



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parashat Tzav 5773

By Rachel Jacoby Rosenfield

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The flour, salt, oil, sugar, yeast, eggs and cinnamon were spread out on the vinyl tablecloth. We had moved the table to the modest cement block porch that jutted out from the doorless entryway to Marta's house. It was Friday afternoon and this Salvadoran woman had opened her home to our group of American Jews for challah baking.

I was staffing an AJWS Rabbinical Students' Delegation to Ciudad Romero in El Salvador, accompanied by 18 rabbinical students from six different seminaries. We came to El Salvador to meet the members of this extraordinary community who, in the brief 20 years since the country's civil war, had returned from exile in Panama to establish an agricultural village on the banks of the lower Lempa River.

Despite the work of many community-based organizations to improve environmental conditions, diversify crops and empower women through micro-credit, this community still faces formidable challenges. A dam, routinely opened by the government to relieve flooding upstream, causes massive flooding and crop destruction in the region. The ground water is polluted from years of heavy pesticide use, resulting in a cluster of kidney disease in the community. And many local women talk about their biggest dream for their daughters—that they not drop out of school in their early teens to wed.

Here in Ciudad Romero, on Marta's porch, I was converting kilos to pounds and liters to cups, following the familiar procedure that I had performed hundreds of times of preparing challah for Shabbat. Before we braided the dough, we performed the ritual of "taking challah." We tore off an olive-size piece from the lump of dough and recited the blessing: "Blessed are You . . . who commands us to separate challah from the dough." This ritual derives from the commandment in Numbers, "When you enter the land to which I am taking you and you eat of the bread of the land, you shall set some aside as a gift to the Lord."<sup>1</sup>

The tradition is to burn this small portion of dough, and we did so in Marta's arching outdoor clay oven, which one participant aptly described as "talmudic" in aspect and proportion. I found myself praying as I took challah that the dreams that the people of Ciudad Romero hold for themselves would be realized: that their crops would be protected from flooding and would thrive, that they would succeed in growing produce without the use of pesticides and that their daughters would receive higher education.

I recalled the experience of baking with Marta, taking challah, and offering prayer as I read *Parashat Tzav* this year. The *parashah* reads like a cookbook, a series of recipes, with the description of each ritual procedure including what should be offered, how long it should burn, what should be worn during the preparation and what should happen to the offering and/or its ashes afterward. The prescriptive tone of the text is underlined by the repetition of the phrase "*zot torat ha . . .*"—translated as "this is the teaching of . . ."—followed by the set of priestly instructions.<sup>2</sup> One can imagine the text saying instead, "This is the recipe for . . ."

<sup>1</sup> Numbers 15:18-19.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004) 564.

Though the descriptions of the sacrifices are highly formulaic, their purpose is profound: to expiate, to exculpate, to transform that which is defiled into that which is sacred, to offer thanksgiving, to ask for well-being. These offerings are made with intention. They are burned so that the smells and sounds and smoke will fill the air, rise into the heavens and deliver these intentions to God. Much like spoken prayer, which replaced ritual sacrifice after the destruction of the second Temple, the rigid formulas for sacrifices serve as vehicles for profound personal and communal expression and, ultimately, transformation.

Praying alone—even with intention—is not enough to complete the transformation. Expiation and well-being really come when the transgressor makes a change in her way of being in the world, through her actions. But using a ritual vehicle such as prayer—or taking challah—to focus one’s intention can be an important initial step. I imagine this was the purpose of our *parashah’s* exacting instructions for sacrifice as well—to admit transgression, gratitude or hope; to express those complex feelings through ritual; and in doing so, to set oneself on a course toward realizing the desired change.

This process can guide our social justice activism as well. Recognizing injustice and feeling responsible for addressing it is a critical first step—one that must lead to further steps, such as *tzedakah*, education and sharing stories with friends and community, and advocacy around U.S. policies that impact vulnerable people in the developing world.

Breaking off a piece of dough and burning it in Marta’s oven did not create any material change in Ciudad Romero—or in the world. But as the smoke rose, so did our group’s understanding deepen of the challenges of vulnerability and poverty that our hosts face daily. And as the lump of dough solidified in the burning oven, so did our resolve to address global injustice with moral courage and meaningful action.



**Rachel Jacoby Rosenfield** is the director of Experiential Education at American Jewish World Service. She was the founding director of the Jewish Greening Fellowship and has held leadership positions in the field of Jewish education and communal service for more than 15 years. She earned her M.A. in Comparative Literature at the University of California at Berkeley. She lives in Riverdale, NY with her family. You can reach her at [rosenfield@ajws.org](mailto:rosenfield@ajws.org).

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45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e [ajws@ajws.org](mailto:ajws@ajws.org) • [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org)