

The Origin and Development of Schlissel Hallah

By: ZVI RON

In recent years as the Shabbat following Pesah draws near, one can see many posts on various forms of social media of people displaying their key shaped *schlissel hallah*.¹ This is accompanied by vigorous debates on whether or not this is a pagan practice² or a holy Jewish custom.³ In this article we will go to the sources and discover that it is actually neither of these things.

¹ Schlissel is the German/Yiddish word for key. Although “key shaped hallah for the Sabbath following Passover” is said to be a practice that has “fallen out of common use” in Eve Jochnowitz, “Jewish, Ashkenazi: Hallah (Bread); Kneydlekh (Matzo balls)” in Lucy Long, ed., *Ethnic American Cooking: Recipes for Living in a New World* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), p. 154, it appears that in fact in recent years it is making a resurgence. See the results of a 2013 survey of Orthodox women where 10% of respondents reported practicing the custom and another 21% heard of it, Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz, *Challenge and Conformity: The Religious Lives of Orthodox Women* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2021), p. 233, n. 38. For an anthropological explanation of the recent resurgence of this custom, see Alan Brill, “Shlissel Hallah, Bread Baking, and the Relief of Anxiety - An Update,” on the blog *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions: Notes on Jewish Theology and Spirituality* (April 2018), where the role of the internet is noted as well, “The internet has played a tremendous role in the rapid spread of this custom in the wider community, which in turn normalizes the activity. Synagogues now have events this week for a collective baking of hallah.”

² The by now classic article, “The Origins of the Non-Jewish Custom of “Shlissel Hallah” (Key Bread): The Loaf of Idolatry?” can be found at: <http://www.mesora.org/shlissel.html>

³ A typical defense, “Shlissel Hallah – An Analysis” can be found at: <https://vinnews.com/2013/04/04/new-york-shlissel-challahh-an-analysis/>

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The Earliest Version of the Custom

Many contemporary discussions of Schlissel hallah begin by noting the many ways the custom is performed. These include baking a hallah in the shape of a key, decorating a regular hallah with an additional bit of dough in the shape of a key, arranging seeds on top of the hallah in the shape of a key, or by baking a key inside the hallah.⁴ Going back to the earliest mentions of this custom, we see that there was originally one way to make this special hallah, which is none of the above.

R. Pinchas Shapiro of Koretz (1726-1791), student of the Baal Shem Tov, is the earliest source connecting a key to hallah on the Shabbat after Pesah. Although he didn't publish any of his teachings in his lifetime, many were collected by his students. In the collection *Imre Pinchas* there is a discussion regarding the Shabbat after Pesah. There his students report the teaching said by R. Pinchas' son in the presence of his father in his name that, "On the Shabbat after Pesah we make [the hallah] like matzah, hinting at the *matzot* eaten on Pesah Sheni. And we make incisions (מִנְקִיבֵיךְ) into the hallah with a key, hinting that the gates are opened until Pesah Sheni."⁵

Although Pesah has passed and the awaited redemption did not materialize, there is still the possibility of a second chance at redemption, as demonstrated by Pesah Sheni. For this reason, the hallah used on this Shabbat has cuts made in it, reminding us of the appearance of matzah. These markings are made with a key to represent the gates of redemption remaining open.⁶ This is also why some sources specifically note that the hallah is also supposed to be round⁷ and flat⁸ on this Shabbat, to make it more reminiscent of matzah.

In the diaspora, where this practice originated, the Shabbat after Pesah is always the Shabbat where the month of Iyar is announced. In Israel, however, sometimes the seventh day of Pesah comes out on a Friday. In such a case the special *ballot* must be made on the following

⁴ See for example, the article "Shabbat Gelah Matzot" by David Angel in *Hamevaser Torani*, 25 Nissan 5774 (2014), p. 12.

⁵ Elimelech Elazar Frankel, ed., *Imre Pinchas ha-Shalem* (Bnei Brak, 2003), p. 93, *siman* 217.

⁶ Regarding the mystical open gates, see the explanations in Gavriel Zinner, *Nitei Gavriel: Hilkbhot Pesah, part 3* (Brooklyn, NY: Shemesh, 2002), pp. 326-327, 57:6.

⁷ See the article by David Stein in *ha-Mahane ha-Haredi* number 524, Nissan 5751 (1991), p. 14.

⁸ See *Luah Davar b-Itto* 5778 (Kiryat Arba, 2017), p. 1060.

