

To see our subscription options, please click on the Mishpacha tab



In the days of Sarah, and then Rivkah, three miracles distinguished the Matriarchal tent, marking it as holy: the Shechinah resting in a cloud above, the Shabbos candles burning all week, and the blessing in the dough. In the Mishkan and later, in the Beis Hamikdash, these three elements were symbolized by the Cloud of Divine Presence, the Eternal Light (Ner Tamid), and the Lechem Hapanim, the 12 special breads that retained their freshness weeklong.

Though we have no Beis Hamikdash today, women have three mitzvos corresponding to this crucial triad within the Jewish home, the *mikdash me'at*: lighting Shabbos candles, separating challah, and the laws of family purity. When a Jewish woman fulfills her three mitzvos, she builds her home on the foundation of our foremothers, beckons the Shechinah and Divine blessing to rest within, and brings closer the ultimate Redemption.

The Chofetz Chaim underscores the importance of the mitzvah of challah in his *Biur Halachah* explanation on the *Mishnah Berurah*, *siman* 242. He writes, "Nowadays some women have begun to let this custom drop, and take challah from the baker. This is not correct — they are reducing the honor of Shabbos."

Challah has abundant spiritual potency, and can help us correct the sin of Chava. It's one of a women's special mitzvos, and, this week, it is a special *segulah* for *parnassah*. Baking challah is enjoyable, and according to our challah experts, can be easy too. Roll up your sleeves and hear their perspectives....

# Tamar Ansh, Yerushalayim

Tamar Ansh is a widely published author and an internationally recognized expert on challah; she hosts lectures, challah workshops for large events, challah parties for bas mitzvahs, and more. Her publications include: A Taste of Challah (Feldheim Publishers), Pesach — Anything's Possible (Menucha Publishers), and Let My Children Cook! (Judaica Press).

## I started making challah when...

My husband asked me to bake challah just about three weeks after we married — I barely knew how to cook noodles at that point! My first challos were terrible, so hard you could bang them on the table. I kept practicing and trying different recipes, and asked everyone I knew for tips and advice, until finally, things began to improve. Eventually, I learned how to bake challah well, and Hashem led me to the next stage — I'd never planned to be a challah lady, but once I figured out what worked, why not share it?

I've received a lot of encouragement from *gedolim* to spread the mitzvah of challah, and today I answer queries from all over the world.



#### To me, challah baking means...

I feel challah is the heart of the Shabbos table. When the challah cover is lifted and the homebaked challah loaves are sitting there in splendor, awaiting their *brachah* of *hamotzi* — and you know how much you invested in them and that you were *zocheh* to prepare them with the *brachah* of challah, *min haTorah* — it's an incomparable feeling. A woman puts so much *tefillah*, care, and heart into her challos. Workers in a bakery just can't give that to your family. A baker can't sing and daven while preparing your challos, nor keep each individual member, as well as all of Klal Yisrael, in mind.

## My favorite part is...

The mitzvah itself. If I don't have time to take challah with a *brachah*, I feel like something is missing. I also love the braiding.

............

............

## My biggest disaster was...

The time I forgot the yeast. (And it was a very big dough!) I tried to add the yeast afterward... but let's not go there.

## My secret to perfect challos is...

First and foremost, I ask Hashem to make it come out good.

Kneading is so important. Knead for a full ten minutes and let it rest for ten, then knead for another four minutes.

And good challah relies on good yeast. Use fresh yeast, or dry yeast that's still at its full potency (find out how to best store your yeast, so that it works well).

#### If I'm short on time...

I usually freeze some challos so I can fall back on them during really busy weeks. Every woman has times which are really too hectic, weeks after a baby or an illness. You have to know when you can't. I don't bake challah from Rosh Chodesh Nissan until after Pesach — that's the only time of year my family gets bakery challos!

..........

# For me, the biggest challenge is...

Hmm... I think so many people are put off by the mess. I bake on a day when I have to be home anyway, and I wash the mixer and clean up right away, even before braiding, so I can enjoy the next stage.

# When I take challah, I keep in mind...

•••••

The Beis Hamikdash. A woman's mitzvos are accompanied by a special *eis ratzon*, and Chazal told us that our main yearning should be directed to relieving the pain of the Shechinah in *galus*. That is why the prayer said at these times is *sheyibaneh Beis Hamikdash* — all of our Nation's troubles will then be solved.

People today are very eager to feel spiritually connected, which is great, but we also have to know that the mitzvah of challah brings down *brachah*. So even if I don't feel the connection and the blessing every time I bake, that's okay. I trust Chazal implicitly that that's what the mitzvah accomplishes — it invites blessing into our homes. And that's good enough for me.

26 Nissan 5775 | April 15, 2015 family first **19** 

# Dorit Solnik, Toronto

Dorit Solnik is a high school teacher in Tiferes Bais Yaakov of Toronto, where her challah-baking lessons are a highlight. Together with several other women in Toronto, Dorit runs the Challah Hotline. She also offers free challah classes, both one-on-one and in groups, to *kallahs* and women in her community.

