

Service-Learning Centered Text Study

The Challahs in the Ark

Told by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner,
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"The following story is told to me by my teacher, Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi.

A long time ago in the northern part of Israel, in the town of Tsefat, the richest man in town was sleeping, as usual, through Shabbat morning services. Every now and then, he would almost wake up, trying to get comfortable on the hard wooden bench, and then sink back into a deep sleep. One morning he awoke just long enough to hear the chanting of the Torah verses from Leviticus 24:5-6 in which God instructs the children of Israel to place twelve loaves of challah on a table in the ancient wilderness tabernacle.

When services ended, the wealthy man woke up, not realizing that all he had heard was the Torah reading about how God wanted twelve loaves of challah. He thought that God had come to him in his sleep and had asked him to personally bring twelve loaves of challah to God. The rich man felt honored that God should single him out, but he also felt a little foolish. Of all the things God could want from a person, twelve loaves of challah did not seem very important. But who was he to argue with God. He went home and baked the bread.

Upon returning to the synagogue, he decided the only proper place for his holy gift was alongside the Torah scrolls in the ark. He carefully arranged the loaves and said to God, "Thank you for telling me what you want of me. Pleasing you makes me very happy." Then he left.

No sooner had he gone than the poorest Jew in the town, the synagogue janitor, entered the sanctuary. All alone, he spoke to God. "O Lord, I am so poor. My family is starving; we have nothing to eat. Unless you perform a miracle for us, we will surely perish." Then, as was his custom, he walked around the room to

tidy it up. When he ascended the bimah and opened the ark, there before him were twelve loaves of challah! "A miracle!" exclaimed the poor man, "I had no idea you worked so quickly! Blessed are You, O God, who answers our prayers." Then he ran home to share the bread with his family.

Minutes later, the rich man returned to the sanctuary, curious to know whether or not God ate the challah. Slowly he ascended the bimah, opened the ark, and saw that the challot were gone. "Oh, my God!" He shouted, "You really ate my challot! I thought you were teasing. This is wonderful. You can be sure that I'll bring another twelve loaves – with raisins in them too!"

The following week, the rich man brought a dozen loaves to the synagogue and again left them in the ark. Minutes later, the poor man entered the sanctuary. "God, seven loaves we ate, four we sold, and one we gave to charity. But now, nothing is left and, unless you do another miracle, we surely will starve." He approached the ark and slowly opened its doors. "Another miracle!" he cried, "Twelve more loaves, and with raisins too! Thank you God; this is wonderful!"

The challah exchange became a weekly ritual that continued for many years. And, like most rituals that become routine, neither man gave it much thought. Then, one day, the Rabbi, detained in the sanctuary longer than usual, watched the rich man place the dozen loaves in the ark and the poor man redeem them.

The Rabbi called the two men together and told them what they had been doing.

"I see," said the rich man sadly, "God doesn't really eat challah."

"I understand," said the poor man, "God hasn't been baking challah for me after all."

They both feared that now God no longer would be present in their lives.

Then the Rabbi asked them to look at their hands. "Your hands," he said to the rich man, "are the hands of God giving food to the poor. And your hands," said the Rabbi to the poor man, "also are the hands of God, receiving gifts from the rich. So you see, God can still be present in your lives. Continue baking and continue taking. Your hands are the hands of God."

The Miser of the Town- Matan B'Seter

Adapted by Susan Tessel

In the 17th century, in Poland, the richest Jew in Krakow, Reb Shimon, was unfortunately known as a miser. When a person found himself in desperate need of money, he would go to the Miser's home to beg for money. But the request always fell on deaf ears, and the poor person would invariably leave empty handed. Each time the poor person hoped Reb Shimon would change his mind, but he never did. They tried everything!! People tried to humiliate the miser into giving. They tried screaming and calling him names. Nothing worked. The inhabitants of the city hated Reb Shimon, and when he passed in the street, people pointed him out and said, "Look, there goes the miser!"

When the Miser died, The Chevra Kadisha, the Hebrew Burial Society, nearly refused to take care of him. Its members wanted to dig a hole in the ground and throw the body into it. They grudgingly gave him a decent burial – only because they were obligated to do so. He was buried at the edge of the cemetery, in a small corner, in a place left for outcasts of the Jewish community. The miser of the town, Reb Shimon, was buried in disgrace.

When Friday came, something strange happened. Early in the morning a poor man came knocking at the rabbi's door. "Every Friday, for years and years, I received an unmarked envelope at my door step, containing enough money to buy food for Shabbat," the man explained. "But this week, nothing arrived." The rabbi gave the man a bit of money and sent him on his way.

A few minutes later, another man came knocking on the rabbi's door. All day, a stream of poor people knocked at the rabbi's door, and the same story was told. One by one, every single poor person in town came to the Rabbi's door with the same story: For the first time in years, the anonymous envelope dropped off at their door steps did not arrive. The Rabbi was overwhelmed with requests. It was so busy, that at first, the rabbi did not realize what had changed. Gradually, as the day progressed, the rabbi realized who had been secretly supporting the entire town all these years. The Miser never told anyone about his philanthropy. No one knew!! Reb Shimon did not care about the recognition, because he didn't want anyone to feel indebted to him. The rabbi thought back at the treatment of

the town towards the miser. He was embarrassed and ashamed. Even the location of his burial spot was disrespectful and inappropriate for such a righteous person. The town had relegated him to the corner of the cemetery. But, how could the rabbi rectify this, and give the miser the honor he deserved? There was not much he could do to rectify the situation.

After much soul searching, the rabbi knew what he had to do. He instructed his family and alerted his community to bury him right next to the holy Miser of Krakow when he died. They honored his request, happy to rectify in some small way the poor treatment of this righteous man. A visit to the old Krakow cemetery, even today, would reveal the rabbi and the miser, buried together in a small corner of the cemetery.