Shabbat, as the significant element is not that it is the Shabbat after Pesah, but rather the Shabbat where the month of Iyar is announced, when Pesah Sheni takes place. This is why the *challot* are made to look like *matzot* on this particular Shabbat.⁹

Making holes in bread with some kind of implement is not itself a special Jewish practice, it is called docking, which is pricking the bread dough with a fork or some sharp tool.¹⁰ This technique as applied to flatbreads helps the steam to escape, preventing air bubbles from ruining a flat pastry base, while also helping the bread to bake more evenly. Docking tools include spiked rollers that are more familiar to Jewish people from matzah baking.¹¹ Versions of docking are the lines cut on top of baguettes, to make sure bubbles do not form under the crust. As can be seen in a picture from an advertisement for a docking tool (Figure 1), circular bread which is thoroughly docked has an appearance reminiscent of matzah.¹²

Other Early Mentions of the Custom

The next mention of the custom is in *Ohev Yisrael* by the Apter Rebbe, R. Avraham Yehoshua Heshel (1748-1825). He states that the custom is

⁹ Eliakim Devoraks, *Netivei ha-Minbagim: Pesah* (Jerusalem: Machon I-Heker Minhagei Yisrael, 2012), p. 363. Of course, it would not be practically possible to prepare *hallot* when Shabbat is the day after the last day Pesah, but rather than saying that in such years the custom is simply abandoned, the ḥallah is made on the significant Shabbat when Iyar is announced. However, see the item regarding the custom in *Aspaklaria* number 164 (5778), p. 62, mistakenly lamenting that the custom could not be performed in Israel that year (2018) as the Shabbat after Pesah was immediately after the seventh day of Pesah.

¹⁰ The purpose of docking was not always apparent to observers. R. Joseph Juspa Hahn (d. 1637) in his book *Sefer Yosef Ometz*, an important collection of the customs of the Frankfurt am Main community, notes special bread made for Shabbat in general. He recalls that in his youth the common practice was that loaves made for Shabbat had holes made in them with a knife. The explanation he heard was that these markings served to make them look different in case they came into contact with meat during the process of preparing the food for Shabbat, the marking indicating that the bread should not be considered *pareve*. Amichai Kinarti, ed., Joseph Juspa Hahn, *Sefer Yosef Ometz* (Shaalvim: Machon Shlomo Aumann, 2016), *siman* 573, p. 163.

¹¹ Colin W. Wrigley, Harold Corke, Koushik Seetharaman, eds., *Encyclopedia of Food Grains*, vol. 1 (New York: Academic Press, 2015), P. 20.

¹² <https://www.walmart.com/ip/EVEDMOT-Pizza-Dough-Docker-Roller-Stainless-Steel-Pin-Puncher-Hole-Maker-Wood-Handle-Docking-Tool-Cookie-Pie-Pastry-Bread/1529906483>.

“to make dots (מנקדין)” on the ḥallah “with a key in particular.” He gives an explanation based on kabbalistic ideas that

It is known that on Pesah all the gates above are opened... and afterwards they are locked and we need to open them... and the good God will open for us His storehouse of goodness... just as He gave our forefathers manna in the month of Iyar which is blessed on this Shabbat.

This storehouse of goodness is opened through our merits, “We make dots on the holy bread on this Shabbat with keys to hint that we are opening a little through fulfilling the mitzvah of Shabbat.”¹³ The emphasis is on the idea that on Pesah it was part of God’s mercy that the gates are opened, and now we must open the gates through our meritorious acts.¹⁴ It is the merit of observing Shabbat that opens the heavenly gates, not the key or the ḥallah itself. He also gives an additional more complex and involved explanation based on the vowels used in Hebrew, since they are called “dots” (נקודות).¹⁵

Describing the custom as making incisions (מנקבין) or dots (מנקדין) in the bread with a key continues in all the early references to the custom. For example, the second Alexander rebbe, R. Yerachmiel Yisrael Yitzchak Dancyger (1853–1910), states that there is a “custom to make dots (לנקד) on the *challot* with keys on this Shabbat,” explaining that perhaps the keys are hinting to the fear of God, which is “the great key with which to enter the rooms of Torah.”¹⁶

Some sources use more general language that served to obscure the original docking custom when read in later periods. The first rebbe of Sighet, Hungary, R. Rabbi Yekutiel Yehuda Teitelbaum (1808–1883) writes, “the *challot* are made using a key (במפתח),” but doesn’t spell out what exactly is done with the key. The explanation given there is that usually the Torah portion for this Shabbat is *Shemini* where forbidden foods and relations are discussed, and these are “the key to serve God in all things.”¹⁷ Similarly, Mordechai Landa, in his *Gedulat Mordechai*, published in 1885, gives multiple explanations for the custom, but consistently describes it as “making marks on the ḥallah with keys,” not using

¹³ Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, *Ohev Yisrael* (Zhytomyr: 1863), pp. 185-186.

¹⁴ Gavriel Zinner, *Nitei Gavriel: Hilkebot Pesah, part 3* (Brooklyn, NY: Shemesh, 2002), p. 22.

¹⁵ Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, *Ohev Yisrael* (Zhytomyr: 1863), p. 186.

¹⁶ Yerachmiel Yisrael Yitzchak Dancyger, *Yismah Yisrael* (Lodz: 1915), p. 106.

¹⁷ Yekutiel Yehuda Teitelbaum, *Rav Tuw* (Lemberg, 1889), p. 96b.

the terminology of cuts or dots found in the earlier sources.¹⁸ Sources such as these would contribute to the variations found in the way that the custom is performed, and to the disconnection from the idea of ḥallah that has the appearance of matzah.

