

Dear Chavraya,

I share with you a story to the best of my memory, in folk-tradition my own stamp upon it now, one that I used to love to listen to with my children. It is a Sephardic folk tale about a poor and pious couple whose greatest joy was to serve God. It is ironically in their effort to serve God quite literally that we find the symbolic answer to an important question to be asked in relation to this week's Torah portion, *Parashat T'rumah*. The portion introduces for the first time the commandment to build the *mishkan*, the desert sanctuary. Filled with details concerning the structure and its furnishings, the question that emerges has to do with our own observance. If the Torah and its commandments are eternal, then how are we to fulfill these mitzvot that pertain to such a particular event in a particular place and time long ago? Every detail comes to be understood symbolically, each one guiding us toward holiness in relation to others. We are each to become the sanctuary, living our lives in such a way that we bring holiness through deeds to the places where we dwell, that God and people be welcome and at home in our presence. *Parashat T'rumah* begins with God telling Moses, *Speak to the children of Israel that they accept for Me an uplifted donation/v'yikchu li t'rumah. From every person whose heart is moved to make a free-will gift you shall accept My uplifted donation.* Among the furnishings of the sanctuary to be made from the gifts of the people is a table overlaid with gold. And upon the table, God tells Moses, *you shall place the Bread of the Countenance/lechem panim before Me continually.* Often referred to as the "showbread," *panim* literally means face and the *lechem panim* came to refer to twelve loaves to be placed upon the golden table before every Shabbos. So the story of the poor and pious couple who sought to fulfill the mitzvah of the *lechem panim*, and in fulfilling it more deeply than they knew, taught us as well how to bring loaves before the "face" of God.

Wondering how they might show their deep love of God, this poor and pious couple thought deeply. The man said to his beloved wife, "Esmeralda, you make the most delicious challah in the world. What could be a more wonderful gift for God? If you make twelve loaves, as the Torah commands, then I will bring them to the synagogue every Friday and place them in the Holy Ark for God." Delighted to bake such holy loaves, as Friday came that first week the man took Esmeralda's challah to the synagogue. In the quiet, empty sanctuary in the time before sunset, the man lovingly placed the twelve loaves into the ark in two rows of six, as it had been done long ago in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. "Ah, Signor Dios," said the man, "my wife bakes the best challah in the world and she has made these for You."

The next morning, sitting in synagogue, the man and woman each held their breath as the ark was opened to take out the Torah. Indeed, the challahs were gone. Their offering accepted, the couple was elated. And so it was the following week, and the week after that, and the week after that. The seasons turned and the woman continued to bake twelve loaves of challah each week and the man would bring them to the synagogue and quietly place them into the ark, wishing Signor Dios Shabbat shalom.

After some time, the pious man told the rabbi of the gift that he and his wife made for God each week, and of its acceptance. A man of little imagination, and of even less understanding and empathy, the rabbi decided to investigate. One Friday he hid in the shadows at the back of the synagogue. Unaware of the rabbi's presence, the man entered and, as always, placed the twelve challahs in the Holy Ark. After offering his usual good wishes to God, the man left. The rabbi continued to wait and watch. Soon he saw the shammes, the caretaker, enter the sanctuary and go up to the ark. A very poor man with a large family, the shammes carefully opened the doors with grateful anticipation and took out all twelve of the challahs, placing them into a bag.

The following week the rabbi waited again. This time, when the pious man arrived the rabbi stepped out and confronted him. "Don't you know," said the rabbi in a condescending voice, "God doesn't eat challah! It is the shammes each week who comes and takes the loaves you bring. Wait and you will see." Trembling, the man stood at the back of the synagogue with the rabbi. And so it was, before long the shammes came and went up to the Holy Ark and opened the doors. A great cry filled the sanctuary and the tears of the shammes fell where for so long, week after week, the challahs had been. The man ran home to his wife, still holding all of the challahs. Telling her all that had happened, they fell into each other's arms and sobbed.

That night the rabbi could not sleep, awakened by a dream in which God came to him and said, "You have taken away My most faithful servants." The next morning, before even going to the synagogue, the rabbi went to visit the couple in their simple home and begged their forgiveness. He told them of his dream and of God's love for their offering and of God's need that it be restored. Now with a heart of deeper understanding, the rabbi asked Esmeralda to continue to bake her delicious challah and that her husband should continue to bring all twelve loaves as an offering. Unlike before, however, the rabbi suggested that now the man should bring the challahs directly to the home of the shammes. From there, as from the golden table in the Holy Temple, and even more so, God would receive their offering with love.

So may we fulfill the mitzvah of the *lechem panim*.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor