**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot**

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This *shiur* is dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky zt"l,

whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev.

May the worldwide dissemination of Torah through the VBM

be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements exemplified the love of

Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.

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Three *Mitzvot* Special to Women, Part 2

*Challa*, *nidda*, and candle-lighting are three *mitzvot* in which women's performance takes precedence over men's. What is the significance of each? How does that help us understand their combined importance?

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In the first part of this series, we saw that the three *mitzvot* reflect a woman’s traditional domestic responsibilities and at the same time form a redemptive unit for women.

Each of the three *mitzvot* also has great independent significance. Let's take a brief look at each and then reexamine how the pieces fit together.

# **Challa**

**The Mitzva** The commandment to separate *challa*, a portion of dough, and offer it to a *kohen* appears in Bemidbar:

Bemidbar 15:17-21 And God spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to the children of Israel and say to them, When you come to the land to which I bring you, and it will be when you eat from the bread of the land, you shall offer an offering to God. Of the first of your kneading you shall offer a roll [*challa*] as an offering, like the offering of the threshing floor so shall you offer it. From the first of your kneading you shall give to God an offering for your generations.

This mitzva applies on a Torah level specifically in the land of Israel, "when you come to the land," at a time when the majority of the Jewish people is settled there. At the present, even in Israel, *challa* is a rabbinic-level mitzva. We separate *challa* from dough made outside of Israel as well, in order to remember the mitzva.[[1]](#footnote-1)

After kneading dough, either before or after its rising, a woman customarily separates an olive-sized clump, and declares *"Harei zo challa*" ("Behold this is *challa*"). Since neither the dough nor the *kohen* of today are in a state of ritual purity that would allow for the *challa's* consumption, the dough is burnt, or wrapped and disposed of.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Because people most frequently prepared bread in the home in honor of Shabbat and Yom Tov, *challa* became the name for the loaves served at these meals. Rema cites a custom to honor Shabbat and Yom Tov by deliberately baking enough dough for them so that a blessing can be made:[[3]](#footnote-3)

Rema OC 242:1 The custom is to knead enough [dough] to meet the measure of *challa* at home, to make from them loaves to break on Shabbat and Yom Tov. This [custom] is a matter of honoring Shabbat and Yom Tov and should not be changed.

We should make an effort to put ourselves in a position to separate *challa* as "a matter of honoring Shabbat."

**Significance** Why should we go out of our way to separate *challa* for Shabbat? Is it just important for Shabbat?

When we give away part of our hard-won produce before partaking of it, we remember that our nourishment really comes from on high and the fruits of the land are rightly God's. This is a message for Shabbat and for all times.

The prophet Yechezkel adds that separating *challa* is a source of blessing for the home:

Yechezkel 44:30 …And the first of your kneading you will give to the *kohen* to set a blessing upon your home.

How does *challa* provide blessing upon the home? *Sefer Ha-chinuch* explains what this means:

Sefer Ha-chinuch 385 Because a person's sustenance is through grains, and most of the world lives on bread, God wanted to give us the merit of a constant mitzva in our bread, so that a blessing rests upon it through the mitzva and our souls receive merit, and the dough becomes food for the body and food for the soul.

Grains are the cornerstone of our diet. By embedding a mitzva in their preparation, God invites us to make our meals spiritually significant. A person who separates *challa* enables our food to become "food for the body and food for the soul." Through this mitzva, women take precedence in infusing eating, one of the most basic physical aspects of life, with spirituality.

Modern Israeli columnist Aya Kremerman writes powerfully about this:[[4]](#footnote-4)

Aya Kremerman, "What's So Special About the Mitzva of Separating Challa?" I say: "From this matter, from this mud, that I sometimes feel that my life resembles, I connect to You." This is the moment in which I push everything to the side – the diapers, the laundry, the hungry children – and connect from within.

When she separates challa, she "connects from within" to the spiritual kernel of her physically demanding life.

# ***Nidda***

**The Mitzva** To understand the conceptual aspects of *nidda,* let's look at the mitzva as presented in the Torah. (The practice *of* *nidda* today derives from the Biblical law, but is much more complex.)

The number seven in the Torah represents the natural world.[[5]](#footnote-5) Often, seven days is a period of transition from ritual impurity to ritual purity.[[6]](#footnote-6) According to Torah law, a menstruating woman must observe a seven-day period of ritual impurity from the onset of bleeding, after which she purifies herself in the *mikveh*. (Today, every menstruating woman must also observe the seven clean days, which the Torah originally prescribed in more limited circumstances.)

Vayikra 15:19 And a woman when she will be aflow, blood will be her flow in her flesh. Seven days will she be in her *nidda* [separation] and all who touch her will be ritually impure until the evening.

