



This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



***“Present a loaf
from the first
of your ground
meal and
present it as an
offering from
the threshing
floor.”***

— Numbers 15:20



Challah: The Blessing in the Dough

There's nothing quite like walking into a home where *challah* is baking in the oven. The heavenly aroma fills the house, evoking a sense of warmth and well-being. Yet, this braided Sabbath bread is more than just a recipe that has been fine-tuned and handed down over thousands of years. According to Jewish tradition, this special bread is the ultimate blending of physical goodness and spiritual blessings.

Truth be told, when the term *challah* is first introduced in the Bible, it is not a direct reference to the Sabbath bread that we eat today. The verse reads: “*Present a loaf from the first of your ground meal and present it as an offering from the threshing floor*” (Numbers 15:20). The “loaf” mentioned in the verse is called *challah* in Hebrew, and in actuality, it need not be any bigger than a large olive.

The practice was to separate a small piece of dough when baking bread and give that to God's priests who worked in the Temple. *Challah* is actually the term given to that piece of dough. However, the term became synonymous with the bread made from the rest of the dough as well, either by way of association, or because taking that one piece transformed the entire batch of dough into *challah* – dough that is sanctified and made holy.

This commandment is considered so great that in the Jewish tradition it is regarded as one of the practices for which the world was created. Jewish sages look at the first word in the Bible, *Bereishit*, which means “In the beginning,” and attribute all the commands containing the word *reishit*,

“first,” as intricately intertwined with the purpose of creation.

For example, one of those commandments is bringing the firstfruits, which we learned about in last month's *Limmud*. Another is separating “*the first of your dough*,” the ritual that we are discussing here. Like the bringing of the firstfruits, separating the dough is deeply significant, profoundly instructive, and powerfully moves us along our walk with God.

The dough from which *challah* has been taken is said to be filled with blessings. The *Talmud*, Judaism's oral tradition, teaches that this ritual was so cherished that young single women would save their money all week so they would have enough money to buy the ingredients to make *challah* and perform the commandment of taking *challah* from the dough. The blessings derived from this practice were seen as the foundation of their future homes.

Today, this commandment is still treasured and practiced by Jews around the world, albeit in a modified fashion since we no longer have the Holy Temple in Jerusalem nor priests to whom we would give our dough. However, in this month's study we will learn how this ancient practice brings rich blessings to our lives even today, and from it, we learn the spiritual lesson that “*man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD*” (Deuteronomy 8:3).

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Bringing Blessings into the Home

“The best of all the firstfruits and of all your special gifts will belong to the priests. You are to give them the first portion of your ground meal so that a blessing may rest on your household.”

— Ezekiel 44:30

While the commandment of making *challah* is not gender specific, it has special significance among women. This is why when Abraham received the three angels disguised as men in Genesis 18, he personally saw to all their needs – water to wash up, meat for the meal, milk to drink – except for one item, the bread. Abraham asked Sarah to bake the bread for the men. This was not accidental. As the primary homemakers, women were especially suited for making *challah*, which brought blessings to the home.

Even after Sarah died and Abraham had continued to take the *challah* from the dough when he made the bread, it was not quite the same because the blessings were gone. According to Jewish tradition, several miracles existed in Abraham’s home while Sarah was living. Her *challah* stayed fresh from one Friday to the next, her Sabbath candles stayed lit from one Friday to the next, and a cloud of protection always rested above the tent. When Sarah passed away, the miracles also ceased to exist, until Isaac married Rebekah. When Rebekah baked the bread and took the *challah*, the blessings and the miracles returned to the home.

Whoever bakes the bread and performs the rituals associated with it, *challah* remains closely connected with the home. Home is where we make our food and nourish our families. It’s where we live, sleep, and take care of our physical needs. By giving us a commandment to perform while making bread, God is teaching us that His providence extends to our homes. When a person goes out into the world to work, it is more obvious that he or she must depend on God for success. But God wants us to know that He is also intricately involved in what happens behind the closed doors of our homes. He is with us as we raise our children, go about our daily chores, and help others around us.

In fact, the very word *challah* reminds us of this fact. *Challah* is a composite of two other Hebrew words: *chol*, meaning “mundane,” and *Yah*, meaning “God.” By engaging in the ritual of making *challah*, we demonstrate that what seems most mundane — the baking of bread — is actually most holy. Whether we are washing dishes, doing the laundry, or simply sitting with family, we recognize God’s presence into our homes and experience His abundant blessings.

think about it...

