

# Where There's Flour, There's Torah: Challah Dough as a (Feminist) Interpretive Medium

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## Genesis 1:26-27

(26) And God said, "Let us make a human in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth." (27) And the Eternal created a human in [the divine] image, in the image of the Eternal God created it; male and female God created them.

## Genesis 2:4-24

(4) Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created. When the Eternal God made earth and heaven— (5) when no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the Eternal God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no human to till the soil, (6) but a flow would well up from the ground and water the whole surface of the earth— (7) the Eternal God formed the human from the dust of the earth. God blew into its nostrils the breath of life, and human became a living being.... (15) The Eternal God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it. ... (18) The Eternal God said, "It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a him a helpmate." (19) So the Eternal God formed out of the earth all the wild animals and all the birds of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that would be its name. (20) And the man gave names to all the cattle and to the birds of the sky and to all the wild beasts; but for Adam no helpmate was found. (21) So the Eternal God cast a deep sleep upon the man; and, while he slept, God took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot. (22) And the Eternal God built the rib that God had taken from the man into a woman; and God brought her to the man. (23) Then the man said, "This time/ Bone of my bone/ Flesh of my flesh!/ This one shall be called Woman,/ For from man was she taken."

## בראשית א': כ"ו-כ"ז

(כו) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וַיְרִדוּ בְדִגְתַּת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל-הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל-הָרֶמֶשׂ הַרֹמֵשׂ עַל-הָאָרֶץ: (כז) וַיְבָרֵא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלְם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

## בראשית ב': ד'-ט"ז

(ד) אֵלֹהִים תּוֹלְדוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ בַּהֲבָרָאם בְּיוֹם עֲשׂוֹת ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶרֶץ וְשָׁמַיִם: (ה) וְכָל-שִׁיחַ הַשָּׂדֶה טָרֵם יְהִי בָאָרֶץ וְכָל-עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה טָרֵם יִצְמַח כִּי לֹא הִמְטִיר ה' אֱלֹהִים עַל-הָאָרֶץ וְאָדָם אֵין לְעַבְדֹת אֶת-הָאֲדָמָה: (ו) וְאֵד-יַעֲלֶה מִן-הָאָרֶץ וְהִשְׁקָה אֶת-כָּל-פְּנֵי-הָאֲדָמָה: (ז) וַיִּצְרֶה ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם עֹפֵר מִן-הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה: ... (ט) וַיִּקַּח ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם וַיְנַחֲהוּ בְּגֵן-עֵדֶן לְעַבְדָּהּ וּלְשִׁמְרָהּ: ... (יח) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֱלֹהִים לֹא-טוֹב הַיּוֹת הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ אַעֲשֶׂה-לּוֹ עֶזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ: (יט) וַיִּצְרֶה ה' אֱלֹהִים מִן-הָאֲדָמָה כָּל-חַיֵּי הַשָּׂדֶה וְאֵת כָּל-עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיִּבֵּא אֶל-הָאָדָם לְרְאוֹת מֶה-יִקְרָא-לּוֹ וְכָל-אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָא-לּוֹ הָאָדָם נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה הוּא שְׁמוֹ: (כ) וַיִּקְרָא הָאָדָם שְׁמוֹת לְכָל-הַבְּהֵמָה וּלְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּלְכָל-חַיֵּי הַשָּׂדֶה וְלֹא-מָצָא עֶזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ: (כא) וַיִּפֹּל ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם עַל-הָאָדָם וַיִּישָׁן וַיִּקַּח אֶחָת מִצַּלְעֹתָיו וַיִּסְגֶּר בָּשָׂר תַּחְתָּנָה: (כב) וַיִּבֶן ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הַצֶּלַע אֲשֶׁר-לָקַח מִן-הָאָדָם לְאִשָּׁה וַיְבָאָה אֶל-הָאָדָם: (כג) וַיֹּאמֶר הָאָדָם זֹאת הִיא עִמִּי עֵצָה מֵעֲצָמֵי וּבָשָׂר מִבָּשָׂרִי לְזֹאת יִקְרָא אִשָּׁה כִּי מֵאִישׁ לָקַחָהּ זֹאת:

## **A Basic Primer of Dough Shapes:**

These shapes are the building blocks of almost any challah design you could imagine. Make them big or small, use them together or alone—there are no rules here.

### **Snake/Log:**

Remember making snakes with playdoh when you were little? Take a small piece of dough (the size of an egg, or smaller), and roll it against the table using your palm. As it gets longer, use both palms, moving them from the center of the snake outward to the ends as you roll back and forth. Apply more or less pressure in areas as needed to get a snake of uniform thickness (no bumps) and desired length.

To make a larger (thicker) log: same basic principle, but to make sure it doesn't end up lumpy, start by flattening your piece of dough against the table, with your hands or a rolling pin into a rough rectangle. Starting at the top of your rectangle, roll the dough towards you with the palms of your hands, pressing down so that you don't get air bubbles, until you have a log. Roll this back and forth lightly, as you would a snake, until the seam is smoothed out and the log reaches the desired size.

### **Ball:**

Take a piece of dough and smush it against the table to flatten it a bit. Gather the four 'corners' (I know, it's a circle, but this is not math or science class) and press them into the center of the circle. Do the same with the new corners that result. Flip this over. Cup your hand, and using your palm for pressure and your fingers to keep the dough under your palm, roll this ball against the table to smooth out the seam on the bottom. Nudge this back into the shape of a ball if it gets a little flat during this process.

