

Ovens give rise to a connection with faith

Rabbi's challah loaves, a staple of shabbat, help feed the elderly and the poor

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Rabbi Jonathan Rubenstein, right, helps Bambii Kertzman and Gabriel Sullivan make challah bread at Temple Sinai in Saratoga Springs on Friday. (John Carl D'Annibale / Times Union)

SARATOGA SPRINGS -- The sweet, yeasty smell of baking bread fills every cranny of the Temple Sinai on Friday morning as Rabbi Jonathan Rubenstein took another pan of challah from the oven with a raisin and whole wheat version of the traditional Jewish loaf.

In the hands of Rabbi Jonathan, as he is known, and his band of baking volunteers, the challah is more than a labor of love, even more than a centuries'-old Jewish tradition. Some loaves from his non-profit enterprise, Slice of Heaven Breads, feed the poor. Others sustain nursing home residents and proceeds from public sales benefit local charities.

The kitchen of the Reform temple on Broadway bakes every Friday morning from around 8 to 10:30 a.m., so the bread can be delivered fresh in time for Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, which starts at sundown Friday night. This week's

is a special batch, falling on the shabbat of repentance during the 10-day period of the High Holidays, also known as the Days of Awe. Beginning with Rosh Hashanah and ending on Monday with Yom Kippur, Jews take time to ask forgiveness and take stock of their lives.

On Friday, Rabbi Jonathan's assistants were 13-year-old Gabriel Sullivan, who is to be bar mitzvah Saturday, entering adulthood in the eyes of the congregation, and Bambii Kertzman, who moved to Saratoga Springs from White Plains in April and found baking to be a way to get to know her new temple and rabbi. The assistants worked the dough into the four-piece braid of the traditional challah shape.

Rabbi Jonathan cut dough and philosophized.

"Challah is a tradition that comes from the Torah, the Bible," he said. "Before you could eat of your own harvest you had to give an offering to God to say thanks from where it all came from."

He rolled a small dough ball, maybe an inch in diameter. This would burn in the oven, he said, to symbolize that sacrifice.

To further link the bread and the Earth, he said he uses only organic ingredients -- eggs from local farms and water from the local springs.

"We're so cut off nowadays from the source of our sustenance because everything is packaged," he said. "I see this as part of the whole movement to be more aware of how precious our resources are."



Freshly baked challah bread prepared by Rabbi Jonathan Rubenstein Friday stays warm at Temple Sinai in Saratoga Springs. (John Carl D'Annibale / Times Union)

Rabbi Jonathan began baking decades ago. Bread rising from scratch offers a sense of creation, he said. In 1986, he and his wife became co-rabbis at Temple Sinai. About two years ago, a friend who owns a Saratoga Springs restaurant offered him use of the commercial kitchen. The rabbi began selling loaves to the Four Seasons Natural Food Shop and Putnam Market downtown. He also started his e-mail list. With permission from the temple board of directors, the rabbi bought new equipment for the synagogue kitchen and moved in-house. Today he bakes about 75 challahs a week, in two sizes. For those who bring their own loaf pans, he provides dough ready to rise and bake so the smell of freshly baked bread can fill their homes, he said.

Eats Gourmet Market in Stuyvesant Plaza in Guilderland stocks the bread, along with the granola and babka, a sweet baked treat. "It's very hard to get good fresh bread," said Eats owner Stephanie Pelham. At \$5 per loaf of challah, she usually sells out her delivery of five to 10 in a day, she said.

Volunteers distribute the bread to people who cannot pick it up themselves. Some of the temple's 228 families have paid for a year's worth of deliveries for Jews in local nursing homes.

Rabbi Jonathan usually has two other helpers in the kitchen, but only Kertzman came this day. She takes a loaf to her parents in Queensbury for shabbat dinner.



Rabbi Jonathan Rubenstein, right, oversees Gabriel Sullivan, 13, making challah bread at Temple Sinai in Saratoga Springs Friday. (John Carl D'Annibale / Times Union)

"My grandmother, of blessed memory, was a fabulous baker in Buffalo, so every great memory I have is of her making challah," Kertzman said. Her father, 81, is 90 percent blind, she said, but every Friday he runs his hands over the braided surface of the challah and takes in the smell.

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On the menu:

Slice of Heaven Breads at Temple Sinai, 509 Broadway, Saratoga Springs, offers these baked goods made to order for special occasions or when Rabbi Jonathan Rubenstein has time:

- Challah (whole wheat, poppy seed, sesame seed, white, raisin or any combination)
- Maple oatmeal bread
- "Seven Species" vegan bread
- Stout or onion rye bread
- "Rich Olive" bread
- Multigrain and seeded multigrain levain (vegan sourdough) bread
- Pumpkin rolls
- Chocolate and rasin nut babka
- Pecan schnecken (sticky buns)
- Apple-filled coffee cake
- Sour cream coffee cake
- Toronto blueberry buns
- "Savta's Slice of Heaven Granola" (Savta is Hebrew for grandmother)

The rabbi e-mails each week's menu to his customers. For information, call the synagogue at 258-5546 or e-mail sliceofheaven@nycap.rr.com.

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