

It started out, to be honest, a complete mess. Sloppy. Wet. It smelled a bit. It got all over everything.

It quickly became clear that I had a ways to go.

Stuck inside our houses for days at a time during the worst of the Covid pandemic, many of us found hobbies or pastimes that we'd never tried before. Woodworking, gardening, binge-watching *Real Housewives* — New York, Beverly Hills, Potomac. *Lots* of options on the table. Most of them, of course, were solitary.

But what if you could pursue a hobby, on your own, that allowed you to engage with a living organism — right on your kitchen counter?

And so it was that I found myself, for the first time ever, in my house, covered in gloppy, yeasty dough, making challah.

Of course, I love the *taste* of challah. And the *smell* of fresh-baked challah is intoxicating. But I was always intimidated by the idea of *making* it. Lots of extra time at home — and many, many episodes of the British Baking Show — cured me of that particular anxiety.

Today I make a pretty decent challah, if I do say so myself. (Anthony concurs, much to my great relief).

But it certainly was a journey getting there.

Perhaps of all kinds of cooking, baking is the most evocative. It comes to us in moments steeped in emotion: cookies from a favorite relative; rows of treats at a bakery; *matzah*, the very symbol of liberation in our Passover narrative. One of our English words for God even comes from baking. The word "Lord" grew out of the Anglo-Saxon *hlaford*, meaning "loaf ward", the master who supplies food.

If you've ever eaten a really good challah, you know — the taste is divine.

And so, this Rosh haShanah, as we begin a journey though Jewish values, I humbly offer: *The Torah of Baking*. Or, if you prefer, *All I ever really needed to know I learned from kneading the dough*.

(Sorry, I couldn't resist.)

Lesson One: **There is amazing potential in everything.** As I said, my first attempt at challah quickly turned into a complete mess. Bringing together water and oil, egg and honey, yeast and flour gets very sloppy, very quickly. The folks on the British Baking Show call this a “shaggy dough.”

But it's more like a gloopy, sticky mess.

At this point, early in the process, I will say — I was tempted to give up. The more I tried to knead it, the more the dough started to creep up my fingers — to the point where it threatened to overtake my hands.

But, as you can probably guess from the fact that I'm giving this sermon, the dough came together. Not at first. There was much scraping of hands, scraping of surfaces, scraping of hands that had touched surfaces — but out of the slop a dough started to form. Miraculous.

Tonight we enter Rosh haShanah, the birthday of the world. At the very beginning of the Torah, in the book of Exodus, we are told that the universe was *tohu va'vohu* — chaotic, wild, formless. Or, as it were, the primordial “shaggy dough.”

But from that unformed mass comes structure, order, the universe — *us*. The fact that God looks at a mess and sees literally a holy mess, the potential for something more is, in and of itself, miraculous.

Even from a purely scientific angle, the fact that all the components of our universe came together in the right way testifies to that spirit, the power of possibility. It's obviously not *my* area of expertise, but take it from Stephen J. Gould, *z"l*. The paleontologist concluded that if the process of evolution were run again from the beginning, it's doubtful that human beings would ever have come to be.

And if you'd have looked at the massive gloppy mess that was in the bowl on my kitchen counter, it's doubtful you would have thought that it could ever become bread. But it did.

On Rosh haShanah, we look at the mess we've made of things. We know that within us there is the potential for better. Within the mess, in fact, may be the stirrings of what we've hoped for.

The key to reaching that potential is to keep hoping. Despite our history as a persecuted people, Jews are dreamers. The Israeli national anthem, after all, is *Hatikva*, "the hope." Jews are in the hope business.

"Hope isn't a choice, it's a moral obligation," the great Jewish playwright Tony Kushner said at a commencement address a while back, "an obligation to the cells in your body." He continued:

*Hope is a function of those cells, it's a bodily function the same as breathing and eating and sleeping. Hope is not naïve, hope grapples endlessly with despair... but lose your hope and you lose your soul, and you don't want to do that, trust me, even if you haven't got a soul, and who knows, you shouldn't be careless about it.*

Like a shaggy challah dough, the world seems like a gloppy mess. This year, it's been so easy to fall prey to despair. But then what?

Well, you all showed up here. You must believe at least a little in what could be. In this world. The possibilities that live in you.

Of course, it takes work. Which leads to lesson number two.

**Lesson Two: Labor is sacred.** Like I said, my introduction to challah dough came with it sticking to my fingers, knuckles, hands, wrists. It's because I kneaded the dough by hand.

Some recipes call for a stand mixer, along with an attachment I found out is called a dough hook. Throw everything in, attach the hook, and *let 'er rip*.

That wasn't going to work for me. Besides the fact that stand mixers aren't cheap, machine mixing would be a betrayal of my baking DNA.

You see, even though it took me awhile, I inherited baking from my grandmother, Grandma Ruth. I've talked about her before. Not your regular TV-grandma, Grandma Ruth. Escaped the Cossacks, cursed like a sailor, smoked unfiltered Kents in the bathroom. But one thing Ruth did was bake. Really well. rugelach, mandelbrot, apple cake, chocolate chip cookies.

