



The Sephardi origin of the *Challah* braided bread

El origen sefardí del pan trenzado *Jalá*

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Abstract

This article will challenge the assumption that the *challah* bread is not of Ashkenazi origin but instead of Sephardic origin. It claims to uncover the place of *challah* bread in history through a historiographical analysis, followed by a study of old sources that mentions it – even including the first recipe – thus, bringing down the previously established postulates. This article also purports to offering an explanation on the link between Ashkenazi and *challah* bread, which has made it the paragon – alongside the gefiltefish – of the Jewish cuisine from Eastern Europe.

Keywords: food; challah; Jews; Spanish history; Sephardi; Ashkenazi.

Resumen

Este artículo pretende poner en tela de juicio el origen de la preparación culinaria del pan trenzado llamado *Jalá*, arrojando luz que no es de origen askenazí, sino sefardí. Pretende ahondar en las investigaciones sobre la presencia del pan *jalá* en la historia a través de un análisis historiográfico, seguido de un estudio de fuentes antiguas que lo mencionan. A continuación, proporciona una descripción de la primera receta de *jalá*, haciendo tambalear los postulados previamente establecidos. Este artículo pretende también ofrecer una explicación sobre la razón del vínculo que existe entre la cultura askenazí y el pan *trenzado*, para, a fin de cuentas, postular un origen sefardí para la *jalá*.

Palabras clave: alimentación; historia de España; jalá; judíos; sefardí; askenazí.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Challah. Here is a word that has much written about it. From biblical times to the present day, this term has been a source of interest and curiosity, especially for Jews. Many scholars and lovers of Jewish cuisine have ventured into a historical and culinary research – more or less risky and often repetitive – on the term’s origins as well as on the dish called *challah*. This word, also written *hallah*, has a Biblical origin (חַלָּה). It is mentioned several times in the Bible¹ as

The first portion of your dough, you shall separate a loaf for a gift; as in the case of the gift of the threshing floor, so shall you separate it. From the first portion of your dough you shall give a gift to the Lord in [all] your generations (Numbers/Bamidbar 15:20-21).²

Many studies use this writing to establish the origin of the eponymous dish: the challah bread. Some studies have already been done on bread and challah as a piece of dough in biblical writings. Therefore, it is not a matter of going back to this, but rather on questioning the absence of old historical references concerning the challah as a dish, since its origin and temporal periods has already been advanced. Wouldn’t this deficiency explain the error made in regard to the territorial origins of the dish’s preparation? From this observation, all that remains is to study the sources that deal with this dish in order to trace its spatial and temporal route, from Eastern Europe to the existence of its first recipe. The aim is to lift the veil on the origin of this braided bread and understand how a dish from *Sefarad* became the emblematic food of Ashkenazi Jewish cuisine.

2. HISTORIOGRAPHY

There are many stories written on the challah bread – which abound and recur themselves – both online (Moskin, 2015; Winston-Macauley, 2012; Straight Dope Staff, 1999; Astaire, 2017) and in the culinary books (Reider, 1987; Glezer, 2004; (Pinson, 2017; Sarna, 2017; Levy, 2012: 63; Roden, 1999; Koenig, 2019). Yet, there is little information actually drawn from historical sources about this dish. That is why a look into the reference books is necessary.

The *Online Etymology Dictionary* tells us that in 1887, the challah bread was a “type of bread, usually braided, typically eaten on Jewish ceremonial occasions”. This detail is consistent with the publication in Philadelphia, in 1871, of Esther Levy’s first Jewish

¹ חַלָּה in Exodus/Shemot 29:2; חֶמֶת חַלָּה in Exodus/Shemot 29:23, Leviticus/Vayikra 2:4, 7:12-13, 8:26, 24: 5, Numbers/Bamidbar 6:19, 15:18-21).