1. How has the home that you grew up in shaped the person you are today?
2. How would you like the home you live in now to influence others who live in or pass through your home? How might you make your house a place of positive influence and spiritual nourishment?
3. What do you feel is your personal God-given mission (or missions) in life? Grade yourself on how well you feel you are fulfilling that purpose. Write down one or two ways you could improve on serving God.
4. In Deuteronomy 8:3 we read, “*man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*” What does this verse mean to you? How does it influence your daily decisions?
5. What are you praying for? The act of prayer forces us to become introspective and to think about what matters to us most. How can you pray more effectively throughout the day?
6. Judaism teaches that even the most mundane activity contains a spark of holiness within it. How might you find holiness in everything you do, whether it’s taking out the garbage, commuting to work, or making the bed?



Bringing Our Blessings to God

“Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When you enter the land to which I am taking you and you eat the food of the land, present a portion as an offering to the LORD.’” — Numbers 15:18–19

The Jewish sages teach, “One who fulfills the commandment of separating *challah*, it is as if he has nullified the worship of idols; while one who does not fulfill the *mitzvah* [command] of separating *challah*, it is as if he sustains the worship of idols.”

How does the act of taking a piece of dough and giving it to God rid ourselves of idol worship?

Bread, or *challah*, is the ultimate hard-work food. In ancient times, the first step in producing bread was making flour, a tedious task that involved separating the wheat grains from their shaft and then grinding the grain into fine flour. However, even before this primary step, someone had to plant the wheat, tend to it, water it, and then harvest it.

Even after the flour had been produced, it still required additional ingredients and then the physical kneading of the dough, involving an enormous amount of time and effort. Finally after all these steps had been completed, and the dough was ready to be shaped and baked, it would be very easy for the bread-maker to take all the credit. By taking that small piece of *challah*, the bread-maker acknowledges that it is not “*My power and the strength*

of my hands [that] have produced this wealth for me” (Deuteronomy 8:17), but rather God Who gives us the ability to do all things.

In a broader sense, bread is a symbol of all material items and physical accomplishments. Money is often referred to as “dough,” and someone who earns money is commonly called a “breadwinner.” The ritual of taking *challah* reminds us that all our wealth and achievements are not of our own doing, but gifts from God.

Idol worship can take many forms. It doesn’t necessarily entail bowing down to an image of wood or stone. Today, idol worship can take the form of relying upon and revering wealth and talents – both of other people and our own. Taking *challah* sends the message that we recognize that we rely upon God alone and attribute our success only to Him. We are confident that as we give away our “dough,” He will provide more. In this way, we turn away from idol worship and affirm our obedience and faith in the Lord. In addition, we express our gratitude for God’s gifts, which include the abilities that He has placed within us to create wondrous things – from bread and beyond.

apply it

1. Write down a list of some of your accomplishments. As you reflect on what it took to achieve these successes, recognize God’s role in helping you do that and give Him praise and thanks.
2. Place prayers into your daily tasks and work. Whether you are baking *challah*, cooking a meal, cleaning the house, or working at your job, infuse your actions with holy thoughts and prayers.
3. Give charity as the Israelites once gave *challah* as an offering. As you contribute to God’s purposes, fill your heart with faith that God will replenish your resources and provide for all your needs.
4. Make your home a place of physical and spiritual nourishment. This can mean placing encouraging messages or Scriptures around the home, creating daily rituals involving God’s Word, or simply providing a hot, nutritious meal cooked with prayer and love.
5. What talents and treasures has God given you? Look for at least one new way you can use your gifts and treasures this month for God’s purposes.
6. Make *challah*! Use our recipe and explanation of the spiritual aspects of the ingredients to experience the joy and blessing of making this ancient bread.



Bringing Blessings into Our World

*“By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”*
— Genesis 3:19 (ESV)

When God created the world, the final thing He did was make man. When God created man, He took dust of the earth, mixed it with water, shaped the mixture, and breathed life into it. The Jewish sages explain at that moment the world was like a large lump of dough, and the first man was separated out from it like “the *challah* of the world.”

