



Photo credit: Cindy Neiburg



The Great Big

CHALLAH BAKE

Brooklyn 2015

The Grand Prospect Hall, located in Brooklyn, New York, has been hosting events for over a hundred years, from the privileged, cosmopolitan society to the political elite, but I can guarantee that the “soaring gilded and marble lobby that recalls the splendor of Versailles” (as their website touts) has never witnessed a *kiddush Hashem* like I saw Wednesday night, October 21, 2015.

The Shabbos Project, conceived three years ago by South Africa's Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Warren Goldstein, to unite Jews from across the spectrum — religious, secular and traditional — by experiencing one full Shabbos together in full accordance with *Halachah*, has spread around the world. Last year, an estimated one million people were involved; it will take a while to tally the totals for this year. As a prelude to the Shabbos Project, Jewish communities across the world organized grand “challah bakes” on the Thursday night preceding the worldwide Shabbos event.

As someone who has been giving challah workshops to both *frum* and non-*frum* audiences for many years, I called Project Inspire, who was organizing Brooklyn's first Great Big Challah Bake, to offer my services as a “challah coach.” I was immediately swept up in the excitement of preparing for the approximately 2,000 women who would be making challah together.

Preparing the Seeds

The first task I was given was organizing the 4,000 envelopes of poppy and sesame seeds for the women to take home with their challoos after the event.

With the Shabbos Project scheduled to take place shortly after Yom Tov, I knew I had to get the ball rolling right away. In the midst of my Yom Tov preparations, I ordered envelopes (color scheme — white and green) and clear labels (to be printed with “poppy seeds” and “sesame seeds”). I called Pomegranate supermarket to ask about donating the seeds, and was told to send my request to their “*chessed* department.” They graciously agreed.

By the Sunday after Yom Tov, we were all set with our

4,000 envelopes, 35 pounds of sesame seeds, and 21 pounds of poppy seeds. My daughters and I contacted our friends, set out a table of nosh, put together a sound track of fun music, set



up tables in the living room and dining room, and opened our doors. We had a slow start, but by early evening, there were about 20 people packaging seeds, sealing envelopes, and counting them out into Ziploc bags. Chanie, the Project Inspire volunteer who was in charge of organizing the Challah Bake, joined the party, and by 8:30 she was ready to leave with the boxes of seeds. Still full of energy, the girls folded up the tables and danced in the living room!

The energy continued into the next Sunday, when I joined the packing party at Yeshiva Ohr Shraga Veretzky. I sat at the oil-packing table and filled hundreds of little square plastic containers with a quarter-cup of oil.

Meanwhile, women and girls at other tables were filling little boxes with a half-tablespoon of salt or half-tablespoon of yeast, or two containers with 1/6 cup of sugar each — one to add to the yeast while proofing and the other to add to the dough.

The tables behind me were piled high with hundreds of five-pound bags of flour ready to be poured into bags — four cups per bag.

I encouraged everyone I saw over the next week to

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register at the Challah Bake along with an “unaffiliated” person — to reach out to their seamstress, neighbor, coworker. The organizers were very anxious to ensure that the Challah Bake include *all* Jewish women, and indeed advertised the event as a “Jewish women unity event.”

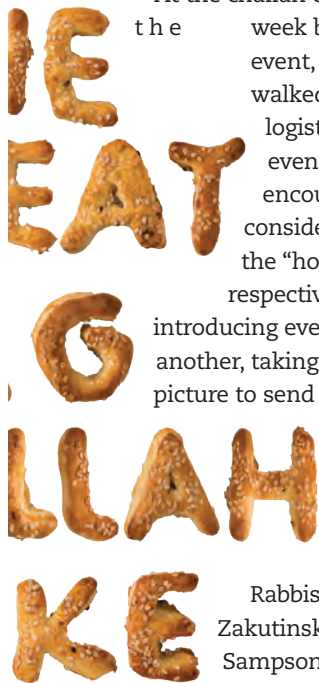
At the challah coach meeting the week before the event, we were walked through the logistics of the evening and encouraged to consider ourselves the “host” of our respective tables, by introducing everyone to one another, taking a group picture to send to everyone at the table after the event, and forming relationships.