At the end of *Ohev Yisrael*, R. Meshulam Zusha Heshel of Zinkov (1813-1866), the grandson of R. Avraham Yehoshua Heshel, has a section of additional material (ליקוטים) that he heard “from people who can be relied upon, that they heard from the holy mouth of the author.”¹⁹ There it is explained that the custom is “to make cuts (לנקוב) in the challot on the Shabbat after Pesah with keys, and on the ḥallah a shape of a key is made (ונעשה על החלה צורת מפתח).” The explanation brought here is that “at this time when the Israelites were eating from the manna, from the time that the *omer* offering was brought and on they no longer ate from the manna as it is written, “The day after the Passover, that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land: unleavened bread and roasted grain” (Josh. 5:11). The Talmud (TB *Kiddushin* 37b) states that “on the day after the Passover they ate (the produce of the Land of Israel), but initially (before that date), they did not eat it,” and from then they began eating the produce of the Land, and the Israelites needed livelihood (*parnassah*) because until now they had manna.” Thus, the key represents that we are asking God to open the gate of livelihood that He alone is in charge of, as stated in TB *Ta’anit* 2b.²⁰ Among the many reasons found in various works for the custom,²¹ this one, with the connection to *parnassah*, would become the most popular.²²

R. Yitzchak Lipetz’s popular *Sefer Mata’amim*, published in 1890 and numerous times afterwards, includes this custom on the very last page in an addendum section. The primary explanation given there is the one about livelihood from the additional material in *Ohev Yisrael*, quoting the description of the custom found there, “to make cuts (מנקבין) in the *challot* with keys and make the shape of a key on the ḥallah.”²³ In the 1904

¹⁸ Mordechai Landa, *Gedulat Mordechai* vol. 3 (Warsaw: 1885), pp. 540-541. The phrases used there are נרשמים החלות במפתחות, לרשום את החלות במפתחות, נרשם החלות במפתחות.

¹⁹ Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, *Ohev Yisrael* (Zhytomyr: 1863), p. 201.

²⁰ Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, *Ohev Yisrael* (Zhytomyr: 1863), p. 217.

²¹ See Menachem Mendel Taub, *Kol Menahem* (Jerusalem: 2011), pp. 257-264 where 33 reasons are brought for the custom.

²² This and the first reason found in *Ohev Yisrael* are the two explanations brought in the very popular *Sefer Ta’amei ha-Minbagim u-Mekorei ha-Dinim* (Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1957), 249-250.

²³ Yitzchak Lipetz, *Sefer Mata’amim* (Warsaw: 1890), p. 144.

edition, called *Sefer Mata'amim ha-Hadash*, the custom is included in the main body of the book, but written in the exact same way as before.²⁴

What exactly is meant by the phrase in *Ohev Yisrael* “and on the hallah a shape of a key is made (ונעשה על החלה צורת מפתח)” is not clear. Similar ambiguous terminology is found in later Chassidic works which mention making the shape of a key on the hallah, such as R. Elazar Rubin, the Sassov rebbe (1892-1932), in his *Zikbron Elazar*,²⁵ and the practice reported in the home of R. Aharon Rokeach (1880-1957), the fourth rebbe of Belz.²⁶ The phrase could mean taking a piece of dough in the shape of a key and adding it to the bread. There were various regional Jewish customs regarding adding shapes to a regular hallah during special occasions, for example figures “representing birds, ladders, hands, keys, and other objects that might facilitate the ascent of prayers to Heaven” at the Tishrei holidays.²⁷ Such small decorative additions to breads were known in many European communities, both Jewish and non-Jewish.²⁸ Therefore, adding a key shaped piece of dough to the top of the hallah rather than poking holes into the bread was something fundamentally familiar and appears to be the standard simple interpretation of this phrase. This would then be the earliest mention of making something in the shape of a key, but here it is an addition to the hallah, not the entire hallah itself. On the other hand, since this is mentioned in *Ohev Yisrael* along with making cuts in the hallah, it has been understood as meaning that the indentations in the dough are made with a key, resulting in key shaped impressions on the bread. This seems to be the

²⁴ Yitzchak Lipetz, *Sefer Mata'amim* (Warsaw: 1904), p. 45.

²⁵ Elazar Rubin, *Zikbron Elazar* (Lvov: 1930), p. 161, עושין צירות מפתח על החלות.

²⁶ Yehoshua Pollak, *Hoshvei Mahshavot* (Tel Aviv, 1974), pp. 151-152. עושין צורת מפתח על החלה.

²⁷ Marvin Herzog, *The Yiddish Language in Northern Poland: Its Geography and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1965), p. 32, see also p. 38. See for example the description of the bread eaten on Hoshana Rabbah in Hayyim Strauss, *The Jewish Festivals* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1938), p. 194, “long loaves with braided layers on top, such as are made and served the day before Yom Kippur. The women claim that these are ladders to heaven.” See also Abraham Rechtman, “Emblems on Yom Tov Halot,” *Yidisher Folklor*, vol. 1, number 2, June 1955, p. 45 where he provides drawings of the different kinds of hallot his mother would make in Proskurev, Podolia, even before 1900.

