

“Why I baked 400 Challos for Rosh Hashana”

Rabbi Antine - Rosh Hashana 5781

This year, the weeks leading up to Rosh Hashana felt very different than in previous years. A rabbinic friend of mine said it best when talking about this year's Rosh Hashana prep - "It was 90% logistics and only 10% content." On a normal year, it is the reverse. In the month leading up to Rosh Hashana, I delve into the big themes of the holiday season: repentance, Jewish memory, the role of ritual. I study books of philosophy, sections of the Talmudic tractate dealing with Rosh Hashana and study Teshuva treatises like "Gates of Repentance" of R' Yonah of Gerona and "Lights of Repentance" by HaRav Kook. While some of the time is spent on determining who is davening and what time services are, that is at most 10% of my time. 90 percent of my preparation time is spent learning the deep spiritual and philosophical themes of the holiday and figuring out how to share them with our shul.

This year, it was the exact opposite. While of course we have an incredible Executive Director and staff to help navigate these issues, all of our hands needed to be on deck. So what that meant was that instead of sitting and preparing with books, I spent multiple hours with the tent company, figuring out which trees had to be cut in order to set them up, literally schlepping chairs and tables (not only for Rosh Hashana but for all of our outdoor minyanim), putting together hundreds of Rosh Hashana kits - and perhaps the craziest thing I have ever done - baking more than 400 challos!

Many hours were spent learning too - but largely in order to figure out what parts of davening could be skipped in order to accommodate multiple shifts of people. In other words, the learning was for the sake of logistics, too!

Out of all of the logistical and physical preparations for this year's High Holidays, baking 400 challos was by far the most important. Why in the world would I spend so much time baking challah?! Every Rosh Hashana (and oftentimes on other holidays), I try to connect to past relatives. Usually I try to emulate my great/great/great Grandfather Yehoshua Halevi Epstein, who was the rabbi of a small town near Gomel Belarus (White Russia) in the early 1800's. I imagine what he did in the weeks leading up to Rosh Hashana. I try to connect to him as I imagine how he led his kehilla through selichot and what seforim he learned to inspire his community.

But this year I find myself connecting to a different great great grandfather. My grandmother's grandfather was Moishe Dovid Shafran, a Lubavitcher chosid, who owned a bakery in Gomul in the early 1900's. While he may have spent time learning Chassidus, I am fairly certain that he spent most of his time before Rosh Hashana, his hands sticky with dough, trying to make as many challos as possible to help his kehilla bring in the new year.

This year, many of our members will be missing shul for the first time in their lives. Even for those who are coming to our minyanim, it will be almost impossible to deliver a scholarly meaningful talk while everyone is wearing masks and most people are outside and subject to the unpredictable weather. I found myself wanting to support and sustain our members through something physical. I wanted to bake everyone a Challah.

I wanted to focus on delicious bread and, working with our amazing staff and volunteers, I wanted to help make the davening conditions as comfortable and safe as possible for everyone who was able to attend.

Yes 90 percent of my rabbinic preparation for this year has been logistics. But I would say, it's been the holiest logistics job imaginable!

This tension (content vs. logistics, Yehoshua Halevi the Rabbi vs. Moishe Dovid the Baker, writing sermons vs. baking challah) comes up in an interesting way when analyzing the primary focal point of Rosh Hashana. In Judaism, holidays fall on a spectrum of Shul-based holiday to Home-based holiday. Pesach is off the charts on the home-based end of the spectrum and Yom Kippur is way on the other side being almost exclusively a shul-based holiday. Where does Rosh Hashana fall? If you just read the Pesukim in the Torah and the Mishna in Rosh Hashana, you would get the sense that it is a Temple/shul based holiday. All the action (shofar blowing, Musaf Amidah with 3 sections of Malchiyot, Zichronot and Shofarot) takes place at shul. True, Rosh Hashana, like any Yom Tov, would have obligatory meals at home, but the meals would have no special content.

In the post-Talmudic era, however, something interesting happens. The halachic authorities pick up on an obscure gemara in Horayot 12a.

"Now that you have said that a sign/omen is a [correct] matter, truly a man should accustom himself to eat/look at squash, beans, leeks, beets and dates on Rosh Hashanah."

It may seem like a simple line, alluding to the special foods of Rosh Hashana. But the other practices described in the same section are not exactly universally practiced in Judaism. A previous in that section says:

"And one who seeks to conduct a business venture and wishes to know if he will succeed or if he will not succeed, let him raise a rooster. If the rooster grows fat and healthy, he will succeed"

I don't think most of us base our business decisions on whether or not a designated rooster grows fat. Yet, many of us participate in the simanim (or omens) on the first night of Rosh Hashana.

