The Afikomen Box: What We Choose to Keep

There are certain objects in our lives that hold more than what they are.

A photograph.

A piece of jewelry.

A book with someone’s handwriting in the margins.

And sometimes…

a small, worn wooden box.

In my family, it was a Carlos Vega cigar box.

Not particularly valuable.

Not antique.

Not something anyone would notice twice if they saw it sitting on a shelf.

But to me, it was everything.

I knew exactly where it was every year at the Seder.

Before I noticed who was sitting where, before I looked for my place card or checked what my grandmother had cooked, I would scan the room until I saw it sitting behind my grandfather's seat.

Once I saw the box, I could relax.

The Seder could begin.

The world was as it should be.

The box itself had a story.

My grandfather—Papa David—kept it under the counter of his store in San Francisco. Whenever someone paid with

something unusual—a two-dollar bill, a buffalo nickel, a silver dollar—he wouldn’t just toss it into the register.

He would pause.

Turn it over in his hand.

Notice it.

And then place it carefully into the box.

Someone once asked him why.

Why not just treat it like any other money?

And he said, “You never know when something special will be needed.”

All year long, the box sat there, quietly filling.

Not with money.

With memory.

And then came Passover.

The Seder would unfold the way it always does. The questions. The story. The rituals that are at once repetitive and completely new every year.

And then, at just the right moment, my grandfather would break the middle matzah, wrap the afikomen, and hide it.

And when he wasn’t looking…

I would steal it.

Because in our family, that was the game.

You find it.

You hide it.

You bargain.

And when the Seder was nearing its end, my grandfather would reach for the afikomen… and of course it wouldn't be there.

He would search.

He would accuse.

He would interrogate everyone at the table.

And finally, he would get to me.

And I would admit that I had it.

Because on Passover, you're allowed to steal.

But you're not allowed to lie.

And then came the negotiation.

Back and forth we would go. He would offer something small. I would demand something outrageous.

Until finally, he would reach behind him, take down the cigar box, open the latch, and say:

“Danny… you drive a hard bargain. But I think I have something here you’ll like.”

And inside…

Coins.

Bills.

Each one different.

Each one chosen.

And as he placed one into my hand, he would say:

“This is not just money. This is memory. Don’t spend it. Take care of it.”

When you are a child, you hear that very differently.

You are thinking about what you could buy.

Candy.

Baseball cards.

And my grandmother—like all good grandmothers—would lean in and say, “Let them spend it.”

And then later, when no one was looking, she would slip us a quarter.

“For candy.”

So we had something to spend.

And something to keep.

It has taken me a long time to understand that distinction.

Something to spend.

And something to keep.

Because that is not just about coins.

That is about life.

We live in a world that trains us to spend everything.

Our time.

Our attention.

Our relationships.

Everything becomes transactional.

What do I get out of this?

What is this worth?

What can I turn this into?

But Judaism insists on a different question.

What is worth keeping?

What cannot be spent?

That’s what the afikomen really is.

We treat it like a game for children.

Hide and seek.

Negotiation.

A prize at the end of the meal.

But the afikomen is the last taste of the Seder.

It is what lingers.

It is what we carry with us when the night is over.

And maybe the question is not just who finds it.

But what we do with it.

Because every family has an afikomen box.

Not always a literal one.

But something that holds the stories, the values, the memories that we refuse to let be spent away.

The way your parents spoke to each other.

The songs your grandparents sang.

The way your table felt on a Friday night.

The things that shaped you, even if no one ever named them out loud.

And here’s the truth.

Those things do not survive on their own.

They are not preserved automatically.

They are kept because someone decides to keep them.

My grandfather could have spent every one of those coins.

He could have treated them like everything else that passed through his hands.

But he didn’t.

He noticed them.

He set them aside.

He gave them meaning.

And then—most importantly—he gave them to us.

After he died, the box didn’t disappear.

My father took it. Put it under the cash register in his clothing store and the practice continued.

Susan B Anthony Dollars, Kennedy Half Dollars, even a few Canadian Loonies that somehow managed to make it into the mix.

And then, at our Seder, he opened it.

And he gave the next generation something to keep.

Not because the coins mattered.

But because the story did.

We often ask why Passover remains the most widely observed Jewish ritual.

More than Yom Kippur.

More than Rosh Hashanah.

Why this?

And I think the answer is simple.

Because at Passover, we don’t just remember.

We participate.

We argue.

We laugh.

We hide things.

We find them again.

We take something ancient…

and we make it ours.

The Seder works because we put something into it.

Because each of us becomes part of the story.

Because we don’t just inherit Judaism.

We handle it.

We negotiate with it.

We decide what it is worth.

And that is the question I want to leave you with tonight.

What is in your afikomen box?

What have you chosen to keep?

Not what you inherited by accident.

Not what you were told mattered.

But what you have decided…

this is worth saving.

Because one day, whether we are ready or not, someone will sit at our table.

And they will be watching us.

Not just what we say.

But what we value.

What we hold onto.

What we pass forward.

And in that moment, whether we realize it or not, we will reach behind us.

We will open whatever box we have filled over the course of our lives.

And we will place something into their hands.

The question is not whether we will pass something on.

We will.

The question is what it will be.

Something spent.

Or something saved.

And maybe that is what my grandfather was trying to teach me all along.

As he placed that coin into my hand and said:

“This is not just money. This is memory.”

Take care of it.