²⁸ See the many examples in Paun Es Durlic, *Sacred Language of the Vlach Bread* (Belgrade: Balkankult Foundation, 2011), pp. 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 30, 40.

original intent, as *Ohev Yisrael* is not describing two ways to perform this custom, but rather the cause and effect of making indentations with a key.²⁹

This expression, repeated in many books of Jewish customs, is the root of the major change in the custom. Rather than making matzah type incisions with the edge of a key, now key shaped indentations are made with the whole body of the key itself. Furthermore, the custom brachiates into those using a key shaped piece of dough on top of the bread, which eventually permuted into making the whole ḥallah in the shape of a key, if a small key on top of a ḥallah is good for *parmassah*, a whole ḥallah in the shape of a key must be even better. It also seems to have evolved into the idea of taking a key and baking it in the ḥallah itself which appears in later sources. For example, it was the reported custom in the home of Rabbi Betzalel Yair of Alexander (1865-1935).³⁰ If touching the top of a ḥallah with a key is good, baking it into the ḥallah should be even better. These permutations are the versions of the custom most often depicted, even before the advent of social media. For example, the journal *Yidisher Folklor* from 1955 contained a drawing of a key shaped ḥallah (Figure 2),³¹ and the *Encyclopedia Judaica* had a picture of a ḥallah with a key embedded on it in the item about Jewish foods (Figure 3).³²

Although many works on Jewish customs preserved the original practice and language of making incisions or dots in the ḥallah with a key,³³ other more recent works downplay or ignore the original practice

²⁹ See the letter by Naftali Zvi Dembitzer in *Or Yisrael*, vol. 29 (5765/2005), p. 256.

³⁰ Reported in *Karmenu*, Nissan 5762 (2002), p. 9.

³¹ Abraham Rechtman, “Emblems on Yom Tov Ḥalot,” *Yidisher Folklor*, vol. 1, number 2, June 1955, p. 45.

³² *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 6 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972), pp. 1419-1420. Captioned there “Halla from Volhynia 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.”

³³ This is the only description of the custom in Rabbi Avraham Sperling, *Sefer Ta’amei ha-Minbagim u-Mekorei ha-Dinim* (Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1957), pp. 249-250, and in Pinchas Halevi Horvitz, *Birkat ha-Pesah* (London: Schneebalg, 1960), 17:3, pp. 93-94. *Pardes Eliezer: Shabbat she-Ahar Pesah, Pirkei Avot, Pesah Sheini, Lag B-Omer* (Brooklyn, NY: Mechon Damesek Eliezer, 2004), pp. 43-58 has a very long and comprehensive discussion of the custom, and consistently refers to it as making cuts or dots in the ḥallah with a key, not making the ḥallah in the shape of a key.

of making cuts in the ḥallah with a key.³⁴ This serves to further obscure the original intent of making the ḥallah have the appearance of a matzah. For example, J. D. Eisenstein in his early twentieth century work *Otzar Dinim Uu-Minbagim* writes that the custom is to make the shape of a key with sesame seeds on the ḥallah.³⁵ Similarly, *Otzar Ta'amei Ha-Mminbagim* describes the custom as “making the form of a key with sesame seeds, and some make holes in it with a key before baking,” and gives a version of the livelihood explanation, as well as one about unlocking the gates of wisdom.³⁶ The original connection between this ḥallah and matzah has by this time been lost. It should be noted that even so, neither of these works, nor any of the Chassidic works cited above, mention making the entire ḥallah itself in the shape of a key, although sometimes sources are misquoted to say that.³⁷

Notwithstanding the explanations given by Chassidic masters, it appears that many people who performed this custom were not aware of the spiritual reasons given for it, or even the reason related to livelihood. A popular explanation reported by folklorists is that it represents the key to where the *chametz* is kept which is now permitted to be used, or has been retrieved from the non-Jew to whom the *chametz* was sold, once Pesah has ended.³⁸

³⁴ See for example Gavriel Zinner, *Nitei Gavriel: Hilkhot Pesah, part 3* (Brooklyn, NY: Shemesh, 2002), p. 225, 39:1, and note 1 there, where it states in the main text, “It is a Chassidic custom to make the form of a key with the dough of the ḥallah that are baked on the Shabbat after Pesah.” However, in the footnotes he quotes R. Pinchas of Koretz including his statement “we make incisions (מנקבין) into the ḥallah with a key.” He also quotes the Apter Rebbe, R. Avraham Yehoshua Heshel, but only his explanation for the custom, not where he says to make dots on the ḥallah with the key. Note that in the introduction to the book he mentions “making ḥallah in the shape of a key or making dots on the ḥallah with a key,” p. 21. Similarly, Eliakim Devoraks, *Netivei ha-Minbagim: Pesah* (Jerusalem: Machon I-Heker Minbagei Yisrael, 2012), p. 363 has a chapter titled “Baking Ḥallah in the Shape of a Key After Pesah,” but in the text itself notes that some have the custom of making cuts in the ḥallah with a key.

