

Mesamche Lev Distributes 42,000 Pairs of Shoes for Pesach

BY FRIMET BLUM

Last week, 42,000 excited children filed through Yerushalayim's Bais Bracha Hall at Mesamche Lev's massive Pesach shoe distribution. The children, eyes agape, were enthralled at the sight of the colossal hall filled with samples of beautiful boys' and girls' shoes hanging on the walls. One person said it seemed that the walls were dancing!

It was not an entirely exaggerated observation, considering the thousands of heels tapping against the walls and the impromptu dancing of 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 Yisrael, Bais Bracha will be filled with other items — first with cases of grape juice, and then with enormous freezers filled with meat and poultry.

The distribution provides Pesach necessities to families who would otherwise not be able to celebrate the holiday properly. The recipient families included 396 *almanos* and thousands of Torah scholars, large families, and others in need — a total of nearly 10,500 families.

This year's distribution was Mesamche Lev's fortieth. Ever since the organization's founder, Harav Zalman Ashkenazi, *zt"l*, began his life's work of helping widows, orphans, and the poor, the Pesach distribution has been eagerly anticipated.

Reb Zalman, 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. He distributed things no one else had thought of, such as shoes. He saw beyond the distinctions between groups, and helped anyone in need. Similarly today, anyone in need is welcome at Mesamche Lev.

Reb Zalman insisted on protecting the dignity and pride of those who received aid, and went to great lengths to make it easy and pleasant to receive from Mesamche Lev. One way he did this was with the Mesamche Lev "credit card." Preloaded with each family's orders, it lets people check out their "purchases" by swiping their cards, and children see their parents "paying" for their Pesach needs.

This year was the second Mesamche Lev distribution since Reb Zalman's untimely *petirah* a year ago last Adar. Despite the challenges of raising significant funds, his Rebbetzin and children continue to keep his legacy alive.

Many families have awaited the Yom Tov distribution for months. The shoe distribution was especially anticipated because shoes are too expensive

for most families to buy otherwise.

One 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." Now she has put the Crocs away in favor of a sturdy pair of leather shoes.

An American donor who was visiting Eretz Yisrael was invited to come see the distribution. He was amazed to see many American *olim* whose parents might not know their children are getting help. He met his niece, who told him that if not for Mesamche Lev, her children would not be getting new shoes.

At the distribution, she received beautiful, top-quality shoes for all her children — the same brand-name shoes their American cousins were getting.

"People were 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 dancing as they held their shoe boxes aloft. Although the older children and their parents were more reserved, there was a spring in their step as they left the hall.

Grape Juice! Meat! Groceries!

When recipients came into Bais Bracha this week, they found neat aisles made up of boxes on top of boxes filled with bottles of Kedem grape juice — the finest quality available. There were giant freezers filled with meat and poultry that would bring *simchas Yom Tov* to more than ten thousand families.

Volunteers reviewed each family's order and filled boxes systematically, giving each family at least one large cut of beef, plus chicken for the entire Yom Tov. The completed orders were put in freezers, awaiting pickup.

Families presented their Mesamche Lev cards to the "cashiers," who swiped the cards and gave them the pre-approved number of coupons stating the amount of meat and poultry they were entitled to. There was no pushing, no waiting, no hassle. Men and women waited in separate sections of the hall.

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

One widow sought out Rabbi Sender Ashkenazi, director of Mesamche Lev. "We haven't had meat since Sukkos," she said. "I really was dreading Yom Tov because it's the first Pesach without my husband, but now I'm excited to get 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



Mesamche Lev Distribution Center at Bais Bracha Hall.



View of the thousands of shoes distributed by Mesamche Lev.



Banner announcing Mesamche Lev shoe distribution.



Display of shoe styles available for distribution.

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, an American from a comfortable family, it was strange to think that there were people who needed help to buy meat. I never thought I would get to know Mesamche Lev [as a recipient]. Your father was a *tzaddik*, and you are all *tzaddikim*."

The tranquil running of the operation was no coincidence. Mesamche Lev invested months in organizing the distribution so that it runs smoothly and is both

dignified and pleasant.

This year the distribution had a new feature. Participants received vouchers to redeem in a supermarket for Pesach staples.

The program was instituted by Mesamche Lev during *shivah* for Reb Shlomo Gross, *z"l*, *l'iluy nishmaso*, a close friend of Reb Zalman Ashkenazi and an ardent supporter of Mesamche Lev. The initiative, valued at over \$200,000, kept Reb Shlomo's legacy of *tzedakah* and *chessed* alive.

One man's face lit up when he received his supermarket vouch-

er. "*Hodu LaShem ki tov!*" he exclaimed, tears running down his cheeks. He told us that he was out of a job and that his family often went hungry. He had thought he was coming just 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!"

Ma'os Chittim

In addition to the tremendous number of products distributed, Mesamche Lev also sent out large *ma'os chittim* checks to *almanos* and *talmidei chachamin*, which brought an added measure of relief and great *simchas Yom Tov* to widows, orphans, and others, enabling them to purchase clothing, household necessities, and other items *lichvod Yom Tov*.

In total, Mesamche Lev distributed eighty tons of meat and poultry, in addition to the shoes, grape juice, and groceries. The budget for the distribution in Israel was over \$2 million, with a retail value of over \$5 million.

The money for the distribution comes largely from donors who open their doors to Rabbi Zalman Ashkenazi's nephew, Harav Berel Ashkenazi, the Maglenitza 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.

Mesamche Lev in New York

After forty years of helping the poor in Eretz Yisrael, Mesamche Lev expanded its operations in the past three years to assist the needy in New York and New Jersey. This Pesach, the organization purchased 40,000 pounds of *shemurah matzah*, which it sold to large families at a greatly-subsidized price. The organization also offered a fifty-percent discount on shoes, redeemable at Schwartz's Shoe Store and Shoes at Park in Boro Park.

Like the operations in Eretz Yisrael, the American matzah distribution was organized and dignified. Families simply called in to a hotline, ordered the matzos they wanted, and paid for their orders by "credit card." They chose from five popular *mehudar* matzah bakeries and paid just \$12 a pound — half price.

Pickup was streamlined and took only minutes, and the subsidized matzah provided great relief to working families who struggle with Pesach expenses but are reluctant to accept *tzedakah*.

The matzah program came on the heels of a Purim distribution in which Mesamche Lev delivered *mishloach manos* with large checks to over 100 local *almanos* and divorcees. The Purim assistance brought great *simchah* to families that might otherwise feel alone at this very happy time of the year.

To learn more about Mesamche Lev's many activities, visit MesamcheLev.org or call 718-506-1400.