# To me challah baking means...

The world! When I do this mitzvah I feel that we are like the Imahos, Sarah, Rivkah, Rochel and Leah in their holy tents. It's an amazing opportunity to connect to Hakadosh Baruch Hu and bring brachah to your family.

# My favorite part is...

I have a couple favorites. One is the chance to daven as I add each ingredient. When I add in the sugar, I fill half a measuring cup and pour the sugar in like a fountain while davening that Hashem pour all the goodness from His treasure houses upon us.

My secret to perfect challos is... First, there is no such thing as the perfect challah. Each family has their own tastes.

But the secret to getting your challah exactly as your family likes it is davening from the moment you start until the moment you finish. Put your *neshamah* into your challah — that's the secret. It's not about the recipe; it's about your connection. That creates the taste. If I'm distracted or worried about something, I feel that my challah is not the same.

My advice: Wash your hands and give tzedakah first, and don't answer your phone. Your family will feel the love when they taste it.

# I started making challah when...

When my son got sick with cancer, I wanted to bake challah as a zechus for his refuah sheleimah. Two wonderful women in the community taught me about challah. The moment I began, I loved it and felt a strong attachment.

My son passed away after five years battling his illness, but I felt that the mitzvah of challah had to be taught, so I began to give classes. The community here in Toronto had been so amazing, they tried everything to help my son, so I wanted to give back to them too.

#### My biggest disaster was...

I made challah one Friday morning before an appointment in the hospital. I was so emotional, I accidentally mixed the piece of challah I had separated back into my dough. After the doctor's appointment I had to go to ask the *rav* what to do. It was pretty embarrassing, but I did it!

## If I'm short on time I...

Make challah on Thursday night.
Occasionally, when I'm very short on time on Friday, I make a smaller batch in the food processor. But most weeks I prepare almost all the Shabbos food on Thursday so I can make challah by hand on Friday.

# When I take challah, I keep in mind...

always have in mind Klal Yisrael. You daven for yourself, but also for Klal Yisrael.

......

# There's a Gemach for Challah, Too

When Yael Louk arrived in Eretz Yisrael from South Africa, she was looking for a mitzvah to become involved in. "In South Africa, I taught *kallahs*, but that wasn't going to happen here." Challah was a natural choice. Today Yael's challah *gemach* is well known in her adopted country as a way to share the special merit of taking challah with people who need it.

"We have many ladies who are committed regulars; plenty others who call or e-mail occasionally," Yael explains. Yael's challah *gemach* e-mail is received automatically by anyone who joins her list. Each week, it includes six new names to daven for, as well as the names of *gedolim* who are sick, and requests continued *tefillos* for previous names who still need a *yeshuah*. A special touch is the inclusion of two challah-related halachos from the *Guidelines* halachah series. Participants can bake their challos any day of the week, as long as they're intended for Shabbos, and one can join on a weekly basis, with no obligation.

"It's such a wonderful, comforting mitzvah, beside all the deeper concepts," Yael says. "The sensory experience, the joy of using your hands so constructively, the fragrance... and the feeling that you're davening for other people at the same time. Baruch Hashem, we've heard of *yeshuos* from many of the people we've davened for."

In Antwerp, members of the city's challah *gemach* all do the mitzvah sometime between sunset on Thursday and candlelighting. The women on the list receive a name by text message on Thursday, with a group of at least 43 women (the numerical value of the word challah) davening for each name. The organizers, Mrs. Chavi Schwarcz and Mrs. Dubrela Fried, are in touch with challah groups in Tosh, Canada, in Manchester, England, and in Switzerland; the Antwerp ladies often fill in for these groups when their numbers run short.

"The bakers are from Antwerp, but the names are from all over the world," explains Mrs. Schwarcz. "Our ladies usually give names of relatives who need a *yeshuah*. We have a waiting list, and those from our town get priority. If the name is recognizable and people want to protect their privacy, we switch names with Tosh for that week."

The Antwerp *gemach* does not accept names who need *shidduchim* — "We have a separate Shir Hashirim *gemach* for that," explains Mrs. Schwarcz — only those who are ill or awaiting the joys of parenthood. On occasion they devote their *zechusim* to the safety of the Jews in Eretz Yisrael. One *hafrashas challah* was dedicated for the continuation of pure Yiddishe *chinuch* in Antwerp, threatened by aggressive new curriculum requirements.

When one of the challah bakers marries off a daughter, this close-knit group of women prepares a challah dough and brings it to the *kallah's* home so that she can take challah with a *brachah* on her wedding day.

In Toronto, Dorit Solnik says, during the time her son was ill and afterward, women gathered in groups of 40 to take challah as a zechus. Creating the Challah Hotline with a group of dedicated ladies took that idea a step further. "For me, 416-CHALLAH is a dream that, with a lot of siyata d'Shmaya, came true," says Dorit. With the encouragement of Rabbi Lowy shlita, women both from Toronto and from all over call the hotline to receive names to daven for. Rav Moshe Lowy gives a shiur about challah, recorded on the hotline, twice a year, once before Rosh Hashanah and once for the week of shlissel challah. "Those times are peak season, while the week before Pesach we have the smallest number of women.