### **Three-Strand Braid:**

Make three logs or snakes of equal length and thickness. Lay them parallel on the table, and gently pinch the tops of the strands together. Repeat the following pattern until you reach the end of the strands:

Move the furthest right strand → center (i.e., jump over the strand to its left)

Furthest left → center (i.e., jump over the strand to its right)

Pinch the ends together, and gently tuck under the rest of the braid.

### **Spiral:**

Begin with a log/snake. Starting on one end, gently roll the end of the strand towards the rest of the strand, and keep nudging this small circle down the length of the strand, like a flat snowball. Keep this loose, or your flat spiral will turn into a tower! Once you've used up the strand, tuck the end under the spiral. You can also make a double spiral by rolling the two ends toward the center simultaneously, one going along the top of the strand, and the other going along the bottom.

### **Epi (wheat stalk/vine):**

Begin with a log/snake. Using a pair of kitchen scissors held at a 45 degree angle to the strand, make deep cuts into the dough--almost, but not quite, all the way through-- at regular intervals, depending on the size you want the 'leaves' of your vine to be. As you cut, move each 'leaf' to alternating sides of the imaginary center line.

## My Favorite Challah Recipe:

(adapted from Deb Perelman: [www.smittenkitchen.com](http://www.smittenkitchen.com))

2 1/4 teaspoons (1 packet — 1/4 ounce or 7 grams) active dry yeast  
1/4 cup (85 grams) plus 1 teaspoon honey  
2/3 cup warm water (110 to 116 degrees F; it should feel warm, but not hot, on the inside of your wrist)  
1/3 cup (80 ml) olive oil, plus more for the bowl  
2 large eggs (plus one for the egg wash)  
2 teaspoons flaky sea salt, such as Maldon, or 1 1/2 teaspoons table salt  
4 cups (500 grams) all-purpose flour (for greater depth of flavor, substitute ½ cup of a whole grain flour for the all-purpose); plus more for kneading

### Make the dough:

Measure out the ¾ cup warm water, and quickly (while it's warm), stir in 1 tsp honey and the packet of yeast until dissolved. Allow to sit for 5-10 minutes, or until foamy on top (if it fails to foam, and your yeast is old—toss it and get some new yeast). Add ¼ cup honey, ⅓ cup olive oil, and two eggs; mix this (I recommend a fork) until the egg yolks are broken up well. Add 4 cups of flour, followed by the salt. Mix with a wooden spoon (or just use your hands) until it collects into a sticky uniform mass.

### Knead:

The dough will be sticky-- don't get scared! With some flour on your hands, gather the dough together into a ball in the bowl. Using more flour as needed, work the dough against the sides of the bowl by pushing the dough with the heel of your hand in a long stroke, then gathering it back into a ball, over and over, until the dough is no longer sticking to the bowl or your hands, but is still soft. You can also do this on a well-floured countertop-- push the dough away from you with the heel of your hand, gather it back up, turn it 90 degrees, then repeat. The dough is ready when it feels a bit like your earlobe when pinched (weird, but it works). Lightly oil your mixing bowl, put the ball of dough in it, and cover the top with plastic wrap. Set aside in a warm place for about 2 hours, or until doubled. [Recommended: you can also leave it to rise in the fridge overnight; just return it to room temp an hour or two before shaping.]

### Shape:

Take the dough out of the bowl, press the air out, and divide according to however many pieces you need. I'm not going to tell you how to shape it—be creative! Pro tip: if you're doing something complicated, make your shape on the parchment paper or silicone mat that you will bake it on-- don't try to transfer it from the countertop! When finished, cover loosely with plastic wrap and allow to rise again for 45 minutes.

### Bake:

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees F. In a small bowl, beat an egg with a fork, and using a pastry brush, gently paint the challah with a thin, even layer of egg wash. Sprinkle with sesame or poppy seeds, flaky sea salt, sprinkles, etc, or leave plain. Baking time will vary based on your shape and oven temp: check at 15 minutes and then every 5 after that until the outside is lightly browned (for a thin challah) or bronze

(for a thick challah), and a skewer poked into the middle comes away clean [pro tip: get an instant-read meat thermometer; the challah is baked when the internal temp is 180 degrees F].

## Resources:

### Tools for challah baking and shaping:

#### Essentials:

- A large bowl
- Measuring cups and spoons (make sure you use a dry measure for flour!)
- Baking sheet
- Parchment paper
- Pastry brush

#### Next level:

- Silicone baking mat and counter mat (the counter mat will change your life)
- Instant-read thermometer
- Food scale
- Bench scraper
- Kitchen shears
- Rolling pin

### Braiding and Shaping tutorials:

- For basic braiding shapes:  
<https://toriavey.com/how-to/challah-bread-part-2-how-to-braid-challah/>
- Braiding tutorials are all over YouTube, Pinterest, and the blogosphere. Type in the shape you want and something will surely appear. I get some of my best creative shaping ideas by riffing off of bread designs that I've seen during random searches on Pinterest.
- Prefer books? [Rising: The Book of Challah](#) by Rochie Pinson is beautiful and full of great illustrated tutorials and recipes. Disclaimer: the book is Ortho-normative and gendered to a pretty extreme degree (my assessment).

### Education:

- A brief summary of research and methods of using clay in therapy (also applies to dough and education): <https://www.txca.org/images/tca/Documents/Conference/PGC13/Handouts/42.pdf>