

## **Sh'lach: The Pleasantness of Bread**

*Congregation Netivot Shalom*

*25 Sivan 5785 / 21 Jun 2025*

I'm glad to spend Shabbat with you in our sanctuary. Shabbat Shalom to those joining us outside. Thank you, my friends on Zoom, for making us a community like Abraham and Sarah's tent, not limited by walls.

I rewrote this drasha several times. Including yesterday. Each iteration was triggered by the latest injustice or horror in this world. There was a lot of sorrow and anger in those versions. Some pleading. Which makes sense because that's mostly what happens in Bamidbar as a group of scared, traumatized people keep messing up. This time, the Israelites listened to liars, and everyone was punished terribly.

That sounds way too familiar.

So no. You will not get sorrow from me today. I set it aside and did something I enjoy. I researched four lines of text for about six hours. Then I wrote, which also brings me joy and woke up (what joy!), and I'm sharing now with you three pleasant thoughts about a mitzvah.

In this parsha, we learn that Hashem [God] commanded Moses to tell the Israelites: "when you enter the land to which I am taking you and you eat of the bread of the land, you shall set some aside as a gift..." (Bamidbar 15:16,20)

This is the mitzvah of HaFrashat Challah. After kneading but before dividing and shaping your dough, you have to separate a piece that you will give to a Kohen. Grab a bit, an olive's worth, but don't separate it yet. Recite the blessing and then pull until it separates from the rest, hold up that olive's worth of dough, and say, "This is challah."

It's okay--you don't have to do it every time you bake bread. Only with bread made from wheat, spelt, barley, oats, and rye. Only when the dough is equivalent to the manna that sustained the Israelites. Which is 43.2 eggs.

The size and color of those eggs are inconveniently unspecified.

One thing about Judaism that brings me joy is parsing the many commentaries, interpretations, and arguments about everything. Truly, anything can be debated. And when those discussions take place over a couple of thousand years in dozens of languages from an infinite number of perspectives and in vastly differing contexts, there

is more than enough material to draw from when figuring out things like how much dough is needed to recite the blessing. Is it three pounds of flour or five? 3.675lbs? 14 cups? Is it easier to figure it out based on the volume of eggs? How many eggs make an omer?

This is one of those pleasant things: HaFrashat Challah only applies in a batch of a certain size. 43 eggs or 14 cups of flour; It's a significant size. It's a mitzvah that happens when we eat together.

And it is one of those mitzvot that only apply in Eretz Yisrael and only when the majority of Am Yisrael resides there [in the Land of Israel, when the People of Israel live there]. It was what the Israelites were charged to do with the bread made in that land. They were supposed to give that challah, that portion, to the Kohanim- the priests.

We haven't had a Temple in a couple of thousand years. Most Jews don't live in the modern nation-state of Israel. Most of us buy our bread.

But the kosher bakers do the mitzvah for us. If we bake it, we have to as well. That's because it is a rabbinical commandment. Even people who receive charity are obligated. The Sages thought it was that important. How pleasant that we can all share this mitzvah, the only mitzvah related to Eretz Israel we can do out here in the Diaspora.

There are lots of other mitzvot that can be done. This is one of the best, I think. We make mistakes. Especially when hurt or worried, or stressed. It's easy to be distracted and forget a step in the instructions. But with HaFrashat Challah, we get a second chance. If you forget to say the blessing, it's okay. If you forget to separate before baking, you can do it after.

If you don't realize that you forgot before Shabbat starts (and you are in the diaspora), don't worry-- it's still okay to eat the challah. Slice a piece and put it aside. Come back to it when you are rested. What a pleasant invitation.

Shabbat Shalom.