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Yad Chessed prepares to fulfill Purim's mitzvah of tzedakah

by **Penny Schwartz** — March 4, 2022 in Front Page



Marsha Finkelstein

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Sometimes you just have to ask for help. That's a message Marsha Finkelstein hopes others in the Jewish community take to heart, a life-changing realization that made a difference in her own when she needed financial support.

Finkelstein, who settled on the North Shore more than 20 years ago from her native Brooklyn, has had a long professional career in human services. At various times, she's been in and out of work.

"I'm a well-educated person, committed to working in human services. But sometimes, it's a struggle," she revealed, with a candor that does not come easily to many people.

At one point, when Finkelstein needed help to pay her rent, she was referred by Jewish Family & Children's Service to Yad Chessed, a nonprofit that provides emergency financial assistance to Jews across

Massachusetts who are experiencing economic and food insecurity.

She was struck by the care and respect staff extended to her.

“They weren’t judgmental. I felt I could be honest,” Finkelstein told the Journal in a phone conversation.

“It was OK to ask for help,” she realized. Over the years, she has turned to Yad Chessed on a few other occasions. “Every time I chose to reach out, I got kindness. I never felt I shouldn’t be asking,” she said.

Yad Chessed’s support alleviated financial hurdles – including a routine car repair – that prevented a downward spiral and allowed her to move forward.

“Yad Chessed was vital,” Finkelstein said. Knowing she had somewhere to turn was reassuring.

Since its founding on a shoestring budget by Robert Housman in 1989, the Waltham-based organization has tied its mission to Purim, the festive holiday that includes the mitzvah of *matanot l’evyonim*: gifts for those in need.

As Purim approaches, beginning on the evening of March 16, Yad Chessed partners with over 140 synagogues, children’s schools, and other Jewish organizations across the region to fulfill Purim’s mitzvah of *tzedakah*.

“Purim gives community members that opportunity to make a tangible, direct impact to those among us who need help,” according to Nancy Kriegel, Yad Chessed’s executive director.

“The mitzvah has its roots in the Biblical narrative in the Book of Esther, when the Jews of Shushan [ancient Persia] are instructed to celebrate their victory over the genocidal Haman and his followers,” according to Rabbi David J. Meyer of Temple Emanu-El in Marblehead.

The rabbi draws on his discretionary funds to contribute annually to Yad Chessed’s Purim appeal on behalf of the temple. Over the years, Yad Chessed has been an outstanding resource for members of his congregation in times of need, he wrote in an email.

The small, nimble organization relies on support from Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston and donations. It does not receive any government support.

There are about 4,000 Jewish households living at the poverty level in Greater Boston, with up to 11,000 more at risk of poverty, according to the group’s website.

Last year, Yad Chessed raised over \$200,000 during Purim and distributed a total of 1,325 food gift cards worth \$150 each.

This year, Yad Chessed expects to increase that number to more than 1,400 vouchers, distributed to some 950 households. Depending on size, some households receive more than one voucher. They can be used at several area kosher markets on Purim day, or later at grocery stores.

But the need is ever present throughout the year, Kriegel emphasized. Two years of the pandemic and its widespread economic impact revealed to the broader community that there are people struggling. “There was an outpouring of a desire to help, what I call back-to-basics *tzedakah*,” Kriegel said.

Last year, Yad Chessed came to the assistance of some 1,833 individuals, with more than 200 receiving help for the first time, according to its 2020/21 annual report.

The demographics of those who need help is as diverse as the Jewish community, Kriegel has found. They serve clients in over 150 communities, from different levels of religious observance, young families, seniors, and those with mental health challenges.

“It could be any of us,” she said. “We need to destigmatize the act of asking for help,” she said, echoing Finkelstein’s sentiment.

Years later, Finkelstein has turned that financial corner and now works as a career coach for Jewish Vocational Services, a job and organization she loves.

She has shared her story about Yad Chessed to encourage others to seek help when they need it.

“Now I find myself in a good position,” Finkelstein said. She credited Yad Chessed with playing a pivotal role in her life.

“It has helped contribute to my success,” she said.

To learn more about Yad Chessed or to contribute, visit yadchessed.org. Those who are experiencing financial hardship can email intake@yadchessed.org or call 781-487-2693.

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