances, it does not refer to the *matzah* eaten after the meal. To the contrary, the instruction to the wise child is: **do not** have an *afikoman* after eating the

paschal offering. So whatever it is, it's something we're supposed to refrain from doing at the end of our meal. The point, it would seem, is to ensure that eating the paschal offering, specifically, is how we end our meal.

With the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, there is no more paschal offering to eat at the conclusion of our Pesah meal. Perhaps in response to this gap, the Tosefta provides us with a hint of a different ritualized conclusion to the meal:

תוספתא פסחים (ליברמן) ב:ב
אין יוצאין בחליט ולא במעיסה
ולא בספגנין ולא בדבשנין ולא
באסקריטין אבל ממלא כריסו
מהן ובלבד שיאכל כזית מצה
באחרונה.

Tosefta Pesahim (Lieberman) 2:20
One does not fulfill the obligation [of eating matzah at the Seder] with dumplings, nor with flour paste, nor with spongy pastries, nor with honey pastries, nor with pastry-balls. But one may fill up their belly with these things, provided that they

*eat an olive's-worth of matzah at the end.*³

The Tosefta here seems to imply that one should conclude their Seder meal with *matzah*.⁴ Perhaps this is the background to the Babylonian Shmuel's adaptation of the mishnaic rule (Talmud Bavli Pesahim 119b): "Rav Yehudah said in the name of Shmuel: 'One does not engage in *afikoman* after the *matzah*.'"⁵ In a world without animal sacrifice, there is no lamb, but there can still be *matzah*; Shmuel therefore replaces the former with the latter.

Eating *matzah*—that is, unleavened bread—at the end of our meal is surprising. On every other holiday and Shabbat, we eat bread at the **beginning** of the meal; in Rabbinic culture (as in many others), formal meals commence with the breaking of bread. At our Seder, too, the meal begins with washing, *ha-motzi*, and eating the *matzah*.⁶ We even make a second blessing before eating the *matzah*, this one a blessing over the obligation to eat *matzah* specifically on that night ("Who has... commanded us regarding the eating of *matzah*"). It seems that, when we eat

1 The actual meaning of *afikoman* is debated in early Rabbinic texts; see Tosefta Pesahim (Lieberman) e10:11; Bavli Pesahim 119b. Saul Lieberman famously argued, based on comparison with Greek, that the word refers to potentially coerced, drunken revelry following a meal (*Ha-Yerushalmi Ki-Fshuto*, 1.521); see Yerushalmi Pesahim 10:4 (37d).

2 See Mekhilta Massekhta de-Pisha 18. See also Tosefta Pesahim 10:11. Curiously, the Yerushalmi has this as the answer to the simple child; the wise child there is taught what is here the response to the simple child. My colleague Jeremy Tabick wrote about this irregularity in a past Hadar reader, "Hierarchies of Knowledge in the Seder," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/pesach-5779>.

3 Though the specifics of many of the foods referenced here are unclear, the general idea is clear: Although kosher-for-Pesah wheat-based foods that are less simple than *matzah* do not fulfill one's obligation to eat *matzah* at the Seder, one may still eat them at the Seder.

4 This, at least, is how the Bavli understands this text; see Pesahim 119b-120a.

5 Later in the same passage (120a), an opposite version of Shmuel appears, explicitly permitting *afikoman* after the *matzah* (and thereby differentiating it from the *pesah*, rather than viewing it as a replacement for it). But both versions lead to discussions that elicit similar ideas, and medieval commentators and codes rule in accordance with the first, prohibiting version of Shmuel.

6 In one sense, Pesah is unusual, insofar as we have an appetizer course (Karpas) before washing, blessing, and eating bread (i.e. *matzah*). Still, the formal part of the meal begins with (unleavened) bread, as on any other holiday or Shabbat.

the matzah at the start of our meal, we fulfill the *mitzvah*.⁷ So why do we now have to eat *matzah* again at the end?

Medieval commentators debate the purpose of this concluding *matzah*-eating, which we now call the *afikoman*.⁸ In his comments to Shmuel's statement (Pesahim 119b), Rashi⁹ contends that, all appearances to the contrary aside, this latter moment is actually when we fulfill the *mitzvah* of eating *matzah*:

"אין מפטירין אחר המצה אפיקומן"
 שצריך לאכול מצה בגמר סעודתו
 זכר למצה הנאכלת עם הפסח
 בכריכה וזו היא מצה הבצועה שאנו
 אוכלין באחרונה לשם חובה ועל
 כרחינו אנו מברכין על אכילת מצה
 בראשונה אע"פ שאינה לשם חובה...
 הלכך מברך אתרווייהו ברישא והדר
 אכיל מצה באחרונה ואחר אותה
 מצה אין נפטירין ממנה באכילת דבר
 אחר שלא לשבח טעמה...

"One does not engage in *afikoman* after *matzah*" because one needs to eat *matzah* at the end of one's meal, a remembrance of the *matzah* that was eaten with the paschal offering in a wrap. And this is the broken *matzah* that we eat at the end, as an obligation. It is by necessity that we recite the blessing "on the eating of *matzah*" at the beginning, even though [that eating] is not an obligation...

Therefore, one blesses over both [eatings of *matzah*] at the beginning, and then one goes back to eat *matzah* at the end. And after that *matzah*, one does not eat something else, so that its taste is not forgotten...