³⁵ J. D. Eisenstein, *Otzar Dinim u-Minbagim* (New York, 1917), p. 342.

³⁶ Shmuel Gelbard, *Otzar Ta'amei ha-Mminbagim* (Petach Tikva: Mifal Rashi, 1996), p. 207.

³⁷ For example, Elkana Yisrael, *I-Hitaneg: Moadim* (Migdal Haemek: 2018), p. 534 writes that in *Ohev Yisrael* it says to make the ḥallah in the shape of a key, while he actually says to make a shape of a key on the ḥallah.

³⁸ Abraham Rechtman, “Emblems on Yom Tov Ḥalot,” *Yidisher Folklor*, vol. 1, number 2, June 1955, p. 45; Yehuda Lev, *Lev ha-Mmoadim: Hodesh Nisan v-Pesah* (Elad: 2019), p. 164.

Matzah after Pesah

We have seen that the original symbolism of the special ḥallah after Pesah is that it should have the appearance of matzah. This places it as part of the variety of Chassidic practices of eating matzah or something reminiscent of matzah in the days following Pesah.

Some of these practices are focused on the first Shabbat after Pesah. These include the custom of Belz chassidim to have round *challot* on this Shabbat, with one of the explanations being that this makes them look like *matzot*.³⁹ Another is the practice to eat fried *matzot* glazed with eggs on the Shabbat after Pesah, called *geula matzot* or variations of that.⁴⁰

Other Chassidic sources extend the eating of matzah beyond the one additional Shabbat. For example, the practice of R. Yehoshua Heschel of Monistritz (1860-1938), who would have *shmura* matzah on all the Shabbatot between Pesah and Shavuot.⁴¹ Other works note the custom to eat matzot at all meals during the counting of the *omer*, or to save some matzah from Pesah to be used on Shavuot.⁴²

The most famous of this family of practices is the idea of eating matzah on *Pesah Sheini*, a custom that was fundamentally started by Chassidic figures and is given great significance in Chassidic literature.⁴³

³⁹ Aharon Pollak, *Siftei Aharon* (Petach Tikva: 2016), pp. 572-573. See also *Pardes Eliezer: Shabbat she-Ahar Pesah, Pirkei Avot, Pesah Sheini, Lag B-Omer* (Brooklyn, NY: Mechon Damesek Eliezer, 2004), p. 30.

⁴⁰ Gavriel Zinner, *Nitei Gavriel: Hilkhot Pesah, part 3* (Brooklyn, NY: Shemesh, 2002), p. 225, notes 2 and 3. See also Yerachmiel Yisrael Yitzchak Dancyger, *Yismah Yisrael* (Lodz: 1915), p. 106; Avraham Abba Ziss, *Minhagei Komarno* (Tel Aviv: 1965), p. 79, *siman* 354; Josef Lewy, *Minbag Yisrael Torah*, vol. 2 (Brooklyn, New York: 1993), pp. 337-338. “Shabbat Gelah Matzot” by David Angel in *Hamevaser Torani*, 25 Nissan 5774, pp. 12-13.

⁴¹ Yehoshua Heschel of Monistritz, *Erkei Yehoshua* (Jerusalem: 1992), p. 252, *siman* 156. This was in addition to having ḥallah with the shape of a key cut into it on the Shabbat after Pesah.

⁴² Josef Lewy, *Minbag Yisrael Torah*, vol. 2 (Brooklyn, New York: 1993), pp. 339-340.

⁴³ See Yechiel Gold, *Darkei Hayyim v-Shalom* (Munkatch: 1940), p. 204, who emphasizes that this is a Chassidic practice. See also Ephraim Greenblatt, *Rivevot Ephraim, Oraḥ Hayyim*, vol. 2 (Brooklyn, NY: Deutsch Printing and Publishing Co., 1978), pp. 246-247, *siman* 129:39; Alter Hilvitz, *Hikrei Zmanim* vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1981), pp. 156-157. Although R. Chaim Palagi (1788-1868), who was not Chassidic, mentions this practice, he writes that it is good to eat matzah on Pesah Sheni “if he has enough *shmura* matzah and there is extra, to set aside a little to eat on the Second Pesah.” This lacks the

There are many versions of this custom, eating matzah only on the 14th of Iyar, eating matzah also on the night of the 15th of Iyar, and also eating *maror* and an egg along with the matzah and singing *Adir Hu*.⁴⁴ This practice was opposed in the early anti-Chassidic literature,⁴⁵ and rejected by the Vilna Gaon,⁴⁶ but over the generations became commonplace outside of Chassidic circles as well.⁴⁷

