

Challah Recipe: A Yom Kippur Sermon
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It's Yom Kippur morning, and I am thinking about making challah.

The Sunday before Rosh Hashanah, our Preschool Director Tamar Andrews led a High Holy Day challah bake.

Step 1: Dissolve yeast and one tablespoon of sugar in warm water.

That's how we begin. By creating an environment of sweetness and warmth. Looking back, there has been so much bitterness and cold. Anxiety and stress.

I remember a gathering, sponsored by Isaiah Women, our temple's sisterhood. A Small Group of women, pre-pandemic, gathered around Sherri Zigman's kitchen island, and we spoke with Beth Ricanati, the author of *Braided: A Journey of a Thousand Challahs*, as we kneaded dough. Beth talked about reaching a place in her life of debilitating fatigue. She was a physician, working long hours, and also a parent. She said that she realized she was headed to the same place as her patients: "to a place where [she] was disconnected with [her] body and with [her] spirit. To the place where disease loves to take hold." She talked about how she used to "just prescribe medications such as calcium-channel blockers and beta-blockers," and that now, she also prescribes baking challah.

Many of you know that I wrote a children's book, published by Apples and Honey Press called *The Goblins of Knottingham*, and it tells a legend of the origin of challah. In the back of the book, there is a page that asks readers to wonder with me about the power of challah. Is it the smell? The taste? The shape? I wrote that the braids often remind me of people holding hands and hugging. I suggested that it isn't really any of those things, rather, its power comes from the people who gather around it, smiling, singing, sharing stories and filling the world with love.

What I remember most about that evening around the Zigman kitchen island was a conversation I had had with one of the attendees. We were both parenting teenagers. We stole a few minutes and stood off to the side, listening to each other's trials, sharing our failures and successes, learnings and confusion. The conversation inspired me, and helped me figure out a decision I had been wrestling with.

That was the healing prescription, not the bread itself, but the meaningful connection to another.

In the past, our K-12 school has partnered with the Los Angeles Holocaust Museum for a program called *L'Dough va'Dough*, a clever play on the Hebrew phrase *l'dor va'dor*, from generation to generation. Small Groups of students sat with Holocaust survivors around tables, and together they kneaded and braided challah dough. While the challahs baked, the survivors shared their stories. Had the survivors had just told their stories, without the hour of sitting around a table together kneading dough and sneaking chocolate chips amidst poofs of flour, there would not have been the

same connection. While hands braided sweet dough, hearts bonded. We created a foundation of trust. And then history became alive.

Is the antidote to isolation, sadness, disease...baking challah? Maybe. But it's more than that.

Step 2: Add eggs. Gradually add flour. When the dough holds together, it is ready for kneading.

Kira Asatriyan wrote in the book *Stop Being Lonely*: "Loneliness is essentially sadness caused by a lack of closeness." She teaches that the feeling of closeness doesn't happen when you simply surround yourself with people. You could be at Royce Hall, sitting amidst a thousand people, and not feel close to anyone. She explained that the feeling of closeness happens when people feel that others understand them and care about them. "The two essential qualities of closeness," she said, are "knowing and caring."

We've seen that happen countless times at the temple, in the right environment of sweetness and warmth, this alchemy takes place. The way flour, eggs, yeast, sugar, oil, salt become a golden woven loaf, people spend time together, share ideas, mingle, mix, open up, and this enveloping golden glow starts to fill the room, touching everything, holding everyone together.

We experience closeness when we gather around kitchen islands, dining room tables, living rooms.

We need to rebuild that closeness. That sense of knowing and being known, caring and being cared for. We have to get the dough to hold together.

Psychologists say that belonging is as primal and essential as food and shelter.

One study compared people who described themselves as very satisfied with those who claimed to be very unsatisfied in life. They found no differences based on socio-economic status, gender identity, marital status, or age. The only difference was that the 'very satisfied' group had a network of 'deep and satisfying social relationships.' (Martin Seligman and Ed Diener, in a sermon by Rabbi Benjamin Spratt)

The danger is that when the need to belong is not met through healthy, loving communities, people look for other means to satisfy it. Hate groups, conspiracy groups offer instant belonging. The fastest way to connect with others is to rally together against someone or something else. It is no wonder that after a year and a half of lockdowns, isolation, ruptures, grief, with our nerves frayed and our societal fabric shredded like shiva ribbons, we see increased attachment to nationalist, extremist, separatist, supremacist, racist organizations that welcome in lost, lonely, angry individuals with cultic camaraderie.

