

# JUDAIC STUDIES ACADEMIC PAPER SERIES

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## The Origins of the Non-Jewish Custom Of ‘Shlissel Challah’ (Key Bread)

### “*The Loaf of Idolatry?*”

#### Introduction

Every year Jewish women, young and old, partake in an Ashkenazi<sup>1</sup> custom to place a key (such as a door key to a home), inside the dough of a loaf of bread that they bake.<sup>2</sup> This custom is known as *shlissel challah*—*shlissel* from the German language *shlüssel* (key) and *challah* or *hallah* from the Hebrew for bread.<sup>3</sup> While a metal key is often baked within the bread, some form the bread itself into the shape of a key or even arrange sesame seeds on top in the form of a key.<sup>4</sup> Often times, these women gather in celebratory groups with the common belief that baking the *shlissel challah* will bring blessing into their homes, and specifically, the blessing of increased fiscal livelihood. There is also a seemingly new ‘custom’ of baking *shlissel challah* in the “merit” of a sick person, as a way of helping them recover from physical disease or trauma.<sup>5</sup> A poll on the popular Orthodox Jewish website *imamother.com* asked participants: “How do you make your schlissel [sic] challah?”<sup>6</sup> The 88 respondents reported: In the shape of a key 13% [12]; With a key baked in it 61% [54]; Neither, I don't do this 17% [15]; Other 7% [7].

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<sup>1</sup> Jews with family roots in countries of Europe and Asia such as Poland, Belarus, Hungary, Lithuania, Ukraine, Russia, etc. Note: In the once popular *The Hallah Book*, the author mentions that key bread originated in eighteenth century Ukraine, but did not provide a source or citation. See: Reider, Freda. *The Hallah Book*. New York: Ktav, 1986. 21

<sup>2</sup> Note: as of late, this custom is becoming increasingly common among Sephardic Jews as well due to co-mingling of communities and day-to-day social intercourse.

<sup>3</sup> aka *shlisl khale*

<sup>4</sup> A photograph of a *shlissel challah* exists in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1972 edition, volume 6 page 1419. The loaf, with a long metal key impressed and left to bake on top, is captioned: “Hallah from Volhynia [Western Ukraine near Poland and Belarus] for the first Sabbath after Passover. The key placed on top of the loaf symbolizes the ‘gate of release’ which traditionally remains open for a month after the festival.”

<sup>5</sup> [Shlissel Challah for Refuah Shlaima] (Are you or anyone you know baking challah this week? Someone is trying to put together a group of 'bakers' for a zechus for a complete refuah shelayma for Rochel Leah Bas Miriam Toba[.] If you can participate, please email: sandyn@... Either way, please have her in mind in your tefillos.

Tizku L'mitzvos!) groups.yahoo.com/group/FrumSingleMoms/message/663

<sup>6</sup> [imamother.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=111317](http://imamother.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=111317) Poll was in April 2010

## Non-Jewish Origins

The baking of a key inside a bread is a non-Jewish custom which has its foundation in Christian, and possibly even earlier, pagan culture. At least one old Irish source tells how at times when a town was under attack, the men said, “let our women-folk be instructed in the art of baking cakes containing keys.”<sup>7</sup>

Keys were traditionally manufactured in the form of a cross, the traditional symbol of Christianity,<sup>8</sup> a physical item all Christian commoners would possess in their home.<sup>9</sup> On Easter, the Christian holiday which celebrates the idea of Jesus ‘rising’ from the dead, they would bake the symbol of Jesus—the key shaped like a cross—into or onto a rising loaf.<sup>10</sup> This was not only a religious gesture, but the bread was a special holiday treat. Sometimes

<sup>7</sup> O'Brien, Flann. *The Best of Myles*. Normal, IL; Dalkey Archive Press, 1968. 393

<sup>8</sup> Small breads with the sign of the cross have been found as far back as 79 CE in the ancient Roman city of Herculaneum (see *The New York Times* March 31, 1912). This was when Christianity emerged in Roman Judea as a Jewish religious sect which gradually spread out of Jerusalem.

<sup>9</sup> This was no different than the poor Jews of the ‘old world,’ who often would not have holy books but would certainly have a *mezuzah* on their door which they considered a holy script in their own home.