Although different explanations are given for each particular matzah related practice,⁴⁸ the common theme is that even though the awaited redemption did not take place at Pesah we still anticipate that it may come in the period following Pesah when the spiritual forces associated with the Exodus from Egypt are still active, and in a fashion extended by the continued use of *matzot*.⁴⁹ The understanding that Schlissel hallah is to be viewed as part of this spectrum of practices is already found in the earliest mention of the custom in *Imre Pinhas* where the Schlissel hallah is supposed to be “hinting at the *matzot* eaten on *Pesah Sheni*. And we make incisions (מַנְקֵי) into the hallah with a key, hinting that the gates are opened until *Pesah Sheni*.”⁵⁰

emphasis and importance attributed to the custom in Chassidic sources, *Hayyim l-Rosh* (Izmir: 1852), p. 106a, *siman* 9.

⁴⁴ Simcha Rabinovitch, *Piskei Teshuvot*, vol. 5 (Jerusalem: 1995), p. 295, see notes 9-11 there. There is extensive literature regarding the Chassidic practice of eating matzah on Pesah Sheni. See for example Menahem Eisenstat, *Zikhron Yehuda* (Ungvar: 1867), p. 35b, for eating matzah on the night of the 15th of Iyar and also eating an egg; Meir Dan Plotzki, *Kli Hemdab* vol. 4 (Peitrikov: 1927) p. 51 and Yissachar Dov Babad, *Otzar Yad ha-Hayyim* (Lvov: 1934), p. 33, for discussions on the proper time to eat the matzah; Yechiel Gold, *Darkei Hayyim v-Shalom* (Munkatch: 1940), p. 204, for eating a meal with matzah on the 14th of Iyar, along with *maror* and the singing of *Adir Hu*; Avraham Abba Ziss, *Minhagei Komarno* (Tel Aviv: 1965), p. 79, *siman* 355, singing of *Adir Hu*.

⁴⁵ Aharon Wertheim, *Halakhot v-Halikhos b-Hassidut* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1960), p. 178.

⁴⁶ Yissachar Dov Ber of Vilna, *Ma'aseh Rav* (Vilna: 1889), p. 39, *siman* 185.

⁴⁷ See Gavriel Zinner, *Nitei Gavriel: Hilkhos Pesah, part 3* (Brooklyn, NY: Shemesh, 2002), pp. 329-330, 57:9.

⁴⁸ See the explanations for matzah fried in egg in Josef Lewy, *Minhag Yisrael Torah*, vol. 2 (Brooklyn, New York: 1993), pp. 337-338.

⁴⁹ Yehoshua Pollak, *Hoshvei Maḥshavot* (Tel Aviv, 1974), p. 152. Regarding this idea in Chassidic thought regarding Pesah Sheni in particular, see Itzik Amitai, *Obel Moed: Pesah* (Har Chevron: 2016), pp. 137-139.

⁵⁰ Elimelech Elazar Frankel, ed., *Imre Pinhas ha-Shalem* (Bnei Brak: 2003), p. 93, *siman* 217.

From Dots to Twists

We have seen that the original idea was to have bread that looked like matzah on the Shabbat when the month of Iyar is announced, accomplished by making dots in the bread with a key. Why did this practice transform over time into ḥallah in the shape of a key?

The original Ashkenazic *hallot* were plain round loaves, as they would remain in Sephardic lands,⁵¹ similar to the bread that was baked during the week.⁵² It was only in the fifteenth century that Ashkenazic Jews in Austria and Southern Germany started braiding their bread for Shabbat.⁵³ Even so, the braiding would not be accorded significance in rabbinic literature for many years, and even now is not noted in many classic works on Jewish customs.⁵⁴ The practice of braiding bread to make it more decorative and fancy and also to make it into various special shapes based on the season was copied from the practice of gentile bakers in Ashkenazic lands.⁵⁵ It took some time for the practice of braided ḥallah to become the universal Ashkenazic tradition.

Since docking is not used for braided bread, as the popularity of braided ḥallah increased, docking became less connected with ḥallah. In terms of the custom of Schlissel ḥallah, this caused a shift away from the

⁵¹ John Cooper, *Eat and be Satisfied* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1993), p. 174. On a family trip to Croatia, we purchased Shabbat food from the local Jewish community in Zagreb. The *hallot* supplied were large, round and basically flat, in accordance with Sephardic tradition.

⁵² Gil Marks, *The World of Jewish Cooking* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 276. See the Yemenite work, *Yitzhak Ratzabi, Shulhan Arukh ha-Mekutzar* (Bnei Brak: 1996), *Orah Ḥayyim* vol. 2, p. 6, note 21, who explicitly states “but our simple custom is that they are round loaves, as they are also on weekdays.”

⁵³ Freda Reider, *The Ḥallah Book: Recipes, History, and Traditions* (New York: Ktav, 1987), p. 13.

