

Chicken Feed

Clara Hammer makes sure no one goes hungry on Shabbat.

by Hillel Kuttler

Every Thursday, Sheina Homnick, 18, runs an errand for her grandmother. It's a simple one, to be sure, but laced with kindness just the same. Venturing from her grandmother's apartment to a butcher shop three blocks away in Jerusalem's Sanhedria neighborhood, she delivers a check to the proprietors, the brothers Moti and Altı Hacker.

In 1999, the checks totaled 156,070 shekels, roughly \$40,000. The money constitutes a debit account that enables 132 impoverished families to deck their Shabbat tables with chicken and flanken, roasts and soy burgers—whatever it takes to feast like royalty on the holiest night of the week.

Few of the recipients know the source of their good fortune, and their benefactor, Sheina's grandmother, Clara Hammer, prefers it that way. "When I go to the butcher, I can stand in line like everybody else," says the 90-year-old. "In front of me can be two families who get chickens. And they say 'thank you' to the butcher, nothing to me." Though she's garnered some press coverage and last year received Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert's highest citizenship honor, Hammer is a do-gooder who believes in Maimonides' dictum that charity is most selfless when it is anonymous.

Nevertheless, she's become known as the Chicken Lady of Jerusalem, a title she wears with pride, judging by her Chicken Lady T-shirt and all the chicken tchotchkes that fill her nest. There's a chicken pillow on the sofa and a chicken needlepoint on the wall, a chicken candy dish, chicken (no piggy allowed) bank, chick-



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"The Chicken Lady of Jerusalem" not only distributes food, but finds clothing and other essentials for needy people.

en fly swatter, chicken mug, chicken tea kettle and chicken windup doll that struts to (what else) the "Chicken Dance," all gifts from her legions of donors in Israel and the United States.

Hammer's voice breaks just mentioning a non-Jewish woman, Judy from Ohio, who sends annual contributions and, in 1997, included a gold-framed ditty spelling out her name:

*Chicken
Lady
Always
Rushes
Around like a
Heavenly
Angel
Making
Miracles happen in
Each life she
Reaches*

"It's people like that who give me the courage to carry on," says Hammer, whose helpers multiply almost as abundantly as her own brood. (She now has 33 great-grandchildren and nine grandchildren from her three daughters.) For example, when North Carolina's Blue Star Camps sought a charity project two summers ago, they chose the Chicken Lady. She reaches across her cluttered dining-room table and snags a cardboard box filled with slips of colored paper on which campers penned messages to attach to their dollars. All come with a chicken drawing and begin, "Dear Chicken Lady": "Good fortune will smile upon you for all the good you do" and "I think it's awesome what you did. You probably saved many lives" (sic) and "You rock! What you're doing is great" and "You showed me that one person can make a difference, so many people have a chicken dinner." And how about this one: "I like chicken/I like liver/Chicken Lady/Please deliver."

Contributors just keep appearing. Recently, a man rang her bell, stuck out a hand clutching 500 shekels and rushed back to his waiting taxi. An acquaintance in Chicago mails \$500 twice a year. He, too, appeared unexpectedly and, although the Chicken Lady was out, he left a bag filled with cosmetics (his line of work), fruit and a check. The Jewish Agency occasionally brings by American kids who chomp on popcorn as Hammer spins her tale.

Hammer gives the word "organization" new meaning: her ledger book (43 pages last year alone) lists the names of each contributor, with penciled marks denoting those who have already been sent thank-you notes. Among her few concessions to age are form letters to first-time givers. Veteran contributors qualify for handwritten replies.

The Chicken Lady has a knack for bringing work upon herself because, it turns out, she's not satisfied being just the Chicken Lady. Not long ago, the Orthodox newspaper *HaTzofeh* reported on a crippled man playing an accordion for his food on the streets of Tel Aviv. So Hammer sent—and still sends—a monthly check for 300 shekels, along with an extra 200 shekels for the man's 14-year-old daughter. That's

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because the girl, Nika Sapozhnikov, attends the Givatayim Conservatory and dreams of a musical career. But with the family in dire straits, she had no money for a violin. So the Chicken Lady temporarily became the Music Lady. Hammer secured an old, lovely instrument from a friend, paid to have it repaired and trekked to the Sapozhnikov home, where an appreciative Nika regaled her with Vivaldi, Bach and Mozart.

"She helps me so much," says Nika, who uses her stipend to purchase new strings, along with special clothes for concerts and, of course, to defray the family's living expenses. "The violin makes such a nice sound. If she wouldn't be helping, I don't know what I'd be doing. I'm serious. I wouldn't be able to learn violin."

To Miriam Malka of Ashdod, who sent a letter relating how her daughter Nurit's classmates mocked her for having to wear her mother's winter coat,

Hammer, suddenly the Clothing Lady, sent a check for a new coat. The thrilled Nurit showed up one day to model it. "She was beautiful!" exclaims the Clothing Lady, as if talking of her own daughter. "I let her kiss me. I said, 'In two years, I'll see you at your wedding!'"