<sup>10</sup> Another account mentions a key in a loaf: “In other parts of Esthonia [sic], again, the Christmas Boar [cake], as it is called, is baked of the first rye cut at harvest; it has a conical shape and a cross is impressed on it with a pig’s bone or a key, or three dints are made in it with a buckle or a piece of charcoal. It stands with a light beside it on the table all through the festival season.” See: Frazer, James George. *The Golden Bough*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1920. VII. Part 5. 302 (Thanks go to Rabbi Yossie Azose who led me to this mention. Rabbi Azose said: “It’s a sad commentary on the state of Jewry today that such a custom [shlissel challah] has become so widespread and accepted; moreover that there are not more contemporary Torah leaders who are not decrying this practice.” Via email December 20, 2011.)

these breads were wholly formed in the shape of a cross; other times the shape of a cross was made out of dough and applied on top. In the context of historically baking a key into bread—the key itself, intrinsically, was a symbol of Christianity and by extension symbolized Jesus ‘rising’ in the dough.<sup>11</sup>

## Connection to Passover

The modern Jewish custom of baking the symbolic *shlissel challah*, annually takes place on the *shabbat* immediately following the holiday of *Pessah*, when tens (if not hundreds) of thousands of religiously observant Jewish women<sup>12</sup> practice this observance.

In Christianity, baked goods associated with keys are commonly called ‘Easter breads,’<sup>13</sup> and in Europe they are also known as ‘Paschals,’<sup>14</sup> as the holiday of Easter in the East

<sup>11</sup> Similar, there are modern non-Jewish customs, such as in Mexico, where a ‘baby Jesus’ figurine is baked into cupcakes; often, the child who finds it wins a prize. This is also practiced in the U.S. state of Louisiana beginning at *Mardi Gras* and practiced for 30 days after. There, a ‘baby Jesus’ toys baked into a whole cake, and whoever finds the baby in their piece has to buy the next day’s cake. In Spain, there is a tradition of placing a small Jesus doll inside a cake and whoever finds it must take it to the nearest church on February 2, *Candlemas Day* (*Día de la Candelaria*), which celebrates the presentation of Jesus in Jerusalem.

<sup>12</sup> This includes women of all backgrounds, including Hassidic and non-Hassidic, Modern Orthodox, etc.

<sup>13</sup> Chandler, Richard. *Travels in Asia Minor*. London 1776. 158 (It’s been supposed the British custom of ‘cross-buns,’ small rolls with a cross on them eaten on the Christian holiday of Good Friday {the Day of the Cross}, probably arose from this.)

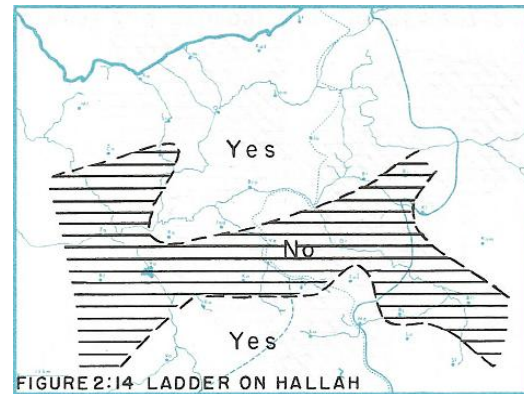
<sup>14</sup> Justin Martyr, also known as just Saint Justin (103–165 CE), was an early Christian apologist. He depicted the paschal lamb as being offered in the form of a cross and he claimed that the manner in which the paschal lamb was slaughtered prefigured the crucifixion of Jesus. Some opinions indicate rabbinic evidence shows that in Jerusalem the Jewish paschal lamb was offered in a manner which resembled a crucifixion. (See: Tabory,

is known as ‘Pascha’ or ‘Pascua.’ This is most likely the reason Christians often call *Easter breads* baked with keys *Paschals*.<sup>15</sup> Before the Romans destroyed the *Beit HaMikdash* (the holy Temple) in Jerusalem, the focus of the Passover holiday for the Jewish people was the *Korban Pessah* (lit. *Pessah sacrifice*, also known as the *Paschal Lamb*<sup>16</sup>). Within Christianity, Jesus is known as the ‘Paschal Lamb.’

### Geographic Origins

Professor Marvin Herzog, a world renowned Yiddish linguist at *Columbia University* tells that dough twisted in the form of a key (among other shapes such as a ladder) were found to top challah loafs in Poland, “...the distribution of some of these things was a regional matter.”<sup>17</sup> As an example of the regionality, Prof. Herzog created a map demonstrating where dough was shaped as a ladder and placed on challah, and how it was specific only to certain communities and was not universal. Inasmuch as a ladder motif was regional, it can be conjectured that the use of a key or key motif could have evolved the same way. Both a ladder and a key are symbolic as tools that could metaphysically

help one attain heaven, as they both help ‘gain access.’



