

LECHEM MISHNEH

The Whole Story

A Baraisa (*Menachos* 12b) teaches that if one of the loaves of *lechem hapanim* broke before the loaves were removed from the *Shulchan*, all the bread of the *lechem hapanim* is invalid. This derives from the superfluous word **הוּא** – it is, in the Torah's description of *lechem hapanim*, which states that "it is holy of holies among HaShem's fire-offerings" (*Vayikra* 24:9), defining each loaf as a significant unit. A broken loaf is considered deficient and therefore invalid. The Netziv wishes to prove from here that a loaf broken into two would likewise be invalid for *lechem mishneh*, even if no part of it is missing (*Meishiv Davar* 1:21). Why is it so crucial that the *lechem mishneh* loaves should be whole? The source of the concept of *lechem mishneh* is found in connection with the miraculous appearance of two *omer* portions of manna in the *Midbar* before each Shabbos. We take two loaves of *lechem misheh* to symbolize this double portion, but *omer* is a measure of quantity, so what is the source that they must be whole loaves?

TWELVE LOAVES

Some have the custom of taking twelve loaves for *lechem mishneh*, based on kabbalistic sources that compare *lechem mishneh* to the twelve loaves of *lechem hapanim*. Many braid their *challos* with six strands of dough to symbolize twelve pieces between the two loaves. My mother o.h. made *challos* from twelve individual buns held together by a surrounding strip of dough, as she had seen her mother do (see picture).

BREAKING BREAD

The *halachos* of *lechem mishneh* are found in *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 274, headed *Hilchos Betzias HaPas*, the laws of breaking the bread. There is a similar English expression, "to break bread," used universally in many languages, meaning to join together in a meal. The origin of this expression dates back to an ancient social practice of sharing a meal to establish peaceful relations. A whole loaf was placed on the table, and the host broke it, distributing pieces to those seated around the table. Thus, the significance of the whole loaf is to initiate a special meal, and this would appear to be the meaning of *betzias hapas*. *Shulchan Aruch* says that one breaks bread on two loaves, but the *Rema* inserts the word "*sheleimim*," whole, next to "loaves."

TORAH OBLIGATION OR RABBINICAL?

There is a divergence of opinion among the *poskim* as to whether *lechem mishneh* is a Torah obligation or a Rabbinical obligation. The *Taz* rules in *Hilchos Chanukah* (*Orach Chaim* 678:2) that in a situation of shortage, *lechem mishneh* takes precedence over the purchase of Chanukah lights because it is a Torah obligation. The *Aruch HaShulchan* (274:1) derives the Torah status of the double loaves at the Shabbos table from the superfluous words "*lechem mishneh*" in the *pasuk* (*Shemos* 16:22). Since they are designated as *lechem*, it follows that they are required to have the same characteristics as *lechem hapanim* or *lachmei todah*, which have to be whole loaves. However, the *Magen Avraham* (254:23) argues that the Biblical reference is merely an *asmachta*. Now, if our *lechem mishneh* requirement derives from the *pasuk*, then it would have to comply with the Torah definition of *lechem* as found in connection with *lechem hapanim* and *lachmei todah*, and the loaves would have to be whole. But if the Torah reference is just an *asmachta*, a symbolic comparison, then the loaves being whole would not be essential.

WHAT MAKES THE MEAL SPECIAL?

The Talmudic source for *lechem mishneh* appears in two places, *Berachos* 39b and *Shabbos* 117b, both of which cite Rabbi Abba as saying that on Shabbos a person is required to break bread over two loaves. The source for this is cited as the *pasuk* (*Shemos* 16:22), where the manna is called *lechem mishneh*. Although the simple translation of the word is to break, Rashi translates **לְבַצּוּ** as meaning to bless and says that one should initiate the meal with the blessing of *hamotzi* on two loaves. The Gemara in *Chullin* 7b remarks about Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair: **מִיְמִיוֹ לֹא**, which Rashi translates as he never said the *hamotzi* blessing on a piece of bread that was not his. We find the expression in *Eichah* (2:17) **בְּצֻע אֲמַרְתָּ**, where the word **בְּצֻע** has the meaning of completing his statement rather than breaking. Thus, according to Rashi, the blessing serves two functions: the regular *berachah* on bread plus the initiation of the meal with blessed double loaves. The *Rif* (*Pesachim* 25b) discusses the broken *lechem oni matzah* on Pesach and in connection with the rest of the year he cites Rabbi Abba's above statement that one must have two whole loaves. It would appear that his text of the Gemara had the added word "whole."



Braiding a six-stranded challah.



A twelve-bun challah

CUT BOTH LOAVES?

