



THE CHALLAH BAKE

WITH TAMAR ANSH, THE CHALLAH LADY

BY MENUCHA LEVIN

Last Thursday evening, I made *challah*, not an unusual thing to do on a Thursday evening. However, this time, instead of being alone in my own kitchen, I found myself in a spacious hall with almost 1,000 other women and girls. We had all gathered there to make *challah* together as part of a worldwide *Challah* Bake. The organizer of this amazing annual event in Yerushalayim was Tamar Ansh, appropriately known as “The *Challah* Lady.”

After the highly successful event, I asked Tamar how she became an expert in *challah* baking in the first place.

“When I got married,” she explained, “the *mitzvah* of *challah* was not so well-known,” she said. “But my new husband wanted home-made *challah*, so I did my best. However, my *challahs* often turned out to be lumpy and misshapen, and I had no idea how to braid them. One of my cousins, whose parents owned a bakery, knew how to braid *challah* and taught me the technique. I didn’t have golden hands, but I worked on it.

She learned from a *rov* about the importance of the *mitzvah*. “At first, I wasn’t making *challah* with a *bracha*, but then I started to make more.”

Tamar heard that a *frum* magazine was looking for a food writer. There weren’t many kosher cookbooks at that time. Tamar had actually written a book, but the topic was *shidduchim*, not food. Still, she forged ahead and, despite her lack of experience regarding the subject of food, she was hired as the magazine’s food writer. At first, she wrote about making decorative food miniatures and fancy dessert pastries. When she suggested making *challah*, the magazine sent a photographer to her house to take pictures of her “woven” *challahs*. The photographer was very impressed, and apparently so were the readers. The magazine sold out that week.

When a book publisher expressed interest in a book about *challah*, Tamar decided to self-publish her own book called “*A Taste of Challah*.” She included a section about *brachos* and information about the *halachos* involved in making *challah*.



“I felt the whole thing was organized by Hashem,” says Tamar. “Then a friend of mine suggested a speaking tour in the US, including a *shiur* on *challah* making. The three special *mitzvos* pertaining to Jewish women bring blessing into our home, like in the *ima-*

hos’ tents, with light hovering above them. The blessing is in the dough itself, and separating *challah* is a very auspicious time for davening.

The *mitzvah* of separating *challah* is mentioned in *Bamidbar* (25:14): “*Of the first of*

your dough you shall set apart challah for a gift.” The *challah* that was set aside was intended to be given to the *kohein* as a gift that he and his family could benefit from immediately, since it was ready-to-eat food.

By taking *challah*, we show Hashem that we still remember - and long for - the *Bais Hamikdosh*. The piece of dough should really go to the *kohein*, and it is a tragedy that we have to burn it or throw it away.

When we separate the dough and recite the *bracha*, it is a propitious time to pray for all those in need of a *refuah*, a *shidduch*, or children. Taking *challah* with a *bracha* in a group of forty women has been cited as a very powerful *segulah*. These women prepare the right amount of dough, and after the *bracha* and *yehi ratzon* are recited, they mention the name of the person for whom they are davening.

Many people have been blessed after a

group of forty women undertook the *mitzvah* of *hafroschas challa* in their merit.

The *Challah* Bake was part of the *Shabbos* Project, started in South Africa three years ago by Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein.

“It is an allusion to the unique restorative

powers – the opportunity for deep physical, emotional and spiritual rejuvenation – which the full *Shabbos* experience affords,” explained Rabbi Goldstein.

Clearly, it was an idea whose time had come. Each year, more and more people around the world participate in the *Shabbos* Project. This year, an estimated one million Jews worldwide experienced one complete, extraordinary *Shabbos*. As one slogan expressed it, “One people, one heart, one *Shabbos*.”

Tamar’s own neighborhood of Har Nof in Yerushalayim wanted to have a *challah* bake last year and prepared for 150 women, but even more showed up. The project took a lot of time, organization and funding, and it was clear that they needed a much larger venue.

This year, the Emek Learning Center (ELC) in the Baka area of Yerushalayim hosted this major event. Its staff of twelve *rabbonim* provide Jewish education and guidance to the English-speaking community. A spacious wedding hall, with a capacity for 1,000 women, was located.

“Finally, everything clicked into place,” Tamar explained. “Most of the actual work, including the registration, was done in the last two or three weeks.”

Tables in the large banquet hall were set up with mixing bowls filled with all the necessary ingredients for a *challah*, pre-measured for every participant.

The ingredients of *challah* may be viewed as symbolic. Making the flour from wheat is

was amazing.

An American woman, completely secular two years ago when she attended a *Challah* Bake, explained how she had felt the connection to “the generations of powerful, wonderful Jewish women, from Sarah Imeinu all the way down to my mother, to me, to my three amazing daughters. I felt an obligation to maintain that 5,000-year-old chain connecting my children back through Sinai.”

This woman and her family, no longer secular, have been keeping *Shabbos* ever since.

A newly budding baalas teshuvah said, “As someone in the early stages of my spiritual growth, the Shabbos Project has been an amazing way to connect with others who are also learning, as well as those who have so much to teach.”

Not only did non-unaffiliated families observe *Shabbos*, but even *frum* people were upping the ante, seeing the beautiful gift of *Shabbos* through new eyes. *One person commented, “The spiritual ritual of hundreds of women coming together in one night to make challah together moved us beyond words. It helped us remember the magic of Shabbos in our own homes.”*

Another woman explained, “My *challah* tasted exactly how my bubby used to make her *challah*. I was never able to get the recipe from her before she passed away, but tonight I got it, and from now on my *Shabbos* dinners will be complete.”

As a final bonus, the *challah* that I made



a long process, and we need patience for the challenges of life. Yeast enables the *challah* to rise, as we should help others rise and grow. Sugar provides sweetness, which is important in our relationships. Salt, the tiniest ingredient, is like criticism, which should be added carefully in tiny amounts. Oil was used to anoint the *kohanim*, who gave us guidance, and we need the right guidance to understand life’s purpose. Water symbolizes Torah, and our homes should be filled with its wisdom.

Under Tamar’s expert direction and with the experienced *challah* makers helping the newbies, we all made *challah* together, reciting the *bracha* with great *kavana*.

“There’s a huge difference between home-made *challah* and bakery *challah*,” Tamar pointed out. “In a bakery, it’s done by machine or by non-Jewish workers. For them, it’s just a job, but for us, it’s our special *mitzvah*.”

The successful event provided a feeling of unity with other women around the world where similar *Challah* Bake events were also taking place. One woman told Tamar that 5,000 women in England were participating in the event there. The international response

“I FELT AN OBLIGATION TO MAINTAIN THAT 5,000-YEAR-OLD CHAIN CONNECTING MY CHILDREN BACK THROUGH SINAI.”

turned out to be perfectly delicious and was enjoyed by my family and *Shabbos* guests. As proof, only a few tiny crumbs were left on our *challah* board, but the inspiring experience of the *Challah* Bake will remain for a long time.

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