

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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## ANCIENT BAKING

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This time of year seems to bring out the baker in many people. All sorts of communities create baked treats for their holidays. Even in Israel, they have donuts only for Hannukkah (and not year-round as we have them in the U.S.) and later, hamentashen for Purim.

As a baker, I'm pretty much at the 50th percentile: I bake bread, popovers and decent pumpkin bread. One of my daughters, on the other hand, makes elaborate desserts. For example, she actually makes the fashionable desert, macarons. If you would see what it takes to make them you'd understand why they cost \$3.00 apiece. The recipe contains no wheat flour at all (it's made of almond meal) and has to followed to the letter and the dough processed repeatedly, colored and carefully molded to turn out those elegant desserts.

You'd think that in ancient times, such fanciness wouldn't have existed...but you'd be wrong. Let's take a look at some ancient baked goods:

**These sorts of baked goods are exempt from certain taxes: baked goods made from rice, millet, poppy, sesame or lentils or peas. Sponge-cakes, honey cakes, and pancakes are similarly exempt. (M. Challah 1:3-4)**

The Yerushalmi describes what some of these items are:

Sponge breads were made in the sun or were fried. But if they were made by baking them over a fire, they are not exempt and are considered bread.

Fine breads are made from very fine flour that are baked and then ground into breadcrumbs to be used for baby food. (Think of modern baby food marked "rice": it bears no resemblance to grains of rice at all. It may have undergone such a process.)

Another popular bread product in the Talmud was a dip of sour milk, salt and bread. This is processed through drying, not baking.

**Then there are dumplings or bagels, made by pouring hot water onto flour or by pouring the flour into hot water. (Y. Challah 1:3-4)**

If only we could go back into time and walk into some of these ancient kitchens and find out what they were cooking and eating! Some of it sounds very much like the kind of breads you find in Indian cuisine: nan, lentil bread, rice

bread. The dip also sounds something like the Russian drink kvass...a slightly alcoholic drink made from old bread.

Before we get to the discussion questions, I wanted to draw attention to how much we can learn about any culture from how it processes and eats its grain products. In a sense, if you know how a culture eats its bread, you know a very great deal about it.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. First of all, the sages are interested in the central question: what is bread and what is not bread? From that essential determination, we can figure out whether something is taxed. If it is bread, it is taxed. If it is not, it is not. So, what is bread to the sages? What is bread to you? Imagine taking one of the sages through the bakery section of your grocery store. How would you explain what is considered bread and what is not? What do you think the sages would make of the frozen bread section? The beer section? Little Debbie's? Pumpkin bagels? Crackers?
2. On a more spiritual note, if you wanted to recognize God in your baking, how would you do it? Would you burn a part of the dough in the oven as a challah offering? Would you make a donation to charity each time you bake? Would you send a gift of your baking to our troops overseas/ What would a good spiritual practice be?
3. On the deepest level, how can you integrate producing and consuming food with prayer and charity so that plentitude feeds the whole system of humanity?

Happy baking and happy holidays!