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A Potpourri of Encounters and Impressions

On Site



Cheaper by the Dozens

How much purchasing power do 40,000 families have? Enough to keep staple items rock bottom and enjoy affordable fresh produce. It's about strength in numbers and the bountiful blessings of unity



Affordable Fruit

Hamechirah, which today ships out to 115 locations in 23 cities, actually began as a *shemittah*-friendly service in the previous Sabbatical year, a little over seven years ago. In order to avoid the conflicting opinions regarding the handling of Arab-grown produce, organizers brought in pallets of fruits and vegetables that were grown outside Eretz Yisrael, and sold at cost on the streets of Beit Shemesh. As the *shemittah* year progressed, the high prices and certain halachic complexities meant that fruits and vegetables had become a luxury for many struggling families.

"We said, 'Let the families of Eretz Yisrael have fresh produce on their tables. Fruit and vegetables have to be affordable.'

And so the *mechirah* began," says Rabbi Levison.

While the sale was launched on the streets of Beit Shemesh, it soon spread to Yerushalayim and Bnei Brak. By Pesach, a phone order system was up, and demand was immediate. "We didn't really start small — it was big right away. People really, really wanted to have affordable fresh fruit in their homes, and word spread."

From produce, the community sale soon branched out to other items that consumers need and that suppliers — because of the volume — are happy to provide at rock-bottom prices. "It's around 400 products a month," Rabbi Refoel Leitner, a veteran *askan* and professional manager and the organization's vice chairman, explains. "But we rotate the categories, so that every week around 90 products are available. Of course, basics like fruit, vegetables, and bread go out every week — but cleaning supplies, disposables, frozen chickens, and other bakery products are part of the rotation." Rabbi Leitner brings considerable energy and managerial know-how to the *mechirah* from the many major community projects in which he's been involved. He hired a professional buyer who scouts out the best prices he can get for popular products, and those items will be included in the week's sale.



Buyer Power

Over 40,000 families in two dozen cities around Israel have happily been reaping the benefits of the power of the consumer — thanks to a team of rabbis and community activists who've learned how market forces can turn what might look like a charity into a mutually beneficial supplier of cheap goods. Through Hamechirah Lakehillah Shelach (Your Community Sale), families receive cut-rate prices on everything from fruits and vegetables to socks and baby wipes.

At the helm is Rabbi Shmuli Levison, a hardworking, community-conscious *avreich* from Jerusalem (and native Londoner) whose base is a massive warehouse in the nearby Har Tuv industrial zone. Until this year, Rabbi Levison, a *talmid* of Ponevezh, made sure to spend his day in *kollel* even after undertaking the running of the *mechirah*. His office, a neat but simple room with a polished table in the middle and pictures of *gedolim* on the surrounding walls and shelves, belies the massive financial transactions that occur here. He's constantly fielding urgent queries from secretaries regarding staggering orders and massive payments to some of Israel's largest companies.

Although the *mechirah* supplements its small core staff with teams of local volunteers who supervise distribution, it's not really a charity — it's more like a buying consortium. As any big retailer knows, lower prices come with greater volume. And 40,000 households means real buying power.

Your Order, Please

The automated phone system accepts orders from Thursday night till 8:30 a.m. Monday morning. With Anglos making up about 25 percent of the *mechirah's* clientele, detailed lists of products and prices are announced in both Hebrew and English. Orders can also be placed online at the *mechirah* website.

"We like to have a few weekly specials," says Rabbi Leitner, "but we ourselves can't offer discounts, because our prices are always only cost. So we ask our suppliers. And because they know that any discounts are always passed directly on to the customer and that no one's pocketing anything on the side, they're often amenable to lowering prices even further."

In the Har Tuv warehouse, not everything looks like food. One pallet of boxes definitely does not look like canned goods. "Socks," Rabbi Levison explains. "Black men's socks. We produced them in China especially for our clientele, and sell them once in a few cycles. They're very popular." Fresh wipes and paper towels are also popular items.