² Jewish Bible with Rashi’s commentary, Rosenberg (transl.).

cookbook: *Jewish Cookery Book* (Levy, 2012: 63). If the term *challah* is not mentioned, the author nevertheless incorporates a recipe for “Twist bread” (Levy, 1871: 60; Levy, 2012: 63) that corresponds to it. Its integration into the consumption of Americans – implicit North American Jews – probably dates back to the publication of this book (Marks, 2010: 96).³ Gil Marks’ *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* (Marks, 2010: 96-101), *Eat and Be Satisfied* by John Cooper (1936), *The Jewish Catalog* (Siegel, Strassfeld, & Strassf, 1973), and the *Treasure of Shabbat* (Bressel, 2017: 48), have all dwelled on the braided bread’s characteristic as an emblem of the culinary heritage of the Jews. Thus, the *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions* states that

the word *challot* [pl. of *challah*] derives from the loaf or cake (Heb. *Challah*) set aside for the priest from each batch of dough (Num. 15:20). Because the dough for the Sabbath meals and the rest of the week was prepared on Friday, the special Sabbath bread came to be called *challah* (Patai, 2015: 486).

This explanation has allowed to put the subjects of history and food into conversation with each other.

3. CONFUSION AROUND THE ORIGINS OF CHALLAH BREAD

Confusion around a culinary history, at first, was common if one believes in the Torah. Thus, although the leap in time is more than substantial, Gil Marks points out in *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* that

for the past two millennia, the term *challah* referred to the small portion of dough removed from each batch and burned. Only much later and initially only among some Ashkenazim did that name become attached to the Sabbath loaves themselves (Marks, 2010 : 97).

Marks emphasizes the importance of the consumption of *challah* bread among Sephardi and Ashkenazi. However, he highlights that there are differences in the type of flour (whole flour for Ashkenazi and white for Sephardi), in the form of *challah* bread (rather coiled in the Sephardic practices). Nonetheless, he provides further details regarding the *challah* bread of some Sephardic communities which “would also sprinkle sesame or some other type of seed over the round loaves, an allusion to the manna that fell in the form of coriander seeds” (Marks, 2010: 97). By choosing its shape and certain ingredients, the relation between the *challah* bread and the Sephardim is now more than conceivable, and it presents the *challah* bread as the original dish. Let’s keep in mind that bread preparation remains basic: flour, water, sourdough and salt. Therefore, it is the way in which it will be kneaded, the

³ “Most contemporary American references describe it [the *challah*] as ‘a braided egg loaf’”.

ingredients that will be added, but also – and above all – the shape that will be given to it and the way it will be cooked, that will make this bread different from the others. Since then, it acquires a singular symbolic value to the extent of being used as a differentiating food in a multicultural context. In the article “Challah: A Richly Fascinating History”, published in the *Jewish Herald-Voice*, Jonathan Fass (2012) writes that “In both Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jewry, there is also a tradition to change the shape of a challah to connect it to the time of the year or upcoming holiday”. Nevertheless, on reading this research, an essentially Ashkenazi profile of challah bread emerges. Why? If the *Online Etymology Dictionary* (s.v. *challah*) defines the challah bread of 1887 as a “type of bread, usually braided”, then it also specifies that this term comes from the “Yiddish *khale*, from Hebrew *chala*, which is possibly from *hll* ‘hollow, pierce’, and perhaps is a reference to the original appearance of it” (Marks, 2010: 96).

At the beginning of the 20th century, John Cooper argues that this braided bread was first coined in Austria in the 15th century, and that before bearing the name of challah it was called “berches” (this name is still used by some Jews to refer to challah bread nowadays). Even so, no historical source is mentioned by the author. Gil Marks takes up this idea by writing that

in the fifteenth century, Jews in Austria and southern Germany adopted a new form of Sabbath bread – on oval, braided loaf, modeled on a popular Teutonic bread, which was called *berchisbrod*, or *perchisbrod* in southern Germany (Marks, 2010: 97).

