

CHALLAH: THE BREADWINNER

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Mitzva:

When kneading a sizeable dough of the five main types of grain (wheat, barley, rye, spelt and oats), a portion of challah was first separated as tithes to the Kohen before the bread was eaten (Bamidbar 15:19-21). (Today, the separation of challah is performed but burnt).

The fruit from the field can be eaten immediately. The production of bread, however, necessitates an elaborate series of activities including threshing, winnowing, grinding, kneading, and baking. Still, a portion of dough is first set aside to G-d before man partakes of it.

Bread is the mainstay of man's diet. Bread, that is not the foodstuff of animals, magnificently embodies the uniqueness of humanity. In fact, there are some remarkable parallels illustrating the affinity between "bread" and "man".

Only man has to work as a "breadwinner" with backbreaking labor. Actually, this toil was as a direct consequence of man misusing his bechira, "free will" and the repercussions of Adam's sin, eating of the Tree of Knowledge, which according to one opinion was of wheat (Berachos 40a). Adam feared "shall I and my donkey eat out of the same trough?" (Pesachim 118a) but his fears were allayed when G-d declared to him *"with the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread"* (Bereishis 3:19).

The sophisticated manufacture of bread, despite its elongated process, affirms man's superior intelligence.

When his actions are holy and directed to G-d, he is rightly crowned the "king" over the other creatures of this world. However, were he to sin, he plummets from his position and loses this title. Adam was rightly concerned lest he degenerate to the lowly level of an animal, to indulge in animalistic behavior.

In his formation on the Sixth Day of Creation, Adam's body was "kneaded [like a dough] from the [earth of the] ground" (Sanhedrin 38b) into which G-d implanted a divine "soul" to elevate and uplift him from a purely materialistic existence. In-other-words, Adam's curious description of the "challah of the world" (Bereishis Rabbah 14:1) points at his exalted status that rests upon his ability to sanctify himself and the world around him just as the portion of challah is sanctified to G-d before partaking of the rest of the bread.

It is true that this task "with the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread" would require wrestling the

stubborn earth to elicit the latent holiness within. But do this he must - until he can declare G-d in the universe as evident within the blessing on bread produced by man, proclaiming G-d with the words: "hamotzei lechem min ha'aretz, the One who brings forth bread from the ground" (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 167:2).

It is appropriate how, like man as king over the creatures, bread is similarly elevated above everything else.

Bread is itself a symbol of kingship. When Boaz gave Ruth "bread" (Ruth 2:14) he symbolized how she was deserving of siring kings (Shabbos 113b). It is not coincidental that King David, descendant of Ruth, came from "Beis Lechem" (Bethlehem) that literally translates as "House of Bread". The most prominent and "king" of all foods, bread has a separate blessing of its own. It is the basis of the meal (breaking bread) which is typically eaten first and afterwards there is the biblical obligation to recite "birchas hamazon, blessing after the Meal".

This, then, provides an additional dimension of the symbolism of challah. Lest man forget how he is the "challah" and "king" over the lower world, his diet is distinctive to that of the other beasts.

His goal is to always be the "breadwinner": to grapple with the "ground" and to bring forth its "bread" and spend his energies to ensure the sanctification of G-d in the world. The course is presented by Osher Chaim Levene, author of SET IN STONE (2004: Targum) about the meaning of mitzvah observance and PEOPLE OF THE BOOK (2007: Targum) about the biblical personalities. A London-based writer and educator, he learned at the Gateshead and Mir Yeshivas, holds a Bachelor of Science (Honors) business degree from London's City University, and is a Member of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors.