

“I Never Saw Anything Like This.” Journal of a Volunteer at Mesamche Lev’s Pesach Distribution

AS TOLD TO: FRIMET BLUM

We received this journal from a yeshiva student who volunteered at last year’s Pesach distribution.

Thursday, 28 Adar 2

I was rushing around the *dirah* last night helping the *chevrah* pack up for their flight home. Weiss was *shvitzing* because his suitcase was overweight, Goldstein still needed to pick up his *kallah’s machzorim*, *B’kitzur*; it was a real *matzav*. I was feeling a little left out, because I was staying in Yerushalayim. Then Goldstein’s phone rang. There was a mad rush to find it under the clutter, but I fished it out after the fourth ring from under a pile of *sefarim*.

“Hello?” he said. Then he stood still. “Mesamche Lev? Oh! I’d love to help, but *l’maaseh*, I’m leaving to the airport in, like, less than an hour.”

“Any *bachurim* who can help? Uh, let me think. Yes, yes, my friend. He’s staying here. Here. Talk to him.”

Before I knew it, I’d been roped in to help out at the Mesamche Lev Pesach distribution. I said I’d be there between ten and two. Honestly, I have no idea what it’s all about. I do recognize the name Mesamche Lev. I think they give out things for Yom Tov.

Friday, 29 Adar 2

My first thought when I turned the corner of Eretz Chaifetz was “Wow.” There’s this huge white tent that takes up the whole block. I went inside, and it’s cavernous. I found Weber, the guy I spoke to last night, and he showed me around. There were tens of volunteers — *bachurim* who were volunteering their *bein hazmanim*.

“Today we’re unpacking shoes,” he said. He showed me how to set up the boxes, a stack of each style and size, lined up neatly on a table. I was surprised that the shoes were really nice, the same ones they sell in the stores. There were even name brands. We set up sections, big and little boys, big and little girls. Everything is so organized. It looks like a massive shoe store, all that’s missing are the kids. On Sunday they come!

Sunday, 2 Nissan

I stood behind a table helping people find shoes in different sizes and styles. What a sight! There were so many kids — they just kept coming and coming and coming. I never saw so many people shopping in one place at one time.

42,000 kids are going through this tent in the next few days. When I think of it, that’s more than *five times* the amount of *bachurim* in the Mir. Wow!

Weber sent me to the little boys’ section. The kids were adorable, running around, giggling, comparing shoes, such fun. One little boy kept peeking inside his shoe box, again and again.

One family sticks out in my mind. They looked so poor. The baby was in an old-fashioned, broken stroller, and he had huge hungry eyes. I wonder if he had breakfast. The four-year-old boy was wearing worn out girl’s shoes, I guess from his older sister. You could see where there was once an ornament, maybe a bow or a flower. I wonder if he was teased in *cheder* for wearing them. Another family came in with two kids in crocs. I hope they had real shoes for the winter.

Anyway, everyone left happy.



Mesamche Lev sold 20 tons of dairy products including milk, cheese, yogurt and more for a mere 20% of the retail price.



At a Mesamche Lev Distribution site.



Mesamche Lev sold 50,000 pounds of matzos which was subsidized by the organization.

Monday, 3 Nissan

If all the *brachos* I got today come through, I’ll have a really good life. The people were so happy, they just couldn’t stop. One grandmother from Meah Shearim came with ten grandchildren. She went on and on, *benching* me with a good *shidduch*, *gezunt*, *parnassah*, *hatzlachah* in learning, *banim u’vnei banim oskim b’Torah u’v’mitzvos* — you get the pic-

ture.

Anyway, today they sent me to help out at the checkout counter. Totally different experience than yesterday, but a real eye-opener. Every family had a plastic card, like a credit card. When I swiped it, I saw exactly how many pairs of shoes they could take. It also calculated how much they have to pay. Every pair is 20 shekel — that’s like five dollars.