⁵⁴ For example, Abraham Sperling, *Sefer Ta'amei ha-Minbagim u-Mekorei ha-Dinim* (Jerusalem: Shai Lamora, 1999); Yitzchak Lipetz, *Sefer Matamim* (Warsaw: 1894); A. Hershovitz, *Sefer Minbagei Yesburun* (Vilna: 1899); J.D. Eisenstein, *Otzar Dinim u-Minbagim* (New York: 1917); Shmuel Gelbard, *Otzar Ta'amei ha-Minbagim* (Petach Tikva: Mifaaal Rashi, 1996). The earliest explanation for braided ḥallah is given by R. Yair Ḥayyim Bacharach (1639-1702). He explains that it is the custom “in all the lands of Poland, Bohemia and Moravia” to make the ḥallah braided because it is often in contact with the meat dishes being prepared for Shabbat. The special unusual braided form is based in the idea in TB *Pesahim* 36a that such bread must have an unusual shape to remind people not to eat it with dairy. *Makor Ḥayyim*, commentary to *Tur, Orah Ḥayyim* 274, introduction.

⁵⁵ See my article, ‘Braided Ḥallah’, *Modern Judaism*, 42:1, February 2022, pp. 3-4.

original matzah shaped bread to braided bread with a piece of dough made in the shape of a key on top of it.⁵⁶ Over time, this would further change to baking key shaped braided bread, the dominant version seen today.

Gentile Shaped Bread

Because examples of shaped bread, including key shaped bread and using a key in the making of bread, have been reported among non-Jews, the custom of Schlissel hallah is sometimes considered a prohibited pagan practice.

While it is true that sometimes crosses were made on Christmas breads using a key, this was just one of many ways to make markings in dough. James Frazer, in his classic work on folklore, *The Golden Bough*, reports, “In other parts of Esthonia, again, the Christmas Boar (a special kind of bread), 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.”⁵⁷ Similarly, bread made in the shape of a key is known among the Vlachs of Europe (Figure 4), but it is just one of many shaped breads used on various occasions, the key shaped bread was sometimes part of the *po-mana* meal made in honor of the deceased.⁵⁸

It would seem to be difficult to directly associate Schlissel hallah on the Shabbat after Pesah in particular with gentile practices. It is more correct to say that in the European milieu, making bread in a range of special shapes for different occasions was common,⁵⁹ and sometimes using a key to aid in the decorating was not particularly unusual. This was done by European Jews and non-Jews alike, as part of celebration of

⁵⁶ See Shlomo Ashkenazi, *Avnei Hen* (Tel Aviv: Sinai, 1990) p. 94, where it is noted that in European communities where braided hallah was made a small piece of dough in the shape of a key would be placed on top.

⁵⁷ James Frazer, *The Golden Bough, volume 7: Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild* part 1 (London: MacMillan and Company, 1912), p. 302.

⁵⁸ Paun Es Durlic, *Sacred Language of the Vlach Bread* (Belgrade: Balkankult Foundation, 2011), p. 38. This book has an illustration of a different kind of special braided bread on almost each page.

⁵⁹ See for example the description of breads made for Easter and other special days in Margaret L. Arnott, *Gastronomy: The Anthropology of Food and Food Habits* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1975), pp. 297-305; Gillian Riley, *The Oxford Companion to Italian Food* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 69-70, 73-74

festivals and special times.⁶⁰ This contributed to the custom shifting from matzah shaped bread to key shaped bread.

Conclusion

A number of rabbis have been asked about whether this practice falls under the prohibition of superstitious practices, called “the ways of the Amorites” (דרכי האמורי) in rabbinic literature. R. Yosef Lieberman (1928-2023) answered that it does not seem to be prohibited, as there are a number of similar seemingly supernatural practices (*segullot*) that are practiced. On the other hand, R. Hayyim Kaniefsky (1928-2022) when asked about Schlissel hallah is reported to have responded, “Who invented this, it is the ways of the Amorites (זה דרכי מי המציא את זה, זה דרכי האמורי).”⁶¹ When asked if it is permitted, he responded “You shouldn’t do this (לא צריך לעשות את זה).” Later when pressed on the matter he said that he unfamiliar with this practice (לא ידוע לי). When shown that the custom is found in *Ohev Yisrael* he wrote in response that if it is the custom then it can be done (היכי דנהוג נהוג).⁶² The usual conflict expressed is how can there be a custom that appears to be superstitious, and even has versions found among non-Jews, yet is mentioned in early Chassidic sources, leading to generally ambivalent statements from rabbis who are asked about this.⁶³

⁶⁰ See Abraham Rechtman, “Emblems on Yom Tov Hallot,” *Yidishe Folklor*, vol. 1, number 2, June 1955, p. 45 where he provides drawings of the different kinds of shaped hallot his mother would make in Proskurev, Podolia, before 1900. The perseverance of the key shaped hallah in a time when most other shaped hallot are mostly forgotten (hands, birds, etc.) may be connected to keys being a powerful symbol in other Jewish folk practices. See Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York: Athenium, 1984), pp. 160, 169; Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1994), pp. 128-130. See also Alan Brill, “Shlissel Hallah, Bread Baking, and the Relief of Anxiety - An Update,” on the blog *The Book of Doctrines and Opinions: Notes on Jewish Theology and Spirituality* (April 2018) “Of all the various Hallah customs, this one was specially chosen and the others ignored because of the anxiety about making a living and as a transition back to bread baking after Passover.”

