

# Mesamche Lev Distributes 42,000 Pairs of Shoes

Tons of Meat, Poultry, and Groceries Also Distributed in Massive Pesach Chalukah

By Frimet Blum



Forty two thousand excited children filed through Yerushalayim's Bais Bracha hall last week, at Mesamche Lev's Pesach shoe distribution. The children were enthralled at the sight of colossal hall, bedecked with samples of beautiful shoes displayed on the walls. The excitement was so palpable; one person said that the very walls were dancing. It was not an entirely preposterous observation, considering the thousands of heels tapping the walls; and the impromptu dancing by several children who couldn't contain their joy. The shoe distribution was the first segment of Mesamche Lev's massive Pesach distribution.

This week, with the shoes safely stowed away in closets across Eretz Yisroel, the décor in Bais Bracha was replaced - first by cases of grape juice, and then by enormous freezers filled with meat and poultry. The distribution brought Pesach necessities to families who would otherwise not be able to celebrate the holiday properly. The recipient families included three hundred ninety six *almonos*, as well as thousands of Torah scholars, large families, and others in need; a total of nearly ten and a half thousand families.

The distribution was Mesamche Lev's fortieth. Ever since the organization's founder, Rav Zalman Ashkenazi, began his life's work of helping widows, orphans, and other poor Jews, the Pesach distribution has been eagerly anticipated by the poor. Reb Zalman zt"l, a world-renowned *gadol* in *chessed*, whose exceptional dedication to the poor was legendary, was deeply attuned to their needs. At a time when there were few organizations offering assistance, he recognized the tremendous challenge faced by the poor before Pesach. In his inimitable style, he distributed things no one else would think of - like shoes. He also saw beyond ideology, and helped anyone in need. *Ashkenazim, Sefardim, Chassidim, Litvaks, Mizrachis, Americans, Yerushalmis* - everyone in need is welcome at Mesamche Lev; and treated with respect.

Reb Zalman always insisted on protecting the dignity and pride of the poor. He went to great lengths to make it easy and pleasant to receive from Mesamche Lev; and devised creative ways to keep the poor from feeling as if they are getting a handout. One way he did this was by asking the poor to "pay" for their shoes. Recipients paid a token twenty shekel per pair; about five dollars, for shoes that sell in the United States for as much as eighty dollars. The fee lets the poor feel comfortable accepting help.

The Mesamche Lev credit card provides yet another level of dignity. Preloaded with each family's orders, including shoe sizes and cuts of meat, it lets people check out their "purchases" by swiping their cards. Many of the children aren't even aware that they got their new shoes from a charity, because they see their parents "paying" for them!

This year marked the second Mesamche Lev distribution since Reb Zalman's untimely *petirah* last Adar. Despite the challenges of raising significant funds, his Rebbetzin and children are continuing his work and keeping his legacy alive.

Many of the families awaited the Yom Tov distribution for months. The shoe distribution was especially anticipated, because most of the families can't afford to buy their children shoes. The shoes they get from Mesamche Lev are the only ones they receive all year! One woman showed us her son's worn, scuffed old shoes.

"These are the shoes he was wearing until now. He wore them every day, for the past year," she said. "For the past few months, he's complaining, saying, 'es drukt mir; they're pinching, but what could I do? I didn't have money. Now he has new ones.'" Another mother said that when her son's shoes ripped, she bought him imitation crocs.

"I really felt bad on rainy days," she said. "The rain went right through the holes. I sent him to *cheder* with an extra pair of socks, but he never put them on." Now she put the crocs away, in favor of a sturdy pair of leather shoes.

One potential donor, an American who was visiting Eretz Yisroel, was invited to come see the distribution. He was amazed to see many American *olim*, whose own parents might not know that their children are getting help. Then he met his own niece - who told him that if not for Mesamche Lev, her children wouldn't be getting new shoes. Now she was getting top quality, beautiful shoes for all of her children. She was especially pleased because her children were getting Botticelli, Corino, and other name brand shoes; the same ones their American cousins were getting. It was a sentiment heard countless times by the hundreds of volunteers who helped parents find sizes and styles, and fit their children's shoes.

"People were so overwhelmed. They couldn't stop telling me what it meant to them that their children had high-quality, stylish shoes; and how happy their kids were," said one volunteer. Another volunteer pointed to a group of children a few feet away, who were literally dancing as they held their shoe boxes aloft. Although the older children and their parents were more staid, there was a definite spring in their steps as they left the hall. Their joy intensified over the following week.

## GRAPE JUICE, MEAT, GROCERIES

When recipients came into Bais Bracha this week, they found it divided into neat aisles constructed of boxes. There were boxes filled with bottles of Kedem grape juice - the finest quality available. There were giant freezers filled with meat and poultry, to bring *simchas Yom Tov* to over ten thousand families.

The packaging was a massive task. Volunteers reviewed each family's order, and filled boxes systematically, giving each family at least 10 pounds of meat and 25 pounds of chicken. Then, the boxes were put into freezers, awaiting pickup. Families then presented their Mesamche Lev cards to the "cashiers," who swiped the cards, and gave them the pre-approved number of coupons stating how the amount of meat and poultry they were entitled to. Coupons were sponsored by generous donors from the United States and elsewhere. There was no pushing, no waiting, no hassle.

Like the shoes and other items, the meat was received with great joy. A spirit of *simcha* and well being filled the air, as families looked forward to a plentiful Yom Tov.

