



# FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD

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Some experts on poverty and hunger in this country estimate that there may be as many as twenty million people who go hungry at one time or another every month. Other experts feel that the figure is much lower, perhaps closer to ten million.

Celeste McKinley, founder of the Gleaners Food Bank in Las Vegas, argues that forty-seven million people could be fed on the food that Americans throw out each year. She distributes 400,000 pounds of food a month, all of which would have been thrown out but instead feeds twenty thousand people. Others disagree about the amount of food that is wasted, maintaining that the number of people it could feed is perhaps twenty-seven million.

We know that many hungry people are Jewish. We also know that many people who waste food are Jewish, often doing so at Jewish events. Even if the figures cited above are in dispute, the point is clear: a large part of this problem can be considered logistical.

## *The Poll I Took*

Since 1976 I have been a staff member on the United Synagogue Youth Israel Pilgrimage. I have had the opportunity to see about 6,500 teenagers over that span of time, from Vancouver to Miami, Maine to San Diego, and just about all points in between, including Chickasha, Oklahoma (population 15,828, according to my road atlas; the Jewish population includes the Miller family and maybe a couple of others).

I enjoy the work. We do tzedakah projects together. They act with grandeur of the soul. In our

conversations, they teach me much. I ask questions about their background and about their experiences with elderly people while we are at Life Line for the Old in Jerusalem. I find out about their involvement back home with the established Jewish community, the leaders, the workers, and the quiet heroes they have met.

They teach me so much; I am often stunned by their answers. In recent years I have begun asking a long question. "How many of you belong to a synagogue where—if just a portion of the food left over from kiddush platters, bar and bat mitzvahs, weddings, luncheons, annual dinners, dessert noshes or morning minyan breakfasts were taken to shelters or soup kitchens—how many of your synagogues would have been able to provide 1,000 meals for hungry people?"

Hands go up all over the place, more than I ever would have expected. And I ask which synagogues, which towns. I know many of the synagogues, and they are not all 1,500-2,000-family congregations. Some are much smaller, but the kids estimate well, and, multiplying by the number of food events per year, consider 1,000 meals a reasonable number.

Here are some statistics: Let's say in the last two years I've worked with 1,000 high school students during the summer. Let's say 200 of them raised their hands. Let's say the 200 kids represent 150 congregations (some of them obviously are from the same congregation). Let's say one third of them are wrong about their synagogues. That leaves 100 congregations at 1,000



meals per synagogue, which equals 100,000 meals.

That is from a small sample, only synagogues, not adjusted for bell curves or other factors known to demographers, statisticians, sociologists, and other experts. It also doesn't take into account Federation events, JCC programs, Israel Bond dinners, Hadassah programs, and whatever other Jewish communal events involve food. And yet, with all the inaccuracies and omissions, it is still a significant statistic to consider.

**More Jewish Statistics**

As I travel around and as my network of contacts grows each year, I gather statistics on Jewish poverty. These are usually culled from community demographic studies or the reports of specialized task forces. Some numbers are a year or two old, and it is important to remember that hunger and poverty are not synonymous. Still, here are some numbers:

• Fifteen percent of the San Francisco Jewish community live at or near the official poverty line. (Crossing the border, the same percentage applies to Toronto's Jewish community.)

• Thirty-seven thousand Jews in Chicago live at or near the poverty line.

• Sixty-five thousand Jews in Los Angeles live at or near the poverty line.

• Eight percent of the Balti-

more Jewish community earn less than \$10,000 a year, and twelve percent of that community's Jewish adults were unemployed and looking for work during the three years previous to the study.

• Seventy-four thousand Jews in the five boroughs of New York City are at or below the poverty line—143,000 at or below 150 percent of the poverty line.<sup>1</sup>

Allow for the usual inaccuracies, but we ought to assume that, if anything, the numbers have grown worse in most cases.

**Proposals**

1. *Food barrels in synagogues and Jewish communal buildings:* This is a must. Many—but not quite enough—have them. It is becoming, and I believe should become, a standard part of a Jewish building, as standard as Torahs in the ark, as the Eternal Light, as the computer that manages business affairs.

2. *The tzedakah habit:* People should be encouraged to purchase one extra item for tzedakah food whenever they grocery shop, and take it to the synagogue or JCC food barrel or directly to shelters or soup kitchens.