Although many of the laws of ritual purity do not apply today without the Temple, *nidda* laws remain in practice.

**Significance** What is *nidda* for? Rabbi Meir explains:

Nidda 31a Rabbi Meir says: Why did the Torah say [a woman is in] *nidda* for seven [days]? Because he [the husband] gets accustomed to her and becomes tired of her. The Torah said, she should be ritually impure for seven days in order that she be as beloved to her husband as when she entered the *chuppa* [wedding canopy].

Rabbi Meir believes that men can tire of their wives and take them for granted, and that *nidda* can help men value their wives. Although Rabbi Meir speaks from a male perspective, *nidda* can help a woman appreciate her husband as well. Much as the seven-day week creates a balance between work and rest, the seven-days of *nidda* create a balance between a couple's physical closeness and their personal space and independence.

Both members of a couple work together to observe *nidda* prohibitions. Naturally, a woman takes the lead because her body is involved. But beyond that, Halacha places complete trust in a woman's knowledge of her body and of the relevant laws. The *midrash halacha* says as much about a woman's count of clean days:

Sifra, Metzora 5 "And she counts for her[self]"— to herself [and not for a court of law].

A woman's word on *nidda* matters has full legal force; she needs no outside confirmations or attestations.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Through faithful observance of *nidda*, a married woman's natural cycles combine with Torah law to set the contours of the intimate relationship she shares with her husband. Halacha puts each woman in charge of making this happen, without any second guessing.

*Nidda* observance creates a sacred context for marital intimacy, with women taking a leading role.

# ***Hadlakat Ha-ner***

Lighting Shabbat candles fulfills three Halachic principles, each of which bears significance: *kevod Shabbat* (honoring Shabbat), *oneg Shabbat* (taking pleasure in Shabbat) and *shalom bayit* (peace in the home).

When something matters to us, we prepare for it. We thus fulfill the rabbinic mitzva of *kevod Shabbat* by preparing for Shabbat, and Rambam mentions the Shabbat candle in this context:

Mishneh Torah, Laws of Shabbat 30:5 And there should be a lit candle and a table set for eating and a bed made, for all these are for *kevod Shabbat*.

Once the candles are lit, they facilitate the rabbinic mitzva of *oneg Shabbat*.[[8]](#footnote-8) Before the electric light, candles were the main source of home lighting. Eating by candlelight is much more pleasant than sitting in the dark:

Tosafot Shabbat 25b s.v. hadlakat …For it is an obligation to dine in proximity to the candle, because of *oneg* [*Shabbbat*].

Shabbat candles also create *shalom bayit*, peace in the home. In fact, the term *shalom bayit* appears in the Talmud only within the discussion of the household's candle:

Shabbat 23b [If one lacks sufficient funds for both, which takes precedence,] the [Shabbat] candle of his home or [wine for] Kiddush? The candle of his home takes precedence because of *shalom bayit*.

Shabbat candles take precedence over wine for kiddush because light infuses the home with peace.[[9]](#footnote-9) Practically, it prevents us from discomfort or from tripping over each other at night—and fighting about it.[[10]](#footnote-10) On a deeper level, it transforms the home environment, perhaps because light symbolizes Torah and *mitzvot*[[11]](#footnote-11) as well as a person's soul.[[12]](#footnote-12)

A traditional prayer for women lighting candles, recited in Turkey, expresses this idea:[[13]](#footnote-13)

Prayer Before Lighting Shabbat Candles, trans. from Ladino May it be Thy will, Lord our God and God of our fathers, that You increase the light of joy in my home and blessing and peace and a good and bright life, and that You light our souls with the light of Your face, and that You grant peace to our family.

Candle-lighting is a priority because it reflects and shapes our relationship to Shabbat and to each other.[[14]](#footnote-14) If a woman is present, she lights the Shabbat candles even if a man wants to light them. A woman has priority creating the Shabbat experience and setting a peaceful tone in the home.

# **In the Home**

Rabbinic traditions develop the idea that the three *mitzvot* correspond to the physical and spiritual foundations of the Jewish home. For example, the Talmud lists a lit candle, set table, and made bed as the classic elements of a home prepared for Shabbat.[[15]](#footnote-15) In another passage, it considers the room containing a lamp, table, chair, and bed – such as that the Shunamit woman sets up for Elisha – to be an excellent home.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In describing how Yitzchak finds comfort in Rivka following the loss of his mother Sara, Rashi (paraphrasing a midrash)[[17]](#footnote-17) uses three examples, including a candle and dough, to argue that Rivka grew to resemble Sara when she established herself in her tent:

Rashi, Bereishit 24:67, s.v. *ha-ohelah Sara imo* “Into the tent of Sara his mother” – [Yitzchak] brought Rivka “into the tent,” and she became “Sara his mother,” that is to say, the image of Sara his mother. For the whole time that Sara lived, there was a lit candle from Friday night to Friday night, and a blessing found in the dough, and a cloud bound atop the tent, and when she died they ceased, and when Rivka came they returned.

