

Challah & Hamin

By

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### Cast of Characters

<u>Miriam:</u>	early 30s, housewife and mother
<u>Tovah:</u>	around 8 or 9, Miriam's daughter
<u>Ezra:</u>	20s, Miriam's brother
<u>Sarah:</u>	20s, Ezra's wife

CHALLAH & HAMIN

*1967, Egypt. A middle-class dining room. A table in centre stage, surrounded by five chairs. There's a tablecloth over it. There is a cabinet in the background, topped with a vase of colourful flowers.*

*TOVAH, a young girl in a beautiful dress, comes in carrying a pile of crockery, cutlery, and napkins. She starts to set the table.*

*MIRIAM enters with two silver candlesticks, two candles, and an ornate Kiddush cup, which she brings to the table. She wears a nice dress and an apron, and her hair tied back and covered with a scarf.*

TOVAH

Mum! You said!

MIRIAM

I'm just -

TOVAH

I don't need help! I'm not a baby anymore.

MIRIAM

Years to go before your Bat Mitzvah.

TOVAH

There's girls had their Bat Mitzvahs who're still babies. Abigail Daoud had hers last year and she doesn't even know how to sew on a button.

*MIRIAM stops fussing and lets TOVAH get on. She's unsettled by the mention of Abigail.*

TOVAH

I can sew. I can dance. I can cook... sort of. If Abigail can still be a baby after her Bat Mitzvah then I can be a grown-up before mine. Now go! You promised!

MIRIAM

I did.

*MIRIAM gives TOVAH a quick hug and a kiss on the head as she leaves. TOVAH doesn't react, concentrating on setting the table nicely.*

*MIRIAM exits. Almost immediately, she returns, carrying a dish of two challah loaves covered with an embroidered cloth. Before TOVAH can get annoyed, MIRIAM quickly passes the dish to her and exits again.*

*TOVAH arranges everything on the table. She looks at it, then at the vase on the cabinet. TOVAH skips over, grabs the vase, and places it with a flourish at one end of the table.*

TOVAH

Mum! You can come in now!

*MIRIAM enters, carrying a pot of hamin that she places on the table.*

MIRIAM

Oh, Tovah, it looks lovely.

(she touches the flowers)

Improvising with what you've got, very nice.

TOVAH

D'you think dad'd like it?

MIRIAM

I know he would.

*MIRIAM ruffles TOVAH's hair. TOVAH dodges away, giggling.*

TOVAH

D'you think he'll be here tonight?

MIRIAM

I don't think so, sweetheart.

TOVAH

Oh... well, that gives me more time to practice! Maybe you can teach me how to make challah? I think dad'd like that.

MIRIAM

Oh, he would. You know how he is about challah.

*MIRIAM exits and returns with a bottle of wine and a few glasses.*

*A knock on the door.*

TOVAH

Oh, I'll get it!

*TOVAH runs off.*

*MIRIAM takes a small medicine bottle out of her apron pocket, dumps the contents into the stew, and stirs it. She puts the empty bottle back in her pocket and takes off the apron and the scarf covering her hair.*

*TOVAH enters with EZRA and SARAH. The couple is nicely dressed. SARAH is heavily pregnant and worried.*

*EZRA gives MIRIAM a kiss on the cheek.*

EZRA

Shabbat Shalom, little sister!

MIRIAM

Shabbat Shalom, Ezra. You're late. Shabbat Shalom, Sarah.

SARAH

Shabbat Shalom, Miriam.

*MIRIAM exits.*

SARAH

She's always like that. Even... today.

EZRA

Like what?

*EZRA turns to the table.*

EZRA

Beautiful table. Great job, Tovah.

TOVAH

Thanks, Uncle Ezra.

EZRA

Born little homemaker, eh? You're husband's gonna be happy.

TOVAH

I don't want a husband.

*MIRIAM returns with a bowl of water and a small towel.*

EZRA

Well, not just yet. Give it time.

MIRIAM

Shall we sit down?

*EZRA goes to sit at the head of the table, but  
MIRIAM gets there first. EZRA sits elsewhere.*

TOVAH

Not ever. I hate boys.

EZRA

Oh, we're not that bad, are we?

SARAH

Yes, your daddy wouldn't like to hear you say that.

*MIRIAM gives SARAH a sharp look.*

TOVAH

That's different. Dad and Ezra aren't boys.

EZRA

(deep voice)

We're men!

MIRIAM

Boys grow up to be men.

TOVAH

Not the boys at our school. They're mean and they hit us and call us names.

EZRA

That means they like you.

TOVAH

Maqsud said we're dirty Jews and his dad's glad they burned down the synagogue.