Rabbis Yoni Zakutinsky and Chaim Sampson of Project Inspire thanked the coaches for their involvement, and broached a sobering idea. We were in the midst of a rash of frightening terrorist attacks in Eretz Yisrael — just that morning, Rabbi Yeshayahu Krishevsky, Hy”d, was

killed on Rechov Malchei Yisrael, a few blocks from where many of our children (my son included) are in seminary or yeshivah. They reiterated what we all know: that a Jewish woman’s response to a terror attack is *tefillah* and *chessed*. The Challah Bake combines both — the power of a woman’s *tefillah* upon doing the

“It was awesome,” said Mrs. Surie Pinter, who runs Bnos Batya, a program for Russian girls under the auspices of Operation Open Curtain. She brought 11 of the girls from the program to the Challah Bake. “These are girls whose link to Yiddishkeit was broken many generations before. I tell them they are now making the choice to reconnect that link.”

“It was amazing and inspiring,” said Michal Michalko, one of the Bnos Batya girls who participated in the Challah Bake. “You could see how everyone was enjoying the unity of the experience; all the Jewish women were together. It didn’t matter who you were or where you came from — we were all equal. We were dancing like crazy and crying.”



mitzvah of *hafrashas challah*, coupled with the *chessed* of reaching out to unaffiliated Jews. What better response could we have?

The Event

I arrived early on Thursday afternoon, October 22, to help with the set-up — 2,000 place settings, each with a placemat, bowl, knife for cutting the dough, the ingredients, a quarter for the Tomchei Shabbos *pushke* on the table, an apron, gloves, and a tote bag including information, recipes, *tefillos*, and of course, my poppy and sesame seed envelopes! Also on the table were candies, mints, and extra water bottles (labeled “Drink me”), as well as foil pans and plastic bags in which to bring home the challah.

What an undertaking! Five of the ballrooms at the Grand Prospect Hall were set up; screens and speakers were provided throughout. There were 180 challah coaches and dozens of

“runners” — high school girls to usher guests to their pre-assigned tables, and provide extra ingredients as needed. (I raised my green flag when one of my table members found her dough was too sticky, and a runner brought more flour.)

As 6:30 p.m., people started arriving, and our well-laid plans were soon overwhelmed by the hundreds of women waiting to enter. We were told, “Forget the seating chart; the women are just coming in. Challah coaches — keep track of how many you need at your tables and claim them. Okay — they’re coming up the stairs, we’re opening the doors...” — and the hordes of excited women arrived.



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Naomi Ross

Baking With the Mavens

“The only thing I remember making with my mother is challah,” shared *Binah* columnist Shushy Turrin, otherwise known as “Cooking in Heels.” For her, challah-baking is a time of reflection and prayer. “I always do the kneading alone and always by hand.” For her many followers, meeting her in person at the Challah Bake hosted at Brooklyn’s Sephardic Community Center on October 22 was an added attraction to an already inspirational event.

Turrin was one of an impressively long list of food authors, chefs, and bloggers donating their time to inspire women with the *mitzvah* of challah. Hosted by Moms on a Mitzvah — a women’s *chessed* organization — in conjunction with The Shabbos Project, the event’s roster of presenters drew over 300 women of all levels of observance. Participants at the sold-out event registered in advance, requesting their choice of which “foodie” they hoped to bake challah with and learn from, each teaching her own recipe.

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Saved from Cancer

Below, we bring you the story of a young man as he related it to us with heartfelt emotion and deep gratitude to the One Above for the personal divine mercy he experienced in the merit of the tehillim.

"I am a veteran subscriber at your Tehillim Kollel, and I also follow your weekly column with interest. The story of a family's seudas hoda'ah after their little boy's bout with cancer struck a chord with me, because we were then going through a frightening medical crisis of our own. The doctors said my wife was very sick.

"It was a sudden discovery. The doctors found a mass in my young, healthy wife and told us she required urgent treatment. We weren't even allowed to go home. They wanted to start treating her right away. We were stunned and frightened. A specialist who examined her told us she would need surgery as soon as possible to remove the growth.

"I prayed fervently and asked Hashem to heal my wife in the merit of the tehillim said on our behalf every day by the minyan at the Tehillim Kollel. My wife was sent for a biopsy procedure, and our wait for the results was permeated with hope and faith. When the results came back, we were stunned for a second time, this time, with praise to Hashem, by the good news. The biopsy revealed that the growth was benign and could be treated with antibiotics. Surgery was not necessary."

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The program began as Mrs. Shimi Adar acted as emcee and set the tone for an exciting and historic event, skillfully shepherding our emotions from serious and contemplative to just plain fun.

