

Our Braided Bread

Benjamin DuBow | Longreads | May 2022 | 16 minutes (4,536 words)

In my native New York, I don't feel the need to perfume the air around me with the sweet scent of challah. But here in Iowa, there is a void I need to fill.



Early on Friday mornings, when the air still whispers with the night, I make sure to feed Orlando before heading out to the community farm.

Back when I first got started with starters, I used to weigh out the flour(s)¹ and water to ensure an equal ratio, but nowadays I just eyeball it. Orlando doesn't seem to mind — in fact, I like to think they welcome the small surprises.

Sometimes these alterations are intentional. The crucial thing is to give him ample time to mature, and I learned from Nate that wetter cultures ferment more quickly.² So, if I think we'll be in a rush later, I'll feed Orlando a more liquid diet. More often than not, these Friday morning

feedings are rather on the wetter side — for when are the hours before Shabbat ever *not* a rush?

As the cold weather comes, I must pay closer attention to temperature. I wiggle my fingers under the tap until I feel the water warm, careful that it doesn't get so hot to scald the baby starter. This added warmth gives her a head start, yes it does.

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The word *challah*, which comes from a root meaning round (suggesting the shape), originally denoted the portion of bread that Jews were commanded to reserve for the *kohanim*, the priests who worked and lived in the Temple and relied on such gifts for their sustenance; the challah, as such, was supposed to be of highest quality, a bread befitting a servant of God.

After the Second Temple's destruction and the scattering of its priests, the Sages commemorated the now-obsolete practice by instituting a substitute: a portion of dough from the people's daily bread would be removed and burned. (The root word might alternatively mean hollow, or pierced. An empty space.) This sacrificial portion was then called the challah.

It always seemed odd to me that we'd memorialize destruction with yet more destruction. As though the jobless and houseless among us are no longer hungry. As though we can afford the waste.³

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Orlando and I bake bread fairly often — generally at least twice a week. One of these (or sometimes two, if I'm baking a double batch to share with a friend) will be a country-style loaf, the kind you might picture when you think of sourdough.⁴ I eat some of this fresh, save a good

hunk for the following day, and usually freeze the rest, in slices, so that I can throw some in the oven as needed. This way, none of it goes stale. But our Friday bake is a different sort entirely, closer to a brioche than the traditional country-style. And though challah made with sourdough starter is not very common these days, this bread we make *is* deeply traditional, with a long history that predates commercial yeast. All challah was once made with the help of a symbiotic culture. This recipe of ours is not a new creation; it is a *re*-creation. A return-together.

These Sabbath loaves (always plural) I do not freeze. Both are needed, whole, to grace the evening's table. This, too, a part of the tradition.

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Ironically, I hardly ever made challah before moving to Ames, Iowa. (Ironical because I come from New York, the center of American Jewry, while here in the heartland I am a stranger in a foreign land.) Certainly not with any regularity, not as I do here nearly every Friday. I have a couple of theories why.

Theory #1: Back home I'm surrounded by a Tradition that is there whether I show up or not. I feel it in the Judaica, the *sefarim* and *mezuzot* that line the bookshelves and mark the doorways of our house. I feel it when my Zeide asks if I'm going with him to *shul* the next day for holiday prayers, which, of course I do if he asks (which he knows, and, bless his heart, only asks once per holiday). I feel it in the pre-Shabbat cooking and showering frenzy and the post-candle-lighting, pre-dinner regroup over glasses of wine and giggles that I'm blessed to partake in with the women of the house now that I'm rarely bothered to go to Friday evening prayers with the men. I feel it in that special quality of quiet that blankets our den on a winter's Sabbath night when dinner is done by eight and the rest of the family goes to sleep soon after and I am alone on the couch, nestled in the favored corner

spot, book in hand, with hours to relax into the cozy embrace of that holy darkness.

What I'm saying is, in that already suffused space, I don't feel the need to perfume the air around me with the sweet scent of the ceremonial Sabbath bread. But here, in Ames, Iowa, there is a hollow, an empty space. A void I need to fill.

