

Nature in the Parasha

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Parashat Shelach Lecha

The Secret of *Challah* & the Feminine *Tikun* (Rectification)

The Spiritual Revival of Women's Mitzvah of Challah

This week's Torah portion includes the *mitzvah* of separating *challah*. This same *parasha* opens with a recount of the negative speech of the spies who were afraid to conquer the Land of Israel. This caused the Jewish people to wander for forty years in the desert rather than proceed directly into the Land of Israel. As the primary rectification for the nation of Israel's abandonment of their Land, Hashem grants us the *mitzvah* of taking *challah*. It is so beautiful that in the Torah whenever we miss the mark, Hashem gives us an opportunity to amend through additional *mitzvot*.

Therefore, this week's *parasha* offers three new *mitzvot* to rectify the spies' lack of faith. *Parashat Shelach lecha* concludes with the *mitzvah* of wine libation, *challah* offering and *tzitzit* all in the Book of *Bamidbar*, chapter 15. The wine libation is an atonement for the nation as a whole since Israel is compared to the grapevine (*Hoshea* 9:10). Whereas the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit* is the primary rectification for the men's role in abandoning the Land of Israel, *challah* is one of the three *mitzvot* dedicated for women to rectify not only the sin of the spies but even eating from the Tree of Knowledge by the very first woman in the Garden of Eden. Since we live in the times of redemption, we are already in the process of rectifying the sins of the Garden. Therefore, it is not surprising that the *mitzvah* of baking and separating *challah* has received a spiritual revival in our time. Women, the world over and especially in *Eretz Yisrael*, bake their own *challah* for Shabbat. Many even organize groups of 40 women to bake *challah* as a *segula* (spiritual empowerment) for a friend to receive healing, find her soul-mate, or conceive. More and more women participate in this important *mitzvah*, which help speed up our redemption process.

Personally, I am in my 35th year of baking my own Shabbat *challah*. I have treasured this holy *mitzvah* since the beginning of our marriage. I once heard Rabbi Lazer Brody say, at one of his lectures at Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin, that a woman who bakes her own *challah* in honor of Shabbat is empowered to remain married. This statement was naturally refuted by one of the participants: a divorced woman who had always been meticulous about baking her own *challah*. Rabbi Lazer didn't intend that we take his statement literally to that degree. Reality has many components. However, baking our own *challah* is an important connection component. It connects us to ourselves, to our husbands and to the Land of Israel. One of the meanings of the word *challah* from the word *chila* (*mechale*) is to soften, sooth and sweeten. We can sweeten the judgment through the awareness that everything emanates from Hashem. The purpose of the *mitzvah* of *challah* is to recognize Hashem, even when preoccupied with material abundance, by separating the first of our *challah* as an offering. *Challah* is the only *mitzvah* among those, which are dependent on the Land that we keep even in exile, outside of the Land. Perhaps the *mitzvah* of

challah comes to sweeten the darkness and judgment of exile, and pave the way for redemption. This fits in with the meaning of the word that Rabbi Nachman attributes to *challah*, namely that of hope and awaiting for salvation (*Rabbi Natan of Breslau, Likutei Halachot, Hilchot Pidyon Bechor, Halacha 5*). I hope to encourage and strengthen all of us to continue to bake and separate *challah* by sharing some spiritual insights of why this mitzvah is so important for women.

Challah – A Bridge between Holy and Mundane

ספר במדבר פרק טו

(ז' וַיְדַבֵּר הָשֵׁם אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: יח) דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם בְּאֶחָד אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אָנִי מְבִיא אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה: יט) וְהָיָה בְּאֲכֹלְכֶם מִלֶּחֶם הָאָרֶץ תְּרִימוּ תְרוּמָה לַהֲשֵׁם: כ) רֵאשִׁית עֲרֹסֹתֵיכֶם חֲלֵה תְרִימוּ תְרוּמָה כְּתְרוּמַת גֶּרֶן כֵּן תְרִימוּ אֹתָהּ: כא) מִרֵאשִׁית עֲרֹסֹתֵיכֶם תִּתְּנוּ לַהֲשֵׁם תְרוּמָה לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם:

“Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: “As you come into the land into which I am bringing you there. When you eat of the bread of the land, you shall offer up a gift (*terumah*) to Hashem. [From] the first of your kneading bowl, you shall offer up a *challah* as a gift (*terumah*); like the gift of the threshing-floor, so you shall offer it up. From the first of your kneading bowl, you shall give to Hashem an offering, throughout your generations” (*Bamidbar 15:17-21*).