Rabbi Refoel Leitner (R) says suppliers are happy to provide rock-bottom prices because of the volume, and encourages new groups to join. "Buyer power isn't partisan. We're in it together, for the good of the *klal*!"



You Can't Order the Weather

Rabbis Levison and Leitner are not salaried employees, and neither are the dedicated volunteers who tirelessly run the weekly sales. "That means that all decisions and policy changes are made *l'tovas haklal* with no hidden interest, by people who take nothing in return," Rabbi Levison stresses. Around 15 full-time paid staff members — financial professionals, warehouse managers, and secretarial personnel — are based in Har Tuv, plus those hired for manual labor twice a week, on Mondays and Tuesdays, when the orders have to be packaged for trucking.

At the entrance to the warehouse, designated mailboxes are filled with labels for the 115 different locations in cities all over Israel.

Since the distributions take place in public areas, not rented space, and are run by volunteers, trucking is the *mechirah's* biggest expense. This includes getting fresh produce and today's bread to 23 different cities. Bread and pitas are delivered at 6 a.m. Wednesday mornings and quickly loaded onto the 100-plus trucks that supply the local sales.

You can order an early delivery of bread, but you can't order the weather. What happens to Wednesday's sale-in-the-street format if there is a storm? Occasionally the *mechirah* will reschedule in order to avoid such complications as a snowy day in Jerusalem — but rescheduling itself is a huge logistic challenge for the organizers and volunteers. In the more benign case of rain, huge portable gazebos are sent along to provide shelter to the shoppers. Then they are rolled up and returned to the warehouse at Har Tuv to be opened, dried, and stored for the next rainy day.

In It Together

Rabbi Levison says that the more who join the *mechirah*, the better it is for everyone. "Business is about competition; *chesed* is about unity," he explains. "No one has ever pulled out of our organization or declined to join because of religious convictions or partisan politics. We make sure that everyone is comfortable. All *hechsherim*, all walks of life... we're in it together, for the good of the *klal*."

The Gur *chassidus* ran its own cost-price initiative for years, until organizers realized they stood to gain by joining the *mechirah*. Today, the *mechirah* runs a separate service for 12,000 Gerrer families up and down the country, using their buying power and logistical prowess to operate a sophisticated phone system and deliveries. "We're in it side by side, because when you unite, the possibilities are endless," says Rabbi Levison.

"You see this loaf of bread? It still has the government-sanctioned price sticker — NIS 7.30. After months of negotiations, we can now sell it to our consumers for NIS 4. One week we even achieved a bonus price of NIS 3.80."

"And the hundreds of yeshivos who we organize joint buying for, get it even cheaper," Rabbi Leitner takes up the story. "For Yeshivas Mir, we saved NIS 77,760 last year on bread alone. And hundreds of yeshivos and other institutions have joined our system: Ponevezh, Chevron, Brisk, Nachalas Halevi'im, Toldos Aharon. We are open to any *massad* joining us; convalescent homes, nursing homes — the more the better. When we unite, we have buying power. It's not only bread, it's hundreds of products we order from suppliers on their behalf."



Shemittah-Free

This year, in order to avoid all *sh'eilos* regarding *shemittah* (e.g., saving or discarding peels from Arab produce, how to discard fruit with *kedushas sheviis*, which regions in Israel are *shemittah-free*), Rabbi Levison again had imported all produce from abroad: Holland, Belgium, New Zealand, Austria, France, Italy, South Africa, Turkey, Cyprus, America, Spain, and Jordan.

The pressing demands of supplying *shemittah-free* produce to his ever-growing consumer community means that this year, Rabbi Levison can no longer be a remote-control director from the benches of the *beis medrash*, but has to be on-site most of the time. Yet his scholarship combined with hands-on experience has made him a sought-after authority on *hilchos shemittah*, particularly on the exact location of the borders of Eretz Yisrael.