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It's only in the past 400 years or so the term has come to designate the bread that actually makes it to the Shabbos⁵ table — fairly recent in the history of our Tradition. Nowadays, the word “challah” is understood to refer to a specific style, the familiar braided loaf, which Ashkenazi Jews in Central Europe.⁶

Daily bread in that region was mostly made of rye, and was dark, coarse, and heavy — what those of us who don't rely on it for survival might quaintly call “rustic.” But Shabbos called for something special, so my forebears would splurge on fine white flour and expensive sugar and further enrich the dough with eggs and oil for a bread befitting the holy day. Two loaves (representing the two portions of manna for the Sabbath)⁷ of six strands each (to represent the 12 showbreads baked daily for the Temple, back when the Temple stood) with seeds on top; the seeds represent abundance and further commemorate the manna that fell, which supposedly resembled coriander seed. We're told it tasted of honey.

This particular style of challah quickly spread to Jewish communities around Europe and was brought to America and Palestine when many of them immigrated en masse toward the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries in order to escape the latest round of worsening violence.

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With most of my breads I weigh out the dough ingredients, but for some reason I invariably use volumetric measurements for challah. This is less precise, borderline blasphemy in the world of serious baking, but I don't question this decision. It just feels right — maybe because the measuring cups I use, old tin things I found buried amid basement clutter, once belonged to my grandmother.

First, I proof a bit of active dry yeast to help the starter along: one half-cup (approximate) of warm-hot water, finger-tested, plus one teaspoon of sugar and one of the yeast.⁸ I have a special bowl I use for this, a little plastic guy I used to eat cereal from as a kid. It's got a striped lavender-and-purple rim and a picture of Tigger (yes, of Winnie the Pooh fame) on the bottom, and it's perfect.

While the yeast is waking up, I fill the mixing bowl (big, metal, Tiggerless) with the rest of the ingredients: three cups all-purpose flour, two cups bread flour (for added strength), a half-cup of sugar, a baby palm of salt, a bit more than half a cup of oil (neutral, unless I run out and only have olive), five farm-fresh eggs, and a healthy heaping of Orlando, who by this point is doubled in size and lofty with gas.⁹

Once the dehydrated yeast has reanimated and regained its vigor, and the image of Tigger is wholly obscured by the foaming, I add the frothy brew to the bowl and mix until all the ingredients come together. If we have time, I'll let the dough rest for a few minutes to make the next step easier.

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Theory #1a: The air back home is so thick it can be suffocating, and the expectation to perform my Jewish identity in a way that makes sense to my family ("Benjamin, please put a yarmulke on your head." As though *that's* what's important here.) precludes a deeper breath.

I can understand that such things *are* actually important to some, that part of what being Jewish means to them is covering your head at the Shabbos table (if you're a man, that is — these head coverings are a gendered practice, and this, too, is part of it). I can, if I really wanted to, object. Make a stink. But then the air would smell of nothing else, and nobody would be happy. So, I do it. I put on the skullcap for the sake of *shalom bayit*,¹⁰ quickly forget about it, and in such ways are the particular contours of my individual identity forced to fit the familiar mold.

But here, in Ames, where there is room for me to stretch my lungs and fully breathe, I do. This is what breathing on a Friday looks like for me.

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Then, I knead. And knead. When I think I'm done kneading, I knead some more. At least 10 minutes of kneading. This step is crucial to a soft and fluffy challah, both in how it builds up the gluten into long, strong, supple strands that are evident in the final product, and because the kneading — a deep-tissue dough massage — is where much of the love comes in.¹¹

When the kneading is done, I smear the inside of the bowl with a film of oil, flip the dough around to coat, then cover with a much-reused plastic shopping bag (a thick yellow one from the Gourmet Glatt in Cedarhurst, ideally) and let the dough rise for an hour.

In the colder months, I must remember to put it someplace warm and cozy so the yeasts don't get sluggish. I've found that the oven, turned off but for the light (incandescent), is a good place for this.

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The second loaf is rarely finished, and often it's barely begun. Challah is delicious, but it's only the first course of the celebratory Sabbath meals, and those who know what's in store know to save room for the rest.

This presents an issue, as I find that our challah tends to go stale pretty quickly — which is somewhat surprising, given the enrichments in the dough. But on the other hand, this does seem rather appropriate, given challah's provenance.¹²

Leftover challah makes for excellent paninis or grilled cheese or slathered sandwiches stuffed with slaw and sliced meats. But in the days following, I usually just have hunks of it with leftover tahina for a snack. Sometimes, on a wine-fueled whim, I'll give it to one of my guests to take home.

The important thing is that it does not go to waste. God forbid we waste this holy bread.