The Sapozhnikovs and Malkas are among 32 families who know Hammer as their benefactor, but only because they live outside Jerusalem and she has no choice but to send them checks. Hammer always mails them on Rosh Chodesh—the first day of every Hebrew month—along with best wishes for a good month. "Today I got a call from somebody who received a check," she says. "I'm glad not all of them call, because it would be too time-consuming."

Being everyone's salvation borders on full-time employment, and Hammer sometimes feels overwhelmed. She voices displeasure about a social worker who just referred two new families to her, but it's hard to take her too seriously. "I would like not to take on any more. I feel that physically, chronologically, I can't. I wish people would stop calling me," she complains. "A few weeks ago, a *rebbetzin* called me about a family with 10 children. What can I do? How can I say no?"

Precisely the point. She can't. Says Alti Hacker, the butcher: "She has the emotions of a mother. A mother worries about every child. So does she."

Just then, a Russian immigrant couple enters the shop, plucks three chickens from the freezer and requests two packages of fresh cutlets. Hacker asks if they know Hammer's name and they nod "yes." He asks how long they've been coming to his store, and they say about three years. When such couples first arrived in Israel, Hammer would accompany them on food-shopping trips. "I went with them to the butcher," she says, "because they didn't speak the language yet and they didn't know what it was to go to a store and get something for nothing."

When Hacker introduces them to me, they shake their heads "no" and scoot out. Their bill comes to 64 shekels

(about \$16), smack in the range of the average “sale.”

Hammer’s charity couldn’t help but rub off on the Hackers. Any time a Chicken Lady customer comes in, the butchers debit only their cost and take no profit. “This is to give people a nice Shabbat. We’ll even throw in the bones or wings for soup at no charge at all, if that’s what they request,” Hacker says.

All this goodness got started 20 years ago. “I went on a Thursday to get a chicken for Shabbat,” relates Hammer. “I was in line when the butcher handed a young girl a plastic bag with what I saw was just skin and fat. She took it, said ‘thank you’ and left. My curiosity was aroused. I asked him how many cats and dogs the family had. He said: ‘None. The father’s on dialysis and they owe me 10,000 *lirot* and I can’t give them any more, so I save this for them. For Friday night, they make soup and Saturday they have cholent.’

“I was so angry I was shaking. I said, ‘You’re giving them poison! You throw it out, and every week, you give them two chickens and anything else they want—schnitzels, hot dogs, whatever.’ That’s when my chicken fund was born. Then he recommended a family to me, then another, then word spread. Social workers, or those from organizations I belong to, started to ask me if I’d take on a family. Once, it was written up in a newspaper, and that was it!”

Hammer’s own background lacked such benevolence. She and her parents, brother and sister fled their native Vinograd, Ukraine, during the pogroms of 1917. Smugglers took them across the river to Romania, but the family was caught and imprisoned in Galatz for three months.

“We were rationed out a bit of water and a piece of bread,” Hammer recalls. The beleaguered family eventually reached Palestine. “When we were in Haifa, we lived in a tent and had nothing to eat. Between ages 10 and 14, I went to bed hungry. I know what hunger is. I have never forgotten it.” They finally made it to the United States, where they settled in Pittsburgh and where Hammer’s father, Meir,

opened a grocery store.

Strangely enough, the prison experience was partly responsible for Hammer’s amateur singing career. A guard promised Hammer’s father he’d give Clara a chocolate if she could master a Romanian song after he sang it three times. She did, and won the chocolate, the first she’d ever tasted.

Now, 80 years later, the elderly widow can still belt out the young girl’s tune, “*Deschide, Deschide, Fereastră*” about a boy calling for his girlfriend on the other side of the window to come in and eat. A few minutes later, unprompted, she offers up “A Yiddishe Mama,” clasping her hands, her palms upward, eyes closed.

Hammer has always loved music. Her photo album is filled with programs that list Clara Hammer as providing the vocal entertainment at Jewish organization events in Los Angeles and Brooklyn, where she and her husband Ephraim taught Hebrew for more than 40 years before immigrating to Israel in 1969.

In Los Angeles, she painted a Mogen David on a white bed sheet and sang in the streets to raise money for Hadassah. At one such performance, with what can only be called adorablechutzpah, she told the assembled crowd, “Ladies and gentlemen, please get your paper money ready while I sing because change disturbs my mood.”

“It’s a wonderful feeling not to be selfish, to be concerned,” says Hammer, closing the album. “I could go to lunch three, four times a week with the girls. They go to the Malcha Mall to try on clothes. What do I need it for?”

“I can make kiddush and sing ‘Shalom Aleichem’ and know that over 130 families have chicken and can do the same. When I sit down Friday night with my great-grandchildren and know that a few hundred children also eat, I enjoy my food.” ■

Hillel Kuttler last wrote for inside about Israeli filmmaker Amos Gitai.