

Raizel Moss

Backing of a Community

Brought to the forefront

Chazal say that the world stands on three things: Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilus chassadim*. In Rockland County, the pillar of *chessed* is strong: one shining example is Tomche Shabbos. To get a glimpse into this amazing institution, *Binah* interviewed some of the special women who keep it running — superstars who are truly Tomche Shabbos's backbone.

The typical *frum* family's weekly trip to the local kosher supermarket yields a shopping cart filled to the brim. But that's nothing compared to what the food buyer for Tomche Shabbos purchases each

week! Every Monday, Debra Rosenstock plans the menu for her extended family, the 350 needy families in the Monsey area who will receive Shabbos care packages that week. A typical week will require

2,250 pounds of potatoes, 1,250 pounds of onions, 400 pounds of carrots, 800 pounds of fruit, 3,500 pounds of chicken, and 850 dozen eggs.

Shopping for such a large group



requires a lot of organization. “We have to get the most products for our dollar,” she explains. “We can’t stick with one supplier.” To that end, each week multiple companies submit sealed bids as to how cheaply they are willing to sell their food products to Tomche Shabbos. To ensure maximum freshness, orders are placed on Wednesday at 1:00 p.m., and deliveries are made to the Tomche Shabbos warehouse on Thursday afternoon. Challah, rye bread, gefilte fish, chicken, grape juice, fruit and vegetables, Shabbos candy, and cookies are all purchased in this manner.

Certain items, such as chicken, gefilte fish, grape juice, eggs, potatoes, onions, carrots, challah, and sliced bread are included weekly, without exception. Other items vary, depending upon the price and availability. These items include tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, and fruit. When affordable, eggplants, squash, or lovely summer fruits may be added to the list. For Yom Tov, meat is included.

Tomche Shabbos usually finds out about the families who need their services via a “shadchan” — a neighbor, co-worker, relative, or

friend who calls Tomche Shabbos to let them know that a family is struggling. Debra remembers all too well a phone call that came in anonymously one hot summer Motzoei Shabbos.

Mr. Goodman and his family traveled to Monsey for a family Shabbos sheva brachos. After the seudah on Shabbos day, Mr. Goodman realized that a favorite co-worker, Mr. Bernstein*, lived nearby, and decided to walk over to the Bernstein house and say Good Shabbos. Normally a very friendly man, Mr. Bernstein kept his visitor outside the door, even as the heat beat down upon Mr. Goodman’s shoulders.*

“Would you mind giving me a cold drink of water before I walk back?” he asked. A child was duly sent to bring a glass of water, and Mr. Goodman finally stepped inside. He froze as he realized he had disturbed the Bernsteins in the

middle of their seudah. Noticing only challah and peanut butter on the table, he grew concerned.

“May I use your bathroom?” he asked, after finishing his water. Upon washing his hands at the kitchen sink, he couldn’t help but see the empty counters — no cholent cooking. Nothing. As soon as Shabbos was over, Mr. Goodman called Tomche Shabbos.

“What is important here,” Debra notes, “is that this was a working man, not someone unemployed. He just did not make enough money to buy sufficient food for his family.”

While the weekly deliveries contain mainly Shabbos food, Debra realizes that some people need weekday food as well. She always tries to help the families get past Shabbos into the week by including extra potatoes and bread. Tomche Shabbos also has a canned food

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program, supported by girls from elementary and high schools as well as young married ladies who go door-to-door, collecting jars and canned food. These jars and cans, along with boxes of cereal and jars of peanut butter, make welcome additions to the care packages.

Shmuel stayed in a different part of town one Shabbos in order to attend the bar mitzvah of a classmate. The bar mitzvah boy's family had made arrangements for Shmuel to eat at his host's house at night, join the class for the kiddush in shul, and then return to his host for lunch.

Friday night, they ate challah, followed by very watery, clear soup. The main course was eight chicken wings, serving ten people. Shmuel feigned a stomach ache, and filled himself up at the kiddush the following day. Lunch at his host's consisted of challah and eight slices of deli meat.

By the time Shmuel returned home, his eyes were red from crying for these people. He felt like every morsel of food he ate was stealing precious food from his hosts. Shmuel's father contacted Tomche Shabbos immediately.

