

The Tenth Challah

Chapter 1: The Sign-Up Sheet

The notice on the community center board says: CHALLAH AND BEYOND - an advanced baking circle, ten Tuesdays starting in Shevat, for experienced home bakers.

Minna, seventeen, stands in front of it for three evenings straight. The sheet is not going to change.

Here is the problem, spelled out in her own kitchen: her sister used to bake the challahs, every Thursday, six of them, and the house smelled like the week exhaling. Her sister left for seminary in Elul. Since then - five months now - the challahs come from the store, in a bag, and they are fine, and they are not the same, and nobody says so at the table, which is how Minna knows everyone thinks it.

Minna has never baked one alone.

Experienced home bakers. She is not one. That is the whole point - you do not take a course in a thing you already know - but the word "advanced" sits on the notice like a guard at a door.

On the third evening she writes her name on the sheet, in the last empty line, before her sense catches up with her hand.

The Thursday after she signs up - the circle starts the next Tuesday - she and her mother bake one together, her mother holding the measuring cup and reading the recipe out loud like a crossing guard. It does not rise. They eat it anyway, with butter. It is not bad, which is not the same as good.

At home she tells her mother, who says, "Good," and then, because she is honest, "You know you'll be the youngest there by twenty years."

"Then I'll be the most improved by twenty years," Minna says, and her mother laughs. It is the kind of line that is easy to say at home and hard to remember on the first Tuesday.

Chapter 2: Night One

The room smells like yeast and vanilla, and everyone brought her own apron, which is how Minna knows she is the only one who had to buy one for this.

They go around the table: name, and how long you've been baking. Twelve years. Since my oldest was born. My mother taught me, so - forever. Bruchy, beside her, has been baking since she was nine, standing on a chair.

"Minna," Minna says. "Once. With my mother holding the cup."

The laugh goes around the table, warm, mostly, and it still stings, and this is the moment - she can feel it - where she could spend ten Tuesdays pretending. Nodding at words like hydration. Hiding her questions in her sleeve.

"I'm the beginner here," she says instead, out loud, to the whole table. "So you all know: I'm going to ask the beginner questions. Somebody has to, and it might as well be the person they're for."

The instructor looks at her for a moment.

"Good," the instructor says. "Then here are your terms, since you were smart enough to claim the job. One question a week. Written down, in a book, before you ask it. The best bakers I know still keep a logbook - the ones who stop writing things down are the ones who stopped learning."

"One question means you have to choose which one," the instructor adds. "Choosing is half the skill."

Chapter 3: One Question

The logbook is a plain notebook, and the first week Minna writes four candidate questions and crosses out three.

She crosses out "What is hydration, exactly?" because she can look it up in the recipe book at home. She crosses out "Why do you weigh the flour?" because Bruchy answered it at the table without being asked. She crosses out the fancy one about overnight rises, which is a question designed to make her sound like she belongs - the one kind of question she is not allowed.

What remains is: "Mine didn't rise. Why?" It is about last Thursday's loaf, the crossing-guard one.

It is an ugly little question. It admits everything. She asks it anyway, and the instructor takes it seriously, the way you'd take a question from anyone, and the answer is three answers - old yeast, cold kitchen, impatient baker - and two were true of Minna's kitchen, and nobody laughs, because half the table has had the same three answers.

On the walk home, Bruchy falls into step beside her. "I can help you, you know. Anytime. I could just tell you what to do."

"Watch me instead," Minna says. "Tell me after what you saw." It comes out before she has thought about it, and it is exactly right, and she writes that down too, next to the question: watching is not doing.

Chapter 4: The Only Column

The first Thursday of the course is baking night. It has always been baking night; her sister made it that, and Minna is not moving it.

Loaf number two comes out lopsided, dense on one side, and Minna stands over it the way you stand over a test with a bad grade.

Her mother, wiping the counter, looks at the loaf and then at Minna's face. "Compare it to last week's," she says. "That's the only column you get. Not your sister's. Not the bakery's. Last

week's."

So the logbook gets two columns, ruled in pencil: LAST WEEK / THIS WEEK. Last week: the loaf before the course, did not rise. This week: rose, lopsided. It is not impressive. It is progress, the kind only she can see, because only she has the column.

That is the week she stops bringing the store bag to the table. Her father cuts the lopsided loaf and says nothing except "more," which is a review. Her little brother asks whether the store went out of business, and her mother says, "Something better," and does not explain, and Minna pretends not to hear and hears.

She kneads the dough the way the instructor showed them, fold and push and turn. There will be nine Thursday loaves before the course ends, nine chances to be one column better. She writes that down: the course is ten Tuesdays, but the real course is nine Thursdays.

Chapter 5: Week Five

Week five, everything cracks.

The loaf splits along the top like it is laughing at her, and the crumb inside is gummy, and at the course that Tuesday, Bruchy's challah sits on the table glossy and even, braided six strands tight, and Minna's sits beside it looking like an apology.

Two thoughts arrive together, like they planned it.

The first: say nothing. Take the slice, copy what Bruchy does, pretend the gummy middle never happened. Nobody is grading.

The second: stop coming. It arrives wearing reasonable clothes - you're busy, the course is half done, the Wednesday fundamentals group would move slower, the instructor even says it, gently, at the break: "The Wednesday group is always there, if you'd ever be more comfortable."

Comfortable. A kind offer, and Minna knows it is kind, and it still lands like a door held open for her to leave through.

