

Center  
StageInspirational  
&  
fascinating  
women speak

## Filling the Knead

### Center Stage with Elisheva Rotberg of the Great Big Jersey Shore Challah Bake

**EVENT TAKES PLACE:** Currently, in Lake Terrace Hall here in Lakewood

**WORKS IN TANDEM WITH:** “Challah Bakes” from 170 countries around the world, including Victoria, Australia, Colombia, Ukraine, and Calgary

**EVENT NECESSITIES:** Individually packaged and pre-portioned challah ingredients, bowls, aprons, mixing spoons and more for close to 600 women

**BIGGEST CHALLAH BAKE GLOBALLY THIS YEAR:** Over 9,000 women in one location in BUENOS AIRES

**PARTICULARLY MEMORABLE CHALLAH BAKE:** The ladies of the Har Nof community joined together for their first big community event following the horrific Har Nof massacre of 2014 at a Challah Bake in 2015, providing the suffering community with a sense of achdus AND CHIZUK.

**WHY IS THE CHALLAH BAKE SO CLOSE TO YOM TOV?** It’s a tough timeframe, but it takes advantage of the spiritual connection that unaffiliated Jews have made over the High Holy Days and builds upon it.

**WORDS TO LIVE BY:** “With a friendly smile and a kind word, anyone can make a difference and do kiruv.”

**T**he lights are off; the doors are closed. All the flyaway flour has been swept up, and the balloons are gone from their cheerful tabletop perches. Once again, the Great Big Jersey Shore Challah Bake has wrapped up for the year.

But like a small seed that seems to be gone once it’s covered in dirt, and then blossoms into a flourishing plant, the Challah Bake’s effects are likely just beginning.

A “Challah Bake” is a branch of the internationally celebrated Shabbos Project, which has just passed its fifth year in existence. Launched in 2013 in South Africa, the Shabbos Project was the brainchild of Chief Rabbi Dr. Warren Goldstein who called on his country to keep just one Shabbos together – Shabbos *Parshas Lech Lecha*. The Shabbos was a smashing success, and by the next year, the idea had already spread around the world. Lakewood jumped on board in 2015, and that was all thanks to Elisheva and the team at Project Inspire Jersey Shore.

## Hi, Elisheva! Can you tell us how this Challah Bake began?

In 2014, when the Shabbos Project went global, I saw it advertised in many different places. I heard about all these different communities doing really special things to join in: making communal Shabbos meals with unaffiliated Jews, getting together the Thursday before to bake challah together, having a “Havdalah concert,” and I was surprised to see that there didn’t seem to be anything going on in Lakewood.

By the next year, as *Parshas Lech Lecha* approached, I woke up really late, but decided to go ahead and try to put something together anyway: a Thursday night Challah Bake. I reached out to Rabbi Yaakov Giniger, the Director of Programming for Project Inspire, who said, “If you get together a group of 20 women, I’ll come down and speak.” I think he probably thought he’d never hear from me again. Two days later, I called him back – we had our 20! That got the ball rolling, and that year, we had about 150 women at the event, with each *frum* person required to bring an unaffiliated woman along with her.

## That’s amazing. And this year’s event was much bigger! How did the event grow?

Last year, we decided: Why not make it big? We wanted to open the doors for more people. We booked Lake Terrace and set up for 500 with capacity for 550. People thought we were crazy. In the end, *baruch Hashem*, we filled up. People showed up at the door until it was full. This year, we had 550 booked in advance and had to turn away about 200 people even before the event! Next year, *im yirtzeh Hashem*, we’ll have to find a bigger venue and hope to expand our capacity.

## For those of us who have never been, what happens at a Challah Bake?

For starters, the room is prepared with small, premeasured amounts of flour, water, oil, and so on, for each attendee, enough to make two challahs per person. We like to begin by setting the tone for the event with a speaker who describes just about how widespread this movement is. It’s very inspiring for participants to hear how it’s not just the women in this room participating in this event, but that hundreds of thousands of people around the world are taking part. This year, over a million people joined in the Shabbos Project!

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The ultimate purpose of the Shabbos Project is to get Jews across the world to keep Shabbos together.

This year, we had a very packed program: Cooking personality Rivky Kleiman spoke about the significance of challah and demonstrated how to make the dough, as well as how to braid it. There were actually many *frum* women who were moved by mixing the dough, because at home, they never mix it by hand. It was nice that they could be touched in this way, too. We had a Holocaust survivor, Mrs. Grossman, say a few words and light a candle to commemorate those who were lost, showing us how the mitzvah of challah is something that has been with us forever and still lives on. Inspirational personality Shimi Adar spoke about the special *eis ratzon* that we have when we make challah, and there was a moment of silence for *tefillah*. This was perhaps the most powerful moment in the entire evening; women were crying – they were really moved. When Mrs. Grossman recited the *bracha* in Hebrew [the bowl on the stage had enough dough to take challah] and Rivky repeated it in English, the whole room responded, “Amen!” and broke out into song and dance!

## What an amazing night! What do you think the main takeaway is for the unaffiliated attendees?

It’s hard to speak for other people, but *baruch Hashem*, we get a very positive response. I think it’s important to provide women of little exposure to religious Jews with an upbeat, warm, and wonderful experience; it’s very uplifting for them.

This year, we had a 92-year-old woman who made challah for the first time in her life. They brought her into the middle of the circle for the dancing and she was blown away. She said this was the most amazing experience of her life.

We also had a mother-daughter pair – the mother comes from a traditional Israeli-Moroccan home, but the daughter was raised very American. For the mother, taking challah



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was familiar from her childhood and she was on a complete spiritual high from it, and for the daughter, it was a taste of something that she doesn't get in her normal day-to-day life. It was incredible for both of them! And who knows what can come from that? You never know how this will affect each person, or what small change they might decide to implement as a result.

### What about for the *frum* woman? What's the takeaway?

I think the first thing is the experience itself. Even for *frum* women, it's incredible to be in a room with so many walks of Judaism; there are women from across the spectrum.

The takeaway message is that everyone can do something when it comes to *kiruv*: be friendly, say hello to your neighbor every time you see her, be genuine and caring... even invite a neighbor to your house for a Shabbos meal or take her out for coffee. You'll start to build a relationship. Then, when you have the opportunity to expose her to something bigger – like the Challah Bake, for example – there will be a context there to do it. You won't just knock on her door and say, "Hey, want to come to this thing with me?" You'll have a connection already, so it will be easy to ask. And even better, it will be easy for her to say yes.

*If you would like to get involved with the next Great Big Challah Bake, please reach out to [jerseyshore@projectinspire.com](mailto:jerseyshore@projectinspire.com).*