She didn't mix dough with a spoon. “I mix it with my hands,” she would explain. “Because that's how the love gets in.”

*Love.* As I mentioned, Grandma Ruth was not exactly a touchy-feely kinda gal. But let her work in the kitchen, and there you'd find this tough-as-nails working-class woman, an immigrant woman, fingers permanently sore from piecemeal garment work, methodically mixing dough, putting love into the food she would put in front of her family — literally a labor of love.

And, make no mistake, mixing challah dough by hand is very much “labor.” Physically kneading, developing that dough, is work. It allows you to feel the consistency as it comes together. After 5, 10, 12 minutes of hand kneading, let me tell you — I work up a sweat!

In the US, today is Labor Day. We remember that, in Jewish tradition, labor is not conceived of as, by definition, a drudgery or a punishment — it is a gift that God models for creation.

Like my grandparents — and perhaps yours too — God is a worker in the creation story, the heavens and earth described as *ma'asei etzba'otecha*

— the “work of God’s fingers.” God is called *Oseh*, “Maker,”<sup>1</sup> *Yotzer*, “Crafter,”<sup>2</sup> *Poel*, “Worker.”<sup>3</sup>

The dignity inherent in labor in our Torah — especially around food — is reflected in the labor done by its first humans, Adam and Eve. We often think of Eden as a place of endless leisure, a world that didn’t require labor. But the text of the Torah itself tells us that God put humans into that Garden *l’ovdah ul’shomrah* — “to work it and guard it.”<sup>4</sup> Only *afterward* does God say that Eden’s residents can eat of its trees.

People connect with land through labor. When I work the challah with my hands, as did those who came before me, I connect with the dough, and I connect with my ancestors — and I connect with my personal challah whisperer, Ellen Krueger, who I have on speed dial. (*Don’t tell her I told you.*)

And all of it connects with God.

Baking, like other wisdom, is a tradition. One of our core values is *v’shinantam livanech*, the words from the *v’ahavta* that mean “teach this to your children.”

In Hebrew, the word for tradition is *mesorah*. It literally means “hand over.” It says, somebody came before you, somebody did the labor before you, and is handing it to you. You may not feel a strong connection to that person. You may not like them. You may not even *know* them. But the physical labor connects you.

The sanctity of this connection, the power within human labor, is reflected in the Torah’s most sacred places, the *mishkan* — the tabernacle that’s the

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<sup>1</sup> Job 25:2

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 2:7

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 15:17

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 2:15

locus of holiness throughout the desert journeys. Within this relatively exotic structure, made of fine fabrics and precious metals, is something we all know — bread. To be specific, twelve loaves of bread, always present and replaced weekly, on a specially dedicated table before God. The Torah calls these loaves *lechem panim*. “Showbread” or “presence bread,” constantly in the presence of God.<sup>5</sup>

The ingredients and procedure for baking the showbread, however, are a mystery. There is substantial debate amongst the rabbinic sources about how they were made. The Torah offers no recipe.

It was one family, and *only* one family, according to the Talmud, that knew the secrets. *Beit Garmu*, the “house of Garmu,” had the knowledge to bake the showbread so that it would last an entire week.<sup>6</sup> As the Talmud tells it, the rabbis wanted to force *Beit Garmu* to share their secrets — and when they refused, the rabbis fired them. Needing someone to make the showbread, the rabbis did what many problematic bosses do: they hired scab workers. Replacements were brought all the way from Alexandria, in Egypt.

Only one problem: the scabs, no surprise, didn’t know what they were doing. Over the course of the week, their bread became moldy. Having learned their lesson, the Sages sent for *Beit Garmu*. Realizing the value of their labor, the bakers refused to come. That is, until the rabbis doubled their wages — then, they came. And they went back to making God’s bread.

You might think the needs of the bakers would be secondary to the needs of the *mishkan*. They weren’t. The labor baked into our food must be valued. The sweat that comes off me when I knead the dough is not unusual. Sweat, effort, labor goes into all the food we eat. The rabbis of the Talmud, in increasing the wages of *Beit Garmu*, realized what we have learned in the last year and a half: any worker that puts food on our table is

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<sup>5</sup> Exodus 25:30

<sup>6</sup> This and subsequent Talmudic references from *Yoma* 38a

owed our gratitude and respect. They are all essential workers, all of them holy.

Like my grandparents. Like someone in your life, no doubt.

Unfortunately, it seems to take us a long time to learn these lessons. But that leads to Lesson #3.

**Lesson Three: Sometimes you need patience.** A large part of the process of baking, it turns out, is waiting. Flour has protein molecules (so they say!) that are insoluble in water. Add water and yeast, and knead it all together, and these proteins create an extensive interconnected protein network called gluten.

In essence, the dough become a mass of a kajillion little balloons. But you need something to fill them up. Most of a finished loaf of bread is empty space — as much as 80% of its volume — tiny, puffy pockets. But there’s no shortcuts in pocket-building. While yeast makes carbon dioxide to puff up the pockets of gluten, it’s not an on-off switch. The recipe I now use requires a first rise of two hours, and a second rise, after braiding, of two more. You just have to wait.