Gotta be Good

As we sit in the warehouse office, a worker comes in with a can of pickles offered by one of the suppliers. The can is popped open and everyone tastes. Then, a discussion: Is it good? Bad? Okay? Rabbi Levison settles the matter. "Look, now they taste fine. But how do they taste after half a day in the fridge? After a couple of days? My wife says neighbors have commented about this brand. It has to be checked. I'm not selling something that will spoil or that people won't be happy with. We want to give our consumers a product they'll enjoy. It's not a *chesed* if half of it goes

in the trash because the family won't eat it." Hence the taste tests — though of course, if the cheaper brand really is good, the *mechirah* people will be delighted to include it.

Pesach fruits and vegetables in particular need to be high quality in order to last the whole Yom Tov. A few years ago, a supplier provided potatoes for Pesach that were lower quality than the type that had been ordered. But the distribution had already taken place when the management discovered the mix-up, and they had no way of tracing who had received those potatoes. The supplier agreed to pay the 40,000 shekel difference, but there was no way to know which

families deserved a refund. They couldn't exactly call each of the thousands of families that ordered potatoes in order to survey whether they had been happy with their tubers — so what to do with the refund?

Rav Nissim Karelitz *parkened* that there was no need to do anything, but Rabbis Levison and Leitner mentioned their own idea of dividing the refund among all their customers' accounts for the next Yom Tov. Rav Karelitz became uncharacteristically emotional, stood up, and blessed them repeatedly, saying "I never saw an organization so determined to give to their clients instead of profiting from them." ●

What Will the Neighbors Say?

Pesach is always a game-changer for the *mechirah*. Overall, they sell five times the weekly volume for Yom Tov, which means renting an additional warehouse and organizing a special trucking system. But it's not as simple as bringing more carrots and potatoes to the usual sites. Some sales points empty out as young couples travel to their parents, while others experience ten times the volume. "It's basically the same skeleton staff pulling off a whole different level of logistics and timing," says Rabbi Levison. "So the system runs 24/6 in the run-up to Pesach, and we put in 16- to 18-hour days."

Nachal Lachish Street in Ramat Beit Shemesh Alef has one of the biggest pre-Pesach sales, with a police permit to close the entire street. Local residents were concerned about losing access to their street, so Rabbi Leitner printed "Lachish Resident" stickers for their cars in order for them to enter and exit freely. On distribution day, the shul on the block announced intermittent minyanim for Minchah, while families opened their homes for bathroom usage and offered coffee, tea, and cake to volunteers. "It's a real community experience," Rabbi Leitner says.

In general, the *mechirah's* directors believe that *chesed* should not be an annoyance. "We bend over backwards to get along with neighbors, explain what we're doing, and address their concerns," says Rabbi Leitner. In return, neighbors in proximity to the weekly sales have become quite accommodating. "They go out to the volunteers with cold drinks and ice pops, or with cups of tea in cold weather, offering to help clean up."

It's All of Us

Upwards of 400 volunteers give away hours on Wednesday to run the sales. They supervise unloading of the produce, give each customer his personalized order printout, then collect payment and supply change. Some string up lights or hang labels to help their customers. Some local organizers have arranged separate times for male and female shoppers.

"Our volunteers are special people," says Rabbi Levison. "*Chashuve* people come forward to help, some of them the families of *rabbanim* or *roshei yeshivah*. They do amazing work for the *klal* in those few hours on Wednesdays. Naturally, we view them as partners."

And that's part of the point of the project. It's not a charity, and it doesn't run on donations. It's a communal effort where everyone pools resources to make products affordable and keep costs to a minimum.

There is one exception: donations to subsidize certain goods before Yom Tov. Those products are clearly listed as such, so families can make their own choice to accept the extra help or not. "Many of our consumers are uncomfortable taking *tzedakah* — that's a lot different from being able to join a powerful buying network where they can provide for their families at cost. We would never want to stuff donations down their throats."

