

Show Me the Bread
Parashat Terumah
By Rabbi Jason Miller

This week's Torah portion opens with the repeated instructions for building the Tabernacle, God's physical dwelling place among the Israelite nation. The detailed narrative calls for the creation of the contents of the Tabernacle (*k'lei hamishkan*), including the table that would stand across from the menorah in the Inner Court. Upon this table would be the *lechem panim*, the "showbread" or better defined as "the bread of display," that was to be before God at all times (Exodus 25:30).

According to Bible scholar Nahum Sarna in the JPS Torah Commentary, the Hebrew *lechem panim* has been variously translated, depending on the understanding of *panim*, which usually means "face, presence, or interior." Commentator Ibn Ezra understood it literally that the bread was to be perpetually set out before the Lord. Rashi took the phrase figuratively as "bread fit for dignitaries."

There were to be twelve loaves (two rows of six) on the table at all times, perhaps symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel. The Levitical clan of Kohathites were the ones to bake the bread and then arrange the loaves on the table where they remained untouched for the entire week. On Shabbat the loaves were replaced by freshly baked ones and the old loaves were eaten by the Kohanim (priests) in the holy precincts.

Even if you are on a "low-carb diet" and not eating bread, there are still several lessons for all of us to learn today from the ancient ritual of the *lechem panim* practiced in the Tabernacle and then later in the Temple. Everett Fox, in his commentary on the Torah, explains that the "table and its implements, like some of the other features of the Tabernacle, are holdovers from a more blatantly pagan model, where the gods were seen to be in need of nourishment." While our ancestors employed some of the conventions common throughout the ancient Near East, the fact that the *lechem panim* in the Tabernacle was eaten by the Kohanim was a clear way of differentiating Israelite worship from pagan worship.

This is one unambiguous way for us to understand that God does not desire nor need our gifts of food. Rather, we can nourish God with our acts of lovingkindness, performance of *mitzvot*, tzedakah, and prayer.

In Second Temple times, the baking of the *lechem panim* became the job of Beit Garmu. The Garmu family members were experts in baking this bread in such a manner that it did not become moldy, even after sitting out for six days. They were an interesting group who maintained a family policy to never eat fancy bread, so that no one would accuse Bet Garmu of feasting on the *lechem panim* that they made (Tosefta Yoma 2:5).

The Garmu family understood and were skilled at this tradition. However, they kept their expertise secretive, refusing to teach others how to properly prepare the *lechem panim*. The rabbis of the Mishnah include Beit Garmu among others who refused to pass along the instructions of Jewish ritual to future generations. The memory of these people was to be recalled for disgrace according to the Mishnah (Yoma 3:11).

The lesson for us is that no one person or group of people should hold a monopoly on Jewish tradition or the intricacies of Jewish rituals. We must keep our rich traditions from dying out by practicing "open source" Judaism, providing future generations with the recipe for Jewish living. We are not a secretive religion nor have we ever been. So when you look at the two loaves of challah sitting on your table this Shabbat, serving as memories not only of the double-portion of manna delivered on Shabbat in the desert, but also of the *lechem panim*, consider the importance of bequeathing your family's customs and traditions to the next generation.