In his commentary on Rashi, Maharal takes this one step further, explaining that each of these elements corresponds to one of the three *mitzvot*: the "lit candle" corresponds to the mitzva of candle-lighting, the "blessing found in the dough" represents the mitzva of separating *challa*, and the "cloud bound atop the tent" symbolizes the Divine presence that resides with a couple when they keep the laws of *nidda*.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The three *mitzvot* define the home physically and spiritually. The candle, food, and bedroom correspond to the light and peace of Torah, blessed sustenance, and an elevated intimate relationship. For our sages, a woman's identity is intertwined with the home,[[19]](#footnote-19) and she defines it through the three *mitzvot*. The Lubavitcher Rebbe expands on this point:[[20]](#footnote-20)

Rav Menachem M. Schneerson, "The Standing of Women in the Light of Judaism" The three mitzvot mentioned are the three pillars upon which are based Jewish home and family life. The fact that they were given over especially to the woman proves that she was granted unusual responsibility and unusual merit in life, not just with respect to her family, but also with respect to the entire Jewish nation, which is of course composed of the aggregate of all individual Jewish families.

Responsibility for these *mitzvot* is both "unusual responsibility and unusual merit," with national implications.

## ● What if a woman does not want to be associated with the home? (See Appendix One.)

How is this relevant to single people? Discussions of these *mitzvot* often center around the married couple. But there are and always have been a wide variety of Jewish homes.

The obligation to light Shabbat candles applies to every type of Jewish household, including those run by unmarried men and women. Every Jew must separate *challa* when preparing a dough that meets the halachic criteria. While the laws of *nidda* bring sanctity to the marriage relationship, they also mandate abstinence for those who are not married and help bring sanctity to their daily lives.

Whatever our family or home structure might be*,* women's precedence in these *mitzvot* gives women a primary role in defining the Jewish home.

# **Accompanying Prayers**

Women customarily recite individual prayers when separating *challa*, immersing in the *mikveh*, and lighting candles. In his commentary to the Torah, Rabbeinu Bachya explains the rationale for this practice:

Rabbeinu Bachya, Shemot 19 It is fitting for a woman to pray to God, may He be blessed, at the time of lighting the Shabbat candle – which is a mitzva incumbent upon her – that God give her descendants who shine with the light of Torah, for prayer is more heard at the time of performing a mitzva.

Rabbeinu Bachya teaches us to pray for things that matter to us specifically "at the time of performing a mitzva." The merit we receive from performing the mitzva may help God hear our prayer.

Earlier we referred to the Talmudic tradition that scholarly children come as reward for care with lighting Shabbat candles. For this reason, Rabbeinu Bachya encourages women to pray for "descendants who shine with the light of Torah" at candle-lighting. Many mothers do in fact pray then for their children, but there is no obligation to do so.

Each individual is free to decide what to pray for when she (or he) lights candles or separates *challa*. Rav Yeshaya Horowitz (Shelah, late sixteenth to early seventeenth century Europe and Eretz Yisrael) suggests reciting the story and prayer of Chana, from the beginning of *Sefer Shemuel* I until 2:10.[[21]](#footnote-21) Chana's narrative begins with the story of Shmuel's conception and birth, but her prayer conveys a larger message about God's redemptive power in our lives.

A woman separating *challa*, immersing in the *mikveh*, or lighting candles can pray for whatever redemption she seeks. The combination of prayer and the three *mitzvot* connects the lives of Jewish women across the world and through time.

● Appendix One: What if a woman does not want to be associated with the home?

*Many of us (women and men) have conflicting feelings about this association between women and the home. How much of a role do social norms play in constructing women's and men's responsibility for the home? Is domesticity essentially feminine? Don't many women flourish outside the home? Shouldn't men take on increasing responsibility for home life?*

*In practice, Halacha leaves room for a wide variety of approaches to shaping home life. Even so, women's priority in the three* mitzvot *recognizes the great influence women often wield at home. The* mitzvot *translate that influence into halachic terms of mitzva and merit, with broad spiritual implications.*

*Home, and the relationships that we have to each other and to God within it, dramatically affects our experience of Torah. In many realms in Halacha, men take center stage; in this central realm, women do.*

