Challah with Golden Raisins

Recipe is originally from my second cousin Ronnie Fein's grandmother.Makes 1 medium challah.

1 package (1/4 ounce) active dry yeast
1 cup warm water (about 105°F; feels slightly warm to the touch), divided
1⁄4 cup sugar, divided
4 cups all-purpose flour, plus more if needed for the dough and for the work surface
2 teaspoons salt
3 eggs
1 1/2 teaspoons vegetable oil
1⁄2 cup golden raisins (or to taste)

In a small bowl, mix the yeast, 1/4 cup of the warm water, 1⁄4 teaspoon of the sugar, and a pinch of the flour. Stir and set aside for about 5 minutes or until the mixture is bubbly.

While the yeast is activating, place 3 3/4 cups of the flour with the remaining sugar and the salt in the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with a dough hook. Add 2 of the eggs, the vegetable oil, and the remaining 3/4 cup warm water. Mix, using the dough hook, until well combined. Add the yeast mixture and the raisins, and blend in thoroughly, about 1 to 2 minutes. Remove the dough and, using your hands, knead for 2 to 3 minutes on a lightly floured surface until the dough is smooth and elastic. Add the remaining flour as needed to make the dough smooth and soft, but not overly sticky.

Cover the bowl with a clean kitchen towel and let the dough rise in a warm place for about 1 1⁄2 hours or until doubled in bulk. Punch the dough down, cover the bowl, and let rise again for about 45 minutes or until doubled in bulk. Remove the dough to a floured surface.

Cut the dough into 3 or 6 pieces, depending on whether you are going to make a 3- or 6-strand braid. (Or round for the holidays.) Make long strands out of each piece. Braid the strands and seal the ends together by pressing on the dough. Place the bread on a lightly greased cookie sheet. Beat the last egg and brush the surface with it. (You won't need all of it.) Let rise in a warm place for 30 minutes.

While the dough is in the last rise, preheat the oven to 350°F. Bake the challah for about 30 minutes or until firm and golden brown.