She says she'll think about it, which is true. She thinks about it all week, over dough she has to mix twice - the first batch she drops, bowl and all, and scrapes off the floor. Dough on the floor is not a loaf; it does not get a number, and the count matters.

Chapter 6: The Terms

Minna thinks to herself, Thursday night, over the second batch: what were the terms?

She opens the logbook. One question a week, written down. Compare it to last week's - the only column you get.

Is she learning? The column answers before her feelings can: the loaf before the course, did not rise. Week three, rose, even. Week four, "braid holds its shape." Week five: crack, gummy, dropped. The column is not a straight line, but it is a line, and it points up.

Is she comfortable? No. Comfortable was never in the terms. The terms said beginner, on purpose, in writing.

On the sixth Tuesday she tells the instructor: "I'm staying. Not because it's going well - because the logbook says I'm learning, and that's the deal I made." Then she asks her one question, out loud, in front of everyone: "Why does the crust split on mine?"

And the room of experts - twelve years and since-forever - argues. Oven too hot, says one. Dough too dry, says another. Bruchy says, "Let it rise longer - a split top is a rushed top," and Minna's mother said the same thing once, and three more women weigh in, and Minna writes down four answers and tests them, one per Thursday, like a scientist with flour on her sleeve.

Being the beginner, it turns out, gives the whole room something to do. The experts like their expertise better when someone needs it on purpose.

Chapter 7: The Tenth Challah

For the tenth and last Tuesday, the instructor announces a tea: everyone bakes, everyone brings, the room opens to mothers and sisters.

The ninth Thursday, Minna bakes the loaf she will bring. It is her tenth challah, counting the one with her mother's hand on the cup. She knows the number exactly, because the logbook knows: one, then nine Thursdays, and this is the ninth Thursday.

It is not the best loaf at the tea. Bruchy's is a six-strand crown, seeds arranged like jewelry.

Bruchy had offered it after the ninth Tuesday, kindly, really kindly, on the way out: "Bring mine and yours both, and if yours doesn't come out, you'll still have a table." And now, at the tea, setting out slices, Minna writes her card in pencil, the way she rules her columns: MINNA'S. WEEK TEN.

People take slices. An older woman takes one and says, "Good crust," and keeps walking, and it is not a parade, and it is real.

The instructor stops at the table and reads the little card. "Week ten," she says. "You labeled it honestly." She takes a slice. "Most people spend the whole course pretending they've been here before. You wrote down that you hadn't - in a book, every week - and look what it let you do." She holds up the slice. "The loaf is week ten too. I can taste which weeks."

Chapter 8: The Next Question

The first Thursday after the course ends, there is no class to report to, and Minna bakes anyway, because Thursday is baking night. It was always baking night.

Her mother watches her measure the flour, level the cup, check the yeast the way you check something you've been bitten by. "You're holding the cup yourself," her mother says.

"I've been holding it for weeks," Minna says. "You just stopped being the crossing guard."

The loaf goes in the oven, and Minna opens the logbook to this week's page, the page with nobody to read it but her, and she writes this week's question.

It is: "How do I know when the crust is exactly, finally done?"

She looks at it a moment. Ten weeks ago her questions were all the same question wearing different clothes: do I belong here, am I allowed, is it showing. This one is about bread. It is only about bread.

She puts the logbook on the shelf next to the flour, where it lives now, and sets the timer. When it rings she will check the crust by smell and sound and the tapping test she invented herself, which is a thing experienced home bakers do.

Eight activities

Activity 1: The terms

What three terms does Minna set (or accept) for being a beginner? From the story, what job does each term do - what does it protect her from?

Activity 2: The honest sentence

"I'm the beginner here." What does saying it on the first night make possible for the rest of the course? What would hiding it have cost - find one concrete place where the sentence pays for itself.

Activity 3: The two pulls

In week five, two thoughts "arrive together, like they planned it." What does each one protect? What does the logbook's two columns answer that her feelings cannot?

Activity 4: Improvement arithmetic (all numbers made up for practice)

A new baker fixes one real mistake per week for 9 practice weeks. A copy-and-pretend baker fixes zero but looks fine for the first 4 weeks. After 9 weeks, how many mistakes has each fixed? If the course had lasted 3 weeks instead of 10, which approach would look better, and why does that matter? Show your steps.

Activity 5: "I can taste which weeks"

The instructor praises the honest card, the kept logbook, and the asked question - never "you're a real baker now." Why does she affirm the actions instead of declaring a rank? What would "you're basically an expert now" have undone?

Activity 6: Draw the tea table

Draw the tea table: the glossy crown loaf, Minna's slices, the little pencil card. Only what can be seen - no labels for feelings. Caption it with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Devory's machine - a made-up case

A teen named Devory joins her aunt's sewing circle having never once threaded a machine, and every other woman there has sewn for years. Write her first-night honest sentence, her one-question-a-week rule in her own words, and the kind offer of a slower group - then write how she answers it from her terms, not from sting. One sentence each, with names.

Activity 8: Word grid

Find eight words left to right. Row/column numbering begins at 1.

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B E G I N N E R F Y
D O U G H M N O R S
O V E N A I Q Z X J
A P R O N Y G H U P
C R U S T S T C D E
K N E A D J K V W B
Y E A S T P L M N O
M E A S U R E I Q Z
X J K V W B F Y G H
U P L M N O R S T C

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The eight words: BEGINNER, DOUGH, OVEN, APRON, CRUST, KNEAD, YEAST, MEASURE. Which word names what Minna claims on the first night, and which word names the thing she finally does herself, without a crossing guard?