### Lack of Sources

While the custom is said to be mentioned in the writings of Avraham Yehoshua Heshel (the “Apter Rav” 1748-1825) and in the *Ta’amei ha-Minhagim* (1891), there is no one clear source for *shlissel challah*. And while people will say there is a *passuq* attributed to it, there is not. And, even if there were, a *passuq* that can be linked to the practice is not the same as a source. Micha Berger, founder of the *AishDas Society*, [orthodox] calls this type of logic ‘reverse engineering,’ it’s like drawing a circle around an arrow in a tree, and subsequently declaring the arrow is a bullseye.<sup>18</sup> The idea of baking *shlissel challah* is not from the Torah; it’s not in the Tannaitic, Amoraitic, Savoraitic, Gaonic or Rishonic literature. Rabbi Shlomo Aviner of Israel’s *Yeshivat Ateret Yerushalayim* said that while baking challah with a key in it is not forbidden, “there is no meaning in doing

Joseph. “From The Crucifixion of the Paschal Lamb.” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Series, Vol. 86, No. 3/4 (Jan.-Apr., 1996), pp. 395-406.

<sup>15</sup> Paschal derives from the Latin *paschalis* or *pashalis*, which means “relating to Easter,” from Latin *pascha* (‘Passover,’ i.e. the Easter Passover’), Greek Πάσχα, Aramaic pashā, in turn from the Hebrew *pessah*, which means “to be born on, or to be associated with, Passover day.” Since the Hebrew holiday Passover coincides closely with the later Christian holiday of Easter, the Latin word came to be used for both occasions.

<sup>16</sup> Driscoll, James F. “Paschal Lamb.” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 8. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910.

<sup>17</sup> Herzog, Marvin. *The Yiddish Language in Northern Poland: Its Geography and History*. Bloomington, Indiana University, 1965. 30-32.

<sup>18</sup> See. [aishdas.org/avodah/vol25/v25n384.shtml](http://aishdas.org/avodah/vol25/v25n384.shtml) & [aishdas.org/avodah/vol28/v28n067.shtml#03](http://aishdas.org/avodah/vol28/v28n067.shtml#03)

so.”<sup>19</sup> Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim<sup>20</sup> of Mesora.Org [orthodox] teaches that:

The Torah teaches that Hashem punishes the wicked, and rewards the righteous. It does not say that challah baking or any other activity will help address our needs...When the matriarchs were barren, they did not resort to segulas, but introspected and prayed...Nothing in Torah supports this concept of segula; Torah sources reject the idea of a segula...baking challas with brachos cannot help...segulas are useless, and violate the Torah prohibition of Nichush [good luck charms]. It does not matter if the charm is a rabbit’s foot, a horseshoe, a challah, key or a red bendel. The practice assumes that forces exist, which do not, and it is idolatrous.<sup>21</sup>

Rabbi Reuven Mann, Principal of *Yeshiva B’nei Torah* in Far Rockaway, New York [orthodox] says one should ask themselves: “What connection is there between putting a key in the dough of a challah (schlüssel challah) and the improvement of my material situation (parnasa)?”<sup>22</sup> He says:

The dangers of deviation are very great. For by inventing new practices not prescribed by Torah one, in fact, implicitly denies the Torah. He is in

<sup>19</sup> [ravaviner.com/2011/04/shut-sms-110.html](http://ravaviner.com/2011/04/shut-sms-110.html)

<sup>20</sup> Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim has been a Jewish educator for 25 years. He is the founder of [www.Mesora.org](http://www.Mesora.org) and publisher of the *JewishTimes*.

<sup>21</sup> “Segulas: Open Letter about the Shliss Challah from Moshe Ben-Chaim” (Mesora.Org) reposted on [aishdas.org/avodah/vol28/v28n067.shtml#12](http://aishdas.org/avodah/vol28/v28n067.shtml#12)

<sup>22</sup> Mann, Reuven. “Segulas II: Be-emunah Shlaimah: With Perfect Faith.” [mesora.org/segulasII.htm](http://mesora.org/segulasII.htm)

effect saying that the Torah is not perfect, for it does not work in my case, and there are other man made practices out there which will work for me. In effect this is a negation of Torah and constitutes a form of idolatry, heaven forbid...[this] indicates that a person has lost faith in the authentic prescriptions of Torah. By performing these “unauthorized actions” one is implicitly affirming that there are other “forces” out there besides God which will respond to the needs of the performer of these ritualistic practices. This constitutes a form of “Avodah Zorah.”

### Who Is Doing It?

As this is written in 2011, the concept and observance of *shlissel challah* continues to grow and be exploited, especially in the USA and among newly religious Jews who are being taught it is acceptable to use a loaf of bread and a machine made die-cut piece of brass as an intermediary between them and the Almighty.

The baking is conducted today across the Jewish spectrum. It is widely popular (but certainly not universally practiced) in both the Hassidic and non-Hassidic *haredi* communities.<sup>23</sup> It is also conducted by the Modern-Orthodox, among the ‘Yeshivish’ communities and by other American Orthodox Jews such as those with Lithuanian and German family ancestry.<sup>24</sup> The idea of *shlissel challah* is known to be taught in schools, but probably is

<sup>23</sup> While some families have a minhag (tradition) of *schlissel challah*, others have none.