Mrs. Chanie Juravel, founder and director of Lev V'Nefesh Institute, principal of Ateres Bais Yaakov School in Rockland County, and popular Binah columnist, took the stage next. She discussed how the mitzvah of challah transforms mundane ingredients into

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into the process and recognizing that though the efforts may be ours, the results are His.

IG
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Chanalee Fischer Schliesser, aka the Challah Fairy, gave instructions

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over the mic, and the challah coaches guided everyone at their table through the process of proofing yeast and adding

Miss Leanora Katzman, a native New York senior who has never made challah before, said, "I never, in all my years, experienced anything like that. It was so well organized; everyone had everything they needed. It was so good to be a Jew in such a situation — it was remarkable. I enjoyed the speaker who spoke about the relationship between G-d and bread. I haven't danced so much in a long time."

the ingredients. The room was full of camaraderie as the women helped one another and kneaded their dough together. The dough was then covered with a napkin and put in a plastic bag (in order to rush the rising process) and the rest of program proceeded as we let the challah rise.

Mrs. Juravel spoke again, discussing the concept of being productive when at rest. Like the yeast causes the dough to rise when at rest, so too, Shabbos is our most productive day, the source of all our brachah, by ceasing all our other activities and focusing on making a connection with Hashem.

She introduced Mrs. Mirca Iskowitz, a Holocaust survivor from Hungary, who has made challah since she was married and distributed challah to poor families. Mrs. Iskowitz lit a *yahrtzeit lecht* in memory of those lost in the Holocaust. Then, Mrs. Malky Giniger and her choir sang Abie Rotenberg's beautiful song "Candles," which perfectly summed up everyone's feelings:

When we put our hearts and minds together

A thousand glowing candles burning bright

Then we become a force that can't be measured

And together we can drive away the night.

After the heartfelt singing, Mrs. Juravel discussed the significance of the mitzvah of *hafrashas challah* and asked for a moment of quiet for each woman to *daven* for whatever she needs. Although it was virtually impossible throughout the evening to keep the women quiet, for this moment they were! For me, this was the most special



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moment of the evening, as women took the chance to fervently thank Hashem for all they have and to ask Hashem to protect us all. Mrs. Iskowitz's granddaughter then made the *brachah* on a previously prepared five-pound batch of dough to which everyone responded "amen."

This was the cue for the music to begin, as Shimi Adar led the crowd in singing and dancing. At every table, women were clapping, dancing, and standing on chairs. The music alternated between *leibeidig* and slow, as women linked arms throughout the many rooms.



"The sight of all the women holding hands as they sang about Jewish unity brought tears to my eyes," said Mrs. Cindy Neiburg, who was there as a photographer. "You couldn't tell who was 'affiliated' and who not.

Everyone was participating, excited, and a part of it."

For the next part of the inspirational program, representatives from Guinness World Records officially measured the world's largest challah (20 feet long), which had been baked that morning and was unveiled on the stage. Rabbi Sampson was awarded with the official certificate, and a video of the challah being braided at Strauss Bakery was shown. (The challah was later eaten at a communal Shabbos Project *seudah* in Manhattan.)

The challah dough was then deemed to have risen sufficiently, and women put their dough onto the placemats as Chanalee led them through the process of braiding a six-strand challah. She also shared many tips and ideas about making challah and the instructions on how to glaze and bake the challos once they were

brought home.

I looked on with satisfaction as the women at my table packed up their beautiful challos and set off to join the crowds going home.

This amazing event was coordinated by volunteers Mrs. Chanie Mandel and Mrs. Mindy Weiss who worked countless hours for many months. Chanie expressed her belief that this

event had turned the tide in *kiruv* in Brooklyn. First, it brought connections among the volunteers, wonderful Jewish women from all over Brooklyn. As Rabbi Sampson said, "If we don't love each other how can we love anyone else?" Additionally, all the Challah Bakes in the wider metropolitan area — Manhattan, Staten Island, Queens, Five Towns, Monsey — consulted and helped each other with the events. (Apparently some of "my" seeds were sent to the Challah Bake in Staten Island.)

"People in Brooklyn tend to be very into their own *dalet amos*, but this event opened women's eyes," Chanie said. "The women who participated in this event will never look at strangers on the streets the same way again. They're empowered to walk over and talk to them."