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Jews from outside of Europe — Iraqi Jews or Maghrebi Jews or Yemenite Jews or Syrian Jews or Persian Jews, et cetera — would probably not have recognized the now-iconic braided loaf; they most likely encountered it for the first time in America or Israel in the mid 20th century when they, too, were forced to leave their homes under threat of violence.

(Something you should know about being Jewish, regardless of origin: Though this threat of violence can go dormant for a while, it never fully disappears. It hides, under the table, behind the curtains, in the dark corners of the room. Even in apparent absence, the violence lurks; the threat looms always in our minds, like a cancer in remission. Whatever comfort and security, whatever wealth we now enjoy may someday vanish in a night of broken glass, and once again we will be forced to

find new homes. Things like challah, though, we can take with us. This is part of what we mean by Tradition.)

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The Sabbath breads from these various Jewish communities were often the same as their weekday flatbreads (which depended on the region), sometimes with sesame or other seeds sprinkled on the surface to signify the manna. Many adopted the braided loaf after relocating but kept their traditions of serving the bread alongside a spread of dips, which many Ashkenazi Jews (my family included) adopted in turn.

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Theory #2: Challah, already really good by itself, goes perfectly with the Friday night dip(s). They elevate each other. And while I admire the local co-op baker's bread prowess and appreciate that they put out fresh challah on Fridays so their patrons can enjoy their challah French toast or challah bread pudding or whatever Iowans like to do with our bread outside the appropriate cultural context of the Sabbath meal, their version doesn't taste quite right to me. Too sweet, especially once tahina or hummus get involved. Maybe it's because their machines knead without heed to everthreats of violence and forget to add my people's pain. Tears, you know, are quite salty.

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Orlando and I have been working on this challah recipe since we moved to Ames two summers ago. I started with other recipes, including my sister's and Joan Nathan's, and tasted what they were about. Then, we tinkered.

To make the bread more tender, I've added more oil, a bit more sugar, a couple more eggs — and good ones at that. I try to use the best eggs I can find, eggs befitting a holy bread. The ones I get from Ron & Kristine up in Hubbard from chickens raised on Central Iowan pasture beam

with sunlight transmuted into liquid gold. The yolks are nearly orange (the product of their foraged, insect-heavy diet) and color the dough so bright a yellow it looks as though I've added turmeric. Now, when I make challah with other eggs — even the nice ones I sometimes get from the co-op when my poultry people are out — the dough looks sad and wan by comparison. Unilluminated.

Then, of course, there is the added component of Orlando, whose presence in this Sabbath bread brings home for me the concept of *shalom*, though I can't tell you exactly why that is the case. (*Shalom* means peace, *shalom* means welfare.) Only that the feeling I get when we bake together, and especially when we bake challah together, is the same sort of feeling I get when I'm home with my family for Shabbos. (*Shalom* means wholeness, means harmony.) This, too, I cannot quite describe. Just that I feel a particular warmth in my heart and stomach, cheeks and toes. (*Shalom* is also used as a salutation — on the Sabbath, for instance, we say: *Shabbat shalom*.)

I think we're pretty darn close to where it wants to be. In distinction to our usual sourdough loaf, our challah has a soft crust (though it still could be even softer) and a finer, closer crumb, the lattice of strands more braided pillow than agglutinated web.

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The holy grail of challah is Ostrovitsky's. Located on Avenue J and 12th in the heart of Midwood, Brooklyn, the store is just a few blocks down from where my Bube and Zeide live — where my great-grandmother lived before — and not too far from where my siblings grew up until I was born and my family moved to Long Island.

Bube and Zeide bring Ostrovitsky challah whenever they come for Shabbat or the holidays, and every time it's perfect. Their recipe is a variant from the western German Jews known as *vassar challah*, water challah, and is made without eggs or oil. It's impossibly fluffy, soft as a

cotton ball and nearly as white as one, too. Nothing in the world tastes as good with tahina.

One day, Orlando and I may try to replicate it. For now, though, I'm content to have Ostrovitsky's when I go home for the holidays (though last time I was home, Bube did offer to ship me some).¹³ In the meantime, while I have access to these gorgeous eggs, we'll keep making our more cakey *eier challah*. It's a big hit at my Shabbat dinners here in Ames.

After the dough has doubled in size, I punch it down, divide in two, then in sixths for a total of 12. Each portion gets rolled into a long, tapered rope. Which, too, is a development: After many lopsided loaves, I've found that the tapered tops help keep the braid evenly elliptical as I pull the ductile strands across each other.

