Challah and Hope

“G-d spoke to Moshe saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: ‘At once upon entering the Land to which I am bringing you when you eat from its produce, then you shall offer up a portion to G-d. The first part of your dough, the challah, you shall raise up, just as you raise up a portion from the grain of the threshing floor. The first portion of your kneading you shall raise up to G-d, for all generations’” (Bamidbar 15:17–21).

This section introduces the mitzvah of challah, or “taking the dough.” The Torah presents this mitzvah in the aftermath of the sin of the spies, after Am Yisrael had been condemned to perish in the wilderness and not enter the Promised Land.

The root of the word is probably derived from a stem meaning “first,” for the challah is the first portion of the dough separated before it is baked, and presented to the kohen as a gift. Today, in the absence of a Temple and laws of tahara, the challah is symbolically separated and then disposed of respectfully, to preserve the memory of the original rite. Like the meal offerings and libations the Torah speaks of at the beginning of the chapter (15:1-16), the mitzvah of challah is also contingent upon entering the Land of Israel, indicating that the judgment meted out to the generation of the wilderness would one day be rescinded.

But in contrast to the meal offerings and libations, the mitzvah of challah speaks of an unusual immediacy: “At once upon entering the Land to which I am bringing you when you eat from its produce, then you shall offer up a portion to G-d,” is more direct than “When you enter the Land, you shall offer up a portion to G-d, the portion to G-d.” The first part of your produce, then you shall offer up a portion to G-d. The first part of your dough, the challah, you shall raise up, just as you raise up a portion from the grain of the threshing floor. The first portion of your kneading you shall raise up to G-d, for all generations” (Sifre Bamidbar Chapter 110).

In other words, Am Yisrael were not obligated to fulfill all the other Land-based agricultural commandments – such as the separation of tithes from their produce or the designation of the first fruits – immediately upon crossing the Jordan and entering Canaan. First, they would have to conquer the Land and settle it, a process that took a number of years. However, they were obligated to fulfill the mitzvah of challah as soon as they partook of the Land’s produce, even though their secure settlement of its soil may have been many years off.

Although the mitzvah of challah is a function of geography because it is contingent upon Am Yisrael entering Canaan, it is not Land-dependent in the narrow halachic sense. Challah stands in contrast to most other agricultural mitzvot, for only produce grown in the Land of Israel must be tithed and only the farmer in Israel must abstain from the planting of diverse seeds, etc. But after we enter the Land, anyone who kneads dough, whether they live in Israel or not, must fulfill the mitzvah of challah. In other words, challah connects us to the Land of Israel even though we are not yet there.

Thus, the mitzvah of challah provided profound solace to Jews throughout history who were separated from their Land. To the generation of the wilderness, the Land may have seemed far off, but challah suggested the Land was relevant even prior to its formal settlement. And for the many generations forced to live exiled from the Land, challah reminded us that one could still be symbolically connected to its holy soil even in the absence of possessing formal deed. In both situations, the point was the same: to gently remind us that living in the Land of Israel was, and remains, the goal.