*Pause.*

TOVAH

I'm not dirty.

MIRIAM

No, darling. Maqsud is. Him and his whole rotten family, they're all dogs. After everything we did for those bastards when/ Jalal needed

SARAH

I don't think you should be talking like that/ in front of Tovah

MIRIAM

Sorry, are you her mother,/ Sarah?

EZRA

(loudly)

Let's sing a song! Eh, Tovah?

TOVAH

Maybe.

EZRA

You love to sing.

TOVAH

I haven't been able to practice since Rabbi Bonfia got arrested.

EZRA

You don't need to practice these songs. They're in the blood. Come on. Eshet Chayil? To thank your mum for this gorgeous dinner?

TOVAH

I dunno.

EZRA

Yes, you do.

(singing, urging the others to join)

Eshet chayil... mi yimtza...

EZRA & SARAH

Vrachok mi'pninim michrah, batach bah -

TOVAH

I don't want to sing until dad's here.

*Pause.*

TOVAH

Until it's a *proper* Friday night dinner.

EZRA

Tovah, your mother's worked hard/ to

MIRIAM

No, she's right. Let's get on with it. I'm hungry.

TOVAH

Me too!

*Before EZRA can protest, MIRIAM stands up. She hesitates.*

MIRIAM

Tovah, do you want to light the candles?

TOVAH

Can I?

MIRIAM

Yes. You're grown-up, after all.

TOVAH

Wow!...

*TOVAH stands on her chair.*

SARAH

I don't think -

MIRIAM

It's my house, Sarah.

*SARAH looks to her husband for support. EZRA pretends not to notice.*

*MIRIAM strikes a match and gives it to TOVAH.*

*With great ceremony, TOVAH lights the candles and puts out the match. She waves her hands over the candles, then covers her eyes and speaks carefully and slowly.*

TOVAH

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam, asher kidishanu...

*Pause.*

TOVAH

A... asher kidishanu... b'mitz'votav...

*Pause. She's struggling.*

*EZRA opens his mouth, but MIRIAM motions for him to be quiet.*

*Suddenly, quickly:*



TOVAH

Asher kidishanu b'mitz'votav v'tzivanu l'had'lik near  
shel Shabbat!

ALL BUT TOVAH

Amein.

TOVAH

Amein!

*Tovah beams proudly.*

*EZRA stands and uncorks the wine. He makes to grab  
the Kiddush cup, but MIRIAM takes it first.  
Everyone stands up. EZRA opens his mouth to speak,  
but TOVAH urgently shushes him.*

*MIRIAM pours wine into the cup. She takes it in  
her right hand, passes it to her left, then lowers  
it onto her right palm. As she sings, SARAH  
becomes increasingly agitated.*

MIRIAM

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha-olam, borei  
p'ri hegafen.

TOVAH & EZRA

Amein.

*MIRIAM looks at the silent SARAH but says nothing.*

MIRIAM

Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha-olam, asher  
kid'shanu b'mitz'votav v'ratzah vanu. V'shabat kad'sho  
b'ahavah uv'ratzon hin'chilanu zikaron l'ma'aseih  
v'rei'shit ki hu yom t'chilah l'mik'ra'ei kodesh  
zeikher litzi'at Mitz'rayim. Ki vanu vachar'ta v'otanu  
kidash'ta mikol ha'amim -

*SARAH bursts into tears. TOVAH is alarmed, but  
isn't allowed to speak, so says nothing. EZRA  
strokes his wife's arm but she bats him away.*

MIRIAM

- ki vanu vachar'ta v'otanu kidash'ta mikol ha'amim  
v'shabat kad'sh'kha b'ahavah uv'ratzon hin'chal'tanu.  
Barukh atah Adonai m'kadeish hashabat.

TOVAH & EZRA

Amein.

MIRIAM  
Say it.

SARAH

SARAH

SARAH  
Amein.

*Everyone but MIRIAM sits down. MIRIAM drinks from the cup and passes it along the left for others to have a sip.*

*MIRIAM washes her hands in the bowl of water, dries her hands with the towel, and passes both along after the wine.*

*SARAH doesn't drink or wash her hands.*

*MIRIAM takes a challah loaf, rips chunks off, and distributes them. TOVAH, EZRA, and MIRIAM eat the bread. SARAH doesn't.*

*MIRIAM serves the stew.*

EZRA  
The hamin looks great, Miriam. Just like Nonna's.

MIRIAM  
Hope it tastes like hers, too.

TOVAH  
(to SARAH)  
What's wrong?

EZRA  
She's fine. Pregnant women are weepy.

TOVAH  
(to SARAH)  
You didn't drink the wine or wash your hands or eat the challah. What's wrong?