One widow sought out Rabbi Avrum Webber, director of Mesamche Lev. "We haven't had meat since Sukkos," she said. "This will be my first Pesach without my husband; now I can go home and start cooking."

An American *yungerman* approached Reb Sender, to thank him personally. "I remember when your father, Rabbi Ashkenazi, zt"l, used to come to my boss for money," he said. "He used to take out his big black briefcase and show my boss Mesamche Lev's canceled checks. To me, as an American from a comfortable family, it was strange to think that people could need help to buy meat. I never thought I would get to know Mesamche Lev this way [as a recipient]. Your father was a *tzaddik*, and you are all *tzaddikim*."

"It was easier here than in a regular store," Chaim T., a *choshuve talmid chochom* with eleven children, said, of the system in the distribution hall. "There was plenty of space, and everything was so well organized. I was in and out in less than a half hour." That was no coincidence. Mesamche Lev invested months in organizing the distribution, so that it would run smoothly, and be as dignified and pleasant as possible for recipients.

This year, there was a new addition to the distribution.

Participants received vouchers to use in a supermarket, redeemable for Pesach staples, including cases of potatoes, eggs, apples, onions, bananas, avocados, and carrots; as well as Kosher *L'Pesach* groceries, including sugar, oil, coffee, tea, even aluminum foil and dishwashing soap! The program was instituted by Mesamche Lev during the *shiva* for Reb Shlomo Gross zt"l, *l'illuy nishmaso*. Reb Shlomo was a close *yedid* of Reb Zalman Ashkenazi and an ardent supporter of Mesamche Lev. The initiative, valued at over \$200,000, helped to keep Reb Shlomo's legacy of *tzedakah* and *chessed* alive.

The food distribution was very warmly received. The recipients came to the Bais Bracha hall with shopping carts, baby carriages, and toy wagons; and, children in tow, loaded up with grape juice and meat. Then they proceeded to the "Hachi Kedai Supermarket" for their Pesach staples. The thanks were effusive. One man's face lit up when he received his supermarket voucher.

"*Hodu Lashem ki tov!*" he said, tears running down his cheeks. He told us that he was out of a job, and his family often went hungry. He had thought he was coming to pick up a few items. "This is a *chalom* - a dream," he said. "To have so much meat, to have all this. My wife, my children, they will not believe this!"

Others, who had already participated in past

Mesamche Lev distributions, were still shocked at the scope of the distribution this year. Recipients marveled at the quality of the merchandise, and at the marvelous system Mesamche Lev instituted.

## MAOS CHITTIN

In addition to the tremendous amount of products distributed, the organization also sent out large *maos chitin* checks to *almonos* and *talmidei chachomim*. The checks brought an added measure of relief to families, and brought great *simchas Yom Tov* to *almonos, yesomim*, and others; by enabling them to purchase clothing, household necessities, and more, *l'kavod Yom Tov*.

In total, Mesamche Lev distributed a mind boggling *eighty tons(!)* of meat and poultry. That was in addition to the shoes, grape juice, and groceries. The budget for the distribution was over two million dollars, with a retail value of over five million dollars. In addition, in response to requests from families in the United States, the organization subsidized thousands of pounds of *matzoh*, which was sold in New York for half price.

The funds for the distribution are raised largely from donors who open their doors to Rabbi Zalman Ashkenazi's nephew, Rav Berel Ashkenazi, Maglemitzta Rebbe, *shlita*; who dedicates himself to fundraising, following in the footsteps of his legendary uncle. Additional funds are raised by donors who respond generously to Mesamche Lev's mailings, and sponsor meat coupons for the distribution.

To learn more about Mesamche Lev's many activities, visit [MesamcheLev.org](http://MesamcheLev.org), or call 718-506-1400.

## MESAMCHE LEV IN NEW YORK

After forty years of helping the poor in Eretz Yisroel, Mesamche Lev expanded its operations over the past three years to include the needy in New York and New Jersey. This Pesach, the organization purchased forty thousand pounds of *Shemurah Matzoh*, which it sold to large families at a greatly-subsidized price. The organization also offered a fifty percent discount for shoes, for *chushove bnai torah* in Brooklyn NY, redeemable at Shwartz's Shoe Store and Shoes at Park in Boro Park.

Like its operations in Eretz Yisroel, the American *matzah* distribution was extremely organized and dignified. Families simply called in to a hotline, where they ordered the *matzohs* they wanted from an automated system, paying for their orders by credit card. They chose from five *mehudar* popular *matzoh* bakeries, and paid just twelve dollars a pound - half price.

Pick up was also streamlined, and took minutes. Families from every *frum* background came to pickup locations, in Boro Park, Williamsburg, Lakewood, Monsey, Monroe, where they provided a phone number and received an order ticket. They then took their *matzohs* off shelves, and checked out by presenting the pre-printed tickets they had received when they arrived. The subsidized *matzoh* was a great relief to working families who struggle with their Pesach expenses, but are reluctant to accept *tzedakah*. Mesamche Lev's program, which sold, rather than gave away *matzoh*, allowed them to retain their dignity, while getting significant assistance.

The *matzoh* program came at the heels of a large Purim distribution, in which Mesamche Lev delivered *mishloach manos* with large checks to over one hundred local *almonos* and divorcees. The Purim assistance brought much *simcha* to families that might feel alone on the happiest day of the year, and gave *almonos* and divorcees a head start on their Pesach expenses.

