

## Dining with dignity

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Each of the 20-odd sunlit tables at the Carmei Ha'ir restaurant is set with silverware and dressed with salt and pepper shakers and a basket of fresh pitot. Waitresses wind between tables with piping-hot dishes of pasta, soup, rice, chicken, fish, plates of salad, and jugs of juice. Some patrons are in suits, others are in sweatpants; some eat slowly, while perusing a newspaper or chatting with friends; others eat hurriedly, then run out the door.

Aside from the absence of a cashier, there is no indication that the three-week-old kosher meat eatery at 72 Rehov Agrippas is anything less than a normal restaurant. But almost every day since it opened, a queue has gathered in front of the new dining hall in anticipation of its noon opening, and by the time it closes at 3 p.m., the restaurant has served meals to over 150 needy Jerusalemites, for whom Carmei Ha'ir has already become their primary source of food.

"There have always been hungry people in Jerusalem," explains co-founder Rabbi Yehuda Azrad. "But over the last three years, the situation has become much more acute." According to Azrad, the bulk of their clientele consists of people who, prior to the outbreak of violence in September 2000, were fully employed and self-sufficient. "Even if they qualify, some of these people refuse to accept social security, let alone enter a soup kitchen," he says. "That's why we decided not to label this place as such; because we wanted to reach those people who are ashamed that they are in need."

Quoting a passage from Rabbi Zushner of Halipol, Azrad points out that he has never seen a man die of starvation. "But I have seen a lot of men die of shame," Azrad says. Taking its name from the Blessing of the Table, "Carmei" is an acronym that translates to mean "Each starving man will eat from this source" (*kol rah-‘EV mee-MEH-nu yoh-KHAHL*). However, just as the name of the place conceals its significance, the atmosphere of the restaurant protects the identity of its patrons.

After completing their meal, each customer leaves on his table the amount he can afford: some have left NIS 100 donations; others, just a thank-you note. All leave with their dignity intact. "The dream," says Azrad, "was to bring people to a place where they can eat with dignity; where they can enter and feel equal to other people."

Azrad shared this dream with two of his friends: Momi Ben-Zruel and Itzik Levitan, who, like Azrad, were individually collecting food from the market and distributing the packages to local families in need, before they discovered their mutual passion for helping the hungry. When the group finally got together a few months ago, the idea to open the facility was born. They run the restaurant cooperatively, with each one paying out of his personal bank account a third of the restaurant's \$1,400 monthly rent. Since the threesome made the decision to open the eatery, they have attracted the assistance of many, among them master chef and former owner of Kikar Safra's prestigious Eucalyptus restaurant, which closed down a year ago, Moshe Basson. "I bring good food and good people," explains Basson, whose loyal Eucalyptus patrons frequent the new establishment alongside the needy clientele. Basson comes to Carmei Ha'ir every morning to prepare the day's food, treating customers to his upscale repertoire of cuisine, including red lentil soup, soy goulash, stuffed vegetables, sweet-and-sour chicken-stuffed figs, and ma'aliba, an upside-down casserole with chicken, vegetables, and rice.

Ben-Zruel's friend, Harel Arbel, was also inspired by the idea and initiated the job-postings board inside the eatery, where four customers have already found employment. Arbel flew to New York on Monday on a fund-raising visit on behalf of Carmei Ha'ir. Every Sunday is pasta day thanks to Angelo Di Signe from Angelo's restaurant, who comes to Carmei Ha'ir to cook pasta.

Every day, a team of three or four volunteers shows up to help with cooking, cleaning and serving. Thanks to those volunteers, who stay after the restaurant closes, the group was able to launch the sandwich program for schoolchildren, which involves delivering plastic-wrapped tuna, egg, and shakshuka sandwiches every lunch hour to 200 hungry kids in 12 schools across Jerusalem. "We only asked that the schools keep one condition," explains Basson, who looks forward to a time when there will be enough volunteers to make sandwiches for the other 500 hungry pupils in the city, according to Social Affairs Ministry figures. "That is that the sandwiches will either be inserted into the pupils' bags secretly, or given to them in the area of the office, away from the other children." Basson recounts the story of one 12-year-old girl who was waiting in front of her principal's office last Friday, after Carmei Ha'ir sent a note to all of the schools explaining that given the shortened work day and shortage of volunteers, there would be no sandwiches on Fridays. "She was waiting in front of the office at lunchtime when the secretary asked her if she could be of assistance," recalls Basson. "The girl explained that she was fine and didn't need anything. After 10 minutes, the secretary asked her again and again, and the girl said she was fine. After another 10 minutes, the secretary asked again and finally, the girl broke down and said, 'I'm waiting for my sandwich.'" After that, Basson decided that there will never be another day without sandwiches.

In addition to the volunteers, many people in the neighborhood have pitched in. One of the workers from the market, who goes by the name of Yehuda, comes to Carmei Ha'ir every morning with a question for Basson: "What do you need today?" Says Basson, "He brings a 20-kilogram sack of fresh carrots one day and a 25-kilogram sack of large potatoes the next." When he arrives in the morning, Basson is greeted with containers of food that were left there, anonymously: boxes of chickens, bags of vegetables, and once, even a huge bag of high-grade basmati rice. "I sent a list of spices to a spice vendor in the market to get a price list," recalls Basson. "But instead of sending me the prices, he sent two kilograms of each spice on the list." After visiting the restaurant, one woman went down the street and returned with a brand-new food processor. "There is an amazing generosity among the people of Jerusalem," enthuses Azrad. "From here, we behold the greatest face of the people of Israel and it's a beautiful thing to see."

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