SARAH  
I... I'm tired. Scared.

TOVAH  
Scared?

MIRIAM  
Don't.

TOVAH

Why are you scared?

SARAH

I'm/ scared of

MIRIAM

That's enough.

*MIRIAM forcefully ladles a portion into SARAH's bowl.*

MIRIAM

Eat.

*MIRIAM sits down and takes some stew with her spoon. She hesitates - then decisively puts the spoon in her mouth. EZRA and SARAH gasp.*

EZRA

Miriam! -

MIRIAM

Before it gets cold.

*She eats almost greedily. No one else does.*

MIRIAM

What? Not to your taste, Ezra?

TOVAH

What's going on?

EZRA

I'm waiting for it to cool.

MIRIAM

Nonna would be upset.

*TOVAH brings her spoon to her mouth.*

*SARAH lowers TOVAH's hand. MIRIAM bats SARAH's hand away from TOVAH's.*

MIRIAM

Eat, Tovah.

*TOVAH tastes a tiny amount. She scrunches up her face.*

TOVAH

It's bitter. I don't like it.

MIRIAM  
Sweetheart -

TOVAH  
I'll just have bread -

SARAH  
Oh, God!

*SARAH sobs and slaps her bowl onto the floor. She  
and MIRIAM stand up at the same time.*

MIRIAM  
How dare you/ do that!

SARAH  
Don't eat it, Tovah!

MIRIAM  
Don't talk to her.

SARAH  
How can you do this?!

MIRIAM  
Ezra, control/ your wife

SARAH  
She's just a child!

EZRA  
Sarah -

MIRIAM  
*Stop it.*

SARAH  
(cradling her stomach)  
*He's just a child! It's not worth it, this damn house  
isn't worth it!*

MIRIAM  
You think it's about the *house*?

*Pause.*

MIRIAM  
Go, then. Leave. You can afford it.

SARAH  
We'll pay for you. We have savings. And they'll take us  
in - they want us there! They'll help!

MIRIAM

*They?* They don't want us there. Israel wants European Jews. *White* Jews.

SARAH

(quickly)

That's not true.

MIRIAM

Isn't it? Go then. Go live in their stinking tent cities with the other vermin and watch the Ashkenazim get welcomed with open arms. They don't even think we bathe. Let them shave your head. Let them spray you with poison.

(pointing at SARAH's stomach)

Let them give your baby to the nice barren Polish couple, German couple, Russian couple. That's what you want, isn't it?

SARAH

What's *this* going to solve? It's just want those monsters in government want! A room full of dead Jews and our property for free.

MIRIAM

They'll get our property for free if we leave.

SARAH

But they won't get us. If it's all the same regardless of if we move -

MIRIAM

They can't make me move. I'm as Egyptian as they are. More, even. We had to - to fight to come here, to be seen, and they/ were

SARAH

Egypt wants us as slaves! That's all they've ever wanted. We have a chance to *make* something of ourselves in a land of our own!

MIRIAM

You never listen to the Rabbi. The diaspora -

SARAH

And if we go - maybe Binyamin's even -

*TOVAH, who's been half-listening, scared, suddenly looks up.*

TOVAH

Dad?!

MIRIAM

Shut up. He's not in Israel.

SARAH

How can you be/ sure

MIRIAM

Ishak told me. Ishak Daoud. The police finally went to his department store, did you know? None of those *connections* were worth a damn in the end. The Daouds have gone. To Israel. And he asked around beforehand, as a favour. He knows who's there. And Binyamin *isn't*.

SARAH

SARAH

EZRA

Sarah...

SARAH

If - if you don't want to go to Israel, you... we can go to Britain,/ America

MIRIAM

(loudly)

They don't want us there either!

SARAH

Because they don't know what it's like here -

MIRIAM

Of course they know. We came here because Europe never wanted us. Our grandparents worked their hands to the *bone* to make Egypt our home, and now everything's falling apart because all along, they hated us, too. Gentiles always do, Sarah.

SARAH

Not all of -

MIRIAM

Not all of them. Maybe not. But they don't care enough to help us, do they?

SARAH

Why do you want to stay, then?!

MIRIAM

(loudly)

Because -

*Pause. For a second, it looks like MIRIAM is about to succumb to emotion.*

MIRIAM

Because Israel isn't for all of us. They don't want us cooking foods they've never tasted, dressing in clothes they've never seen, speaking languages they've never heard. They want it to be *European*. They want - a nation of Yiddish-speaking gentiles. And I won't give up who I am to be accepted by people like that.

SARAH

So you'll give up your life?

MIRIAM

You're giving up yours.

SARAH

No. You can't say that. Not when you won't even try.

