

On the eve of the Shabbat following Pesach, I look forward to opening my Instagram and Facebook pages to see pictures of my friends' and family's Schlissel Challahs. After a week of eating a glorified cracker, just looking at pictures of golden-brown, warm, fluffy challah is enough to make my mouth water. For those unfamiliar with a Schlissel Challah, these are the first challahs that we bake following the Passover holiday and the custom is to form these challahs into the shape of a key. Schlissel in Yiddish, or Schlussel in German, means key. These loaves can consist of multiple challah loaves intricately woven together to form a key shape. Others simply grab a key and bake it into or onto the challah itself, or use sesame or poppy seeds to create a key shape on top of the loaf. The reason behind this *minhag* is to evoke the Divine to open the locked gates of heaven and provide more blessing, specifically *parnassa* which is material wealth. And according to some people - it works! As I was researching this custom further, I came across a story of a woman placing a key from her old, broken down car into her Schlissel challah and later that month she *won* a car, all expenses paid. Stories like that reaffirm my belief that there are no such things as coincidences.

What really piqued my interest, however, is the symbolism of the key. One of the most well-known mentionings of keys in our tradition is written in the Talmud, tractate Taanit 2a, which states: **"Rabbi Yohanan said: There are three keys maintained in the hand of the Holy One, Blessed be [God], which were not transmitted to an intermediary, i.e., God tends to these matters [Godself]. And they are: The key of rain, the key of birthing, and the key of the resurrection of the dead."** Which key is missing from these initial three? The key of *parnassa*!

However, the Talmud continues: **In the West, Eretz Yisrael, they say: The key of livelihood is also in God's hand, as it is written: "You open Your hand and satisfy every living thing with favor" (Psalms 145:16).**

Two questions came to my mind regarding this piece of Talmud in conjunction with the Schlissel Challah. First, why and how is *parnassa* (livelihood) connected to Passover? Second, if we don't need an intermediary to pray for *parnassa* as that is in G-d's own Hand according to Rabbi Yochanan, then why are we baking a key into a baked good?

After a bit of digging, I found the answer to my first question. The Mishna states, in tractate Rosh Hashana 16a, that "At four times of the year, the world is judged. On Passover, judgment is passed concerning grain." Back in the time of the Talmud, wealth depended on how fruitful your harvest was. So, this "judgment concerning grain" is G-d's judgment regarding our financial status. In addition, in the book of Yehoshua, we see that the Jewish people encamped at Gilgal and offered the Pesach sacrifice on the fourteenth day of Nissan around evening time, which is around the same time we have our seders. On the day after the Pesach offering, they ate the produce of the country, unleavened bread and parched grain. On that same day, when they ate of the produce of the land, the manna ceased. From this account, we learn that once B'nai Yisrael entered the Land of Canaan, they no longer needed to rely on G-d for their livelihood. Rather, it was now their responsibility to provide from themselves, without such direct Divine intervention. But according to the Schlissel Challah custom, aren't we doing exactly what B'nai Yisrael *did not* do? Are we not praying for a miraculous change of our fortunes akin to the falling of the manna? Also, by forming the challah into the shape of a key, or just baking a key directly into the loaf, aren't we then constructing the very "intermediary" that Rabbi Yochanan states is not necessary because these keys are in G-d's hand?

I was not the first person to have this realization. Apparently, some Rabbis argue that the origins of this *minhag* are Christian, even idolatrous, in nature. There is a Christian practice going back to the 14th century to bake Easter bread a few days before Easter with a cross baked into the top to symbolize the crucifixion. Hot crossed buns would be an example of this type of bread. Considering that a key looks a lot like a cross and when the *minhag* of Schlissel Challah originated with the key pressed on top of the challah (not baked inside) we have reason to believe that this *minhag* was adapted from a non-Jewish custom. In addition, the idea of baking schlissel challah is not from the Torah; it's not in the Tannaitic, Amoraic, Savoraitic, Gaonic, or Rishonic literature. In fact, the first mention of a Schlissel Challah is in the 18th century writings of Avraham Yehoshua Heschel.

Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, one of the primary spiritual leaders of the Religious Zionist movement in Israel, said that baking Schlissel Challah is not forbidden, but there is no point in doing so. Therefore, should we even do it? Granted, the time for baking Schlissel Challah this year has already passed, but next year should we consider doing away with this custom altogether? By performing this action, granted an action religious in nature, aren't we pushing the envelope just a bit too far?

In this week's parsha, Aron's sons, Nadav and Avihu unfortunately did just that. They became too zealous and they went too far. After the Kohanim's initial sacrifice has been accepted, they, on their own accord, jump at the opportunity to *give* more and *ask* for more. They grab their fire pans, fill them with incense, and

וַיִּקְרְבוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם

which means they placed their offerings before G-d via a strange or alien fire that was not commanded of them. A fire then came forth from G-d which consumed and killed the men immediately. However, what is interesting about this verse is the phrase

לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם

which means "which was not commanded of them." According to the Daat Zekenim, who were the disciples of Rashi who compiled a Torah commentary in the 12-13th centuries, this phrasing is odd and uncommon. Rather, we would expect to see the phrase "that which was forbidden to them," which, in my opinion, would explain the swiftness of G-d's punishment. Therefore, from this phrasing we can learn that in some exceptional instances, something that is normally prohibited can become permissible. The type of sacrifice that Nadav and Avihu offered was not forbidden in and of itself. Rather, it would have been acceptable under different circumstances.

An example would be when Eliyahu HaNavi utilizes a private altar on Mount Carmel, something which was expressly forbidden once the Temple was built, when faced with the 450 priests from Baal. For those unfamiliar with the story, Eliyahu haNavi and the priests of Baal have what can only be described as a "Sacrifice Face-Off," in which both sides prepared a sacrifice to see which of their gods was the true G-d. The priests of Baal created an offering to Baal, and the offering went unaccepted. Then, Eliyahu ha Navi constructed an altar, prepared an offering to the Divine, and BAM holy fire came down from the sky. G-d did not ask Eliyahu to build a new altar as that would be forbidden due to the Temple's existence, yet G-d rewarded the action as it was necessary to the circumstance and Eliyahu constructed his altar correctly. Similar to the actions of Nadav and Avihu, this story is another example of how G-d

does not appreciate excessive or idolatrous behavior, but will reward actions that are done properly and in moderation.

Which brings me back to the Schlissel Challah. Like Nadav and Avihu's sacrifice, it is not necessarily forbidden, but it also is not necessary. Both can be viewed as idolatrous and excessive. I know what you are wondering - what is the key meaning of this drash?

What I do know is that our Jewish journey, both individually and collectively, is something that is ever-evolving. If a custom like Schlissel Challah, which has inGRAINED itself in our popular culture, helps you feel connected to your greater Jewish community and strengthens your relationship to the Divine, then I fail to see the harm despite the murky backstory. Plus, a little extra *parnassa* never killed anybody. But, if baking a key-shaped Challah isn't really your thing, or maybe it does feel just a bit off, then I encourage you to reflect on what a "key" is. A key is the ultimate opener. A key can introduce us to concepts and ideas that envelope us in learning and answers. Contrastingly, a key can unlock those things that maybe we should not know and should take caution before learning or proceeding. A key can lock out something that is harming us. A key can let us into the places that make us feel safest. Going back earlier to what I mentioned about coincidences, I do not think that it is a coincidence that the keys to the two places that I treasure the most, my house and my synagogue, hang directly next to each other on my key-ring. So, on that note, what are the keys in your life that only the Divine can unlock on your behalf? What are the things, the places, even the relationships that you are hoping to unlock or keep behind lock and key as this year continues? I pray that we all receive the *parnassa* that we need to flourish, the correct keys to unlock the right doors and the right time, and enough fluffy challah, key-shaped or otherwise, to sustain us until next Pesach.

Shabbat Shalom!