Step 3: Knead the dough.

At one point in the Rosh Hashanah challah bake, Tamar said, "The dough needs to be kneaded." And after a pause, she added with a laugh, "Everyone needs to be needed."

When Temple Isaiah first started to talk about purchasing the building next door, its design and how it would be used, rather than social halls and large sanctuaries, Rabbi Dara talked about creating

kitchen island and living room spaces, places where people could gather in Small Groups, and recreate that sense of warmth, family and belonging. This is the vision behind the Joan and Ephraim Sales Community Center.

The concept of Small Groups has been the cornerstone of a number of modern churches. Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback Church talks about how their Small Groups ministry allowed their congregation to grow larger while also becoming smaller. He said “the intimate fellowship in our small groups...connects people to each other at the heart level.”

Over the past few years, Jewish congregations have been experimenting with the Small Group model to create deeper connections, and the response has been overwhelmingly positive.

Rabbi Nicole Auerbach, when launching a Small Groups initiative, said to her congregation: “Let this be a year where we recognize that God doesn’t show up one day a year in the holy of holies; God shows up when we show up for each other.”

We have an age-old, uniquely Jewish version of the Small Group: the minyan. The minyan, in Judaism, is the smallest definition of community. Ten people. There are certain prayers which traditionally can only be said in a gathering of at least ten people. The *Barchu*. The Kaddish. It is this extraordinary idea, that before we pray, we must assemble this micro-community. Creating this micro-community is a prerequisite to prayer. We don’t pray alone. We don’t mourn alone.

The whole purpose of the minyan is showing up for each other. If you don’t show up, the minyan isn’t complete, and the prayers can’t be said. In a minyan, the thirteen year old and the 93 year old stand equal to one another in fulfilling the mitzvah. They need each other. The minyan, this micro-community of knowing and caring, where each person counts, is the heart of Judaism. Showing up for each other, and being counted, being needed. We show up for each other in order for God to show up.

We need to rebuild our minyans. (I can just see one of those aforementioned hate groups excerpting this quote: Los Angeles rabbi calls upon congregation to build up their evil minions!) I am not talking about those yellow cartoons or servile underlings. We need to rebuild our micro-communities.

We need to re-learn the art of gathering.

Rabbi Dara spoke in her Erev Rosh Hashanah sermon about shifting our focus this year from one of individual accomplishment... to one of community, faith and collective responsibility. She quoted Esau McCaully who said, “The pandemic has reminded us that life is more than what we do. It is about whom we spend our lives with. We cannot hug a career or laugh with a promotion. We are made for friendship, love and community.”

Step 4: Let it rise in a warm place.

This past year, Rabbi Dara Frimmer, Sheri Reynolds, our Director of Membership Engagement and I hosted a series of gatherings to talk about the concept of Small Groups. We met with parents, millennials, empty nesters, and we shared the idea. We solicited reactions and feedback, and

everyone was enthusiastic. Then we invited anyone who had talked with us about Small Groups if they would like to help us plan.

Thank you to Danielle Ambrose, Natasha Bogopolskaya, David Chiu, Caryn Friedman, Linda Glaser, Beth Goss, Elan Levey, Greg Michelson, Raphael Simmons and Connie Sommer who said yes.

We talked about the philosophy of Small Groups. That people have been pent up, time has felt stagnant, and now more than ever we need to branch out and feel the love of others. We talked about how even the introvert who was happy to be home needs stimulation, needs the opportunity to try new things. We talked about how precious relationships are, that in many ways, they keep us alive. We talked about how Small Groups is not an ask from the temple, rather, it is a give. Small Groups will nourish and benefit, build relationships, friendships. That it is about self-care, self-compassion, good for the soul. We talked about how not too long ago, everyone was home making sourdough by themselves, and we want to go back to making sweet challah together. And we thought if people say, “But I already have friends, what do I need to join Small Groups for?” Well great, get your friends together and make a Small Group around something you want to try together. As a temple group, it will be different, your gathering will take on new dimensions, and in that warm place, will rise.

