



SERMON ROSH HASHANAH: THE EARTH – GOD’S DOUGHBALL

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 19 September 2020
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 I've been trying to work out who's 'won' the pandemic. So many lives have been blighted by it, surely some must have done well out of it? People with shares in Zoom, certainly. But also... sourdough starters. It seems like everyone's been using their time at home to cultivate a yeasty creation of their own.¹ And no doubt, as we come to the end of a very strange year, while Jews across the world tuck into round Rosh Hashanah challot, many more of them have been home-made than at any time in recent history.

- 2 A very different sort of round challah appears in the Mishnah.² This isn't the pleasant plaited bread that we call challah these days. It was the 'dough offering'³ which Israelites had to offer to the priesthood.

- 3 And the way it would work was, late each week, a priest would wander the streets of his neighbourhood, collecting all the offerings. First he'd be given one – a small lump of dough, maybe about the size of a table-tennis ball. Then at the next house he'd get another one, which, probably, he'd squidge onto the first for ease of carrying. He'll un-squidge it later so he can check how much of this 'offering' he received and from whom. And another piece of dough from the next house, and another from the next house, and another... until eventually he'd be walking through the last couple of streets carrying a huge globe comprised of small pieces of dough pressed together.



- 4 The reason the Mishnah brings this up is... what if someone touches the giant doughball? Someone impure? In the world of biblical offerings and defilement – one touch from someone impure, someone who'd trodden on a dead lizard or walked over a grave or given birth or had a period – that could be a serious business. Even if they'd visited a mikveh to immerse themselves and become pure, some vestige of their impurity would still linger until that evening, and they could disqualify the entire set of dough offerings.
- 5 The priest would have to prepare himself meticulously to make absolutely certain that he was ritually pure before heading out on his challah-gathering expedition. He'd be exceptionally careful. And then, just one innocent touch, unintended or well-meaning, from a stranger... and it's all spoilt.
- 6 This is a message about the arbitrariness of our world. This year more than any other I can remember has been defined by arbitrary luck. How many plans – carefully-made plans, detailed plans – have been completely upended by a virus that came, incredibly suddenly, out of nowhere? How many lives have been affected? Holidays cancelled, weddings postponed, business expansions reversed, all ruined by something unpredictable and uncontrollable. The best of preparations and the best of intentions can come to nothing.
- 7 Rosh Hashanah rolls around every year come rain or come shine. Whatever has been going on in the 12 (or so) months since the last Rosh Hashanah – births, deaths, victories, defeats – it comes around as regular as clockwork. This is the meaning of the round challah: it symbolises the cycle of life, which began long before we were born and will continue, inexorably, long after we are gone.



- 8 Straight after Rosh Hashanah we enter the period known as the ten days of repentance. Every single year we schedule in this time for repentance. I could look up the dates of this ten day period for any future year you choose to ask about. We know that we will do wrong. We know that we will have done things which require repentance. We don't know what, but we know it will happen. Sometimes these sins are things we choose to do, sometimes things we feel forced to do, sometimes things we are forced to do. Sometimes things which circumstances force us to do. Eight months ago, none of us could have imagined living like this, living in a way which now seems second-nature and wearily over-familiar. But the creators of the Jewish calendar were wise, and knew that we should expect the unexpected. Each Rosh Hashanah they remind us that life's journey takes us through twists and turns which, although their nature is unpredictable, are themselves predictable.
- 9 But what do we do about the priest with the round challah, well-prepared but potentially ruined by circumstance? As usual, there are two answers. The school of Hillel remind us that this is no usual doughball. It's not just one big mass, but it's composed of lots of smaller pieces of dough stuck together. So, they say, the specific lump that was touched by an impure stranger is now defiled, but the rest of them are still valid. This is a typically lenient, compassionate ruling. We take good intentions into account; we try not to write off worthwhile hard work where we can avoid doing so; we don't throw out the baby with the bathwater.
- 10 In the new year, which we enter as part of a world still governed by coronavirus with all the arbitrariness that means, we need to cling to Hillel's teaching. The only thing we can control with absolute certainty is ourselves, our attitude and our intention.



- 11 The other answer came, of course, from the school of Shammai. They said that the whole giant doughball has to be thrown out. This is a typical Shammai-ite ruling. Life is tough, life is unfair, we have to cope. Good intentions butter no parsnips.
- 12 His reasoning is important, however. While the giant doughball was made of many pieces squigged together, and while only one of them was touched, it's no longer divisible. It's one mass, one object, one entity.
- 13 In the new year, which we enter as part of a world still governed by artificial separations between households, we need to cling to Shammai's teaching. The big sphere of dough could not be ripped back into its component parts; if you try to separate two pieces of dough, little bits of one will cling to the other. The big sphere of our society, of our world, cannot be divided neatly into households with no interaction. Since March, we've all discovered more and more how interconnected we are. It's not possible to pull at the piece of dough on which I live and render it completely separate from the piece of dough on which you live. Strands will always connect us.
- 14 Some might say it's a weakness of the human race that when one person is infected, very quickly the rest of the workplace, city, country will be infected. Hillel would say it's ridiculous of Shammai to rule that as soon as one globule of challah-offering is defiled, they're all defiled.
- 15 Yet that is what it is to be alive. And today, as we celebrate the birthday of the world, of that great ball of interconnected dough which God has been assembling and holding onto for 5,781 years, we cling to both sages' teachings. Shammai teaches that we're all connected and all bear the brunt of reality's random twists and turns. Hillel teaches that our task is to make what we can of it, and plough on with the best of intentions.



16 May the new year be for us a good year – but, failing that, may it be for us a year where we accept our lack of control, accept that we are but dough in the hands of a Baker (who kneads and stretches us at will), and celebrate what it is to be part of a huge, interconnected and endlessly changeable and surprising world. And let us say Amen.

Check against delivery.

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¹ Katharine Gammon. “Kneading to relax? How coronavirus prompted a surge in stress baking”, *Guardian* (19 April 2020): <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/19/coronavirus-stress-baking-sourdough-kneading-relax>>

² m.Tevul Yom 1:1

³ Numbers 15:19