Harav Noach Weinberg, *zt"l*, when speaking of the need to get the entire *frum* community involved in *kiruv*, spoke of the sleeping giant in our midst. It seems the sleeping giant is beginning to awaken.



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Jennifer Chalme, a Sephardic resident of Flatbush, said she always made challah at home, but wanted to come and learn new tips. “The dough is so tough to knead. I usually do it by machine!” she laughed. Chalme was seated at Kim Kushner’s table. Kushner, author of the *The New Kosher*, believes challah is best learned when taught hands-on. Her spicy maple topping was a new twist for the group.

For others, the event opened the door to a *mitzvah* which had previously been closed. Shifra Klein, editor of *Joy of Kosher* magazine, wanted to show how easy it is to make your own challah. Klein recommended using a timer to knead for a full 10 minutes. “It’s a great family experience and fun for the kids to be involved in the *mitzvah*, too,” she added.

Red plastic tubs lined the prepared tables in the Sephardic Community Center’s large gymnasium, marking a place for each participant. The women wore pants or long skirts, *sheitels* or hats, short sleeves or long. Some were Sephardic, others Ashkenazic. Each woman got a tub and they all made challah. Together. “What made me happy was how unifying it was — Hashem wants to see us loving each other,” expressed Linda Sadacka, event organizer and founder of Moms on a Mitzvah.

Notwithstanding the wide range of participants, the venue attracted a sizable Sephardic constituency. Many had not heard of and therefore would not have attended the other larger challah bake events taking place. Participant Sophia Mizrahi admitted, “I make challah all the time, but this was our way of participating and bringing everyone together.”

Poopa Dweck, author of *Aromas of Aleppo*, taught how to make Syrian pitot instead of challah, a nod to generations past who used Syrian breads instead of challah on Shabbos. For the health-conscious, Levana Kirschenbaum, author of *The Whole Food Kosher Kitchen*, made spelt challah with her table. Gluten-challenged? Esther Anzaroot (glutenfree.sy) showed how to make gluten-free challah and offered troubleshooting advice for gluten-free bakers. A diverse array of *challos* tailored for the diversity of the Jewish people.

Beyond the pre-measured yeast and flour — the physical components that often dominate our focus — the ephemeral ingredient that seemed most free-flowing was prayer: a loud “amen” when the *brachos* of *hafrashas* challah were recited, a quiet contemplation over names of people who needed

healing, the silence of praying for peace and unity. This ingredient overflowed the red tubs, spilling over into dance and song between the tables, a contagion that swept through the room.

“Baking challah is compared to raising children,” explained Rebbetzin Sarah Feldbrand, as she delivered inspirational remarks to the crowd. “You have to invest in good ingredients with the right quantities. You put in a little salt (discipline) and sweetener (love)... then you wait. You wait for the dough to rise and pray for the best, joining all the mothers of the Jewish People.” Much like parenting, the act of making challah can be used as a vehicle for understanding and developing patience and *bitachon*.

Mrs. Sadacka identified this kind of *bitachon* as the foundation for all the efforts of Moms on a Mitzvah, whose organization was successful last year in petitioning the FDA for approval of an experimental drug for a five-year-old child with terminal brain cancer.

“Hashem has helped us with everything, each and every project. When you are trying to help Yidden and the door seems impenetrable, Hashem unlocks and opens the door.” Indeed, most of the costs involved in creating the challah bake were donated.

“Chef Chaya” Lichtenstein had a crowd surrounding her table as she demonstrated intricate braiding techniques. Appreciative of the opportunity to connect in person with her readers, she shared what baking challah means to her. “G-d gives sustenance, and the *mitzvah* of taking challah is my thanks offering.”

Handling the dough is a reminder to appreciate our food — “it’s the building block for all food,” said Naomi Nachman, host of “Table for Two with Naomi Nachman,” a radio show on the Nachum Segal Network. “It’s so holy and special.”

I’ve taught challah baking for over 12 years now. I’ve taught newbies, *bubbies*, and everyone in between. Still, I gained much more than I could have expected from this unique event. Besides having picked up a new tip or two from my wonderful colleagues and friends (did you know gluten-free challah dough will braid easier when refrigerated? I didn’t!), the experience of coming together in large numbers just to do a *mitzvah* was exhilarating. An almost tangible energy and spirit permeated the room, something not typically felt when baking alone. The trick, of course, is to fill up those red tubs and carry it home.