

Insights into Halacha

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The Great Cholent Challenge

(PhiloTorah editor's notes in green)

Cholent is its Name...

Ahh! Nothing is more geshmak than the awesomely redolent aroma emanating from the kitchen and wafting throughout the house on a Shabbat morning. If you are like most of us, you just can't wait until you sink your teeth into that piping hot, special for Shabbat, delicacy - Cholent. This exceptional meat and potato, barley and bean (and whatever else you decide to throw in) concoction of a stew has been around for a very long time. In fact, the eminent Ohr Zaru'a, Rav Yitzchak of Vienna, in the mid-1200s, already mentioned Cholent by name!

Etymologists have a difficult time figuring out where the name comes from. There are several hypotheses regarding it, including the Hebrew / Aramaic SHELAN (food that rested overnight), SHALUK (thoroughly cooked), from the German SHUL ENDE, referring to a food for after shul, and a combination of the French words CHAUD (hot) and LENT (slow). However, most Sefardim stick to the

name given to a hot Shabbat food by the Mishna, CHAMIN.

The origins of this humble dish lie in the words of the renowned Ba'al HaMa'or, Rav Zerachiya HaLevi of Gerona, who lived in the mid-1100s. He writes that it is a Takanat Chachamim (Rabbinic decree) to enjoy the Shabbat with a hot dish. He adds that whoever does not do so is suspect of being a MIN (heretic; a.k.a Apikores)!

The reason is that the heterodox Kara'im (Karaites), who denied the Rabbinic Mesorah, prohibited eating any hot food on Shabbat, due to their rejection of Torah SheB'al Peh (the Oral Law) coupled with their literal interpretation of the pasuk, LO T'VA'ARU AISH B'CHOL MOSHVO-TEICHEM B'YOM HASHABBAT, You shall not kindle fire in any of your dwellings on the Shabbat day" (Sh'mot 35:3). The Ba'al HaMa'or explains that one who refuses to eat a hot dish on Shabbat (cooked before Shabbat, as per the Oral Law) is suspect of following their heretical interpretation of the Torah and not those of our Chachmei HaDorot.

On the other hand, the Ba'al HaMa'or affirms that whoever makes sure to cook, heat up (before Shabbat), and eat a hot dish on Shabbat will merit seeing 'the end of days'. Quite a large reward just for eating Cholent! And this is not just a minority opinion; his

words are codified in halacha by the Rama as a 'Mitzva' and eating Cholent on Shabbat is considered 'Minhag Yisrael' by the Mishna B'rura. In fact, I know of a certain well-known rabbi who, although not enamored of Cholent, nonetheless makes sure to "eat one bean every Shabbat", and that way fulfill "Mitzvat Cholent".

Serving Up

However, getting the Cholent from a bubbling pot on a blech (a plain sheet of metal placed on the gas burners) onto our plates presents several halachic challenges, as, in our zeal to fulfill this gastronomical Mitzva, we certainly do not want to unintentionally desecrate the Biblical prohibition of BISHUL, cooking on Shabbat. Aside from the issues of SHEHIYA, placing a food on the fire before Shabbat until the time it is being served on Shabbat, and the more stringent CHAZARA, returning food to the (covered) flame on Shabbat, there is also a separate issue of MEIGIS, stirring, which one might possibly violate by doing the simple innocuous action of lifting the lid off of the simmering Cholent pot and replacing it, or just ladling out some Friday night TO'AMEHA Cholent.

There is an inyan of tasting Shabbat food on Erev Shabbat LICHVOD SHABBAT, to ensure that it is properly cooked. This is referred to as TO'AMEHA.

Therefore, in order to serve our 'Mitzva Cholent' properly, without Chas V'Shalom unwittingly transgressing any Shabbat prohibitions, authorities have come up with a five-point plan, which enables us to serve a steaming, savory Cholent, and allows us to return it to the blech for seconds. (more Mitzvot!)

Note: This follows the widespread Ashkenazic practice that one must first remove the pot from the fire in order to serve.

Here are the five steps:

The pot of Cholent must be sitting on a covered flame, as a reminder that we cannot adjust the flame on Shabbat.

Several extensive footnotes add much to the discussion presented here - see the website...

In Mishnaic and Talmudic terms this is referred to as GARUF V'KATUM, meaning the coals in the ovens were pushed to the side and /or covered up. There is a famous machloket Rishonim whether the key reason for doing this is so there will be a reminder that it is prohibited to stoke the coals and make the food cook faster and better, or whether it is meant to actually lessen the cooking heat. Making sure the flame is covered is a prerequisite for committing CHAZARA on Shabbat in a permitted manner. A blech on the

stovetop is the most commonly known example of this.

Regarding the Shabbat hot plate (plata), another common method to keep food warm on Shabbat, most contemporary authorities, including Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank, Rav Moshe Feinstein, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Rav Ovadiah Hadaya, the Debreciner Rav, Rav Yisrael Yaakov Fischer, Rav Yitzchak Zilber, Rav Eliezer Yehuda Waldman, Rav Ben Tzion Abba Shaul, Rav Shmuel HaLevi Wosner, Rav Ovadia Yosef, and Rav Yitzchak Yosef, maintain that it is has the halachic status of a blech, since its temperature cannot be changed, and it is only meant to keep food warm, and not actually cook. However, it should be noted that several of these poskim maintain that this halachic dispensation only applies if one is actually unable to cook on the plata. Other authorities feel that even if one can actually cook on said hot plate, the din still applies as it is not the derech to cook on a hot plate, and therefore no issue of MECHEZI K'MEVASHEL arises. Several authorities, on the other hand, including the Chazon Ish, Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, and Rav Nissim Karelitz, are stringent that a plata does not constitute a true covered flame, due to a LO PLUG. Rav Moshe Sternbuch rules that only B'SHAAT HAD'CHAK may one be lenient to perform CHAZARA onto a plata. Due to this

debate, several authorities maintain that it is preferable to place a layer of thick aluminum foil on the plata before Shabbos, in order to satisfy all opinions.