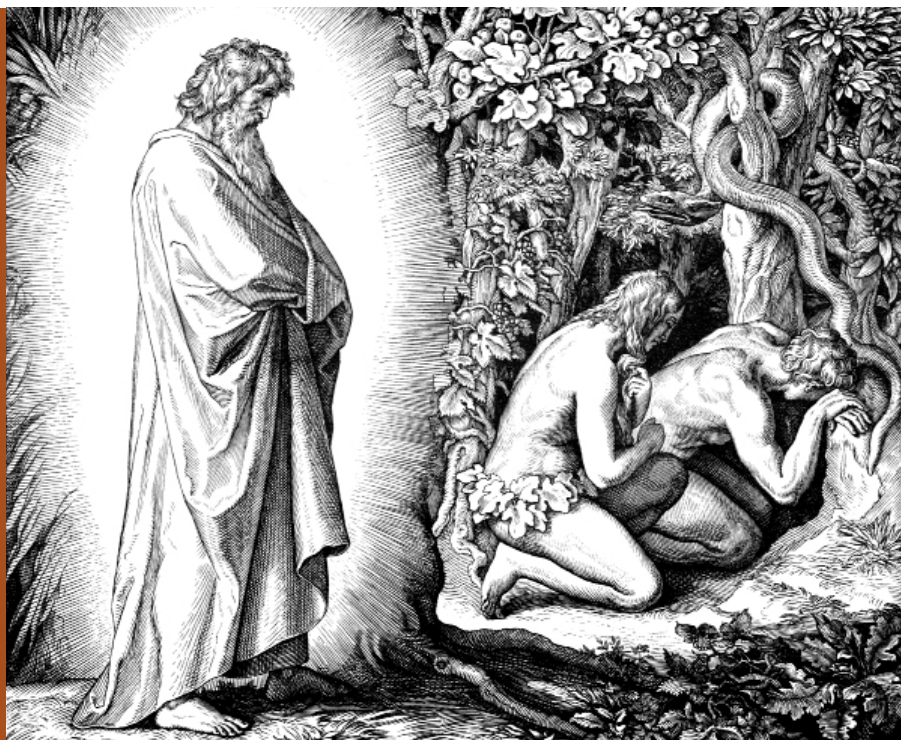
Just as bread is made from flour and water, shaped, and given time to rise with air, man was made from earth, water, and God’s breath. Just as we are commanded to take a piece of dough and dedicate it to God when making bread, humanity was the part of the world separated and designated for holy purposes. For that brief time on what is considered in Jewish tradition the first Friday afternoon, the world was in a state of perfection. Adam and Eve resided in Eden in a state of complete harmony.

However, as we all know, that paradise was short-lived. Adam and Eve ate from the prohibited Tree of Knowledge, causing a deep cosmic fracture that shattered all humanity as well as our relationship with God. According to one opinion among the Jewish sages, the forbidden tree in the garden was a “wheat tree.” As a result of the sin

that entered the world, the wheat tree was symbolically splintered into many pieces and became lowly wheat sheaves – a mere grain – no longer a great and whole tree.

It’s no coincidence then that just after this first sin, humanity was told that they would eat bread. When we make bread, we are symbolically bringing the wheat back together into a cohesive dough; in essence, restoring our world and ourselves back to the state of Eden. *Challah* is traditionally braided, illustrating our desire to reunite the scattered fragments that resulted from sin. When we perform the commandment of taking the piece of *challah* dough and dedicating it to God, we demonstrate our determination to return to the state of humanity before the sin – designated and dedicated to serving God in harmony and obedience.

Challah is the bread of restoration. We traditionally bake it on Friday afternoons, not just because it is the eve of the Sabbath, but because that is when, in the Jewish tradition, Adam and Eve sinned. Baking our *challah* brings us closer to the world of perfection as it once was. It’s no wonder that biting into freshly baked *challah* is like a taste of paradise.



Rituals and Customs Observed Then and Now



Over time there have been many customs associated with baking *challah*, such as giving charity just beforehand and reading Psalm 90. In addition, many keep in mind the symbolism of each ingredient, intentionally blessing the dough with prayers as it is made.

When the Temple stood in Jerusalem and the priests served in the Temple, the dough that we are commanded to separate when making bread was given to the priests. This was part of the required contributions that allowed the priests to serve God without worrying about providing sustenance for their families. Essentially, the offering was for God, since it allowed the priests to serve in His Temple.

Today, while we no longer have the Temple, we still observe the practice of taking *challah*, first so that the practice will not be forgotten, and second, because the meaning and the spirit of the law is as relevant today as in biblical times. The only difference is that since we cannot give the *challah* to the priests, we dispose of it respectfully. Some have the custom of wrapping the dough in foil and burning it in a hot oven; others simply wrap the dough in a paper towel or paper bag and place it in the garbage.

There are several rules that govern this biblical directive of taking *challah*. The first is that *challah* is only taken from dough containing flour made from the following grains: Barely, rye, oats, wheat, or spelt (hulled wheat). The second is that we only observe the commandment of taking *challah* when the dough

contains flour that is 2 pounds, 11 ounces or more – and even then it is taken without reciting the traditional blessing.

However, when the flour in the dough weighs 3 pounds, 11 ounces (roughly 12-14 cups of flour) or more, *challah* is taken and the following blessing is recited: “*Blessed are You, God, our LORD, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments, and has commanded us to separate challah from the dough.*” After the blessing is recited, the small piece of dough is held up and we declare: “This is *challah*.” After that, the piece is either burnt or disposed of and the rest of the dough is now blessed and ready to be shaped and baked.

