

**Bringing forth bread from the earth**  
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**Shabbat Emor – May 8, 2020**

Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, haMotzi lechem min haaretz.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of all, who brings forth bread from the earth.

I have pondered the meaning of this blessing since I first learned what it meant. My mother was a wonderful baker and even as a child I understood that bread didn't just spring from the earth. I had watched my mother bake bread, and I knew that a lot of work went into making even a single simple loaf. So what does this prayer mean? Why are we giving God all of the credit by essentially saying that bread just pops out of the earth?

Wouldn't it make more sense to say "Blessed are You, Adonai our God, who brings forth grains from the earth?" For instance, when we say the kiddish we bless God as the "Creator of the fruit of the vine" – and not the "Creator of the wine."

So why the difference? I think it has to do with bread being the most basic of nourishment. What did the Israelite women do as they fled Egypt? They baked bread to take on the journey. Unfortunately for us, had they started the process a little earlier, it would have had a chance to rise, and we wouldn't still be eating matzah – or what we fondly call the bread of our affliction. Bread that is hard to digest, but still, bread all the same.

Bread has always played a central role in Judaism. The motzi is probably the most anticipated prayer at every service and life cycle event. It is hard to think of a holiday or Jewish celebration where the ritual is not concluded with the prayer over the bread.

And in this week's torah portion, Parashat Emor, bread makes an appearance in the Holy Sanctuary. In this portion that is largely about

laws regulating the lives of the priests, as well as the sacrifices in the Temple, and the ritual calendar, we read about something called “lechem hapanim.”

We are instructed in this portion in the following manner:

“And you shall take fine flour, and bake twelve challot of it; two tenths of a measure shall be in one challah. Place them on the pure table before the Eternal in two rows, six to a row. With each row you shall place pure frankincense, which is to be a token offering for the bread, as an offering by fire to the Eternal. He shall arrange them before the Eternal regularly every Shabbat – it is a a commitment for all time on the part of the Israelites. They shall belong to Aaron and his sons, who shall eat them in the holy place; for they are his as most holy things from the Eternal’s offering by fire, an everlasting statute. (Lev. 24:5-9)”

Let’s unpack this text a little. Basically, the priests were being told that they are required to bake 12 challot every week, and put them on a special table every week, and at then end of the week, the High Priest and his sons were required to eat 12 loaves of week old Challah, every week, until the end of eternity.

So what is going on here? Usually the High Priest and his family only ate the best of the best food, and they were required to eat the food while it was still fresh. You know all of those sacrifices we read about that the Israelites would bring to the temple? Their finest animals and grain and wine? That didn’t all go up in smoke, that was to feed the priests and their households. So why at the beginning of every Shabbat were the priests commanded to place 12 fresh simple loaves of bread on the alter and to eat the 12 old, stale loaves?

The number of loaves is a simple one to decode, in the Temple, 12 is always symbolic of the 12 Tribes of Israel. The Priests would wear special breastplates adorned with 12 semi-precious stones symbolizing the 12 tribes – so that they would literally feel the weight of the tribes resting on their shoulders as they went about their work.

But why were the priests required to eat the lechem panim – literally meaning bread before God, that had been sitting out all week long?

Rabbi Helaine Ettinger teaches that the bread was a symbol of humility, a reminder to the priests who had been elevated above the rest of the community because of their service to God, that unless every one of the twelve tribes had enough bread to eat, the priests were not fulfilling their duties.

Another way to put this is that it was food for thought. Unlike fresh Challah which can be gobbled up quickly, it takes time and effort to eat dry, stale, week old bread. And the priests were eating this bread not in their homes, but in a holy place, their place of work. And what exactly was their job? Their job was to serve God by serving the people and ensure that even the most weak and vulnerable in our society were being cared for. They were responsible not just for the wealthy and the powerful, but also for the type of people who would have been grateful to have even that stale bread to eat.

So what does this portion mean to us today? The Holy Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed nearly 2000 years ago, and yet aspects of this tradition remain.

In the Book of Exodus we read that when we stood at Sinai God said to Moses to tell the B'nai Yisrael: "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. (Ex. 19:6)"

Just as the Priesthood was to take on a sense of responsibility for the well being of all Israel, and in particular the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger, all Jews are supposed to take on that role in the world.

And each Shabbat in Jewish homes from around the world, we in essence role play the Temple service. Our kitchen tables become holy alters, it is where we light the sacred candles, an eternal light, we sanctify the day with wine, and we place a modern version of the lechem panim – the bread we place before God, a holy offering on our tables and we bless it and we eat it, and it has become as the Torah declared, an everlasting statute, an eternal reminder of our responsibilities in the world.

So while we do not eat stale Challah, in those sacred moments when we gather round the Shabbat table, we too are supposed to be having food for thought, tangible reminders of what it means to be a Holy Nation, a kingdom of priests.

As we eat those simple loaves of bread, we should be mindful of all those in our midst for whom that simple loaf of bread would be a feast. We are supposed to remember that to be Jewish is to have not only a sense of responsibility for the well being of the most vulnerable, but we must act on that responsibility, to be like the priests and use our privilege to lift up others.

And we are supposed to remember that the blessings in our lives are not because of our own inherent merit, but because if not for the grace of God, from the wheat being planted in the soil, to the time it touched our tables, so many things could have gone wrong, as we have recently been reminded, there are so many ways the food chain can be disrupted, and yet, like a miracle, from the farmer to the weather, to the baker, and the trucker who brought it to the grocery store owner, to having the money in our pockets to purchase the item, we have food to nourish us. If anywhere along the line, just one thing went wrong, we might go hungry.

And so when we eat, we are taught to take a moment, show gratitude, be humble, think of our responsibility to help those who are hungry and in need, and say:

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