

# “CHALLAH HAS POWER!”

REFLECTIONS ON THE

THE GREAT BIG

BROOKLYN CHALLAH BAKE

2017

BY MALKY LOWINGER

**IF THE BROOKLYN CHALLAH BAKE** was just about baking challah, that certainly would have been reason enough to be there. But ultimately, it wasn't just about the pouring, the mixing, the kneading, the braiding and the baking. It was about a venue filled with almost 2,000 women who left their differences at home and joined together for an evening of inspiration and energy, reflection and spirit, unity and joy.

Last week's Challah Bake, coordinated by Project Inspire, a program of Aish HaTorah, was held at PacPlex in Canarsie, and the anticipation was evident as soon as we arrived. As groups of ladies of all types and all ages approached from every direction, we entered a massive sports arena decorated boldly in grey and red, clever centerpieces gracing each table, and a roving camera recording from overhead. One sensed an audible buzz of excitement, a feeling that tonight something big was going to happen.

Hosting such a huge event is no simple feat, but the coordinators rose to the occasion. Impeccably arranged and organized, each participant found an arrangement of carefully measured and selected ingredients at her seat, as well as a commemorative apron, swag bag, and gloves.

Tonight's event is sponsored by Mr. and Mrs. Isaac and Edie Gross in memory of their beloved mother, Malka bas Yoseph Yuspeh, O'H. "My mother lived and breathed Shabbos," Mr. Gross tells us. "She suffered with Alzheimer's for years. There were times she didn't remember our names, but as soon as she saw the Shabbos candles she got up and made the bracha."

Jamie Geller serves as celebrity host of this year's Challah Bake and she reminds us that there's more to challah baking than meets the eye. "Challah has power," she says. "It's the single most significant food you can make. It transforms the physical into the spiritual. With challah, we are feeding our souls."

As we reflect on all this, the challah baking activity begins in earnest, with Jamie coaching from the stage and the rest of us combining our water, yeast and sugar, and then our flour, egg, oil, and salt until we have formed a perfect dough.

I meet Heather, who has come here tonight with her friends, and is amazed by the size of the crowd. "Seeing everybody doing this together," she says, is wonderful. She's also impressed by the coordination and the décor. "Wow, it's amazing how they put this together," she says. "The colors, the ingredients, everything!"

Miriam from Flatbush brought her three daughters with her tonight. "The best part of the Challah Bake," she says, "is seeing everyone doing this together."

I meet several mother-daughter teams tonight and also random groups of friends and neighbors. Apparently, this is considered the perfect ladies' night out. A large group is here from Mill Basin. "We came together with the Rebbetzin of our community," says one woman. "We brought a few ladies last year and they wanted to come again."

Why did they decide to come back for more? "Here at the Challah Bake, it doesn't matter what kind of Jew you are. We feel the achdus. We are all the same."

After a quick video by Ner Echod, and a short pause while we place tzedaka coins in a pushka, we are addressed by Mrs. Bronia Brandman. Bronia is a Holocaust survivor who speaks eloquently and passionately. "Could I ever in my wildest dreams," she asks, "imagine a gathering like this? There's so much positive energy here, it boggles the mind! My

heart swells with pride and disbelief and I feel the kedusha hovering over us."

Bronia speaks of how, at the age of 12, she was deported to Auschwitz with her sisters. Somehow, she survived and was liberated, but she was left alone in the world. Eventually she went to America and started a new life. She married and went back to school, graduating college with a B.A and M.A.

Yet she was haunted. "I presented a well adjusted persona, but I was emotionally dead." Until she visited Eretz Yisroel after the six day war. "Can you imagine the euphoria?" she says. "It restored my identity as a proud Jew."

Looking out at the vast audience, she continues, "I see here the excitement, the inspiration, and the spark of divinity. Together let's keep that spark alive! Let's keep the fire and the passion alive! Am Yisroel Chai!" After

a standing ovation, Bronia lights the Memorial Candle in memory of six million "who will never light candles again."

Rebbetzin Sara Meisels, daughter of the Bobover Rebbe, addresses us next, reiterating the significance of the mitzvah of challah. "Taking challah is the role of the woman," she says. "By taking challah we generate a flow of blessings in Heaven."

Moments before she performs the mitzvah of taking challah on our behalf, Rebbetzin Meisels asks us to join in a moment to reflect silently and pray. This silent prayer is one of the powerful moments of the Challah Bake. Tonight, we all feel that anything can happen.

Rebbetzin Meisels takes the challah, makes the bracha, and is answered with a thunderous 'Amen'. And then the magic begins. Shimi Adar, our Emcee, leads us in joyous song and dance. We celebrate the night, the unity and the precious mitzvah of challah. Nobody in that room, not young or old, is untouched by the mood and the magic. Onstage, Shimi shouts -- "We are changing the world one challah at a time!"

This all culminates in a musical interlude performed by four young women who sing about acheinu bais yisroel. And then – the braiding begins.

Jamie patiently explains the six-braid process and then comes off stage to help those who need some extra attention. While the women are working diligently at their braiding, I speak to Judy from Boro Park who says the atmosphere tonight is unbelievable. And Nomi from Mill Basin who says the achdus and the variety of women are amazing.

Nika from Manhattan Beach tells me, "Tonight is electric! We are all one big happy family!" And Zehava from Boro Park says, "The achdus is so special and the happiness is palpable. You could almost touch it."

I speak to Barbara, a ba'alas teshuva who says she is inspired by seeing "the beauty of people who are not religious wanting to get closer to Hakodosh Boruch Hu."

And Rochel Leah, from Boro Park, who shares that she recently had her first baby after waiting for many years. "I needed to touch base spiritually" she explains. "And this did it. Tonight was a spiritual awakening for me."

On my way out, I meet Chaya Sara from Flatbush who has brought her young daughter with her to the Challah Bake. "She was crying last year when I didn't bring her," Chaya Sara explains.

She is hoping for tonight's inspiration to last over the weekend as she is expecting several guests to join her family in their home this Shabbos. Then she glances at the braided Challah in the foil pan that she is carrying. "And of course," she tells me, "we'll use the Challah that we made tonight."

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