Aside from financial concerns when placing her orders, Debra must take into consideration the men who pack the boxes and the drivers who deliver them. Drivers do not like carrying heavy watermelons, but if the price is right, watermelons are occasionally purchased. Likewise, grapes often get squashed at the bottom of packages, and string beans prove difficult for the packagers to divide into family-sized portions.

Tomche Shabbos of Rockland

Cans of tuna, boxes of cereal and jars of peanut butter collected by kids are welcome additions to the care packages.

County has someone who makes discreet inquiries into each family's situation, remaining anonymous, so as not to cause embarrassment to people who may run into him later.

Is the husband out of work? Unfortunately, in today's economic climate, people are losing higher-paying jobs, so the fall is much greater. There are large mortgages



and car payments that suddenly cannot be paid. For those who have been laid off, Tomche Shabbos has set up a website to help them find jobs: www.Jobs@TomcheShabbos.org.

Tomche Shabbos asks potential employers to advertise there first before placing an ad in a newspaper. Moreover, they encourage unemployed people to submit their resumes as well.

Does the family need a car? Again, Tomche Shabbos attempts to make a "shidduch." Tomche Shabbos now accepts donations of running cars. These cars are donated directly to needy families. As a bonus, the tax deduction is often greater than with a traditional donation, because the deduction is at book value, which may be more than the car would have sold for.

Does the family have specific kashrus requirements? Those are fulfilled as well.

Each box is individualized for each recipient family. Sizes range from tiny, for a single person, to large, extra large, and extra-extra large. Each family is randomly assigned a number to insure anonymity, so that the packers and the drivers never know the identity of the recipients.

Once, a seasoned driver returned to the warehouse three weeks in a row claiming the family was not home because the lights were out. "We knew something was up." Through quiet investigation, Tomche Shabbos learned that the family had been without electricity for three weeks. "That means no heat, no hot food," Debra reminds us. The family had run an extension cord to a neighbor's house, alternatively plugging in their refrigerator and a space heater. The boys slept in one bed, the girls in another, and piles of blankets covered them.

As this was the Thursday of Thanksgiving weekend, the electric company was closed until Monday! Tomche Shabbos has a special fund to cover such emergencies, when possible. Small Tomche Shabbos

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donation cards in denominations of \$1, \$3, and \$5 are sold alongside the cash registers in many local supermarkets. The money raised is used for situations like this one, and in this case, it provided the family with electricity. This fund and the counter displays that are its source of support were conceptualized by Mrs. Devorah Adler, who created this campaign and still oversees all aspects of it, despite her hectic schedule as the mother of a large family. Since the time Devorah Adler first envisioned these coupons at the check-out counters of kosher stores, more than \$100,000 has been raised. Mrs. Adler has assembled a group of similarly dedicated housewives who visit the stores and maintain the program.

At Chanukah time, children receive toys, courtesy of a benefactor. Questionnaires are sent out yearly, prior to Chanukah, determining children's ages and genders in order to ensure that they receive appropriate gifts.

Yehudis could hardly listen as her children gleefully told her what they wanted for Chanukah. Baruch Hashem, they were unaware of how bad things had gotten, but still — how would she possibly be able to buy them anything? It's one thing to wear hand-me-downs without complaining, but shouldn't they get something new, just once a year? Her heart was pained, as she tried to find something they could possibly do without, in order to make some kind of gift possible.

When Thursday night's weekly food package arrived, two more boxes accompanied it. Yehudis felt the true meaning of a nes as she opened up the carton: a shtender, wood with silver plating, for Yosef, two new games for the twins, a truck with a car carrier attached for Shimmy, and a toy bracelet for Sarala.

Sometimes, Tomche Shabbos itself receives a wonderful gift. On occasion, a family who was once on the receiving end experiences a reversal of their

Shaindy has been receiving Tomche Shabbos packages for about five years. At the time the packages started, she had seven children, and her husband had just finished his master's degree and was beginning to work. A friend noticed that she seemed strapped financially and asked if she could sign Shaindy's family up for food. Reluctantly, but gratefully, Shaindy agreed.

"It saves me hundreds of dollars each week," Shaindy estimates. Plus, the extra eggs, potatoes, onions, chicken, and bread fill out the week. On Erev Pesach there's a huge delivery, and sometimes there's a surprise of chocolate, candy bars, orange juice, or canned fruit. Recently, Shaindy started baking her own challoos and cancelled that delivery.