⁶¹ Gamliel Rabinowitz, *Gam Ani Odeka*, vol. 15 (Bnei Brak: 2018), p. 29.

⁶² Gamliel Rabinowitz, *Gam Ani Odeka*, vol. 15 (Bnei Brak: 2018), p. 30.

⁶³ Gamliel Rabinowitz, *Gam Ani Odeka*, vol. 15 (Bnei Brak: 2018), p. 31. See also David Cohen, *Avraham Yagel Yitzchak Yeranen* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 2000), pp. 122-123, where the idea of Schlissel hallah is framed as part

However, going back to the custom as it actually appears in the early Chassidic sources demonstrates that there was no mention of bread in the shape of a key, and the intent was to make hallah in the form of matzah, a particular and unique Jewish symbol. This should at least resolve the issue of similarity to non-Jewish shaped breads. Relying on this as a supernatural source of *parnassah* remains problematic, but that too is just one of many reasons given for the custom, and is not found in the very earliest explanations of the custom.

By going back to the roots of the custom, and understanding that there never really was a custom to make a loaf of bread in the shape of a key in the first place, and that originally it had nothing to do with *parnassah*, the major difficulties raised with it are resolved. By now, the original Chassidic custom of the late 1700s and early 1800s has been transformed beyond recognition in terms of both form and meaning.

of the general practice of having special symbolic foods at different times of year, such as round hallot on Rosh Hashanah and *kreplach* on Hoshanah Rabbah.

Figures



Figure 1:
Advertisement for docking tool:

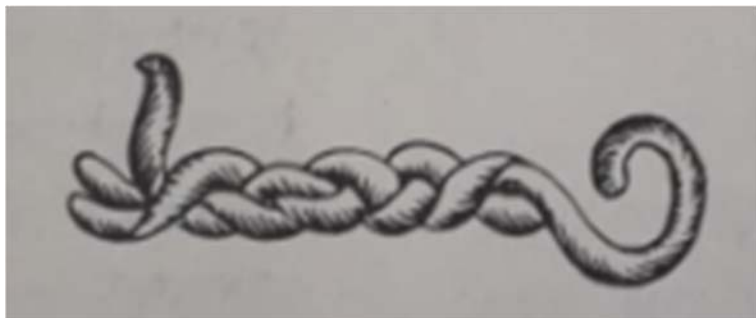


Figure 2:
From Yidisher Folklor (1955)

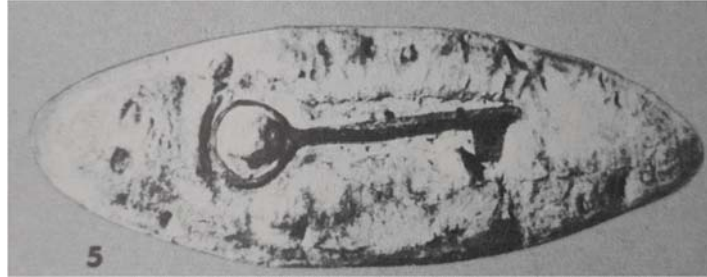


Figure 3:
From Encyclopedia Judaica (1972)

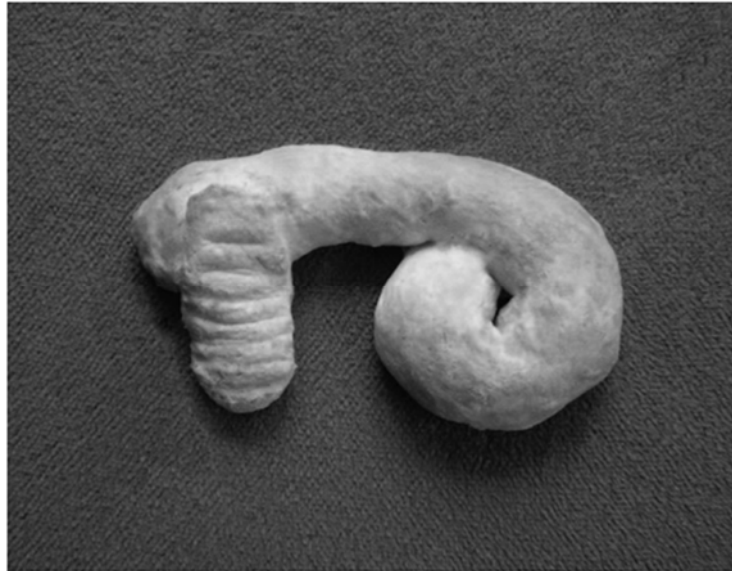


Figure 4:
Vlach key shaped bread