3. *MAZON-A Jewish response to hunger:* MAZON proposes a food tax for any Jewish event. Three percent of the cost of the food goes to MAZON, and they distribute it to Jewish and non-Jewish programs involved in feeding people.<sup>2</sup> More and more organizations are participating in

the project. Two recent examples: (1) A staff member of a large Federation recently called to say he is proposing that it institute a three percent policy, with a portion of the money to go to MAZON, the rest to other similar, worthwhile endeavors. (2) Some Jewish teachers in the Toledo area voted to cancel a dinner in their honor and to donate the funds that would have been used for the dinner to MAZON.

4. *Jewish food banks serving Jews and also non-Jews:* The following cities, among others, already have them: Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Dallas, Chicago, Philadelphia, Chicago, Baltimore, and New York. A story: I was talking about TDDs to some teenagers and adults in New Rochelle, New York. A TDD is a typewriter with a modem that deaf people use to communicate with others over the telephone. I was complaining that there aren't enough of them in the Jewish community. One synagogue in particular irked me by saying it didn't need one because it had no deaf members. The synagogue was part of a community of 500-600,000 Jews. Others said that, if they had a TDD and advertised they would interpret for the deaf, they might indeed get a number of deaf Jewish members. The reasoning ran something like this: since there aren't many TDDs around in Jewish communal buildings, it must mean there aren't many deaf Jews.

Then the heavens opened up and inspiration struck. One of the participants extended the logic, saying, "Since we don't have many Jewish food banks, it must mean there aren't many hungry Jews."

**Food barrels should become a standard part of a Jewish building, as standard as Torahs in the ark, as the Eternal Light, as the computer that manages the business affairs.**

5. *Leftovers in the general community:* Members of the Jewish community should be encouraged to approach grocery stores, restaurants, bakeries, food distributors—anyone involved in bringing food to the table—to donate leftover, unsalable food to local soup kitchens and shelters. (And shoe stores for shoes, dry cleaners for unclaimed articles, bed and bath places for linens, towels, soap. . .) I encouraged a few people to try bakeries, and then talked myself into trying it once in Shreveport, Louisiana. It worked: the Lutece Bakery gave me what must have been \$300-400 worth of bread and pastries that would have been thrown away. All they wanted was a tax receipt from the recipient, Sister Margaret's mitzvah project, which feeds people daily. Some cities (probably many more than I know) already have pick-up programs, most notably New York, Philadelphia, Houston. In Washington, a brand-new project called Second Helping is just starting out that way: small and direct; just pick up and deliver.

### *The Ultimate Proposal*

A standard synagogue (Federation, Hadassah, JCC, Bonds, caterer) policy ought to be: "We suggest that at least a portion of the leftover food be donated to a local food bank, soup kitchen, or shelter."

Only that we suggest it. If the sponsor wishes to do it, that is up to the sponsor.

For synagogues, that means (a) fewer kids will raise their hands next summer when I ask the "1,000-meals-a-year" question,

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and (b) many more hungry people will be less hungry.

There is some need for clarification:

- Many already do it.
- Many Jewish restaurants would love to do it. For just one example, I was approached at Moshe Dragon's, the kosher Chinese restaurant in Rockville, Maryland, and asked what they could do with leftover chicken parts they don't use.
- Many—particularly Jewish conventions—could do it if they prepared ahead of time, making certain their contracts with the caterers read that they, the sponsors, owned the leftovers, and by arranging for pick-up and delivery to the shelter or soup kitchen.

(The bad news is, at the General Assembly of the Federations in New Orleans in November, 1988, the process began too late. So much food thrown away! I am sure this won't happen in 1989.)<sup>3</sup>

- Many, even at the last minute, still manage to do it, announcing at the event itself that the leftovers are ready to go, and they need someone to drop them off. (The very bad news is that the Rabbinical Assembly Convention in Washington, D.C., in the spring of 1989 did not succeed in convincing the hotel to release leftover food, despite the great efforts of Rabbi Jack Moline, one of the chairpeople, and other participants. So much food thrown away! I am sure this won't happen in 1991.)

● The issue of pick-up and delivery is solvable: people of good will and some spare time make the rounds, load the car or station wagon or van, deliver it, and the recipient agency sends a tax receipt.

