

A Whiff of Love

*It was her rare declaration of love that came back to me
with the aroma of my own gift challah.*

BY SIMEON J. MASLIN

It was early afternoon on the Friday after the surgical removal of several cancerous masses from my abdomen when I heard the quiet knock on my hospital room door. I was weak, groggy from the IV pain killers, and still in pain from the incision and the fifty-odd staples required to close it after almost seven hours on the operating table.

My visitor turned out to be the “Challah Lady,” a volunteer offering Jewish patients in hospitals a challah on Friday afternoons, along with a few friendly words and a “Shabbat Shalom.” My wife thanked her profusely without mentioning that it would be a while before I was ready for solid foods. As she left, I managed a feeble wave, thinking, *when will I be able to eat challah and celebrate Shabbat with the grandkids again?* Then I drifted off, feeling sorry for myself and never expecting that the aroma of the challah would serve as a Proustian madaleine.

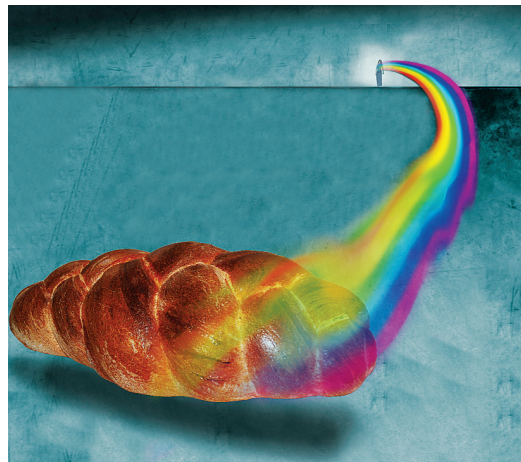


It was another Friday afternoon, this time in a Jerusalem hospital, thirty-six years ago. I sat alone at the bedside of my terminally ill mother, who, I’d been told, probably had only days to live.

Mother drifted in and out of consciousness as I sat there musing over our uneven relationship over the decades. Mother was a life-long organization woman—Hadassah, Ladies’ Auxiliary, Garden Club, Cultural Society, etc.—

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and when she wasn’t at one or another meeting, she was usually “in town,” shopping at Jordan’s or Filene’s. As I



tried to call up some special moment of warmth, of tenderness between us, there was a knock at the door and a hesitant entrance. A woman was pushing a cart with dozens of Shabbat candles, some already lit and some not yet. On the lower shelf of the cart were sweet-smelling braided challahs.

As the woman explained her mission, my mother’s eyes opened and she greeted the woman with a weak “Shalom.” The woman asked if she wanted to light candles, and when Mother said she was too weak to reach over to the cart, the woman offered to light the candles for her; Mother had only to recite the blessing. Mother nodded, the candles were lit, and she slowly whispered the words. As I watched her, I noticed that after she finished the traditional words of the blessing, her lips kept moving with a silent prayer. For the first time since receiving the news of her illness, I began to weep.

I remembered standing as a little boy at my mother’s side, watching her light the Shabbat candles in the four-branched candelabrum that was moved from the sideboard to the dinner table every Friday afternoon. She would light the four candles, close her eyes, recite the blessing, and then conclude the ritual with her lips moving silently for a minute or so. When I was about ten years old, I asked her what she was saying. She hesitated for a moment and then answered: “I ask God to give you and your sister long and happy and healthy lives. I ask God to love you as much as I love you.” And she kissed me.

I cannot recall one other occasion over the intervening years when my mother told me that she loved me or kissed me in more than a perfunctory way. She had trained as an English teacher at a Normal School for Boston ladies, and she more than retained the dispassionate composure of her New England Brahmin mentors—except for that one time three decades ago, after blessing the Sabbath candles. And it was her rare declaration of love that came back to me with the aroma of my own gift challah.



During the long weeks of my recuperation, I have thought often about that challah-induced memory. I am deeply grateful for it. If I need a reminder of the power of love, which, as the author of Song of Songs reminds us, “is stronger than death,” I find it in the glow of the Shabbat candles and in the aroma of a
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