I can see the *chachmah* in it. The kids saw their parents paying, and it gave them a certain pride, like, “I bought my shoes,” not just got it for free from an organization. They don’t feel bad about being picky or asking for *another* style in *another* size.

Weber explained to me that Reb Zalman Ashkenazi, Mesamche Lev’s founder, really understood what it means to give with dignity. He thought through every little thing. Also, he wanted the *tzedakah* money he raised to go 100% for shoes; nothing else. The 20 NIS covers the hall rental and overhead. There’s such *chachmah* and sensitivity here. *Ashrei maskil el doll!*

Tuesday, 4 Nissan

One lady with eight kids asked me if she could take shoes for herself. The distribution is only for kids up to 18, so I didn’t know what to tell her. I found someone from Mesamche Lev to ask. He took one look at her and said “No problem.” When the woman was out of earshot, he told me, “There are rules and there is the fifth *Shulchan Aruch*. I saw the desperation in her eyes, and I couldn’t tell her ‘no.’”

Wednesday, 5 Nissan

The giant shoe store is closed. I hear that before they opened here, they had a smaller distribution for 7,000 kids in Beit Shemesh, so the *bnei Torah* don’t have to *shlep* their families to Yerushalayim. *Gevaldig!* I can’t stop thinking that every single pair that was here the first day of the distribution is in a closet somewhere, making a kid happy.

Believe me, I know how badly the kids need them. I mean, the things they came wearing on their feet! I wouldn’t have believed that in 2017, kids could be slicing the front of their shoes to make room for their toes. One kid was wearing shoes that were more duct tape than leather. It’s sad, but at least now they have good shoes for Pesach.

Anyway, today is setup day again. They’re bringing in giant freezers for the meat distribution.

Thursday, 6 Nissan

Some *bachurim* spent the whole night packing the orders. When I got here, everything was in the freezer already. It works like clockwork. My job was to find the orders. There’s a whole computerized system with numbers, so it’s really easy. I’m sure it wasn’t simple to set up. You can see a lot of thought went into it.

The whole thing is such an eye-opener. People are really excited about chicken and meat. I mean, to me chicken is such a basic, but obviously, it’s a treat for lots of people to have a full freezer.

I still can’t get used to seeing really poor people. One lady came with eight little boys and girls wearing the most old-fashioned, faded clothes I ever saw. I saw just the mother’s name on her order, no husband. She could be an *almanah*. She opened the box and said, “Look! *Ofo!* *Basar!* *Lichvod hachag!*” Her



Shoes on display at the Mesamche Lev distribution site.

kids crowded around the box, counting the bags as if they were diamonds. I guess the only time they eat *ofot* and *basar* is on Yom Tov. I feel so spoiled.

Friday, 7 Nissan

Last night I couldn't sleep. I kept waking up and thinking of people I ate by on Shabbos, and the little slivers of chicken they served. It never dawned on me that people don't have money for chicken. I brought my *maaser* money with me, to give to Mesamche Lev. I want to pay for a family's order. Now especially, I see how much it means to a family to get meat and chicken. These are real people! *Bashefer!* They're hungry!

Sunday, 9 Nissan

When I gave the money to Weber yesterday, I felt like now I could sit by the *Seder* and say *kol dichfin yesei v'yeichol*, with a clear conscience.

Monday, 10 Nissan

Weber asked if I could help him in the evening, and deliver checks to *almanos*. Of course I said yes — I'd do anything for Mesamche Lev.

The first envelope was for a family on the block of my *dirah*. I recognized the kid who opened the door. He comes to the *shtiebel* sometimes to say *Kaddish*. It breaks my heart. When his mother heard me say "Mesamche Lev," her face lit up. I could see how happy she was. I'm sure she was counting on the money.

The next *almanah* turned out to be my mother's classmate. She grew up two blocks away from our house in Brooklyn. The father was killed in a terror attack maybe three or four years ago. Eleven kids, all ages. I wonder what they live on.