The Cholent must be fully cooked.

It must still be hot or at least warm.

One must take it off the fire in order to serve it.

If one wants to keep it hot for later (Fleishig Shalosh Seudot, anyone?) he must have in mind when taking the pot off the fire to serve that he is planning on returning it to the fire.

One must have his hand on it the whole time.

However, in extenuating circumstances, even if one was not planning to return it to the flame, as long as his hand was still on it, he may nevertheless do so. Similarly, if he placed it on the counter (i.e. in order to serve the Cholent), but still intended to return it to the fire, according to the majority consensus, he is permitted to return it to the blech.

Sefardic Style

Common Sefardic practice follows the opinion of the Shulchan Aruch, based on his understanding of the Rambam, that once the Cholent is fully cooked, scooping out from the pot no longer constitutes MEIGIS. Accordingly, one may scoop out and

serve Cholent directly from the pot after it is fully cooked, even while it is still on top of the blech.

However, it should be noted that the Ben Ish Chai and, later, Rav Ben Tzion Abba Shaul, qualified this leniency, explaining that one should only rely on this L'TZORECH MITZVA; otherwise, they maintain that one must take the pot off of the fire before ladling out. Interestingly, the Tzitz Eliezer maintains that Yeshiva bochurim raiding the Cholent pot on a Friday night in order to learn, qualifies as TZORECH MITZVA. Rav Ovadiah Yosef added that if the bochurim in question were trying to save time in order to hurry back to their learning, then certainly even the Ben Ish Chai would agree that it is considered L'TZORECH MITZVA to allow serving off the fire.

When in Bnei Brak...

A third opinion is that of the Chazon Ish. His was a dissenting opinion regarding the permissibility of relying on using a blech, explaining that since a blech does not sufficiently lessen the fire's heat level, as well as merely acting as a cover for the fire, it is not considered a true covered flame. Therefore, he held that one may not put the pot back on a blech on Shabbat. Consequently, he maintained that in order to keep Cholent hot after serving, it is permissible to scoop out Cholent while the pot was

still on the fire, provided that the Cholent was fully cooked and one took care not to actively stir the pot. His brother-in-law, the Steipler Gaon, followed this as well. According to this ruling, once the Cholent is fully cooked, one need not take the pot off the fire in order to serve.

Although, as mentioned previously, most contemporary Ashkenazic authorities did not allow one L'CHATCHILA to scoop out of a hot pot while still on a blech, there is one scenario on which many contemporary authorities rule leniently (relying on the Chazon Ish's shita): if the pot is too heavy to move off of the fire. A prime example of this would be the giant Cholent pot found in many a yeshiva kitchen.

Many decisors, including the Minchas Yitzchak, Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, Rav Shmuel HaLevi Wosner, and Rav Moshe Sternbuch, allow one to scoop and serve the Cholent without taking the pot off the blech if it is too heavy to move off the flame. However, it should be noted that Rav Moshe Feinstein was not inclined to rule leniently in scooping out Cholent from a pot on the fire, even if the pot was too heavy to move. Rather, he mandated that several people move it together in order to properly serve the Cholent from off of the fire.

Quite fascinatingly, it turns out that concerning the simple-sounding, yet

quite complicated halachic topic of serving Cholent on Shabbat, the perceived MEIKEL, Rav Moshe Feinstein, who allows CHAZARA onto a blech, is actually the most MACHMIR, as even regarding an industrial-sized Cholent pot, he only allows the Cholent to be served off of the fire. On the other hand, the perceived MACHMIR, the Chazon Ish, who in practice forbids CHAZARA on Shabbat nowadays, is practically more MEIKEL, as I'maaseh, once the Cholent is fully cooked, he allows it to be scooped out and served from the pot while still on the fire.

Although these procedures and nuances may seem complicated, they are but a small sampling of the numerous intricate halachot that pertain to the prohibition of cooking on Shabbat. It behooves us all to make sure that we are serving our Cholent in the proper halachic way, as, aside for the earthly reward of eating Cholent on Shabbat, the taste of its Mitzva is eternal.

See website for all the footnotes and sources.

Rabbi Spitz's footnotes are very extensive. The ones I decide to include are few among the many. If you want more than this PhiloTorah column provides, click on the website, find the topic and do some more reading.

For any questions, comments or for the full Mareh Mekomot / sources, please email the author: yspitz@ohr.edu

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ohr.edu/this_week/insights_into_halacha/

Disclaimer: This is not a comprehensive guide, rather a brief summary to raise awareness of the issues. In any real case one should ask a competent Halachic authority.

Rabbi Yehuda Spitz's English halacha sefer, "Food: A Halachic Analysis" (Mosaica/ Feldheim) containing over 500 pages featuring over 30 comprehensive chapters discussing the myriad halachic issues pertaining to food, is now available online and in bookstores everywhere.