I remember when a Small Group of temple members went to Hollywood Aerial Arts and challenged ourselves to try to balance beam, ribbons and trapeze. And because we were a group of Isaiahs, it wasn’t just an exercise class. It wasn’t simply an unusual outing. A meet-up. We were practicing courage together. Supporting and encouraging one another. Sharing our failures and successes. Talking about the art of holding on and letting go.

I remember another program called Death over Dinner. It was amazing. Small groups of people gathered around round tables at the temple. At each table was a “death doula,” a person who specialized in ushering people, with beauty, ritual and meaning, as they crossed over from this life, their last breath. Over a family-style dinner, we talked about mortality, burial, cremation, afterlife, fears, beliefs. We laughed a lot, cried a little, and felt lighter. The topic no longer taboo, or scary.

These Small Groups, because they are born out of a shared membership to a temple community, had new dimensions of meaning, rose up to a higher level of reflection and contemplation.

Dr. Ron Wolfson, author of the book Relational Judaism, said: “a skeptic might think, ‘Mahjong small groups are just a bunch of people playing a game. *That* will transform lives?’” And he answers, “Yes, it can..”

Reading through some of the Small Groups at Rabbi Asher Knight’s congregation in North Carolina, there was one I would want to join called Vino and Vinyl. The description said: “building relationships while drinking wine and listening to the 80s music we grew up with.” That’s not just a social club. That’s a group of temple members, taking time to reminisce about their nostalgic childhoods. There is a lot of nourishment there. (And I can only imagine that once you’ve sung Tears for Fears, Twisted Sister and the Beastie Boys together, you are bonded for life.)

Professor Randy Pausch, in his Last Lecture, said: “We send our kids out to play football or soccer or swimming or whatever it is, and ...we actually don’t want our kids to learn football. I mean, yeah,

it's really nice that I have a wonderful three-point stance... But we send our kids out to learn much more important things: teamwork, sportsmanship, perseverance..."

We do things not for the thing itself but for the deeper values it teaches, the connections it helps us make. So too with Judaism, we look for the deeper values and connections in everything we do.

So, whether it is a Small Group gathered around learning Kabbalah or Canasta, whether it is Bagels and Lox, Podcast Talks, Beach Walks, we connect to each other on a heart level.

Whether it is an Interfaith Families Group, a Guitar Players Jamming Group, a Small Group on Investments, Shabbat with Friends, Hiking, Biking, Bourbon and Beer, Documentary Discussion, Meditation, Wine Tasting, Jewish Questions, Genealogy, Poetry, Medical Ethics, Mussar, Spiritual Recharging, Israel Conversation, Nature Conservation, Exploring Life's Purpose, Pursuing Peace, Neighborhood, Parenthood, Peoplehood, Underwater Basketweaving or Pickling Peaches and Plums...God shows up when we show up for each other.

And we know, from 70 plus years of Isaiah history that when people connect, they find meaning and purpose and deep happiness and a sense of belonging to something that touches the eternal.

Step 5: Take half the dough and form it into balls. With your hands, roll each ball into a strand. Place them all in a row and pinch the tops together. Braid the strands together.

We have many thriving communities at Temple Isaiah already. We do. And Small Groups is not meant to replace.

We are a community of communities.

We have ChaiVillageLA, which provides congregants relationships, resources, programs and support to live lives of purpose, growth and joy, with everyday opportunities to come together.

Isaiah Women, whose motto is "Creating community, building friendships, learning together," brings women together in education, celebration, and community service, strengthening Isaiah by strengthening the bond between the women of Isaiah.

Family Philanthropy Club's mission is to open our children's hearts and minds to issues and struggles beyond their own backyard, providing a forum for Temple Isaiah families to do this work together.

TING, Temple Isaiah's Business Networking Group, brings together Jewish professionals to get to know one another with the goal of referring good contacts and potential clients, helping improve businesses and the well-being of the community.

We have our Green Team whose mission is to establish awareness of our Jewish responsibility to maintaining and healing our planet.

Am Tzedek: Isaians Pursuing Justice is Temple Isaiah's organizing group in partnership with One-LA.

We have our choirs, our Preschool Parents Association, our K-12 Parent Association, and Havurot that have been together for decades.

And what we know about all of these communities is that they work. People receive strength and meaning and love by joining these groups. That's why we are building even more opportunities to connect. Adding more strands to the braid. But this time, we are doing it differently.

