

Mitzvah Day

By Paula E. Kirman

In Judaism, the term mitzvah refers to the 613 religious laws that Jewish people follow, such as those concerning the Sabbath or keeping kosher. Some also deal with moral and ethical issues. As a result, the word has also come into every day use amongst Jews to mean a good deed. When one helps someone else, that positive action is called a mitzvah.


A local group of Jewish people have taken the concept of mitzvah and turned it into a community event helping agencies throughout the city. Mitzvah Day started 12 years ago as an initiative of Rabbi Lindsey Bat Joseph, former spiritual leader of Temple Beth Ora, Edmonton's Reform Jewish synagogue. Mitzvah Days were taking place in other cities, and she felt it was time for Edmonton to have one of its own.

Francie Nobleman, a local speech pathologist and member of Temple Beth Ora, became Mitzvah Day's organizer. "The concept of a day where you're looking at ways to make the world a better place is what Mitzvah Day is all about," she explains. Mitzvah Day in Edmonton started out small, with Rabbi Bat Joseph bringing in a representative from the Bissell Centre to speak about poverty and someone from Nicaragua who had lost everything in a flood in that country before coming to Canada to speak about his experiences. The children from Beth Ora's religious school brought mittens and other small items of warm clothes to give to them.

Within a year, Mitzvah Day became established on the third Sunday of November and would include more and more organizations as time went by. After 11 years, there were more than 20 recipient agencies throughout the city, including the Youth Emergency Shelter, the Bissell Centre, Boyle Street Community Services' youth center, Boyle McCauley Health Centre, George Spady Centre, Terra (for teenage mothers), Multicultural Health Brokers, Africa We Care, WIN House, Wings of Providence (a crisis shelter for women and children), and the YMCA, all non-denominational charities here in the city. The only Jewish agency receiving donations is Jewish Family Services. "We try to have a balance of the kinds of different people we help," says Nobleman.



Sorting clothing during Mitzvah day



Mitzvah Day continued...

Each agency provides the Mitzvah Day group with a wish list of what they need. Items would start to be gathered at the Jewish Community Centre (JCC) in late August, and stored in the part of the building where the swimming pool used to be. As the date drew closer, the area would grow packed with the needed items: clothing and household items, as well as toiletries, toys, baby items, electronics, kitchen supplies, furniture, food and sporting goods. Volunteers from throughout the Jewish community would sort, box, and deliver to the various agencies.

“We have teams of schleppers, (schlep is a Yiddish word meaning - to drag around), people who drag all the donations that were made to the JCC and sort them in the back,” Nobleman explains. Cash donations are also accepted, but not actively solicited, and donors receive income tax receipts through the JCC.

There is some major work the night before the main event. “We’ve got some tremendous volunteers with really good organizational skills and they have this down to a fine art,” Nobleman explains. “As soon as sundown comes and Shabbat is over, a whole crew of volunteers comes in to sort what has not already been pre-sorted. The next morning we’ve got a head start. It evolved from one Sunday morning with two people speaking to this huge community effort that involved teams of sorters for three months, teams of people bringing the stuff from various places, then on the weekend of teams of people to sort and finally to deliver.”

Due to the expectation that the Jewish Community Centre was going to be sold, Mitzvah Day did not happen in 2008 with the same scope. Instead, there were a bunch of smaller Mitzvah Days helping out one organization at a time. The sale of the building fell through, but impending renovations have put the future of a large Mitzvah Day up in the air, and Nobleman suspects that 2009 may bring another series of smaller events.

Nobleman says that for her, the biggest purpose of Mitzvah Day is, “to bring people in the Jewish community together for something that is not just for us, but for the broader community. The thing that gives me the most pleasure is seeing all the different people in the community working together for something that is helping a whole bunch of other people of different faiths and backgrounds.”