A coalition of Jewish women in Worcester, Massachusetts, recently set up Rachel's Table, a group of women dedicated to doing just that: picking up the leftovers at Jewish communal events and delivering them to soup kitchens and shelters. It seems simple enough. This group must know something others don't know. Call 508-799-7600 and ask them how they do it. We already know why they do it. (The very sad news: I was speaking to a stewardess on Delta Airlines after she had just served the meal. I asked what Delta did with unopened containers of food—either complete, untouched meals, or things such as the granola bars, boxes of cereal, or little jars of peanut butter that are never opened. She answered that it was all thrown out. She was distressed that at her own daughter's wedding the caterer would not release leftovers for the hungry; according to the contract, he owned all the leftover food and could do with it as he wished.)

### *The All-Holy Excuse: Lawsuits*

The fact is, you can't be sued successfully if you donate to a



soup kitchen or a shelter. My good friend Michael Bohnen, a lawyer in Boston, tracked down copies of the relevant law of every state and the District of Columbia. Here is a passage from the Pennsylvania law:

*Notwithstanding any other provision of law, any person who, in good faith, donates food to a charitable or religious organization for ultimate free distribution to needy individuals, shall not be subject to criminal or civil liability arising from the condition of such food, if the donor reasonably inspects the food at the time of donation and finds the food fit for human consumption. The immunity provided by this subsection shall not extend to donors where damages result from the negligence, recklessness or intentional misconduct of the donor, or if the donor has, or should have had actual constructive knowledge that the food is tainted, contaminated, or harmful to the health or well-being of the ultimate recipient.<sup>4</sup>*

That is essentially the law everywhere in the United States. In some states, the soup kitchen or shelter may be liable, but that is their responsibility, and they can determine which foods they will serve and which they will refuse. People scream, "But there's The Health Code, The Health Code!" Any project already picking up food (try City

Harvest in New York, 212-349-4004; try Rachel's Table in Worcester) knows the health code backwards and forwards and won't handle suspect food. These kitchens and shelters have been serving food for a long time to hungry people. They know the rules. Any project involved in picking up leftover food and delivering it can tell you what kinds of forms and waivers of responsibility you might want to sign. If some of the finest restaurants in New York, Philadelphia, Houston—which most certainly do not relish the idea of being sued—are already doing it, they must know something we don't know. (It's probably something that goes like this: It's simple. Don't complicate matters. Do it. We always hated throwing the food out anyway, and by the way it's also good for business.)

So if we are not doing it because we don't have the logistical resources to get the food from Location A to Location B, let's say so. But let us not give the All-Holy Excuse about lawsuits.

Am I angry? Yes, but only because, as I deal with this question with some groups, that is the most commonly given excuse. It's just not so.

### ***In Conclusion: Combining Some Statistics***

If the MAZON people are right, estimating that Jewish catered affairs cost about \$500 million a year, and that twenty percent of all the food in this country is thrown out, \$100 million worth of food could be saved annually to feed hungry people.

Cut that figure in half. Let's say that the studies are wrong, that the numbers are inaccurate, that for one reason or another much of the food is not usable.

That still leaves \$50,000,000 worth of food annually. Let's just do it. Get a copy of the law from any lawyer. Let's just do it. ■

#### NOTES

1. Most communities estimate "at or near" the poverty line because the Federal guidelines (a) were established in the 1960s; (b) were on the basis of an income three times the cost of the average food basket; (c) certainly didn't allow for the extra cost of kosher food; and (d) only allowed deviations for Alaska and Hawaii, and not outrageously expensive places like New York.
2. Editor's Note: The Reconstructionist movement is calling on all its congregations to participate in MAZON.
3. A call by the Editor to the organizers of the 1989 G.A. confirmed plans for food donations this year.
4. 10 P.S. Section 351 ETSEQ.

### **The Wisdom of Women**

(continued from page 13)

#### NOTES

1. Included in *Kampf um Israel, Reden und Schriften (1921-1932)*, Martin Buber, (Berlin: Schocken Verlag). Also in Hebrew, *Darko Shel Mikra*, (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik), p. 135 ff.
2. George Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1973), p. 119.
3. Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 173.
4. For example, Sotah 12a.
5. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, p. 174.
6. Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Psychology of Moral Development* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), p. 370.
7. *per-sona*, lit., "for sound"; also the source of "parson," i.e., "the one who gives voice," "preacher."