

This article appeared in the Nov. 28, 2014 Jewish Advocate.



Rabbi's newest and chewiest book perfect for Chanukah and year-round

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Susan Abramson holding her latest book.

In December, Susan Abramson will mark her 31st year as the rabbi of Temple Shalom Emeth in Burlington. One of the first 50 women ordained as a rabbi, she is the longest-serving female rabbi in Massachusetts. However Abramson is perhaps best known as the author of the acclaimed "Rabbi Rocketpower" children's book series, four tales centered around a Jewish holiday and loosely modeled on her own family, with superpowers added to the mix.

Her newest title, "Challah: A Chewish Guide to the Torah," is billed as a cookbook, a weekly Torah guide and a colorful picture book with "everything you knead to know to make tasty tidbits of Torah." Abramson received her bachelor's degree at Brandeis University in 1976 and was ordained in 1981 at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, where she received a Doctor of Divinity degree in 2006. Her first flaky foray into the art of challah baking occurred when her son Aaron, now a Brandeis sophomore, was in kindergarten at the Rashi School, a Jewish day school presently located in Dedham. The genesis of the household challah creation rose, so to speak, when he was a toddler attending her synagogue's Tot Shabbat program. Each Saturday, Abramson attempted to incorporate a bit of fun and games into the formative exploration of the children's Jewish identities. "One month, a friend suggested that we braid our own challah as part of the program," she recalls in the book's liner notes. "She brought a tub full of dough, and

every family had a great time creating their own loaf." A recipe entitled "No Fail Challah" was part of the presentation.

Abramson, who grew up in the 60s, had never focused upon traditional "women's" activities such as cooking and baking. But now firmly entrenched and actualized in a female leadership position in the community, she let go of this longtime aversion to traditionally relegated women's roles. "The following Friday, I took her up on the challenge," she writes. "Aaron and I attempted the recipe and, of course, failed. The dough didn't rise. When I took it out of the oven, it was as hard as a brick." Guided by the memory of the baking skills of her Hungarian immigrant grandmother Sadie and of her professional pastry chef cousin Jennifer, she was not to be deterred. She and Aaron tackled yeast protocol, stuck to their sticky mission, and voila - eventually created traditional braided and round challot suitable for the Sabbath and any Jewish holiday celebration. In addition, in her own inimitable manner, she created whimsical, edible takes on Jewish figures and rituals that are featured in the chapters of the new book.

"By mixing ingredients, kneading and braiding the dough, putting it in a warm oven, smelling the bread throughout the house, and uncovering it as we say the motzi (Hebrew prayer over bread) together, we celebrate this timehonored connection," she writes.

Abramson's humorous approach to writing and teaching is a tribute to her own determination and perseverance. She lost her husband, a software professional whom she had helped immigrate from Russia as part of her synagogue's Soviet Jewry efforts, to an untimely heart attack just before their son turned 10. She raised Aaron on her own, and today, he has continued to succeed, both scholastically and as a young Jewish activist who is a staff op-ed writer for Brandeis University's independent student newspaper.

Abramson's newly chewy tale continues her uniquely winning, stylistic technique of combining learning with fun and mystique.