The key to understanding this dish lies in the analysis of a new technique – braiding. Marks claims that it was born from the German who, after converting to Christianity, would have

twisted dough to resemble hair and offered the loaves to *Holle* (the witch) to escape her punishment. Although European Jews certainly did not worship or even to a large extent know anything about *Berchta* or *Holle*, they assimilated the attractive bread (Marks, 2010: 97).

The present characteristic form of the braided bread challah would therefore have its origin – according to these works – in the culinary culture of the Jewish Ashkenazi from the Middle Ages (Ottolenghi, 2012; Roden, 2012). The *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions* (Patai, 2015: 197) is not the only one to repeat this premise. In the chapter “Jewish Ashkenazi in Gastronomy in Northern Italy in the Early Modern Period: The Testimony of the Book *Mitzvot Hanashim*”, Zahava Weishouse deals with religious laws for challah in the Jewish-Ashkenazi cuisine. She writes that

the Ashkenazi Jews who settled in Northern Italy and the Po Valley assimilated into the Italian way of life. [The book entitled] *Mitzvot Hanashim* (1552) reinforces the conclusion

that Ashkenazi Jewry's adaptation to Italian culture and life took about a century more until it was fully completed (Weishouse, 2019: 228-247).

We understand that we must backtrack in history in order to find the origin of the challah braided bread. From Germany, we pass through Austria, to arrive in Italy where – we know – Ashkenazi Jews and Sephardic Jews rubbed shoulders and shared – to varying degrees depending on the field – their cultures: clothing, liturgical, dialectal, which could also be culinary. However, they did not stop claiming their respective singularities (Zimmels, 1996: 37). Now, the question is: where did the Sephardic people of Italy come from? A subject that is still debated (Garvin & Cooperman, 2000; Guetta, 2014). It should be remembered that the various expulsions suffered by the Jews of Christian Europe have Italy as a place to stay (Segre, 2005). Thus, it is not surprising that this country has seen both the Germanic coming from the north and the Sephardic from the south. The Jews of Spain who fled the Spanish Inquisition established as early as 1478 – also in force on its territories such as Sicily (Bresc, 2005) – emigrated to settle mainly in Morocco and Turkey, but also in Italy (Borgolotto, 2005). Therefore, it is still logical to be able to find in Italy – but also in Austria and Germany – dishes from these two Jewish communities. So, why could not the challah braided bread accompany the Jews from Spain who came to settle in Italy from the end of the 15th century?

4. CHALLAH BRAIDED BREAD FROM AL-ANDALUS

Let's look to what the analysis of Iberian sources offers us – and more specifically those from Spain – concerning the Challah braided bread. A singular food that the *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* defines as “a braided egg loaf” (Marks, 2010: 96). The importance of egg in the Challah is also highlighted in *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions* as Raphael Patai describes it as a “egg rich braided bread” (Patai, 2015: 197). The Ashkenazi origin of the Challah braided bread seems fading, and it is the discovery of a recipe written in Arabic in the first cookbook in the south of Spain, in Al-Andalus, called the *Kitāb al-ṭabīḥ* [The Cookbook], which comes to close the debates. Written under Muslim rules, it is the first – and unique – medieval Western cookbook to contain Jewish dishes. Among the 462 recipes that it contains, six are explicitly Jewish recipes. However, my research has shown the existence of other dishes scattered in the cookbook which were – and still – prepared and consumed nowadays by Sephardic Jews. A careful and meticulous reading allowed me to uncover a very singular recipe. In the manuscript it bears the name of “عمل الضفاير” which means “The making (عمل) of braids (الضفاير)” (Friedman, n.d.). The term “braids” corresponds to the word “ḍafair” Arabic. No other sources or recipe from the same period of this cookbook mentions that term “ḍafair”. What is interesting is that the Spanish translation of this recipe offers the word “guedejas” for “braids”, and the closest translation

