

## Mesamche Lev Recipients Effusive in their Thanks, after Massive Shoes and Food Distribution



By: F. Blum

Shoshana L. hasn't walked into a shoe store in years. She and her twelve children generally 'shop' at gemachs, and pass shoes down from one child to the next. So when she received a letter inviting her to come to Mesamche Lev's Shoe Distribution, she was understandably excited. Her excitement mounted when she walked into the welcoming white tent on Rechov Givat Shaul, in Yerushalayim.

The tent – a massive twenty five thousand square feet – was lined with shelves filled with stacks and stacks of neat cardboard boxes.

"But where are the shoes?" asked six year old Chava, who had never seen a shoe box before. She soon found out. One of Mesamche Lev's one hundred ninety volunteers was with the family in minutes, patiently sizing every member of the family, and presenting them with several pairs of beautiful shoes to choose from.

"We walked out with fourteen pairs of shoes," says Shoshana, grinning broadly. "I paid 20 shekel a pair." The token charge does not cover the cost of the shoes – but it does let people like Shoshana feel that they bought them.

Mesamche Lev distributed over 60,000 pairs of shoes this week, to families from Yerushalayim, Bnei Brak, Rechovot, Beit Shemesh, and beyond. The families came to Mesamche Lev's tent at pre-appointed times, and presented a special magnetic card that had been mailed to them. The computerized cards let volunteers see what sizes each family needed.

The shoes were high quality imports from Italy, the US, and China; and retailed at fifty to seventy dollars a pair. Mesamche Lev purchased them wholesale, for about twenty dollars each. The shoe distribution cost the organization over one million dollars, but was valued at over three million.

Several of Shoshana's children asked if they could wear their new shoes home, because their old shoes were so torn. She told them to save them for Yom Tov – besides for one little girl, whose soles flapped so badly, it is a wonder she was able to wear them to come to the distribution. The child fairly danced out of the tent in her new Italian Mary Janes.

If you would have given us just shoes – Dayenu!

Mesamche Lev's largess did not end there. Days after the shoe distribution, Shoshana's husband came back to the tent. This time, it was filled with food. 30,000 pounds of Komemiyus matzah, 4,000 cases brand-name wine and grape juice filled the tent.

"The volunteers at the tent swiped my magnetic card, and brought me cases of food," says Yehuda, Shoshana's husband. "It was unbelievable. Everything was fresh and high quality." Yehuda also received coupons from Mesamche Lev, which were redeemable at local grocery stores.

"Thanks to Mesamche Lev, we will have a magnificent Yom Tov," he said.

Yehuda and Shoshana could not have bought even a fraction of the food they received, without Mesamche Lev's assistance. Yehuda is



a distinguished ben Torah, who receives a small stipend from his kollel. The money is not nearly enough to feed their large family, even on a daily basis. Before Pesach, it buys nothing.

"Without Mesamche Lev, we would scrimp to buy just enough matzah and wine for the kzaysim at the Seder. I don't know what we would feed the children. Maybe potatoes. If we could scratch together the money", He swung his hand over his brimming shopping carriage.

"But now – we will have a Yom Tov! A real Yom Tov!" And grabbing the hand of the Mesamche Lev volunteer who had assisted him, he broke into an impromptu rekidah.

He was not the only one to express his joy, though others were more restrained. Mesamche Lev received mounds of letters from recipients, thanking the organization for granting their families a simchas Yom Tov, and sparing them from hunger and despair. One letter writer rewrote the Dayeinu.

"If you would have given us only shoes, Dayeinu – it would have been enough. If you would have given us only matzah, Dayeinu – it would have been enough. If you would have given us only wine and grape juice; fish; meat and poultry; food coupons & cash, Dayeinu – it would have been enough. But you have given us all that – and we are so grateful!"

Mesamche Lev helped over eleven thousand families this week with 60,000 pairs of shoes, 300,000 lbs of meats, poultry & fish; matzah, wine and over

\$500,000 cash stipends. There were Ashkenazim and Sephardim; Chassidic and Litvishe families; baalei teshuvah and recent olim. Every segment of Orthodox Jewry was represented at the distribution – and every recipient was served with dignity and sensitivity.

The organization was founded over thirty years ago by Rabbi Zalman Ashkenazi, of Brooklyn. The Pesach distribution was run by his son, Rabbi Yakov Shalom Ashkenazi of Yerushalayim. The organization serves the poor all year, by providing food coupons, stipends, and emergency assistance; and helps the needy marry off their children, pay for medical care, provide for Yom Tov, and much more. The Pesach distribution is their largest project, with an actual price tag of three million dollars, and a retail value of over five million dollars. This year, the falling dollar meant that money raised could not go as far as usual – but the organization did not cut even one person off its list. With tremendous siyata dishmaya, they were able to help as many people as ever.

Mesamche Lev is endorsed by rabbonim in Eretz Yisroel, the United States, and Europe, and is staffed almost entirely by volunteers.

"My father founded Mesamche Lev out of genuine ahavas Yisroel," says Rabbi Yakov Shalom Ashkenazi. "He runs the organization with mesiras nefesh. I have been zocheh to see what it means for us to be mesamchei lev – to really, truly gladden the hearts of our fellow Jews". A great zechus, indeed.