What makes a Small Group different is that they are time limited. You aren't signing up for a lifetime. They are short-term. The frequency, dates and location are ultimately determined by the group. Small Groups are a low-risk, low-commitment on-ramp for members. And at the last scheduled meeting, the group may decide to renew, or you can join a different Small Group, try something else.

We often hear from people that they want to get more involved, but they don't know how. And we hadn't figured that out, until now. This is how to get involved, try something new, with little risk.

We know how stretched you are. We know that you belong to many groups. Professional groups. Boards. Work out groups. Parent Groups at your children's schools. But you joined Temple Isaiah for a reason. And you might think you joined Temple Isaiah because your child needs a bar mitzvah, or you were looking for a preschool, or your partner wanted to, or your parents made you. But that is not the only reason. You were drawn here because you saw a community of people with shared values. You saw a place where you yourself could belong.

Do you like Sci Fi movies? Well, I am sure there are others who like them too. Do you like camping? Woodworking? Are you a caregiver for a family member who would like to talk with other caregivers? Maybe during the pandemic you developed a hobby. Small Groups give you the chance to share your hobby or explore a new one. A Small Group can be as few as three people, and as many as 18. All you need is an interest or an idea and two other people to form a group, and we will be there to help you get started and support you along the way.

And we will braid our amazing communities and our micro-communities together into something beautiful.

Step 6: Brush egg wash on top of the loaves to make them shine. Sprinkle poppy or sesame seeds on top.

This sermon is only chapter one of a great story. Chapter two begins when you go to our website, www.templeisaiah.com, click on the tab that says "community," and then click on "small groups." Chapter one was mostly description and setting up the story. Chapter two is where we meet the characters. You, and you and you. Chapter two is when you look at our Small Groups page, write in your name, and press "submit" to let us know you want to learn more, that you want to join a Small Group, or that you have an idea for a Small Group.

If you have an inkling to lead a Small Group, we will provide for you the training and support to help your Small Group to shine.

Chapter two will be filled with seedlings. And what will sprout in chapter three, four, five, six, is a mystery. How the story unfolds will be an adventure. New leaders, renewed energy. Some of these easy on-ramps, these short-term groups, may evolve over time into sharing meals in each other's sukkahs, participating in celebrations and Jewish life, joining Am Tzedek, Isaiah Women, ChaiVillageLA.

I am telling you, that this Small Groups story we are writing together is the one I am most anticipating, the one I can't wait to read. This, to me, is the Book of Life into which we are all hoping to have our names written and sealed. The Book of Good Life, of purpose, growth, closeness, happiness.

Every community at the temple started as a Small Group. The Preschool and the K-12 program started as a Small Groups of parents wanting to give their children a Jewish Education. The temple itself started as a Small Group, meeting in living rooms and around kitchen islands.

Step 7: The last step. Bake until golden.

The word challah actually refers to the small bit of dough that was set aside in ancient times for the priests as an offering to God. When baking challah, it is traditional to pinch off a little bit of the dough and to set it aside, burn it as a sacrificial offering.

We encourage you to set aside a small bit of time this year, challenge yourself, lovingly nudge a family member to try something new. Let this be your challah, your little offering, a little gift to yourself. After a year of stops and starts, step out of the bitterness and cold and into an environment of sweetness and warmth, of belonging. We are made for friendship, love and community.

Come hang out in the kitchen. The challah is not ready yet, but you can smell it. It won't be until Yom Kippur ends that you can take a bite, but the very best things take time to create, and are worth the wait.

In the meantime, come hang out in the kitchen, just show up, and let's talk about our lives, our failures and successes, wisdom and confusion. Let's sing and tell our favorite jokes. Let's pour ourselves a drink, and toast l'chayim. Let's spend time together doing things we enjoy, fun things, and let's also do the things that are important to us, the things that change the world for good. Let's ask the deeper questions, in an environment that is warm and sweet. Let's weave a little of our lives together, a little of ourselves with others.

Let's get together, enveloped by that golden glow, strengthened and supported, rising up from this year of ruptures.

Let's get together, and begin to rebuild all that has been lost, and so much more, one minyan at a time.

Ketiva v'chatima tova. May we be written and sealed in the Book of Good Life. *Amen.*