"I love the mitzvah of taking challah," she explains. "But I also love knowing that there's one less item I'm taking, that we're one step closer to being back on our feet again."

Still, Shaindy is embarrassed. "Of course I'm uncomfortable," she says. "But I couldn't make it otherwise. If we were able to pay our bills, we wouldn't take it, but we can't." A few times, her three boys have gone to the warehouse on Thursday nights to assist in the packing, and "it felt good to be on the giving end."

Although it started out completely discreet, as the kids grew, they realized that they are the recipients of food donations. "The older children know about the packages coming late Thursday night. We wait up for the knock on the door, and then quickly bring the boxes in. No one wants a neighbor to see."

With trademark sensitivity, Tomche Shabbos never sends a driver to deliver in his own neighborhood. Total anonymity and preservation of dignity is mandatory.

One year, Shaindy recounts, there was a mix-up. The Erev Pesach delivery came a day earlier than she expected. "There was a knock at the door, so I answered it. A man was standing there, looking totally surprised, like he was caught in the act. He was unloading a van with lots of boxes."

While Shaindy immediately offered to help, he refused. "He was so embarrassed. He didn't want to know who we were. He wanted to maintain our privacy," she recalls.

Little by little, Shaindy's financial situation appears to be improving. "At this point, it would be nice to be on the other end," she contemplates. But for now, *baruch Hashem*, her family can count on a regular supply of food for Shabbos, and even some basics for the week.

financial situation. A letter arrives at the office thanking Tomche Shabbos for their previous help, and includes a check as a token of appreciation.

A lot of people are embarrassed to receive the boxes at their doorstep. Unfortunately, they often wait to request help until the situation has grown desperate. "A woman once called crying. She had fed her children popcorn for breakfast, as that was the only food in the house, then sent them

off on the school bus," Debra recounts. The poor mother tearfully related that she now had absolutely no food in her house to feed her children when they arrived home from school.

Tomche Shabbos grabbed whatever food was available in the warehouse freezer and sent people to local stores, which provided discounts for the rest. When the children arrived home, the kitchen was stocked, plus Shabbos food was set to begin arriving weekly.

Tomche Shabbos implores people not to wait until the situation is desperate. While they sympathize with their embarrassment, they stress that help is available and provided in a totally *bekavodig* and *tznius* manner.

A separate program, under the umbrella of Tomche Shabbos, is the Tomche Shabbos Simcha Project, which began about five or six years ago. Since its inception, Erica Shulman has led this group in raising over \$100,000. Whenever she learns of a *simchah*, Erica sends a formal letter to the *ba'alei simchah*. After wishing them *mazel tov*, she explains that, "in olden times, hosts used to invite *aniyim* for the *simchah*." Accordingly, she offers them the opportunity to do so by sponsoring food for Tomche Shabbos, marking the occasion they are celebrating. In essence, they are "inviting the *aniyim* for the Shabbos of their *simchah*," she articulates.

Erica Shulman doesn't request a specific amount. Rather, she suggests that feeding a family of four costs \$35, and offers packages of food for 10 families for \$350. Some people offer to feed the entire 350 families that

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Tomche Shabbos helps.

On Thursday night, as the men are packing up boxes, an announcement is made that Mr. and Mrs. Parnes are making a bar mitzvah and are sponsoring 20 boxes. "It really encourages the people who are packing," Erica notes. Like a candle lighting other flames, the *mitzvah* spreads from person to person.

Sponsors are provided with beautiful cards to adorn the *simchah* tables, explaining that the *ba'al simchah* has made a donation to Tomche Shabbos in honor of this *simchah*. While not everyone wants these cards, many choose to display them on the tables at their *simchah*,

hoping to encourage others to contribute as well.

"Being involved in *chessed* helps you and your family in so many ways, even more than what you do for the organization," Debra explains. "I'm *zocheh* to constantly see the *Yad Hashem*; expenses are often covered when there seems to be no hope, always in the nick of time. I feel truly grateful to be involved in this tremendous *chessed*." **B**

For those families needing assistance, please call 845-357-5885, extension 1. For those wishing to make a donation, please call 845-356-0202.

* Names have been changed

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