

From north to south, Israelis join together to feed those who are hungry



By HILLEL KUTTLER

IT'S 10:30 on a Thursday night at the loading dock of Ganei Levy, a catering hall in the northern Israel town of Nahariya, and an all-volunteer food pantry known as Chesed V'Emunah (Benevolence and Faith) kicks into action.

Three women distribute produce from cardboard boxes into scores of bags. In the hall's kitchen, others fill plastic containers with salads and cooked meats, leftovers from a just-concluding affair. The bags, containers and loaves of bread will be delivered to nearly 100 Nahariyan households whose members don't have enough to eat.

A mile away, early on a sunny Friday afternoon in Nahariya's town square, 20 senior citizens sit beside the entrance to the Merkaz Halechem (Bread Center) bakery. Nearly all are Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Two workers step out to distribute bulging bags of buns, submarine rolls, challah and pastries.

According to government figures, 21 percent of Israelis (including 30% of children and 25 percent of Holocaust survivors) were living in poverty in 2018.

"Thankfully, there are many

wonderful local initiatives helping the weaker sectors of the population on a regional level," said Deena Fiedler, a spokeswoman for Leket Israel, a nonprofit organization tackling food shortages.

The two grassroots efforts in Nahariya make a local impact. On a larger scale, so does Kiryat Gat-based SAHI, which has branches in 37 Israeli towns. A JUF partner, SAHI provides food to 1,000 needy families every week, 150 in the Kiryat Gat/Lachish/Shafir region. It enlists at-risk teenagers as volunteers to discreetly identify peers—such as classmates with empty lunchboxes and families in need, and to deliver food parcels to them, anonymously.

Teens also help collect food by chatting with shoppers outside supermarkets. Other donations come from Leket Israel and from pledges, said Avraham Hayon, who cofounded SAHI in 2009.

Hungry families appreciate that "someone wants to help," while each teen takes action to "become a good citizen," said Hayon, noting that some teen volunteers are themselves recipients.

The Nahariya project each month receives more than 100 cartons of donated produce from Leket Israel and a ton of

prepared meat, cooked vegetables and salad from catering halls and corporate cafeterias.

"I was very excited by the concept," said Roni Knaffo, who heads Chesed V'Emunah, about why he began volunteering in 1996. "I felt, 'Okay, I did something good. Let's continue it.'" Knaffo works at defense-industry giant Rafael and arranges for the company to donate food from its dining room.

Orit Hazan and Rinat Drey volunteer, too. The friends have come every Thursday for two years to pack food baskets.

"It's the giving: to give of your time to help people who really need it, who don't have food. It's doing good," said Drey, a business owner, while scooping salads into a container in the caterer's kitchen.

Alon Rozen, Merkaz Halechem's owner, remembered someone requesting food soon after the bakery opened a decade ago. The next week, four people came. A week later, two more.

"I get a good feeling," Rozen said between sips of coffee as he watched recipients line up their chairs. "It's good that I'm in a position to give and not take."

Yitzhak B., 82, does both. A retired chemical engineer who moved to Nahariya from Moscow a quarter-century ago, he keeps some donated bread for himself and his wife. Most goes to a Ukrainian neighbor.

And so it goes in the doing-good business. Leaving the catering hall at midnight, Knaffo drove along Kaplan Street. He stopped momentarily to deliver a food box to a single mother from the Netherlands. Her three children lack school supplies, so Knaffo asked an art store to donate some.

Now, he said, he's helping the woman get a job. ■

Hillel Kuttler's feature articles have appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal. He can be reached at hk@HillelTheScribeCommunications.com.



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