

BELIEFS Values

Jews strive to brighten Passover for less fortunate

By RENA FULKA

SPECIAL WRITER
Yad Ezra — loosely translated, it means "helping hands."

And like its name implies, Oakland County-based Yad Ezra relies on the helping hands of countless volunteers to provide kosher food to the Jewish disabled, elderly, unemployed, working poor, single parent and new American.

In addition to regular food distributions, Michigan's only kosher food pantry has joined forces with Moses Chetiv to provide a special holiday distribution that will feed more than 1,300 Metro Detroit families during Passover.

Jews prepare for the holiday by removing food from the home and replenishing it with prescribed Passover foods. For those on a limited budget, the tradition may mean a holiday of going hungry or eating foods that are not acceptable according to Jewish law.

"The Passover distribution means they can actively participate in the most celebrated holiday of the Jewish year and the most restricted as far as what you can eat," said Ellen Goldman, executive director of Yad Ezra.

"They can feel good about observing properly with the right food." Packages prepared for distribution on March 24-26 include traditional Passover foods like matzah, gefilte fish, horseradish and grape juice.

"Our Passover distribution food is extremely comprehensive. Everything is kosher," said Goldman. "It transcends any particular ideology within the Jewish faith. Any Jew would feel comfortable here receiving food that meets all their requirements."

Yad Ezra began in a 400-square-foot office in Southfield, where founders expected to feed 20-30 families a month. But when they opened in February of 1990, more than 200 families were waiting at the door.

Two years later, Yad Ezra moved to its 6,000-square-foot warehouse at 25541 Harding in Oak Park. Today, the non-profit organization provides nutritionally balanced, kosher and non-kosher food to more than 1,100 financially strapped families. Clients visit the center once a month to select as many items as their shopping list allows based on eligibility. Deliveries are made to the homebound.

Holiday a legacy to freedom

By RENA FULKA
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Passover, or Pesach, is observed for seven days by Reform and Israeli Jews and for eight days by Conservative and Orthodox Jews. It begins at sundown on the 15th day of the Hebrew month Nisan, or on April 3 this year.

"It reminds us, as Jews, of the time we left slavery in Egypt and gained freedom," said Rabbi Harold Loss, of Temple Israel in West Bloomfield. "It's an enormously big moment, not only in Jewish history, but in the history of all people."

Preparations begin in advance with a thorough cleaning to rid the house of "chametz," or fermented products. House cleaning also involves the changing of dishes, serving utensils and pots and pans to those reserved only for Passover use.

The main moment is the seder meal, where we sit down as a family and a community to relive and retell the story of freedom," said Loss, of the event that dates back to the time of Moses around 1250 B.C.E. "It's a wonderful family moment."

The seder begins with the

lighting of candles and follows a clearly defined ritual outlined in the "Haggadah," or prayer book. Among ritual foods on the seder plate are matzo, a flat, unleavened bread symbolizing the haste in leaving Egypt; salt water, recalling the tears of Israelite slaves; charoset, a mixture of apple, wine, walnut and cinnamon representing the mortar used in building; and roasted shank, reminiscent of the paschal offering that allowed the angel of death to "pass over" the homes of the Israelites, sparing the lives of their firstborn during the tenth plague.

"The symbolic foods visually represent for us the historic realities of what was experienced, and they serve as wonderful teaching tools," said Loss.

In an after-dinner ritual, children search for the "afikomen," or half-matzo, which is shared as the last food of the evening. The table setting also includes a cup for Elijah, the prophet who will announce the coming of the Messiah.

For most Jews, the week-long celebration culminates with the transformation back to the eating of non-Passover foods.

■ 'This is the most rewarding thing I've ever done professionally... We have a real sense that God is watching out for us because things fall into place easier than I'd expect, considering the enormity of what we do and how small our staff is.'

Ellen Goldman, Yad Ezra

Goldman came to Oakland County from Connecticut last June, after nine years in synagogue administration had her yearning for a hands-on approach to helping others.

"This is the most rewarding thing I've ever done professionally," said the Southfield resident, who does everything from strategic planning to loading warehouse shelves. "It is such a pleasure that nothing seems insurmountable. We have a real sense that God is watching out for us be-

cause things fall into place easier than I'd expect, considering the enormity of what we do and how small our staff is."

Yad Ezra operates as a completely independent agency, almost exclusively from private donations. With only two full-time and two part-time employees, the small staff must rely on a host of volunteers to stay afloat.

"If the community didn't rally around us, this wouldn't happen," said Goldman, a former administrator of Temple Emanu-El



JERRY ZOLYNSKY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Caring and sharing: Southfield residents Ellen Goldman (left), executive director of Yad Ezra, and Ellie Glen, a volunteer, are among countless concerned citizens who extend "helping hands" in providing pre-packaged kosher Passover food for the Jewish needy throughout Metro Detroit.

in Oak Park.

Volunteers of all ages and from all walks of life spend an average of two hours a week at Yad Ezra, which serves from 25-100 individuals a day, six days a week.

Among more than 100 volunteers is Ellie Glen, a Southfield retiree. Glen spends most of her time verifying client need through one-on-one interviews, sometimes in Yiddish. But she seems just as eager to help with other phases of the operation.

"I see how important the organization is in its motive to help people feed the hungry," said Glen. "The people here are so kind, with no strings attached. It's a wonderful way to say, 'Please come, we'll help.'"

"We're not doing them a favor. We're providing them a service," added Goldman. "Dignity to our clients is a priority."

For more information, contact Ellen Goldman at Yad Ezra, 26641 Harding in Oak Park, by calling (810) 548-3663.

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