"The hotline brings the women of the community together by arranging that they daven for others," says Dorit. "Part of the *koach* of the mitzvah is the *achdus* it creates. Just think of it — water and oil cannot mix, and salt kills yeast, but combine them in a challah dough and you can taste Gan Eden. Davening for each other takes advantage of this time of closeness."

# Cara Widmonte, Sydney

Cara Widmonte lived and learned in Yerushalayim for six years before moving to Sydney, Australia, where her husband is youth rabbi of Kehillat Masada community and Cara runs the shul's women's program. After a fantastic communal challah-bake, Cara continues to spread the joys of this mitzvah to Jewish women in Sydney.

#### I started making challah when...

Before I was married I would bake challah on Thursday nights with friends. When I got married, we moved to Eretz Yisrael and my challah was not nearly as nice as the mouthwatering challah from the makolet (Vizhnitz was our all-time favorite). Since moving to Sydney, Australia, I started making challah again every week. I love making it, baking it, and serving it to our many guests.

#### To me, challah baking means...

A spiritual experience, quiet time on my own on Thursday night to focus on what's real. It is one of the mitzvos of the Jewish woman and I take my time to really concentrate on the brachah.

## My favorite part is...

The setting. The children are sleeping peacefully, my husband has a chavrusa in the dining room, and I'm alone in my kitchen, lost in my thoughts as I pour in the ingredients and knead the dough.

............

## My biggest disaster was...

The week of the worldwide Shabbos project, I was having a large crowd for Shabbos dinner and I used the dough that I made together with thousands of women at the challah bake. I must have added salt instead of sugar, and the challah didn't taste very good... but I can assure you it was filled with kedushah and brachah!

#### My secret to perfect challos is...

Make the dough on Thursday night, by hand. When you think you are finished kneading, knead another five minutes. Put the dough in a bowl that has room for it to rise. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate overnight. In the morning, take out the dough, let it reach room temperature, then knock it down and braid. Let rise and bake.

#### My most unusual challah was...

On parshas Noach. I took my challah dough to my Friday morning "Mums and Bubs Shabbos Group" and the kids added food coloring to the dough to make rainbow challah.

...........

••••••••••

............

#### If I'm short on time...

I put the challah in the oven to rise as the temperature increases to 180°C (350°F).

#### For me, the biggest challenge is...

That my children love to make challah, but I like to have it ready before they get home from school. I started leaving some dough for them to make their own rolls when they get home.

•••••••

#### When I take challah, I keep in mind...

People who need a refuah sheleimah and people who are hoping to have children.

## Mrs. Devora Heller. Roro Park

Mrs. Devora Heller, the Challah Maven, has been baking challah for 24 years. She teaches and demonstrates the mitzvah of challah to numerous groups of women and girls at bas mitzvah parties, bridal parties, shul functions, and Melaveh Malkahs.

#### I started making challah when...

Twenty-three years ago, I caught the challah bug, together with a lot of my friends, who all started to bake at that time. Until then, I bought in the bakery. My first attempts were a disaster — everyone said, "Give up. You're not the challahbaking type!" Nine years later, after much trial and error, I was a seasoned challah baker for my own family.

I wanted to give something back to Hashem. I'm a child of survivors, and I was childless for nine years before being blessed with a large family, kein ayin hara. As a way to say thank you for these presents, I reached out to guide women and help them keep the mitzvah of challah. I started with small groups in people's houses and asked Pepper Mill, a Brooklyn kitchen goods store, if I could hold a class there on challah baking. By now, I've been invited all over the US, Canada, and Europe.

## To me, challah baking means...

A lot! First, the dough is not just any dough; it's holy. It's food for the neshamah. And when else do I get the opportunity to become an artisan and a sculptress?

## My favorite part is...

The eis ratzon when I can daven.

And the braiding.

And of course the best part of living is giving — I send challos to patients at Maimonides Hospital every week.

## My biggest disaster was...

The very first time I made challah. I was using my mixer – the beaters and the white bowl. Dough went everywhere, flying round the kitchen! I called my sister and she said, "Devora, the white bowl is for snow! Try the metal one, and the other beaters."

#### My secret to perfect challos is...

A great recipe! And a lot of love, that's definitely the secret ingredient.

#### My most unusual challah was...

Last Purim I made a beautiful seudah challah. Two side braids of four, topped in sesame, and a six-braid in the middle, topped with poppy.

#### If I'm short on time...

Well, when really in a hurry, you could braid and egg your challah, then put it in the oven at 200°F, not to bake but just to let it rise. This is called proofing, and the dough should double in bulk. Then increase the heat to 350°F and bake as normal – don't include the proofing time in the baking time.

## For me, the biggest challenge is...

When women are waiting for me to teach a class and I'm stuck in heavy traffic.

Also, shlissel challah week is my busiest week for orders of dough, I make 200 to 300 pounds this week! So when Pesach ends on a Thursday, my Isru Chag is highly pres-

# When I take challah, I keep in

People who need a yeshuah. I get calls with names all the time.