The word *challah* originally referred exclusively to the sanctified *challah* offering, which we set aside for the Kohen. This *challah* offering makes us worthy to receive a *bracha* in our home, as it states, “...You shall also give to the Kohen the first of your dough, that he may cause a blessing to rest on your home” (*Yechezkiel 44:30*). The mitzvah of *challah* is performed on all dough (of a minimal quantity), whether it is intended for baking for Shabbat or for a weekday. Today, however, the term *challah* has become synonymous with the bread baked specifically for Shabbat. Perhaps this is because Jewish women traditionally baked enough bread for Shabbat to be required to set aside *challah*. In the times of the Second Temple, even young unmarried daughters regarded this mitzvah as so important that they would spend their own money for baking enough bread to take *challah* every *Shabbath* eve (*Shulchan Aruch, Yore Deah 328*).

Today, many women have adopted this *minhag* (custom). It is also possible that *challah* has evolved to refer to the bread permissible for all to eat (not just for the Kohen) because the name *challah* shares the root with the word *chulin* (mundane, ordinary, without sanctity). It is as if the word *challah* is a bridge between the profane (*chol*) and the holy. We can now understand why the term *challah* today specifically refers to the Shabbat bread, as its original meaning referring to the sanctity of the holy *challah* offering is retained by the fact that it now refers to the holy Shabbat bread. On Shabbat, we rise to a level similar to the Kohen, our table becomes a *mizbeach* (altar) and our food a *korban* (sacrifice). Through keeping the mitzvah of *challah* and partaking in the Shabbat *challah*, regularly, people lacking the special holiness of the Kohen, may receive a certain level of holiness too. In addition, *challah* as the staff of life symbolizes food in general and teaches that everything is in its essence holy – *kodesh*, and always will be. G-d gives us permission to use His world for a mundane, *chol* purpose, under one condition: that we preserve its holy essence.

From Cradle to Kneading Trough – Dedicating the First to Hashem

Challah is also related to the word הַתְּחִלָּה/*hatchala* – beginning. The mitzvah of *challah* is hinted in the beginning of creation. The very first word of the Torah, בְּרֵאשִׁית/*Bereishit* – “At the beginning,” alludes to the mitzvah of separating *challah*, which also is called רֵאשִׁית/*reishit* – “beginning” in our Torah verse. From here we learn that G-d created the world for the sake of the *challah* (*Bereishit Rabbah* 1:4). Maharal points out that Hashem created the world for the sake of *chesed* (*Tehillim* 89:3). The mitzvah of separating *challah* is considered a great *chesed* for it is done equally to the poor and the rich. *Chesed* is, moreover, one of the three pillars upon which the world rests. Therefore, Hashem created the world for the sake of the mitzvah of *challah* (*Maharal, Derech Chaim, Chapter 1, Mishnah* 18). Setting aside *challah* indicates dedication to the Divine. This dedication takes place right at the start, as we take *challah* even before braiding it. The law of separating *challah* teaches us to dedicate the very beginning of everything to Hashem by expressing our recognition of G-d. The Hebrew term for kneading bowl is עֲרִיסָה/*arissa*, which also means a child’s cradle. This alludes to the beginning of human life. From the very start of any pivotal moment of our lives, we must dedicate the first and best to Hashem.

Connection with the Land

The mitzvah of *challah* is the first *terumah* offering connected to the Land of Israel. It applied from the moment the Jewish people entered the Land, as we learn from the expression, בְּבֹאֲכֶם אֶל הָאָרֶץ – “When you come into the land” (*Bamidbar* 15:18). Upon entering the Holy Land, we were no longer spoon-fed manna, but required to earn our own keep by cultivating the land. Because of the tremendous human effort put into producing bread, one may be tempted to forget that without Hashem’s blessing we would not be able to lift even a finger. Therefore, especially while working hard for our living, we need to remember Hashem by separating off a piece of our dough as a *challah* offering. Since it is a greater challenge to remember Hashem while involved in the earthly pursuit of working the land rather than receiving manna directly from His heavenly hand, the mitzvah of separating *challah* symbolizes our superior relationship with Hashem that empowers us to assume ownership over the Land of Israel as Rabbi Nachman teaches:

ספר לקוטי עצות - ערך ארץ ישראל יב. מצות חלה היא בחינת ירושת ארץ ישראל.

