

GREAT BIG CHALLAH BAKE!

By M Lowinger

Here's the secret recipe for the best Challah Bake ever. Take 1,200 women and 120 coaches. Add 1,500 pounds of flour, assorted ingredients, an inspirational program, and some spirited dancing. Mix all together and let rise. You just created an unparalleled event of amazing achdus and a powerful Kiddush Hashem.

The Great Big Brooklyn Challah Bake is coordinated by Project Inspire and sponsored by Mr. and Mrs. Isaac and Edie Gross. In terms of sheer magnitude, it's massive and includes girls and women of all backgrounds. The sheer logistics of this event are mind boggling. It's hard to imagine how many volunteers measured out the challah ingredients, arranged the hundreds of spoons, bowls, aprons, baking pans, placements, and assorted utensils, for this huge crowd. According to Chaya Lew, who organized the event, "We must have had over a hundred volunteers coming and going just on the day of the event itself. Even before the event, we saw what unity can accomplish!"

The program is awesome from start to finish. Shimi Adar rocks the house as only she could. "Clearly," she says, "I'm hyper." As we are very much still in post-election-day mode, she says, "No doubt the President of all the presidents in the world is really proud of His Jewish daughters tonight!"

Rabbi Chaim Sampson, of Project Inspire, speaks about the power of Jewish women. "When we are united," he explains, "the power of the Al-mighty is with us. Take home with you the power of Jewish women and Jewish unity tonight."

Chaya Lew speaks about the significance of the mitzvah of Challah and teaches us that "our mother Sarah understood that bread gives us life, but it's up to us to make that life meaningful." Each of us then places a coin in the pushka on our table for tzedakah.

We are now ready to begin. We are in the capable and expert hands of Chanalee, the Challah Fairy. We pour, we drizzle, we stir, we mix. And eventually we knead and we punch our balls of dough. But a funny thing happens as we immerse ourselves in the process of baking challahs. Women who were virtual strangers just moments ago are bonding and sharing, helping each other and connecting.

Slovie Jungreis Wolff, daughter of the legendary Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis, O'H, gives a powerful presentation based on the story of a lone candelabra rescued from Hungary after the Holocaust, handed down to her by her mother. "I bring you this as a testimony to the eternity of the Jewish people," she says. "Each of us has a spark within us, a tiny flame that can become a great fire. Go out into the world and light a candle. Create a fire. That is the mission of the Jewish people."

Chanie Mandel introduces Liana who takes challah on behalf of all. Liana, who grew up unobservant, was injured badly in a bus accident



in Yerushalayim. It was during her hospital stay that she was overwhelmed by the caring and compassion of her fellow Jews. "I couldn't believe the unity of the Jewish people. I felt proud to be Jewish." Today, she is healed both physically and spiritually. Her children are receiving a proper Jewish education. Liana makes the bracha and 1,200 women respond with a thunderous 'Amen'.

We share a minute of silent prayer. It's a powerful moment. But that power is quickly transformed into boundless energy as soon as the music starts and the ladies begin to dance. The spirit of joy takes over. It's impossible to resist the energy and enthusiasm in the room tonight.

I meet Chloe. She is here with her mom, part of a group of nine women from Flatbush. "We're bonding like crazy glue!" she laughs.

I meet Orlit who lives in Manhattan Beach and tells me she recently lost her mother. "I've never been to a challah bake before," she admits. "But this is so therapeutic. It's a whole new experience for me." She is here with her sister-in-law, Rebecca, who says that, "there may be assimilation out there, but here we are all united."

Finally, I meet Esther and her elderly friend Taranya. They both live in Bensonhurst and are here together because Esther remembers the inspiration from last year and wants to share it with Taranya this time around. "The feeling of unity lasted me all year long," she says. "That's why I'm back."

She pauses to add a special bracha: "Hashem should look down at us now and see what's going on here so He will bless us this week and always."

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"The event was spectacular, but it doesn't stop here,"

says Rabbi Chaim Sampson. "The challah coaches and amazing ladies in the community who worked tirelessly to organize the event are already sharing their photos and staying in touch with their new friends on their tables. I have already heard countless stories of people taking steps to draw closer to Hashem and Torah in their own individual ways. B'chasdei Hashem, it's beautiful."

Even Chaya Lew was surprised when the emails and text messages came pouring in on the morning after the event. "My friend brought her 75 year old neighbor," she reports, "she was so inspired that she went out this morning to a Judaica store to buy her first Shabbos candlesticks!"

Another woman was worried about an upcoming scheduled surgery. "When we had the moment of silence, she was davening for a yeshua." The next morning she got a call from the doctor's office. "They reevaluated her case and told her she won't be needing the surgery after all. They'll just treat her with medication!"

Yet another friend told Chaya that she had brought her public school students with her to the Challah Bake. "They were enthralled!"

"Nobody knows how deeply this can affect people," says Chaya, "but things happened last night and we can only hope they will make a lasting roshem."