*MIRIAM scoffs.*

SARAH

If they don't want my food, my clothes, my language - I'll learn. I'll learn to be like them and they'll have to let me keep my baby. You - you like to talk about our - our ancestors, Miriam. That's what they did. They adapted. Blended in. That's what we *do*. So don't - don't you make me feel like a traitor for surviving.

MIRIAM

*SARAH looks at EZRA for support.*

EZRA

*SARAH walks away from the table.*

SARAH

If you're not out in ten minutes, I'll drive home and pack my bags.

*SARAH exits.*

*MIRIAM picks SARAH's bowl up off the floor and puts it on the side of the table.*

TOVAH

Where's dad?

MIRIAM

TOVAH

Mum -

MIRIAM

Remember when Mrs Daoud came to say goodbye? The government took their shop. They had money hidden abroad and they're using it to start a new life.

TOVAH

Why did the government take their things?

MIRIAM

Because we're strangers in our own country. Our family's been here three hundred years, but - we're strangers. Gentiles think we're - dirty, like Maqsud said.

TOVAH

Why?

MIRIAM

Because they say we're faithful to Israel and Egypt's at war with them.

EZRA

Twenty years of Israel trumps a lifetime of community.

MIRIAM

You're too young, Tovah, you won't remember, but it - it wasn't always like this. Your Nono and Nonna and me, we went to synagogue and people would wave hello on the way there, we taught the neighbours our songs, we gave them the keys to our house.

EZRA

They never gave us the keys to theirs.

MIRIAM

MIRIAM

I thought we were equal. But when the winds changed, they turned on us so quick. Maybe it was always like this, deep down.

*Pause.*

MIRIAM

There were protests when the Daouds lost their business. Dad joined them.

TOVAH

Two weeks ago.

MIRIAM

Yes.



TOVAH

Where is he?

MIRIAM

He's not in Israel. He's not in Egypt.

TOVAH

MIRIAM

*TOVAH sobs.*

MIRIAM

The government want to take our house now, too. They've already taken dad and Ezra's shop. But they can't take us. We were born here.

EZRA

And we'll die here.

MIRIAM

EZRA

Egypt's my home, too.

MIRIAM

But Sarah.

EZRA

MIRIAM

You don't/ have to

EZRA

But you wanted both of us to -

MIRIAM

I don't know what I want. Just that I don't want to leave.

*She coughs. TOVAH hugs her.*

EZRA

Miriam -

MIRIAM

Tovah. It's your choice. You can go with Sarah. If you stay here, we're not coming back.

*TOVAH doesn't say anything. MIRIAM turns to EZRA.*

MIRIAM

Take her with/ you

TOVAH

No.

MIRIAM

Tovah -

TOVAH

I want to see dad. I want to be all together. Home.

*Pause. EZRA and MIRIAM watch TOVAH turn to her bowl, and begin to eat. MIRIAM coughs more, harder.*

EZRA

Miriam...

MIRIAM

You should go.

EZRA

I'm staying. I don't think I can... (*go through with it*) But I'll stay until it's...

*He trails off.*

MIRIAM

Is it too bitter?

TOVAH

It's not so bad.

*She keeps eating. MIRIAM coughs harder.*

*TOVAH finishes her portion. She takes MIRIAM and EZRA's hands.*

*She sings Eshet Chayil.*

TOVAH

Eishet Chayil mi yimtza, vrachok mi'pninim michrah  
Batach bah lev ba'alah, vshalal lo yechsar  
G'malathu tov v'lo ra kol y'mei chayeha  
Darsha tsemer ufishim, v'ta'as b'chefetz kapeha

*EZRA, close to tears, joins in. They sing to MIRIAM.*

TOVAH & EZRA

Hay'tah k'oniyot socher, mimerchak tavi lachma  
Vatakom b'od laila, V'titen teref l'beitah v'chok  
(MORE)

TOVAH & EZRA (cont'd)

l'na'aroeha

Zam'mah sadeh v'tikachehu, mi'pri kapeha nat'ah karem

Chag'rah b'oz motneha, va'tametz z'ro'oteha

*MIRIAM coughs harder, more persistently. Blood comes out of her mouth.*

EZRA

Oh my God.

*EZRA clutches MIRIAM.*

*TOVAH resumes the song, shakily.*

TOVAH

Ta'm'a ki tov sochrah, lo yichbe balayla nerah

Yadeha shilcha b'kishor -

*TOVAH starts to cry in earnest. She hugs MIRIAM.*

TOVAH

I'm scared.

*TOVAH coughs. MIRIAM holds her tight.*

TOVAH

I'm scared.

*Lights slowly dim.*

*End.*