The mitzvah of *challah* is the aspect of inheriting the Land (*Likutei Eitzot, Eretz Yisrael*).

Women & Challah

During our current Messianic era, we have begun to experience the unending beauty and excitement of discovering G-d even in the core physical experience of making bread. The more mindful we become the more we allow the spiritual light to break through, and reveal how the bread is a means of ‘holding’ that light and making its presence tangibly felt in our material world. Our matriarch Sarah achieved this level in her own lifetime. This is why her bread stayed fresh from one eve of Shabbat to the next (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishit* 24:109). The life force that she was able to identify – the *Shechinah* – did not depart. In her role as matriarch, Sarah laid the foundations for the future of every Jewish woman’s spiritual journey. Hashem let her experience a miracle week after week – leaving a permanent imprint not just on her, but on each of her future descendants. Sarah experienced the miraculous blessings of her tent, and not Abraham, because

women elevate this world and raise it to reconnect with its Source. The direction of men is opposite. They bring down light from above to below, through learning Torah as an end in itself. When Sarah died; the miracle no longer took place – although the widowed Avraham continued to take *challah* from the dough. Today too, women are given precedence in performing this mitzvah. As life-givers, we can rectify the world by relating it to its Source – the Divine Presence. We are the ones who knead the dough, and feel how its components of flour and water – physical and spiritual – join (Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller, <http://www.aish.com/sh/t/rai/48970616.html>).

Bread– The Perfection of Humanity

It is the woman who bakes *challah* just like it is her role to refine man. Baking bread is a microcosm of our spiritual refinement process – reflecting the many steps it takes to actualize our potential. It reflects becoming refined and transformed over and over until we become what were are meant to be. Bread is the ultimate hard-work food as it takes eleven steps to create it, from sowing the grains to baking the loaves. Since baking bread reflects the perfection of humanity, it brings us closer to *Mashiach*, the most perfect human being. Therefore, it is not by chance that *Mashiach* derives from Beit Lechem (the house of Bread). *Mashiach* will be a direct descendant of King David, who was born in Beit Lechem (I *Shmuel* 17:12).

The Braided Shabbat *Challah* – Unifying Our Fragmented World

Wheat used to be a tree, as Rabbi Yehuda taught that the Tree of Knowledge was wheat (*Babylonian Talmud, Brachot* 40a). After the sin of eating from the Tree, the Tree fell and became dispersed into many sheaves of wheat and its status was lowered into a mere grain. When the first woman tempted man to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, she spoiled him, who was “the bread of the world.” Therefore, we have the opportunity to repair her transgression by baking enough bread to separate a *challah* offering. The braiding of the *challah* may reflect unifying the split consciousness caused by eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. By braiding the *challah*, we symbolically unify the scattered sheaves and elevate them to once again become one unified entity braided together, like the Tree prior to its fall. Braiding with six could signify the unification of the physical realm with its six dimensions. The *challah* created from these six strands symbolizes the seventh dimension – the aspect of Shabbat – the holiness within the physical reality. The Mitzvah of *challah* braids together, Israel, the Land, the Woman and Hashem. Although in the Torah it refers strictly to the gift for the Kohen, naming it *challah* (from *chulin*) – food permissible for all to eat, Hashem encoded within it the evolvement to become what we call our Shabbat bread. The mitzvah of *challah* represents refinement and recreation of the perfect human being as a *tikun* for eating from the Tree. Therefore, this mitzvah is linked to Shabbat, which represents the perfected reality, מַעֲיֵן עוֹלָם הַבָּא – (A foretaste of the World to Come). The unifying quality of *challah* binds the physical to the spiritual by recognizing Hashem even within the most physical reality. This process will culminate with the *Mashiach* from Beit *Lechem* (House of Bread) – the most refined human being women can produce through sifting, kneading and baking. May it be our merit to see the unity and wholeness – that *Challah* so deeply represents – redefining the fragmented and wounded world in which we live!