In other words, don’t just do something. Sit there!

Because if you can’t help yourself, if you keep mushing and shmushing and otherwise messing with the dough, it becomes what’s called “overworked.” The result is a tough and dense challah.

Sometimes, it turns out, *not* doing is as important as doing. Having the patience to wait until just the right moment.

If you know me at all, you know that patience is not my strongest quality. If I see something that I believe needs attention, I want to jump in and do something about it. I love the teaching, for instance, about Nachshon ben Aminidav, the man that Midrash teaches jumped first into the Red Sea, the

waters only parting when he had advanced into the sea far enough that the water level reached his nose.<sup>7</sup>

In some ways, I’m a product of our time and our culture. There’s a results-oriented ethos in our culture. Find the problem, fix it, and move on to the next thing.

But in some cases, we don’t give the thing that’s already there a chance to work. A little patience can give a situation time to develop, often for the good.

When dealing with flesh-and-blood human beings, “fixing” the problem is sometimes the *last* thing we should do. Countless arguments between partners, for instance, end in the plaintive request: “I don’t need you to fix it. I just want you to listen.”

And in some situations, it’s best not to do even that. In *Pirkei Avot*, Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar counsels:

*Don’t [try to] assuage the anger of your friend at the time of their anger; don’t console them at the time when their dead lies before them... and don’t seek to see them at the time of their humiliation.*<sup>8</sup>

If someone is at a moment of rage, of existential grief or shame or anguish, what could possibly be said or done to “fix” it? There’s a reason shiva doesn’t begin until after the burial of the dead.

One of our core values is *ahavat haBriyot*, “loving all people.” Sometimes giving people space to feel their feelings and regroup is the most loving thing we can do, letting them know we’re here for them if they want to talk.

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<sup>7</sup> *Mechilta d’Rabbi Yishmael* 14:22

<sup>8</sup> *Pirkei Avot* 4:23

Some of the things for which we need to ask forgiveness, it would seem, are the times we overworked the dough — reacting too soon, saying too much, jumping in when we should have waited.

And, sometimes, we’re the ones who need some time to regroup, or just cool down. After learning the hard lesson about the damage that can be done by a hastily sent email, I have come to be deeply grateful to God that some software engineer invented the “draft” button.

Just as we offer space and compassion to others who need to find their footing after a wound, we’re also wise to offer ourselves compassion — allow ourselves time to regroup from our own intense feelings — rather than thoughtlessly reacting, making decisions we’ll come to regret.

Despite some Torah narratives that would seem to indicate the opposite, it turns out our model for this kind of patience is actually God. In the 13 attributes of God that we’ll chant in front of the ark tomorrow, we’ll call upon God — *YHVH, YHVH... Erech apayim*.<sup>9</sup> A God who is slow to anger, who waits for us to figure out who and what we want to be in the world, is our example for how to treat each other.

The word *erech* in *erech Apayim* comes from the Hebrew root *aleph-reish-chaf*, which means “to lengthen” or “to stretch.” Like a challah dough that’s been worked but allowed rise and rest, we find that — given some space and time — the human heart is pliable, and can stretch and move as it grows.

Which leads to the final lesson, Lesson #4.

**Lesson Four: There’s amazing mystery in this world. You’re a part of it.** — I have worked with dough that seemed to be fighting me. I have looked at challah loaves that I thought were too small, or too crooked, or too

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<sup>9</sup> Exodus 34:6-7

*something*. I have turned up my nose at a pile of dough on my kitchen counter and exclaimed, “it’s ruined!”

But as I have baked more, I have learned one other thing: what you put in the oven often looks very different than what comes out. As challah dough heats up in the oven, it becomes more fluid and the gas expands and the dough rises. The outside of the loaf solidifies, the gas has nowhere to go, and the pressure increases, forcing open the big holes you see when you tear into a loaf.

The whole process is a sensuous, wild miracle. Baking brings all our senses to the fore. The smell of the yeast, the sight of it rising, the feel of the sticky dough that somehow becomes a ball, the resounding *thump* of the finished loaf — and, of course, the final payoff, the finished challah — all indicate power all around us but just barely noticed. And a power that, through our work, we partner with God to bring into being.

We’ve been through the ringer since March 2020. Maybe you feel like a pounded-out challah dough, pulled and prodded. And tested by fire. But here we are. Here *you* are. You made it. It’s a miracle. You’re a miracle. Whether it was baking, or knitting, or being there for family, or supporting a friend, or making a Zoom minyan, or helping a friend get vaccinated — you got through. We’re not out of the woods yet by a long shot, but still.

What a blessing. Like a challah baked to perfection, you defy gravity. You rise.

Doing what we need to do on these days of awe isn’t easy. But look around. Look at all the blessing that lives around us, and within us. It’s so clear that, like a freshly baked challah, this year is already *tovah u’metukah*, good and sweet, a year we endured and thrived, a year we found the strength and courage to live.