Both the above sources continue to report that Rav Kahanah held two loaves while reciting the blessing on Shabbos but broke only one. Rav Ashi explains that two loaves are held because they “gathered a double portion,” and it is not written that they broke a double portion, implying that only one of the loaves needs to be cut. The Gemara then cites the practice of Rabbi Zeira, who, after reciting *hamotzi*, would break a large enough piece to last the whole meal - בָּצַע - לְכֹלֵיה שִׁירוֹתֶיה. These three words appear in the heading of Rashi’s commentary, but our Gemara text has a slightly different version of these three words, namely, בָּצַע אֲפָלָה שִׁירוֹתֶיה. The Rashba interprets this to mean that Rabbi Zeira broke the whole meal, i.e., both the *lechem mishneh* loaves. The Shulchan Aruch rules that one holds both *challot* for the *berachah* and cuts only the lower one, but the Bi’ur HaGra rules that, in accordance with the Rashba (following Rabbi Zeira) one cuts both loaves. The Rashba cites a Midrash that the concept of pairs is found in several Shabbos *mitzvos* besides *lechem mishneh*: two candles, *zachor* and *shamor*, and two *kevasim*, lambs (*Teshuvos HaRashba* 7:130).

THE FUNCTION OF LECHEM MISHNEH

This *machlokes* would appear to hinge on the two different understandings of *betzias hapas* outlined above. According to Rashi, the *mitzvah* is the blessing over the two loaves, and it is therefore not necessary to eat from both. One leaves the second loaf for the next day in the same way as the second *omer* was left for the next day. According to the Rashba, the meal attains its significance by starting the *seudah* by eating double bread, and therefore, it follows that one needs to eat from both loaves.

EATING FROM THE LECHEM MISHNEH

The Levush (167:15) writes that those seated at the Shabbos table may eat from their own rolls after the host has eaten from his *lechem mishneh*. The Shulchan Aruch HaRav (274:4) disagrees, stating that this applies only when each person has two rolls; otherwise, everyone must eat a piece from the host’s *lechem mishneh*. This may hinge on the two approaches outlined above. The Levush follows Rashi in holding that the essential feature of *lechem mishneh* is the blessing; therefore, once the host is *motzi* everyone with the *berachah* on *lechem mishneh*, they have fulfilled that *mitzvah* and can then eat their own roll. The second approach views *lechem mishneh* as initiating the whole meal, and thus it is essential to eat from it.

THE FAMILY MAKE THEIR OWN BERACHAH

Many chassidim have the practice that the host makes *hamotzi* on *lechem mishneh* and distributes pieces to family members, but each makes his own *bircas hamotzi*. The Eshel Avraham (Butchatch, siman 274) writes that family members can fulfil their obligation with the host’s *berachah* on *lechem mishneh* even if they listen before washing their hands and make their own *hamotzi* later. He explains that the host’s *berachah* has the dual function of *bircas hamotzi* and of a *berachah* on *lechem mishneh*. The latter *mitzvah* does not require a personal action but serves to provide special designation to the meal, and therefore, the principle of *shelichus*, agency, can apply. The host acts as agent for the *mitzvah* of *lechem mishneh* but not for *bircas hamotzi*.

OBLIGATION OF WOMEN

Rav Moshe Stern (Debretzin – *Be’er Moshe* 5:75) emphasizes the importance of women complying with the *lechem mishneh* requirement. The Ran (*Shabbos* 117b) cites Rabbeinu Tam, who holds that women are obligated in this *mitzvah* because they were also involved in the miracle of manna. The Ran comments that women’s obligation stems from the linkage of *shamor vezachor*, noting that although women may be exempt from time-bound *mitzvos*, this linkage equates positive and negative *mitzvos*. This disagreement reflects the dispute over whether *lechem mishneh* is a Torah obligation, since involvement in the miracle would produce only a rabbinical obligation. The Mordechai (*Megillah* 780) notes that this principle applies only to rabbinical obligations, such as *Megillah*, *Chanukah*, and the Four Cups. Rav Stern justifies the practice of Admorim whose wives are not present at the Shabbos *tisch*. In the same way as *shelichus* can extend the *lechem mishneh mitzvah* to those who have not washed yet, it can also be extended to the Admor’s wife who prepared the two loaves, thinking that her husband will act as agent on her behalf when he makes the *berachah*. However, Rav Stern does not recommend this practice for others and cites the Chasam Sofer, who is particular that family members do not make their own *bircas hamotzi*. Perhaps one can add that the idea of dividing *bircas hamotzi* between its two functions would only work according to Rashi, who held that the *berachah* served a secondary function of the *lechem mishneh* obligation which was not an essential part of the meal.