



STORIES FROM A CHALLAH BAKE

From the Other Side of the Stage

BY TAMAR ANSH

When one attends an event as a participant, one doesn't really know what transpires "behind the scenes." I'd like to share my perspective of what it was like to be "on the other side of the stage" at the Grand Challah Bake in Yerushalayim this past Thursday night.

The room is set up for the Challah Bake. Each bowl contains all the ingredients and Tamar Ansh's "Incredible Challah Dough" recipe card (in Hebrew and English) that she hands out for free at such events.



"Yes," I answered.

"My daughter is a *kallah*. She's getting married tonight in the hall adjacent to this one. Could we ask that Rabbanit Mizrachi give her a *brachah* when she comes?"

A brachah? From the main speaker?

I had no way to speak to the Rabbanit before she came, but I could not refuse this mother's sincere request.

"Certainly!" I assured her, while doing mental gymnastics trying to figure out how we could accomplish this. Our schedule for the night was beyond packed. "The Rabbanit has only 20 minutes to be here, so come back at exactly seven o'clock. I don't want you to miss her."

Then the *kallah*, who had come with her mother, also asked me to bless her. I took her hands in mine and gave her the best *brachah* I could think of. "You know," I told her, "it's written that on the day of her wedding, a *kallah* is like a *malkah*, a queen, with the power to bless others. Please give me a *brachah* too!" Visibly warmed by the encounter, the *kallah* and her mother went back to their picture taking.

Now I had to find a way to snag Rabbanit Mizrachi before she took the microphone. I made sure to get to

the front of the room before seven to be able to do so. "*B'vadai!*" Rabbanit Mizrachi responded when she heard the woman's request. "Bring her in!" At 7:20, when the *kallah* still had not appeared, the Rabbanit turned to me and asked, "Where is our *kallah*?"

My daughter quickly ran to the wedding hall to get her.

When this *kallah*, who obviously came from a non-religious but traditional background, walked into the room, hundreds of women rose to greet her. The glowing *kallah* was quite moved, and as Rabbanit Mizrachi embraced her on stage in front of everyone, she gave her a beautiful *brachah*.

Rabbanit Mizrachi also told her that on the day of her wedding she is a *malkah*, and she should now bless all of us — which she did. Immediately afterward, the room burst into song!

The seminary girls with us went into high gear, running to the front of the room directly in front of the stage to sing for the *kallah*, linking arms and dancing, wedding-style, right there. The *kallah's* mother and all the other family members there were overwhelmed with happiness by all the spontaneity. The girls didn't stop there; they danced

This Challah Bake was one of the highlights of my entire challah demonstration career. I was *zochah* to lead a challah event, put together by the Emek Learning Center of Baka, Jerusalem. It took place in front of nearly 900 women from every walk of life, in Yerushalayim Ir Hakodesh, in advance of the worldwide Shabbos Project.

First on the agenda was a short talk given by the famous Rabbanit Yemima Mizrachi, scheduled to begin at 7:10 p.m. Sometime around six o'clock, an older Israeli woman walked over to me and asked (in Hebrew), "Are you the one doing the *hafrashas challah* tonight?"

the *kallah* down from the stage and accompanied her all the way back to the wedding hall.

The strains of *Od Yeshama* were still reverberating in our hall as I took the podium. And I had been so concerned about my opening lines! Nothing to worry about — *that* was certainly a highly different beginning to our challah event than any of us could have planned or envisioned. I'm quite sure that no other challah bake in the world had a *kallah* getting married at their evening!

Forget all my previous worries and stage fright — all that dancing and the unexpected gift of a *kallah* to grace our evening totally charged the atmosphere. We launched right into the holiness of challah, and why, out of all the 613 *mitzvos* Hashem gave us, challah is singled out as one of the three given specifically to women. After this brief intro, I explained how we would make our doughs with so many participants, and exactly how to measure what was provided in each participant's bowl and in what order to add the ingredients. We then donned aprons and gloves and got started.

As we finished putting the last of our flour and salt into the bowls, we said some *Tehillim* and sang Shabbos songs, accompanied by live music courtesy of the Shaw sisters, two talented young

women who came to play — one on the flute, one on the violin. To the strains of *Mizmor l'Dovid* we finished kneading our doughs, covered them and then sat back down.

Here are a few of the questions people asked:

Question: My dough is very tough. What can I do about it?

Answer: If your dough is too tough, stop kneading. Don't keep adding in more flour to make it less "sticky"; that will only dry out the dough. Instead, make a small tunnel in the center of your dough, add more water and close the dough. Grease the outside with some oil, cover the dough and wait about 10 minutes. Then attempt to re-knead the dough. It should get rather mushy and then become a bit softer.

Question: This is my very first time taking challah with a *brachah*! Can I recite a *Shehecheyanu*?