1. Rambam *Hilchot Bikurim* 5:5,7 We are only obligated in challa in the land of Israel, as it is said, "When you eat from the bread of the land," etc., …and at the time that all of Israel are there, as it is said, "When you come," the coming of all of you and not the coming of [only] a small amount of you. Therefore challa in Israel at this time … is only rabbinic… We separate challa outside of Israel on a rabbinic level in order that the law of challa not be forgotten from Israel… [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is not meant to be a comprehensive halachic guide to separating *challa*. Customs and measurements vary. For more information, see here (checked 16/2/17): <http://www.star-k.org/articles/articles/1197/when-you-need-to-knead-a-guide-to-hafrashas-challa/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dough containing at least 1.67 kg of flour (about 3.7 lbs) is subject to the mitzva of *challa*. If the dough contains at least 2.4 kg of flour (about 5.3 lbs), a blessing is made prior to the separation: "To separate *challa* from the dough,” “*le-hafrish challa min ha-isa.*" [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Aya Kremerman, "[Ma Meyuchad Be-mitzvat Hafrashat Challa?](https://www.hidabroot.org/article/230889)" *Be-sheva*, 14 Shevat 5778. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Maharal, Netzach Yisrael 19 Therefore they said that completeness of this world is only until seven, for this world is the world of nature, which was created in the seven days of Creation. And for the days of the Messiah of eight... [which represents that which is] above nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Other examples include impurity from a corpse (*Bemidbar* 19:14) and the purifying procedure from *tzara'at* (*Vayikra* 13:4-6). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Tosafists even suggested that the general principle of accepting only one witness to establish ritual matters, as opposed to the usual requirement for two, is derived from our reliance on a woman's account of her progress towards ritual purity:

Tosafot Gittin 2b s.v. ed echad And whence do we know that a single witness is [sufficiently] trustworthy in ritual matters? And one can say that we learn it from a *nidda*… [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See also *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Shabbat* 5:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In the absence of wine, kiddush can be made over bread. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Rashi, Shabbat 23b s.v. shelom beito …the members of his household are uncomfortable sitting in the dark. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Mishlei 6:23 For a candle is a mitzva and Torah is light. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Mishlei 20:27 The candle of God is the soul of a person. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Translated from the Hebrew version in Aliza Lavie, *Tefilat Nashim*, (Tel Aviv: Yedi'ot Books, 2005), p.139:

יהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלקינו ואלקי אבותינו שתרבה בביתי אור של שמחה וברכה ושלום וחיים טובים ובהירים ותאיר את נשמותינו באור פניך ושמחה תתן במשפחתנו. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. We will return to the mitzva of candle-lighting in the Shabbat section of our site (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Shabbat 119b And when he [a man] comes to his home and finds a lit candle and a set table and his bed made, the good angel says: May it be His will that your next Shabbat will be thus. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Berachot 10b What is an “upper room”? The best among homes. “And we will put for him there a bed and a table and a chair and a lamp” (Melachim II 4:10). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Bereshit Rabba, Chayei Sara 60:16 "And Yitzchak brought her to the tent of Sara his mother." All the days that Sara was alive there was a cloud hovering upon the door of her tent. When she died, that cloud ceased. And when Rivka came, that same cloud returned. All the days that Sara was alive, the doors were open wide. And when Sara died, that openness ceased. And when Rivka came, that openness returned. And all the days that Sara was alive there was a blessing in the dough. And when Sara died, that blessing ceased. When Rivka came, it returned. All the days that Sara was alive there was a candle lit from Shabbat eve to Shabbat eve. And when she died that candle ceased. And when Rivka came, it returned. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Gur Aryeh Bereshit 24 Corresponding to three *mitzvot*: a blessing found – corresponding to *challa*. And a lit candle – corresponding to lighting. And a cloud bound atop the tent – for the cloud of glory is the Divine Presence of His Honor, may He be blessed, and this is in honor of sanctity and purity, for purity brings us to the sacred spirit as we say in tractate *Avoda Zara*, and therefore Sara who kept purity from *nidda* merited that a cloud of glory would rest on the tent. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The Talmud often refers to a wife as *debeit’hu*, literally 'of his home.' The Talmud also reads the word tent as a euphemism referring to a woman.

Mo'ed Katan 7b And a man's tent is none other than his wife. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Rav Menachem M. Schneerson, "*Ma'amad Ha-isha Le-or Ha-Yahadut,"* in *Igerot Melech* (New York: KH"T, 1992), p. 399. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Shelah, Shabbat, Mitzva Candle 30 I received [the tradition] that the woman should read at this time the haftarah of Rosh ha-shana, of Chana until "and he will raise the glory of his Mashiach." [↑](#footnote-ref-21)