I braid them so that there is a prominent ridge of doughy hummocks just left of center, rather than the usual French-style braid with its disappearing valley. This is just a personal preference.

An egg wash for each, another covered rest.

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Theory #3: My friends here like our challah, and I like giving them a familiar comfort. A reason to look forward to Shabbat. And while the traditional Friday night feast — a celebration of abundance where, in good times, there ought to be enough for everyone to have seconds and thirds (You like it? Please, have more!), where there's no fear of running out and no problem welcoming last-minute guests (Yes, of course! Don't worry, there's plenty to eat!)¹⁴ — would probably be reason enough for my Ames friend-family to anticipate these meals, they would be incomplete if not crowned by the glory of this Sabbath bread.

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Once the braided loaves have risen the right amount (the precise timing of this step, dependent on temperature, et al., is another of the things we're still playing with), they get another egg wash. I then top them with my flashy six-seed blend of cumin, caraway, fennel, white poppy, and black sesame (I started using that last baffling duo as a Purim stunt last year and it stuck),¹⁵ and nigella, and into the oven they go. Eighteen minutes at 350 degrees, turn them around, and continue to bake until the doubly washed crust has reached the proper golden-brown color — about 10 to 12 more minutes. It's better to underbake than over; we want the crust to be soft.

The smell during this period is intoxicating — sweet bread aromas mingled with the mysteries of toasted spice — and fills my whole house with the scent of Shabbat. They come out steaming, and I juggle the too-hot loaves onto a rack to cool until we're ready to eat.

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It took me a long time to understand this gift from my Tradition. For much of my childhood, Shabbos was a time of No, a period in which all the fun and exciting things were off-limits, *muktsuh*.¹⁶ Eventually, though — once I adopted the family practice of bunkering down on the den couch with a book, after I relearned the delight of the post-lunch nap (a delight that I had known as a toddler then foolishly forgot for a dozen years or so) — I began to glimpse the promise of Shabbat.

It is not a time of No, I now realize. It is, rather, a Yes so radical that my hypnotized mind struggled to see this affirmation which challenges the priorities of our modern world and forces a reckoning with what we consider most important to our lives. Shabbat is a Yes to family, to community, to togetherness; it is a Yes to good food slowly and carefully prepared; it is a Yes to rest, to giving our selves time to breathe in the company of other breathing bodies given space, ideally, to be their precious selves.

Every week, everything pauses. And in this sacred space-in-time,¹⁷ removed from the concerns of the workweek and the distractions of modern technology, we are enabled to sit down at the table and break bread with our loved ones. Oh yes, Shabbos is a gift indeed.

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My guests begin to arrive a bit before seven and gradually trickle in. I'll pop on out, glass in hand, to hug and say hello and offer them glasses so they can drink the wine the previous guest brought while I finish up in the kitchen. Sometimes folks will congregate by the kitchen doorway and half-watch me scurry around, but now that the cold weather is here and the fireplace lit, that's the obvious gathering place.

I do enjoy having an audience, it's true. But I've learned that it's even more satisfying to be alone in my kitchen-cave and hear the heartwarming chorus of hellos and how've-you-beens as more friends arrive, grab a drink, and gather by the fire to unwind and warm. (Heart, stomach, cheeks, toes.)

When I'm done prepping, I refill my glass and join them. The light from the fire mingles with the light from the Shabbat candles that burn just above on the lintel in the olivewood candlesticks my mother gave me on my last visit home, and these colliding firelights catch in my friends' bright eyes, in our raised glasses. Eventually, when the moment feels right, I invite them to the table where our challah rests.¹⁸

There is a blessing my people say over our bread, thanking God for the gift of it. And though I've moved away from much of the ritual trappings of my Tradition, layered as they are in language that does not speak to me, I do love this sentiment of gratitude.

So, instead of thanking an omnipotent but troublesomely transcendent deity, I simply express my thanks. It goes something like this:

[Lifting both challot in my hands] I am grateful for all of you, my friends; I am grateful for (insert some wonder of the week and/or relief that a stressful period has passed); and I am grateful for this bread.

Then, I pull a loaf apart. The braided ropes come apart at the seams as the strands of gluten stretch and tear, and the steam still inside the bread rises above the table like an offering. I rip off a hunk, pass the halves to either side of me, dip, and take a bite.

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