The saddest visit was when I knocked on a door and a girl told me to come inside to her mother. The lady was in a wheelchair, connected to an IV pole. She thanked me and *bentched* me, and said that since her husband passed away, Mesamche Lev is always there for her. I feel so bad for the kids. They don't have a father, and their mother is so sick. *Hashem yiracheim!*

Tuesday, 11 Nissan

I met my great-uncle in Geulah, and he asked me how I'm spending *bein*

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Mesamche Lev distributed half-off coupons for shoes, clothing, and Judaica.

hazmanim. I told him I'm volunteering for an organization, Mesamche Lev. You should have seen his face.

"Mesamche Lev? You know what they do?" And he told me story after story, right there in the tiny *makolet*. He remembers Reb Zalman Ashkenazi, z"l, who started the organization. "A *tzaddik fun a Yid*," he called him.

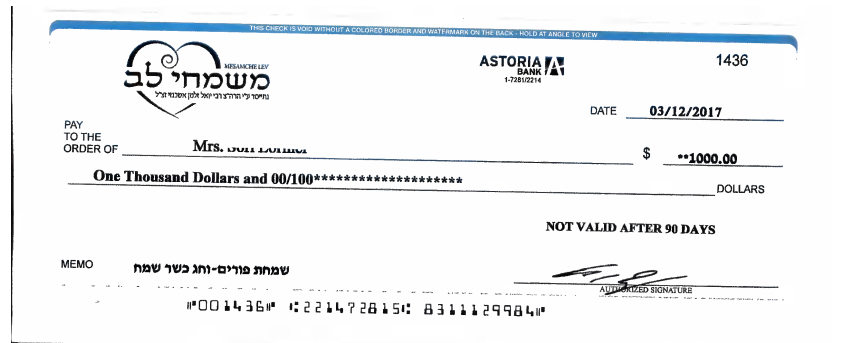
The whole city — no, the whole *Eretz Yisrael*, depends on Mesamche Lev, he said. They give and they give and they give. Food and shoes and *chasunos* for *yeshomim*, *mamash* so much. And you know what's amazing? They never ask you where you *daven*, what color is your *kippah*, what kind of hat do you wear, what group you belong to. "It's just *ahavas Yisrael*, pure, pure *ahavas Yisrael*."

Wednesday, 12 Nissan

I thought the distribution is over.



Shoes on display at the Mesamche Lev distribution site.



A Mesamche Lev check given to cover Yom Tov needs.

Not quite. There's still the *milchigs* "sale." It's in three locations, so it's convenient for everyone.

I went to Ezras Torah. Huge Tnuva trucks unloaded every *milchig* product you can think of. Milk, yogurt, butter, 5% cheese, hard cheese, cottage cheese, pudding — the works. They're selling everything for a third of the price. A leben that usually costs about 4 NIS is 1.30. A 15-shekel pack of butter is just 5. It's affordable!

When you think of it, if a family can't buy *milchigs*, what do the kids eat on Pesach? Expensive matzah? Come on. They starve! A week ago, I wouldn't believe it, but after seeing the people who depend on Mesamche Lev, I have no doubt.

I'm thinking of the yogurts in my *dirah*. The *chevrah* and I — we buy every product in the *makolet*, and

never check the price. This week changed me. At the very least, I'll try to appreciate having so much for a little while.

Friday, 14 Nissan

There's no place in the world I'd rather be on Erev Pesach than right here in Yerushalayim. After all the hustle and bustle of the past few weeks, there's a serenity, a *kedushah* in the air. The kids, the streets, even the doorknobs are scrubbed cleaner than clean, and when I see a child coming towards me, I find my eyes looking downward to check if he's wearing new shoes.

When I walk down the streets in the poorer sections of the city, I smell chicken soup wafting out of windows. Don't tell the *chevrah*, because I'm not the sentimental type, but I have to swallow hard not to cry. This is Pesach. This is Mesamche Lev. I was part of it.