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*Spiritual Kneading through the Jewish Months: Building the Sacred through Challah* is a braid of two books. One an erudite manual of monthly themes for Rosh Chodesh gatherings and the other an innovative cookbook of *challah* throughout the year. Rosh Chodesh is a woman’s holiday celebrated at the new moon of each month and often focuses on the events of that month pertinent to women. Challah is the festive bread used for holidays and Shabbat. Clearly, the author has a love for both bread baking and Rosh Chodesh. Also clearly, the author “kneads” or yearns for spiritual connections.

I was immediately struck by the trope of the title connecting the Rosh Chodesh to the challah baking. This set the tone for a well-written book that is both approachable and informative. As an occasional organizer of Rosh Chodesh celebrations, I have been rather stymied in finding good resources for monthly themes. This book fills that niche in a complete, informed, and joyful way albeit problematic way for the liberal Jew. It gives detailed instructions for challah baking including pictures of the braiding process.

As a frequent baker of challah before the bread was “discovered” by my local bakery, I was very surprised to find that Abraham-Klein considers egg challahs non-traditional. I was raised in the Ashkenazi tradition and had no idea that Sephardic was considered more traditional and that Sephardic challahs are made without eggs in the batter.

You will notice that most of the recipes throughout the book are water challahs, because that is the more traditional recipe for challah. The addition of eggs in challah was a tradition of Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe. (p 148)

This is hardly a reason for Ashkenazi Jews to ignore this book since Abraham-Klein has recipes at the end of the book, which include eggs in the batter as well as water whole wheat challah, and gluten free challah. The shaping and sometimes stuffing of the challot [pl. of challah] in the earlier chapters will succeed with the egg-based dough.
I appreciate her inclusion of flour weight as well as volume since this way of measuring is more accurate where volume can differ so much by volumetric measuring practices. The recipes all require five pounds of flour, making about eight loaves, since 59 ounces or more of flour are necessary for taking challah or *hafrashot challah* whereby an olive-sized piece of dough is separated from the rest of the dough and burnt over an open flame to remember the ritualistic bread offering to the Cohanim (priestly caste). This much flour also requires that you also say the blessing for *hafrashot challah*. This was new information for me. I always took challah when I baked with my children despite making much smaller batches. Since I did not know the brachot [blessings], I did not say them so I was half right.

As mentioned at the beginning of the review, the trope of the title and the trope of braided challah set the tone for a blending and combining for the rest of the book. For instance, the Rosh Chodesh themes and activities blend new age meditations with traditional explanations of women’s role in Judaism.

All Hebrew prayers are translated into English and the shorter ones, mainly the brachot (blessings), are also transliterated. All monthly meetings follow a suggested and repeating pattern. Each Rosh Chodesh gathering begins with an introduction to the month’s theme while the yeast is activated and the dough is mixed. Guided meditation follows while the bread is kneaded. Smelling fragrant spices serves as interlude between kneading and rising reminding me of smelling spices during the Havdalah service, which serves as the separation of Shabbat from the ordinary days of the week. Discussion of the month’s themes occurs while the dough rises. Challah is taken with a suggested Kavanah (intention). Dough is shaped and parceled out to participants to bake at home. Optional Rosh Chodesh psalms are included.

There is a chapter about a Segulah ritual or Challah baking (p. 26) which requires a gathering of forty women who are attempting to bring a change in an individual’s situation such as bringing an easy childbirth, finding a soul mate, bringing fertility, or Refuah Shleimah (complete healing) to someone who is ill. The Refuah Shleimah prayer in this chapter (p. 29) regrettably only refers to the patriarchs. A more liberal practice would include the matriarchs and the patriarchs when asking for a speedy healing.
The integration of baking, meditation, discussion, and reflecting by a group of women is scrupulously described in the foreword chapters “How to Use this Book” (p.11) and “Separating Challah” (p. 14) while the biblical connection of challah and its components are well covered in the foreword chapter “What you “knead” to know about Challah” (p.20).

It is in these foreword chapters and the monthly themes that the author’s philosophy of women in Judaism comes forth. She follows a traditional path both in liturgy and women’s roles. The roles prayed for in the Segulah are only the very traditional ones that women might adopt including childbirth and marriage. I would love to participate in a Segulah for a woman or man running for a political office, leaving home to receive an education, or beginning a new career. The acronym of Hafrashat Challah (taking of the Challah) describes the blessings that will come to a woman who practices this mitzvah. Again, only the very traditional women’s roles of childbirth and marriage are included.

The monthly themes are varied and time appropriate including, for example, Teshuva (cleansing) for Tishrei (the month of Rosh Hashanah), “Insight from the Seven Species” for Shevat (the month of Tu B’shvat, celebrating the new year of the tress and the beginning of the agricultural cycle), and “God is in the Field” for Elul (the month preceding Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when introspection brings us closer to God). Appropriate challah recipes are matched with the themes including apple filled challah for Tishrei, cheese filled challah for Kislev, and carrot raisin challah for Tammuz. I love these riffs on Challah although it might be hard for me to find silan (date honey), za’atar (a spice mixture containing sumac, thyme, sesame seeds, and salt), or rose water in rural Virginia. I will surely be making some of these luscious treats in the coming yearly cycle and I will find a way to replace pomegranate syrup, barley grits, and other difficult to find ingredients. I might even learn to love water challah.

The month of Cheshvan’s discussion includes Rachel since this is the month of her yartzheit. Rachel is discussed as the quintessential mother and admired for allowing her sister Leah to give birth first. This made her a good Jewish mother even before she bore her own children. In my mind this is a bit tortuous way of saying that women must bear children to be worthy, a cruel message for those women who cannot or do not want to bear children. Even the need for a
women’s holiday from daily chores assumes that women are the sole caretakers, cooks, and cleaners of the household. I may have to whisper to Abraham-Klein that it is no longer only in the providence of women to cook clean, and take care of children.

Adar Aleph is recognized as the month that joy develops culminating in the happiness of Purim in Adar Bet (leap months keep the lunar calendar and solar calendar relatively in sync). The author’s example of the greatest joy is being pregnant. I am relieved that she also recognized that joy could come from other circumstances (p. 83).

Other months such as Adar Bet can be interrupted in a more modern light. The giving of Mishloach Manot (sent gifts) can be considered in the light of redistributing wealth from the rich to the poor and unifying all Jews despite social and religious difference (p. 91). Elul, preceding Rosh Hashanah, presents chances to visit God in his dwelling place. Elul’s meditations and topic also allow for bringing down fences that separate people (p. 144) and overcoming rifts with friends and family.

*Spiritual Kneading Through the Jewish Months* is more a reference book than a casual read. It might be a good one for adult women who do not wrap their identity around the separation of gender roles that this book suggests and traditional Judaism enforces. I would not want girls and young women to think that their only role in Judaism is to bake bread and birth children so I would not use this book during Bat Mitzvah preparation or high school classes. For mature women wanting to escape from household chores (alas these are still born predominantly by many women) for a reflective evening with other women and who will feel free to pick and choose from the themes or modify them to match their less gender stratified lives will find this a useful book.