Answer: Now, this question took me a bit by surprise, as I had never thought of it before. The women came to the front to ask this question with faces so full of purity and with the will to do this *mitzvah* in the best way possible. I realized that many others may also have the same question. So I took the mic and answered for everyone to hear that this is a beautiful question but, no, we don't recite *Shehecheyanu* on this *mitzvah*.

However, you do get a huge *zechus* for doing it!

At this point, I explained that what we were about to do was the main focus of the entire evening — our *mitzvah* of *hafshas challah*. For many in the crowd, this was their first time doing the *mitzvah*. In fact, our oldest participant proudly told me afterward that she is over 90 years old, and this was her first time separating challah!

A group of women at another table were in the process of *giyur* and had heard about our event from their Rabbi back in South Africa. It was also their very first time. And we had quite a few groups of young women here in Israel for a year of study who were really excited to participate in this *mitzvah* for the first time as well.

I stopped for a moment and announced: "I'm going to begin. Out of this entire room filled with so many beautiful, holy *neshamos*, what do I want from all of you? I want your *amens*. I ask that when I say my *brachah* aloud, every one of you please answer *amen*, so we'll have approximately 1,000 *amens*!"

"And when it is your turn to make the *brachah*, try to do it in pairs; one woman should make her *brachah*, and the other should answer *amen*, and then the reverse. And then *pray*. That is why we are all here tonight, to gather together and use this tremendous *eis ratzon* to



pray together. It's so powerful — look at all the hundreds of *zechuyos* we are meriting together: It is Thursday night, which is considered Erev Shabbos, + over 900 women + the *achdus* and togetherness + the *mitzvah* of *hafrashas challah* + the best part of it — being right here in Yerushalayim Ir Hakodesh, a mere few meters from the *makom haMikdash* — no other challah bake in the world outside Jerusalem can claim that. It's just incredible!"

I closed my eyes and began... and as I finished my brachah, the entire room thundered in answer, so many amens, from so many types of women...

I realized I had also heard many amens from behind me. All the "secular" Israeli sound, video and mic guys standing behind me had answered "amen" too...

The room grew hushed as all the hundreds of women did their own *hafrashos* simultaneously, with their many, many *tefillos*. While our two young musicians softly played "*V'zakeini*," we covered our eyes and prayed and prayed — and cried.

Dear Mrs. Ansh,

I just wanted to write and thank you for the wonderful evening at the Great Challah Bake. In addition to the incredible feeling of bonding with so many other Jewish ladies and girls, and doing a mitzvah I have never been able to do before with a brachah, I felt that the evening was personally healing for me. I was there with my daughter, who had a difficult teenage-hood and is not necessarily 100% from anymore, although she is trying her best and I'm really proud of her.

Standing together, kneading our dough, saying our own personal tefillos, we experienced a bond that has been missing for so long. I could not stop crying, and she couldn't stop hugging me. On the bus home, before she got off at her stop, she kissed me and said, "Mommy, I love you so much. I want you to know you are my main role model."

In addition to strengthening the bond between my daughter and me, I felt that my own bond with Yiddishkeit and Hashem, which had been strained from the difficulties of the past years, was renewed. I am so grateful to you for providing the environment for this to take place. Many thanks...

Volunteers went around the room gathering together the separated pieces of dough — the pieces that we aren't able to give to a *Kohen*, as we still don't have our *Mikdash*. As the *Rabbanit* told us, separating challah shows Hashem that we miss Him, that we still remember His House and that we want Him back again! We can't use these pieces of dough, but we still separate and keep them holy because we want to show that we want Hashem back.

As we finished, I turned to the sound crew and said,

"Now!" With the music starting up, I turned back to the crowd and announced, "Ladies! We were just *zocheh* to perform a *huge mitzvah*, in *achdus* and unity — it's amazing! Let's celebrate!"

Before I knew it, the room exploded in song and dance as we held on to each other, and danced away our excitement, our unity, our love of Hashem's *mitzvos* together!

Dear Mrs. Ansh,

*I would like to thank you for **such** an inspirational evening. I bake challah every so often, but now I am inspired to try to do it every week. Your explanations on the ingredients and your guidance while we were all making the dough were amazing. It was indescribably inspiring to attend this event with so many other women, all there for one purpose and all making challah together... [everything was] a great lesson to me. Not only did I enjoy the evening, I enjoyed telling other people about it... and I enjoyed the mitzvah of making them, kneading them, performing *hafrashas challah*, plaiting, and ultimately, eating them. I really felt the mitzvah. Thank you!*

The dancing was truly one of the highlights of the night; the women couldn't stop. Even though I had originally thought one song would be "enough," we started another and continued, hands on each other's shoulders, girls, women, arms linked, singing at the top of their voices...