Rashi states that the obligation to eat *matzah* at the end of the meal derives from its status as a commemoration of the eating of the paschal lamb, which

would be eaten with *matzah*.¹⁰ Since, according to Rabbinic understanding, the sacrificial meat and its accompanying *matzah* were to be eaten at the end of the meal ("al ha-sova - in a state of satiation", in Hazal's formulation),¹¹ we likewise fulfill our obligation to eat *matzah* by doing so at the end of our meal, despite the absence of the offering itself. True, we recite the blessing over eating *matzah* when we first eat the unleavened bread at the start of the meal, but that's simply because it would be inconceivable to have a meal without bread, and impossible to eat that bread without making the relevant blessing. The real *mitzvah* of eating *matzah*, however, will not take place until we are done eating our soup and fruit slices, when we consume an olive's worth of broken *matzah* at the end of the meal.

The Rosh¹² takes issue with Rashi's position:

פסקי הרא"ש י:לד

ולפי זה היה נראה שצריך לאכול עמה מרור וחרוסת כיון שהיא זכר מצה הנאכלת עם הפסח בכריכה...
 אמנם תמהני למה עושין כריכה בתחילה יספיק בכריכה אחרונה זכר למקדש הלכך נראה לי דאותה מצה אינה לשם חובה אלא אוכלין אותה זכר לפסח שהיה נאכל על השוכב באחרונה ולפי שהוא זכר לפסח יש ליתן לה דין הפסח שלא לאכול אחריה...

Piskei ha-Rosh 10:34

And according to [Rashi's view], it would seem that one must eat [the *afikoman*] with maror and haroset, since it is a remembrance of the *matzah* that was eaten with the paschal offering...
 However, I am shocked: Why do we break bread at the beginning? It should be sufficient to break bread at the end in commemoration of the Temple! Therefore,

it seems to me that this [concluding] *matzah* is not an obligation, but rather that we eat it as a remembrance of the paschal offering, which was eaten only when sated, at the end. And since it is a remembrance of the paschal offering, we give it the same rule as the paschal offering, not to eat afterwards...

The Rosh rejects Rashi's claim that eating the *afikoman* is a formal obligation that fulfills the *mitzvah* of eating *matzah*. Rather, he says, it is simply a commemoration of what was done in Temple times. Since it commemorates that practice, it adopts the same rules—including the requirement that it be the last thing we eat at the Seder. This does not, however, make it a *mitzvah* in its own right. It is only an imitation, a pale shadow of a *mitzvah* we are obligated in, but which, due to the destruction of the Temple, we are sadly unable to fulfill.

Curiously, though Rashi and the Rosh are polar opposites in their rulings—Rashi saying the *afikoman* is an obligation, fulfilling the *mitzvah* to eat *matzah*, and the Rosh completely rejecting such a view—they use nearly identical language to explain their respective positions. Both Rashi and the Rosh see the *afikoman* as a "zeikher - remembrance."

In some sense, then, the debate of Rashi and the Rosh is a disagreement about what it means to recall an idealized past.¹³ For the Rosh, remembering is an act of noticing absence. It is, in his words, a *zeikher la-pesah*, a remembrance of the paschal offering, which we no longer have. That offering was eaten with *matzah*, which thankfully remains accessible to us. When we eat the concluding *matzah* nowadays, we are trying to remember what we no longer have: the *pesah*. We eat the

7 Strengthening this impression further is the language of the Rambam in his laws of Pesah: "On the night of the 15th [of Nisan] alone there is an obligation [to eat *matzah*]; and once one has eaten an olive's-worth, they have fulfilled their obligation" (ליל חמשה עשר בלבד חובה ומשאכל כזית) (Laws of Leavened and Unleavened Bread, 6:1). Therefore, once we've eaten *matzah* at the start of our meal, we should be done with required eatings of *matzah*!

8 The phenomenon of referring to this *matzah* as the *afikoman* is a relatively late development (recall that in the classical sources, the *afikoman* was the post-*matzah* practice that Shmuel forbade!), beginning in Ashkenazi lands in the 12th-14th centuries, and even later in Sefardi writings. See Joshua Kulp, *The Schechter Haggadah* (2009), p. 266.

9 R. Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105), France.

10 See Exodus 12:8 on the requirement for the paschal offering to be eaten with *matzah* (and *maror*).

11 See two of the earliest statements of this requirement in Tosefta Pesahim 5:3 and Mekhilta Massekhta de-Pisha 6.

12 R. Asher ben Yehiel (1250-1327), Germany and Spain.

13 I am grateful to my friend and *havruta* R. Joel Goldstein for this framing of the debate between Rashi and the Rosh.

matzah, and we must attend closely to its taste, not in its own right, but for what it lacks. Remembering is an act of noticing loss.

Rashi, by contrast, describes the *afikoman* as a *zeikher la-matzah*, a commemoration of the *matzah* eaten with the *pesah*. We are fundamentally remembering, in other words, the part of the ritual that remains alive for us. Presumably, we notice the loss as well, but our attention is focused not on what we lack, but on what we are doing in the here-and-now. It is, therefore, not “merely” a remembrance; it is a vital and active act of remembering, which can therefore be a *mitzvah* in its own right.

Even as Rashi and the Rosh offer us opposite approaches to what it means to recall a now long-lost tradition, both require an intense mindfulness in our eating. In Rashi’s words, we eat this last *matzah* so as “not to forget its taste.” Making the flavor of *matzah*, a simple dish of flour and water, linger in our mouths into the night requires a kind of attention we too rarely give to our food. And for the Rosh, who asks us to taste what is **not** there, this kind of attentiveness is all the more necessary.

The *afikoman*, then, is meant to be the opposite of what it too often becomes. Rather than a hasty moment of shoving some *matzah* in our mouth, rushing through the end of a long Seder after the “real” work of telling the story of liberation, the *afikoman* asks us to slow down, to pay such close attention that we can taste an entire story from our history in a subtle, understated olive’s-worth of *matzah*. It is a statement that religious life requires not only spiritual work, but attention to our senses, to the world around us. ♦