of “guedejas” is the term “peot” in Hebrew. This recipe entitled “The making of braids” corresponds very closely to the preparation of Challah braided bread. It consists of white flour or semolina which, after being moistened with hot water, should be well kneaded. Sifted flour is added again, and then sourdough and salt. Hot water is poured several times and the dough is kneaded to obtain a medium consistency. Then, for each *ratl* [468g or 1lb] semolina, five eggs must be added and 1 dirham [3.9g or 3/4tsp] of saffron. The large amount of eggs and the importance of the yellow color of the bread, should be highlighted. The recipe states that the dough has to be kneaded well, and then put in a dish, covered and left to rise. Once raised, it is necessary to fill a pan of fresh oil and boil it over the heat. When preparation is ready, it is the moment to prepare the braids of raised dough, like hair-braids, of a handspan or less in size. After coating them with oil, braided breads are fried until they turn brown. Once cooked, they must be put in a plate and poured over them skimmed honey, spiced with pepper, cinnamon, and spikenard (it’s like lavender). Sprinkled with ground sugar. This dish is unique. Its resemblance to the nowadays challah braided bread is more than surprising: flour, eggs, sourdough, salt and, of course, the braiding technique, so characteristic of this dish. Two unexpected elements are mentioned in this recipe of braided bread. First, the size, since it is smaller than *challot* breads currently consumed. Second, the baking, because the braided bread is fried, not cooked in the oven. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that olive oil was mainly used by the Jews in Spain, both in frying and in culinary preparations. Indeed, since it is *parve*, it allows easier compliance with the dietary laws of the Kashrut. Its massive consumption among Iberian Jews also made it stand out from Muslims’ culinary foodways, who certainly used oil but also *smen* (rancid butter, a practice much less followed by the Jews). Moreover, the using of oil was so important in Sephardic Jewish communities that non-Jews associated the smell of it in a city to the substantial number of Jews who lived there [this is what was said about Seville at the beginning of the 16th century]. The mention of the Challah bread by the famous Spanish exegete Abraham Ibn Ezra [1089–1164] supports the existence and consumption of this dish in Spain at least from the 11th century. In addition, the rabbi and the commentator specify that it must be “thick” (Marks, 2010: 96). What is interesting is that in the same page Gil Marks points out that the Shabbat bread of the Ashkenazi

grew increasingly enriched and embellished. The use of oil replicated the ingredients of the breads prepared in the Temple. Eggs and, less frequently, a pinch of saffron added to the dough simulated the yellow color of cooked manna. Not coincidentally, the large amount of oil and eggs produced a softer texture and richer flavor [...]. The original enriched Sabbath braids were not sweetened (Marks, 2010: 96).

But all this information is already present in the recipe “The Making of braids” of braided bread from the 13th century. A recipe only prepared by the Jews of Spain. And this

makes it even more unique because Muslims did not seem to consume this bread, and still do not consume it nowadays.

The challah braided bread, an icon of today's Ashkenazi Jewish cuisine, would therefore find its attestation of recipe in the first cookbook of Spain in the 13th century. Accompanying the Sephardic Jews who were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in the 15th century, the challah braided bread began its long-haul northward, and then passing through Italy between the 15th and 16th centuries. Blended with the culinary practices of Ashkenazi' Jews, they adopted it and gave it a home of permanence and survival not only in the present-day Eastern Europe, but also throughout the world.

Here is a reconstruction of this 13th century recipe, as close as possible to the original recipe:

Dough:

- 2 cups (300 g) flour
- 1 cup (170 g) extra fine semolina
- 2 tbsps (25 g) fresh yeast crushed
- 3 tbsps lukewarm water (to mix with the yeast)
- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 5 eggs
- 1/4 tsp salt
- Neutral oil for frying

Drizzle:

- 1/8 cup sugar
- 1/8 cup honey
- 1/2 tsp pepper
- 1 tsp cinnamon butter
- Lavender [to decorate]

Figures 1 & 2. *Challah* braided bread





Source: Hélène Jawhara Piñer

This recipe is mentioned and explained in my book *Sephardi: Cooking the History. Recipes of the Jews of Spain and the Diaspora from the 13th Century Onwards*, forthcoming with Academic Studies Press/Cherry Orchard Books in spring 2021.

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