<sup>24</sup> It also occasionally takes place by those in the Reform and Conservative synagogue movements and at ‘JCC’ Jewish Community Centers.

upon the whim of the individual teacher. An informal telephone survey of 40 participants demonstrated that it has been taught in haredi educational institutions such as the *Bais Yaakov* and *Bnos Yisroel* schools in New York City, Los Angeles, Miami and other locations. It is also taught by teachers in the Centrist / Zionist Orthodox Jewish schools.<sup>25</sup>

After *Pessah*, *shlissel challah* can be found being sold in stores, a challah with a key right inside the bag! As the custom of *shlissel challah* continues to be passed along from mother to daughter and in social groups, it also has been popularized on Facebook, Twitter and promoted on other popular internet social media outlets. On the internet can even be found an anonymously distributed prayer, said to be specifically developed for those who make the key challah.<sup>26</sup>

An internet search will find dozens of articles and comments on *shlissel challah*:

- *Shlissel Challah is a segula, good omen, for parnassa, or livelihood. It's a very interesting custom with many sources and traditions.*<sup>27</sup>
- *It's really bizarre, and EVERYONE is doing it. It was all the talk among the women at the playground. Mind you, the talk was about technique for making it, not whether the practice has any merit or makes any sense.*<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Survey conducted by this author November 12, 2011-December 1, 2011 (This includes the *Shulamith School for Girls* in Brooklyn, NY, the first Orthodox Jewish elementary school for girls in North America).

<sup>26</sup> [thefivetowns.com/images/schlisseltefillah.pdf](http://thefivetowns.com/images/schlisseltefillah.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> [thekosherchannel.com/kosher-recipes-blog.html](http://thekosherchannel.com/kosher-recipes-blog.html)

<sup>28</sup> [backoftheshul.com/viewtopic.php?f=21&t=3581](http://backoftheshul.com/viewtopic.php?f=21&t=3581)

- *My friend told me about this and we baked the key in the challah and this week we got a tax refund that we were not expecting!*<sup>29</sup>
- *I also shape a piece of dough in the shape of a key and place it lengthwise on the challah, from end to end, so that everyone can eat a piece of the key.*<sup>30</sup>
- *I had a aunt who one year put a car key and got a new car and another year put a house key and bought a house that year.*<sup>31</sup>
- *The economic downturn has affected virtually every community and Lakewood...For the Shabbos after Pesach, Lakewood Mayor R' Menashe Miller arranged for a key to Lakewood's Town Hall [to be used in schlissel challah]*<sup>32</sup>
- *This week is the week to bake shlissel challah, challah imprinted with or shaped like a key. It is a segulah for parnassah, and fun, too!*<sup>33</sup>

### Halakhic Acceptance

Several clever ideas have been devised which attempt to connect the non-Jewish idea of 'key bread' to the Torah, however these all fail to bring a Jewish wrapper to a wholly non-Jewish tradition. A popular one attempts to inexplicably connect the idea of a spiritual "gate" to a physical "key," during the period when Jews count the 49 days during the Omer up to the 50<sup>th</sup> day which is the holiday of

<sup>29</sup> [asimplejew.blogspot.com/2007/04/guest-posting-by-talmid-shlissel.html](http://asimplejew.blogspot.com/2007/04/guest-posting-by-talmid-shlissel.html)

<sup>30</sup> [imamother.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=149108](http://imamother.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=149108)

<sup>31</sup> [imamother.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=2033](http://imamother.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=2033)

<sup>32</sup> [jewishupdates.com/2011/05/09/key-to-lakewood%E2%80%99s-town-hall-used-for-shlissel-challah/](http://jewishupdates.com/2011/05/09/key-to-lakewood%E2%80%99s-town-hall-used-for-shlissel-challah/)

<sup>33</sup> [metroimma.com/group/shabbatchallah](http://metroimma.com/group/shabbatchallah)



path with Torah sources, not blind faith practices which are “trendy,” “in,” or “cool.”

Educated Jews should help to promote Torah sources to our friends and neighbors, not false practices which are of non-Jewish origin and have nothing to do with Judaism.

Examples of traditional keys (from left to right: A, B, C)

A. Key with three circles representing the Trinity

B. Key with a cross representing the “four corners” of the Earth (From Christianity iconography which discusses the Gospels (the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) being preached in the four corners of the Earth)

C. Key with a cross on it



Examples of *shlissel challah*



Source: COLlive: Chabad news website



Source: pragmaticcattic.wordpress.com/2011/04/28/shlissel-challah