The Secret of Challah and Teshuvah

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Rochie Pinson with her new book, *Rising: The Book of Challah.*

As we get closer to Rosh Hashanah, and the freezer starts filling up with every recipe I can find with the words apple, honey or pomegranate in it, I start dreaming of my Rosh Hashanah challahs.

My kids look forward to this all year, the only time I surrender and pour a bag of chocolate chips into my challah dough. (I can hear you gasping here . . . "What–not raisins??" That, dear reader, would never pass muster in my household. If it's going to signify a sweet year ahead, it absolutely has to be chocolate.)

But since I have a reputation to uphold as The Challah Rebbetzin, I have expanded my Rosh Hashanah challah repertoire to include some new and inspired recipes. When you've finished reading the following article I will share a fresh twist on the traditional challah recipe from my cookbook *RISING! The Book of Challah.* From my kitchen to yours, with love!

Unlike the rest of Tishrei cooking, which involves many large pots simmering simultaneously and a constant stream of action, challah baking allows for stretches of quieter time. The proofing, the kneading, the rising . . . are all opportunities to reflect on the year past and anticipate what lies ahead.

Challah's energy is palpable and real, and its power to bring women together is already proven. In unlocking the secret of challah, we also discover the power of *teshuvah*.

As *chassidim*, gifted with the teachings of our Rebbeim, we are privy to this secret.

The Alter Rebbe calls the month of Elul, *Melech Basadeh*–The King in the Field. Indeed, the power of this month is the ability to encounter the Divine within our most physical

spaces.

The act of making challah is a very mundane and messy one. You can't get much more physical than being elbow deep in a sticky dough. Yet it is precisely there, deep in our challah bowl, that we can encounter our truest self, experience connection to *Elokus*, and realize the very fact of *dirah b'tachtonim*.

Our mother Sarah knew this. She understood that in her relationship with her husband, she could bring the *Shechinah* to rest over her tent. Through beautifying her home through the *Shabbos* candles, she could have the light burn timelessly, and through the nurturing of her family with challah, she could bring an everlasting freshness and goodness into her home.

With her constant awareness of the connection between heaven and earth, *melech* and *sadeh*, Sarah was able to infuse all of her mundane, daily service with a pure awareness of G-dliness. As such, all she touched was connected with life and would stay alive, lit and fresh.

In the month of Elul, we search for our lost connection. We yearn for *teshuvah*, to return to the *hei* of creation, that original breath of life that is our perfect *neshamah*.

What better way to re-establish our attachment than through an act of life itself, baking challah to nourish our family, both physically and spiritually?

The mitzvah of challah was given as we stood about to enter into our promised land, and in the beginning it applied only in the land of Israel. And yet, we are told that any wheat, even from *chutz la'aretz,* that would be brought into the Land of Israel would become sanctified by its very presence in Eretz Yisroel, and take on the laws of challah *(Challah 2:1)*

This law of challah, the law of return, is the story of a *baal teshuvah*. One who returns to their place of origin, and whose entire being then becomes infused with the *kedushah* of their new spiritual reality.

Unlike many of the other *terumos*, or gifts, the Torah clearly states that this particular *terumah* of challah is a gift for all future generations. Chazal told us that not only does the *mitzvah* of challah apply beyond the time of the Beis Hamikdash, but in every place we find ourselves as well.

Challah, like teshuvah, transcends time and space. It is our way of reaching beyond, to a place of infinite possibility and formlessness, and recreating, renewing and rewriting our reality.

By removing a piece of the dough, which is the sustenance meant to feed ourselves and our family, we are transcending our physical reality and reaching into a place of infinity. From this place of formless, infinite possibility, we are able to draw down all the blessings and create a shift in our physical reality.

Teshuvah, likewise, gives us the ability to transcend the physical universe of cause and effect–where our actions create irreversible reactions–and reverse and even transform our past.

Although the actual mitzvah of challah is the *hafrashah*, the removal of a piece of dough to be burnt, I always talk about the process of challah as being itself an opportunity for deep introspection and connection.

As we make our challah for Rosh Hashanah, we have an amazing opportunity to use the process to tap into our capacity for real and transformational *teshuvah*.

The Baal Shem Tov divided the process of *teshuvah* into three *stages: Hachna'ah, Havdalah, and Hamtakah*. Submission, separation, and sweetening. As we make our challah, we can live out these three stages through the process, and find our way back through the beautiful *mitzvah* of challah.

1. HACHNA'AH / SUBMISSION:

A time for the messiness, when we need to put our hands way into the guck of the still-loose and separated ingredients and just be present with the situation as it is, right now. It is the awareness that there is work to be done, and maybe I don't want to struggle with it, but it's there and it needs to be dealt with. So we roll up our sleeves and get right into the heart of the mess and we knead all the separate ingredients together.

This is Elul, the first stage of *teshuvah*. It is an awareness of the disjointedness and a desire to unite all the disparate elements of our lives into a cohesive whole. In this place we submit to reality as it is, and feel the pain and isolation of being separated from the *Eibershter*, and from our own deepest self.

2. HAVDALAH/SEPARATION:

A time of detachment. We walk away from the dough and allow it to rise. We don't touch it or deal with it right now. We know that we have done what we can and we step away from the situation.

This is Rosh Hashanah. It is a time of letting go of our regrets, of our connection to our past mistakes, and living in the present as a perfect *tzaddik*. We wear Yom Tov clothes, feast, and throw our mistakes into the water at *tashlich*. We don't talk about *aveiros*, and we understand deeply that we are not our mistakes.

At our very essence, we are pure and holy.

3. HAMTAKTAH /SWEETENING: We take off a piece of challah, acknowledging that in the separation is where we find the wholeness. The challah dough looks perfect and whole, but until we remove that piece, it is incomplete. The brokenness brings us to the wholeness. We acknowledge that all of what we receive is from Above. All the pain and the "mistakes" were part of a larger plan that brought us to this very moment of higher awareness. We bake the dough in a *biyur* of *eish*, fire, which by its very heat and intensity brings the dough into its fullness, so that we can absorb it and finally taste its sweetness.

This is the time of Yom Kippur through Sukkos. We do say *viduy* and *al chet*, but it is from a place of understanding that we are bigger than our mistakes, and we acknowledge that all of the things we have done and experienced have allowed us to come to this place of *teshuvah* and deeper, higher connection. With this awareness we enter into the joy of Sukkos, when we can just be at one with Hashem, embraced in the Divine hug of the *sukkah*, and finally when we can experience the joy of *simchas beis hasho'evah*–the joy of bringing the water back into the Mikdash. This represents the re-integration of all we threw away, bringing it back into our lives, and seeing the interconnectedness of all things in our life: how each moment–both the positive and the difficult –brought us to this very place.

So, dear reader, as you stir, season, and generally sweat it out in your kitchen this Elul, take the time to knead your challah dough with a little extra intention. Wait for a quiet moment to separate your challah with mindfulness, and remember when you say the *brachah*, and you ask G-d for His blessings, you are accessing the awesome power to renew, reveal and rewrite a story of a good, sweet and healthy year to come.

And now for that challah recipe I promised you, so we can fulfill the *mitzvah* in actuality, and taste the sweetness of our efforts, please turn to the color section at the very end of this magazine.

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