

Yachatz

Contributed by [Pardes](#)

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At this stage in the seder, the middle of the three matzot is broken and the larger half designated for the afikoman at the end of the meal. In one of many attempts at the seder to keep children attentive and interested, young participants are encouraged to stealthily steal the afikoman. The source for this custom, which seems to be counter-educational, is a passage in the Talmud which says that we grab (hotfim) the matza to make sure that the children do not fall asleep (B. Pesachim 109a).

In 1946, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (Ramash, 1902-1994) prepared a haggadah that meticulously recorded Lubavitch Passover practice. In this work, he noted that the custom in the Rebbe's home – referring to his father-in-law, Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn (Rayatz, 1880 -1950), who was the leader of the Lubavitch Hasidim at the time – was not to steal the afikoman.

By way of explanation, Ramash added a succinct reference to a talmudic passage: Even someone who steals from a thief, tastes the flavor of larceny (Berakhot 5b). Ramash, it appears, was speaking to the educational costs of encouraging theft, even if the practice was confined to the seder night.

It is unclear how far back this afikoman custom goes, and we should note that it is not confined to Lubavitch: other hasidic groups also avoid this ritual. It appears, however, that it was not always accepted Lubavitch practice to avoid stealing the afikoman. In his writings, Ramash recorded that in 1935, while in Warsaw, Rayatz related the following episode. Rayatz's grandfather, the fourth Lubavitcher rebbe, Rabbi Shmuel Schneersohn (Maharash, 1834-1882), wanted his children to steal the afikoman. The children, however, did not dare. One seder night, his oldest daughter, Devora Leah, plucked up the courage and grabbed the afikoman – and her father, Maharash, gave her a pearl necklace as a reward.

What began as a practice in the Rebbe's home – apparently born from respect and awe – has become standard Lubavitch custom. Ramash justified the Lubavitch practice on pedagogical grounds. Most homes, however, encourage the stealing of the afikoman – also on educational grounds: a creative attempt to hold the attention of our children as we commemorate the history of our People.