The Jewish appetite for more food rituals only then increases through the generations. Jacob ben Asher (The author of the Tur, 13th century Toledo) tells us that in Germany the custom was to eat apples in honey (interesting that this custom is not mentioned in the Talmud) and that in Provence the custom was to eat the head of a lamb and say that "we should be like the head and not the tail!" "A third custom says that we should eat the head of a male ram to remember the ram of Isaac. (I have a hard enough time convincing my vegetarian wife and my (almost) vegan daughter to have the head of a fish on the table. I am not even going to try the

head of a lamb or ram!). The apples in honey lead to challah in honey and then numerous challah shapes (round, ladder, hand) are added to the mix. All of these customs eventually turn into a full blown Rosh Hashana seder that is practiced in many Sephardic communities, and popularized across the Jewish world in the last few decades.

So what is happening here? Why are the medieval rabbinic authorities taking obscure practices from the Gemara and inserting them into Rosh Hashana dinner? Isn't Rosh Hashanah already full of content? There are hundreds of pages of tefilot and 100 shofar blasts. Did we really need to eat some obscure food at dinner?

The answer is that we absolutely needed it. We needed the food rituals because Judaism is about the mind and the stomach. It is about Torah but also about real life. It is about philosophy and spirituality but also about feeding those who are hungry. And whenever there is a risk that Judaism moves too much in the direction of the mind over the body (too much towards my great grandfather Rabbi Yehoshua Halevi Epstein and not enough of my great grandfather Moishe Dovid the Baker) then halacha and minhag pull us back..

I am so grateful for this balance, especially this year. I am sure that when Rosh Hashana comes and I actually have an encounter with the deep philosophical truths about G-ds sovereignty, Teshuva, Jewish memory and Revelation; i will be inspired and elevated. But as I prepare for Rosh Hashana in this most challenging and unprecedented year, my soul is not looking for lofty ideas and answers. My soul craves to be nourished and to nourish. It wants to know that a tremendous group of volunteers spent countless hours making sure our shul would be safe and ready for me to have a High Holiday experience whether inside, outside or at home. It wants some good comfort food and some very sweet challah! And since I know that this is what my soul craves this year, it is what I wanted to give to the members of our shul. So I spent 90% of my time on logistics and whatever other time I had I was in the kitchen (channeling my great grandfather Moshe Dovid the Baker) and baking a challah for each and every one of you.

One more thing about the challah! The recipe called for ¼ cup of honey for every 5 lbs of flour (which made approximately 10 challos). Everytime I poured in that ¼ of a cup, I would scan the shul membership list and focus on 10 families as I poured in the honey, blessing those families with a sweet and healthy year. And then I would add a little more honey just to give those families a little more sweetness for this coming year!

May Hashem bless all of us with sweet, happy and healthy new year!

P.S. Many of you have asked me for my challah recipe. It is adapted from a recipe from Esty Wolbe. Here it is! With a name like "Best Challah Ever", you cannot go wrong.

Ingredients	Instructions
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● 4 Tbsp active dry yeast● 5 cups warm water● 2 Tbsp sugar● 5 lbs bread flour● 1 cup sugar● 2 Tbsp salt● 3 eggs● ¼ cup honey (plus a teaspoon!)● 1¼ cup vegetable oil	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Combine dry yeast, warm water and 2 Tbsp sugar in a glass bowl and set aside to proof 10 minutes.2. In a very large bowl, mix 1 cup sugar and 2 tbsp salt. Add the eggs, honey and oil. Mix well.3. Add almost all of the flour to the large bowl4. Once the yeast is proofed, add to the flour mixture and mix until all ingredients are well incorporated. Transfer dough to working surface and knead until smooth and elastic, adding more flour as needed.5. Return the dough to the large bowl greased with oil (don't be stingy!). Turn dough over so that oil covers entire surface of dough. cover with plastic wrap or a towel. Set aside to rise for 1 hour and 30 minutes in a warm, draft-free spot.6. Preheat the oven to 350°F.7. Uncover the dough and "take challah" then portion and braid your challahs. Allow to rise 10 minutes then egg wash. If making 8 loaves, bake for about 42 minutes. If making 10 loaves, bake for about 38 minutes (depending on your oven).8. Allow to cool completely before storing.