The sages teach that the time of separating the *challah* is an auspicious time for prayer. Some people pray for health, for sustenance, for peace, or anything at all. It is the Jewish custom to also pray for the rebuilding of the Third Temple, where we will be able to offer our *challah* in the way that it was originally intended.



Challah – A Recipe for Blessings

There are literally dozens of *challah* recipes ranging from sweet to savory. In addition, there are many ways to shape a *challah*. Most commonly, *challahs* are braided in three, four, or six-strand braids. Alternatively, there are different variations on round *challahs*, sometimes used throughout the year, but always incorporated into the High Holiday meals that commemorate the Jewish New Year and recall the yearly cycle of life. Moreover, there are *challahs* shaped to commemorate special occasions. *Challah* comes in all shapes and sizes and flavors, too, however, the basic spirit of baking *challah*, which we have studied, is always the same. What follows is a traditional Sweet *Challah* recipe formed in a three-strand braid.



RECIPE

This recipe can be halved and made in a standard sized electric mixer. However, if the recipe is halved, we do not separate dough as the batch isn't large enough to meet the requirement for taking *challah*.

INGREDIENTS

13–14 cups all-purpose or
bread flour

1½–2 cups sugar
(depending on desired sweetness)

2 tablespoons salt

3 tablespoons dry yeast

4 cups warm water

1 cup canola oil

2 eggs, plus 1 egg for glazing

Optional – sesame seeds

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease four to five cookie sheets.

Combine 12 cups of flour with the sugar, salt, and yeast. Separately, combine the warm water with the oil. Whisk the water and oil together until the oil is integrated into the water and quickly pour into the dry ingredients. Knead both wet and dry ingredients together. Next, add 2 beaten eggs and knead the dough again until mixed. Finally, add 1–2 cups of flour (starting with 1) until the mixture is not too sticky. At this point cover the dough with a towel and let rise for 10 minutes.

After 10 minutes, if we are separating *challah*, it is done now and respectfully discarded. After that, we shape the dough. This batch can make 4–5 *challahs*. We form each *challah* by taking three portions of dough slightly smaller than the size of a tennis ball. Roll each ball into a long strand. Braid the three strands and place the *challah* on a greased cookie sheet.

After all *challahs* are shaped, cover with a towel and let rise for about 1½–2 hours. Brush the *challahs* with beaten egg, and if desired, sprinkle with sesame seeds. Bake at 350 degrees for about 27–30 minutes. Cool on a wire rack. Enjoy!

SYMBOLISM

Each ingredient of *challah* is symbolic. As we add each ingredient, we meditate on its meaning and say appropriate prayers. In addition, the time of kneading the dough is traditionally a time for prayer. Many women do not speak to anyone while kneading dough and only utter words of prayer.

FLOUR — RENEWAL. Flour is the product of God's daily sunshine, air, water (either from above or below) and earth. Just as God renews these forces daily, allowing wheat to grow and thrive, we ask that He renew us as well. Just as flour is the product of hard work, we ask that God replenish our strength so that we can effectively perform all our tasks in life.

SUGAR — SWEETNESS. Sugar is what makes our *challah* sweet. We ask God to add sweetness to our life — just enough to make our lives pleasant and joyful, but not too much that the sweetness overwhelms us to the point of distracting us from our life's purpose.

SALT — ENHANCEMENT. Salt brings out the flavor in all other foods. So, too, we pray that we will be like salt and bring out

the best in all who live in our homes or who visit. In addition, we fill the tablespoon close to the top, but not completely full. This symbolizes our desire to leave room for others in our lives. It's not just about fulfilling our own potential but helping others become their best as well.

YEAST — BLESSINGS. Yeast makes our bread grow. As we add yeast, we ask God to shower us with blessings to help us thrive. Specifically, we meditate on blessings for protection, sustenance, peace in the home, health, and a faithful heart. Appropriately, there is a custom to fill the tablespoon of yeast so that it slightly overflows, signifying our prayer for overflowing blessings in our lives.

WATER — TORAH. God's Word, the *Torah*, is symbolized by water in Jewish tradition and in multiple places in the Bible. As we

add water, we pray that our homes and our lives be saturated by God's Word and that it infiltrates the lives of those who live in our home.

OIL — UNIQUENESS. As we learn in the Bible, oil was used to anoint prophets and kings. Oil symbolizes our unique talents and treasures. We pray that we utilize our special God-given gifts to serve our family members and contribute to the world. We also pray that our friends and family find their own unique talents and realize their potential.

EGGS — REBIRTH. Eggs represent the potential for new life. As we add eggs, we pray that we can once again be reborn as better, stronger, more faithful individuals, unattached to our sins and mistakes from our past.