Can you imagine how much more powerful it will be when the *Geulah* will really be here, in Yerushalayim Ir Hakodesh? We were the *only* ones who got to perform this *mitzvah b'rov am* right here in Yerushalayim, just a few meters away from the site of the *Beis Hamikdash*! The thought is incredible — and it was *us*, this one unified, pulsating group filled with *simchah* and song. I had to catch my breath, and not only because the dancing was so strong and lively...

Once we all calmed down again, the shaping began. It was time for everyone to take their beautiful *challos* home and bake them, *lichvod Shabbos Kodesh*!

As we walked through the hall, cleaning up and gathering our paraphernalia, I offered some of the sound and mic personnel *challos* to take home. These tough-looking, secular Israeli young men softened immediately

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when I approached them. They had this look on their faces that reflected some of the *kedushah* and *achdus* felt by all the women who were there. I was surprised — it didn't occur to me that they were paying such close attention to what we were actually saying and to the *tefillos* as well. But a holy *neshamah* rests inside of each and every Jew — no matter how he is dressed and what background he “appears” to be from...

I was finishing up when one of the sound men who was there leaned forward and said to me (and I'm no Rebbetzin!), “Can you also bless us? My friend here is about to have surgery; can you give her a brachah too?”

My heart caught in my throat. When another person's soul shines like that, you have to just take hold of it. I took her hands and gave her whatever brachah Hashem put into my heart just then, and as I finished I told her, “After surgery, when the pain is most intense, remember that Hakadosh Baruch Hu sits at the head of a choleh's bed. He is right there with you. Use the pain to pray as much as you can to Him.” And she nodded her head in understanding...

It was so hard to leave, to let go, break up and go back to being just me... Everyone who was with me felt the same way. I came home on a high... and the feelings lingered; I'm still “up there”! It was *such* a beautiful evening.

I think it proves how strongly every Jew really wants to connect to other Jews. Though it may seem at times that we are divided, when you provide a venue and an outlet for true unity, prayer and *ruchniyus*, people really light up from it.

The *zechuyos* that Rabbi and Rebbetzin Warren Goldstein of South Africa have for initiating what has become known as the worldwide Shabbos Project and, in conjunction with it, the worldwide Challah Bake, are simply infinite. We, the people “on the ground,” have a lot for which to be thankful to them.

We've all heard that we need “just one Shabbos” for the *Geulah* to come.

That always troubled me, because how will we ever be able to reach every Jew — and, more than that, how can we convince them all to keep that one Shabbos? But look at what's happened — the Shabbos Project has become a worldwide cause that more and more people sign up for each year.

Last year, one million Jews kept Shabbos through the Shabbos project, and this year even more — it's an incredible thing! A million Jews! All we have to do is latch on to that *kedushah* and to what it could accomplish for *Klal Yisrael!*

I often hear religious people sigh, “Oh, how I wish I could participate, but I don't know anyone to invite,” or “I don't know how I would fit into the Shabbos Project; it's not for me...”

That's not true! We have to keep in mind that the Shabbos Project should be not only for people who have never kept Shabbos before.

Every one of us should grab onto the inspiration and that which has been set into motion by the Shabbos Project and propel it to the next stage: Invite people who you know could gain from a real Shabbos experience, or do something to increase your own *shmiras Shabbos*.

Every person can take on something more. Do we want to be stuck in the same patterns that we've been in all the years?

We can welcome Shabbos ten minutes early. Or we can choose to finish off what we “have to do” before Shabbos a bit earlier than usual. We can make sure to be dressed in Shabbos clothing by the time Shabbos arrives... There are numerous ways to improve and enhance our Shabbosos and show Hashem that we love having Him with us and that we look forward to His Shabbos.

If Hashem is compared to the *chassan* and *Klal Yisrael* to the *kallah*, and we are coming towards Him on Shabbos, then Shabbos itself is like the *yichud* room. Would any *kallah* go to the *yichud* room with a magazine or anything distracting in her “back



pocket”? Wouldn't every *chassan* want his *kallah* to greet him with a smile as they close the *yichud* room door behind them?

Our *mitzvah* of baking challah and *hafrashas challah* with a *brachah* not only enhances the Shabbos table, it brings down *kedushah* for our homes, our families and all of *Klal Yisrael*, passed from mother to daughter until today.

Let's continue and keep the inspiration, and hopefully we'll be *zocheh* soon to what the *passuk* promises (*Yechezkel* 44:3): “*L'haniach brachah el beisecha*” — so that *brachah* will rest in our homes. ■

Tamar Ansh is a recognized challah expert who has led challah bakes for the Shabbos Project several times. In addition, she frequently leads interactive challah shows in Israel for bas mitzvahs, seminary programs, engagements, tzedakah events, kiruv and tour groups. Mrs. Ansh has authored several books including “A Taste of Challah,” a guide to making your challahs the best they can be. Contact her via Hamodia.