

The Challah Bake Trend

What is behind the new trend of Challah bakes and what important lesson does it teach us?

Challah Bakes

I'm sure you've all heard of "Challah Bakes."

It's a relatively new phenomenon which began in Israel about 15 years ago, but it has become really popular since October 7th.

At its core is a very specific mitzvah: anyone baking dough in an amount exceeding 5 pounds is commanded to separate a part of the dough for the Kohen. You recite a blessing, "Who has sanctified us with His commandments... to separate challah." A small amount of the dough is taken, held in one hand, lifted, and declared as "challah." Then—because we don't actually do the Kohen-gifts in our day, the separated piece of challah is burned in the oven and discarded.

The mitzvah actually applies equally to men and women; anyone who makes dough is obligated to perform it. However, it is considered one of the commandments entrusted especially to Jewish women and girls, along with lighting Shabbat candles and family purity. And, just as women add a personal prayer in a whisper when lighting candles, and similarly when immersing in the mikveh, some women also take the opportunity of the mitzvah of challah to add a personal prayer as well.

This custom is actually reflected in a verse in the Book of Exodus: “And He will bless your bread and your water, and I will remove illness from among you” (Exodus 23:25). This means that the “blessed” bread—which is sanctified through the mitzvah of challah—has the power to heal a person from illness and bring good health to those who perform it (Sefer HaChinuch says: “So that this blessing may rest through the mitzvah... and the dough will be nourishment for both the body and the soul” (Mitzvah 385)).

Perhaps the reason the bread of Shabbos is called “Challah” is because, by Jewish tradition, we attempt to always fulfill this mitzvah when baking bread for Shabbos. On a regular day, when baking bread at home, one does not necessarily bake in quantities that require the separation of challah. But when baking for Shabbat, we strive to bake enough pounds of dough to fulfill the mitzvah, so that the challah on Shabbat will be from a “mitzvah” dough (Rema). This is the source of the name “challah” for the loaves baked for Shabbat.

Fiddler on the Roof

Now, the new trend is to perform this unique mitzvah in public. While the other two mitzvot are observed more discreetly, separating challah has become a social event where women from all walks of life and ages participate. Many women organize such events before a wedding, bat mitzvah, birth, or simply to pray for something important. Since the war, many of these events are held in merit of the hostages, and so on.

One of the popular “Challah Bake” leaders in Israel is Smadar Morag. She has a fascinating journey to Judaism, and she uses

these events to share her story.

Smadar was born in 1970 in Israel. Her mother was from Holland, a Holocaust survivor, and her father was from Egypt. The family soon immigrated to the Netherlands and Smadar never connected to her Jewish identity during her childhood. When she was 14, her parents returned to Israel, but she did not adapt and at the age of 18, she parted ways with her family and returned to the Netherlands.

As a child, she always sang and acted in school theater productions, so when she returned to Holland, she enrolled in a performing arts school. She was completely disconnected from Judaism, to the point that she began a relationship with a non-Jewish boyfriend. Her parents were very upset, and her father cut off contact with her; for seven years, she was completely disconnected. However, there was one thing that she remained committed to—fasting on Yom Kippur.

One day, she went to audition for the musical “Fiddler on the Roof.” She auditioned for a specific role, but the director decided to cast her as Hodel, Tevye’s rebellious daughter who wants to marry a non-Jew. He realized that her Jewish appearance and the fact that she was Jewish would add to the production.

Rehearsals for the musical stirred something in her heart. As part of the production, she lit Shabbat candles, listened to Jewish music, and was inundated with questions from her fellow actors who wanted to learn more about Jewish customs. She suddenly became the “rabbi” of the actors—none of whom were

Jewish.

Then, special guests arrived. Her parents came from Israel for the premiere. Smadar was nervous about how her father would feel when he saw her in the show, telling Tevye that she chooses her non-Jewish boyfriend, and Tevye tearing his clothes and sitting shiva. After the show, in fact, he approached her and to break the ice, he said, “You see, even Tevye thinks like me.”

The play raised her Jewish consciousness and profile further. The Dutch media discovered her, and everyone wanted to interview the only Jewish actress in the production. But the final jump took place several years later, when—in 1999—a powerful earthquake struck Turkey, killing tens of thousands, including some Israelis. Smadar’s aunt (her father’s sister) and her entire family perished in the earthquake. She was deeply shaken, and returned to Israel for the family funerals. When she returned to the Netherlands, she left her non-Jewish boyfriend.

Despite the change, she remained avowedly secular. A year later, at a party for Israelis in the Netherlands, she met her future husband, a non-religious man named Yigal. That night, they already felt the spark, and six months later, they got married. But then “the worst” came: a few months after the wedding, Yigal began to become more observant.

Smadar did not like it at all. Before meeting Yigal, people had tried to set her up with kippah-wearers, and she had vehemently refused. Now, her own husband was discovering Judaism—and she felt that they were drifting apart.

Yigal never imposed anything on her. For a long time, she

performed in the theater on Shabbat while he went to the synagogue. Then, one Shabbat, Yigal decided to join her in her hotel room for the weekend. After the show, she returned to the hotel to find a table set with a white tablecloth, Shabbat candles burning, and the wonderful aroma of Shabbat food. They made Kiddush, and she sat there, mesmerized. Suddenly, she realized the connection that Shabbat creates within the home, and her resentment to Judaism vanished.

It's all about priorities!

This mitzvah of Challah, at the center of all these celebrations, appears in this week's Torah portion. The Torah commands us to give to the Kohen "of the *first* of your dough" (Shelach 15:20). Before you eat your own meal, you must give challah to the kohen.

This is a very important lesson about giving. In the natural order, a person first takes what they need, and if anything is left, they give to another. However, the Torah teaches us to give "of the *first* of your dough"; before we enjoy it, the first thing we do is give to another person.

The Rebbe once gave a directive that reflected this idea. Right before Rosh Hashanah in 1988, the Rebbe requested that charity boxes be installed in each kitchen—and that before preparing a meal, charity should be dropped inside. In the Rebbe's words: "When a woman gives money to charity before preparing the meal, it serves as a symbol and reminder that she is connecting her meal with the poor person... somewhere out there... who has nothing to eat" (Toras Menachem 5748, Vol. 4, p. 344).

In other words, the innovation in the mitzvah of challah is not the very concept of giving to others, but about setting priorities. First, you give to the needy, and afterwards, you enjoy your food. The mitzvah is the first thing, and everything else follows.

The Rebbe often cited from ethical works that the term “*arisoteichem*” (your dough) is related to “*arisa*” (crib or bed), referring to the time a person wakes up every morning. In other words, the concept taught by this mitzvah—that giving to G-d should come as a priority—can be incorporated into our every day: when we wake up from our *arisa*, we think of G-d first; we recite the prayer of Modeh Ani. Everything else can follow (Maamar, Shelach 5728).

One of the main problems with Hebrew schools is that they are secondary. They take place only on weekends, and if they are in session more often, it’s after school, in the afternoon. Even if we assume that the teachers are the best available and the children come happily and want to learn, the fact that the studies are at the end of the day sends a message to the children that Judaism is secondary. First and foremost, they go to public school. Then comes all their sports. Then, if they have time, they might learn a bit of Judaism.

The Torah tells us, “The *first* of your dough.” In the morning, you should start the day with G-d. You should begin the day with Jewish studies, and fifteen minutes in the morning will have much more impact than an hour and a half in the afternoon—because the child will see that Judaism is important.

This should be a guiding principle in our lives.

The mitzvah of challah teaches us Jewish priorities; Judaism is at the top of the list, and everything else comes afterwards.