

Shlom Bayyit

Challah - Luyah

It is well known that a sumptuous meal is the foundation of a successful Jewish gathering. On Shabbat, on special occasions, on the Jewish festivals (with the exception of Passover) we serve family and friends our traditional dishes and adorn our dinner table, not with *Lecham*, plain bread, but with that special bread, “the rich man’s bread”.....Challah.

The Story of Challah In the Torah (Numbers 15:17-21) it is written “...*It shall be that when you eat the bread of the land, you shall set aside a portion (of dough) of God.*” Therefore, before the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E., it was customary for a portion of the dough from each family’s Sabbath bread to be separated before baking. A loaf was formed from the collective pieces and was awarded to the *Kohanim*, the priests. After the temple’s destruction, the sages evoked that this mitzvah of “the taking of the challah” during the preparation of bread be continued, so that those of us living in the Diaspora will not forget this commandment. Challah, then, originally referred to the olive size portion of dough that was removed from unbaked bread. The term has since come to refer to the whole loaf. Jewish bakers continue to remove, then burn or discard the separated portion of dough to commemorate its original purpose. The Challah, then, is considered Kosher.

The Ingredients in Challah Only bread made from five specific grains needs to be separated: wheat, barley, maize, spelt or oats. Since these were the grains used by the wealthy in Europe, this rich man’s leavened bread, made with lots of eggs, sugar, honey or molasses, came to be eaten on Shabbat “when even the poor are rich.”

Braiding the Challah This is usually done with 3, 4, or 6 ropes allowing for a more aesthetic appreciation of the bread. The braids look like arms intertwined - perhaps symbolizing love. One *midrash* relates it to the way God adorned the hair of Eve before her wedding to Adam.

Rosh Hashanah Challah This one is prepared with raisins and extra honey for extra sweetness in the New Year. Added poppy or sesame seeds symbolize fertility and plenty. The Challah’s circular shape - no beginning and no end – is symbolic of the cycle of the year, the cycle of life, the wholeness of the universe – continuity.

Covering the Challah On our dinner table, the Challah is presented covered. In traditional families 2 loaves are placed atop one another on Shabbat to commemorate that, on Fridays, a double portion of manna was allotted to the Children of Israel in the desert. Thus God insured that there would be enough food through the Sabbath. Perhaps the Challah cover represents the dew that fell upon the original manna. However, a popular explanation says that the covering is our way of showing respect for the Challah. We don’t want to offend it since it is blessed second, after the *Kiddush* over the wine.

Serving the Challah The blessing is said, and then some cut Challah slices using a decorative Challah knife. However, the Torah recounts that Abraham, tested by God, did not use the knife on his son, Isaac. It has, thus, become custom to spare the knife and tear the Challah and pass it to those at our table. At our TBR Shabbat services, Rabbi Emert calls forth the children to perform this tradition.

Leftover Challah It makes divine French toast!

The next time you savor the smell, the texture, the beauty, and finally the taste of Challah be reminded of how it has come to be surrounded by so much folklore, tradition, and symbolism. It is yet another connection to our rich history and to Torah.