

HELPING HANDS

Tomche Shabbos of Rockland Thinking Out of the Box

BY DOVID MARGOLIN

It's a cold, dark winter evening somewhere in Monsey, New York, and a Tomche Shabbos of Rockland County driver waits with his partner in the car. In the trunk they have a box of Shabbos food to deliver to a needy family, but there are a few people milling around in front of the family's home. Should they drop the box off anyway? The driver calls Tomche Shabbos director Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Moskowitz and asks him what to do.

"Don't get out of the car — we can't risk embarrassing the family," answers Rabbi Moskowitz emphatically. "Take the package with you and deliver it in the morning on your way to work."

So goes the vital work of Tomche Shabbos, operating under the cover of darkness and with tremendous emphasis on its recipients' right to privacy. Traditional food distribution, however, is only one aspect of its work. Tomche Shabbos has branched out into a number of projects, including a cost-price food market and a job-placement program.

"Each person has his own personal situation; no one is just a number," says Alan Rosenstock, the organization's president. "When someone calls us, we cannot say, 'Hold on, I have people on three other lines.' We need to listen to each person, because whatever that person is going through is unique."

Pallets of food stretch for as far as the eye can see



Traditional Roots

It has been the tradition of Jewish communities for thousands of years that they help their poor in any way possible. Monsey, New York, is no different, and as the community grew, small independent groups did their part to try to help needy families in whatever way they could. It was not until the early 1990s, in an attempt to formalize these efforts, that Tomche Shabbos of Rockland County was born.

“Like all places, Monsey has had poor people living here forever,” Mr. Rosenstock begins. “There were always individuals who helped others, but eventually the poverty and need for help became too widespread, and it was time to join forces.”

‘Waste Not’

“Things have evolved, *baruch Hashem*, from when we began as a formal organization. In the beginning we would pick up leftovers that had not been distributed in Williamsburg by an organization called Tzedaka V’Chessed, run by Rav Mordechai Polachek, and distribute it in Monsey. This would happen every other week.”

“Pick-ups of food from Williamsburg began around ‘89,” adds Rabbi Moskowitz. “A local volunteer, Reb Shlomo Zalman Feldman, who worked for Mail Lease, would take his truck into the city and bring back the food, which we divided among the thirty-two families on our list. It was delivered by drivers on six different routes; today we have more than seventy-six such routes.

“In 1992, we incorporated and began raising money to supply food for those on our list during the weeks when we didn’t get anything from Williamsburg. Things have grown immensely since those days, and today we serve over 460 families. Unfortunately, we have to add around one hundred families every three to five years.”

In the 1990s the organization began to expand, and soon Mr. Rosenstock was raising enough money to pay for weekly delivery of food boxes. “I had been told

that we could fund all necessary deliveries if I could raise \$6,000 every week. Miraculously, I somehow raised what was then for me a crazy sum, and we immediately began to provide packages weekly.”

Mr. Sammy Friedland, the founder of the retail chain Amazing Savings, has been active in Tomche Shabbos since its inception and has served on its board for more than twenty years. He recalls the impetus behind the organization’s first dinner.

“I remember that in the early days

they didn’t want to make a dinner because they didn’t want to potentially embarrass anyone,” recalls Mr. Friedman. “At the time, Tomche Shabbos was not able to provide for everyone, there was a waiting list to get help. We received a telephone message from a woman that went something like this: ‘I’m calling you, and I know that there’s a waiting list, but I thought I might double-check that my name didn’t get lost somehow.’

“Someone actually visited this woman’s house and saw that she had



The warehouse in action. Packing food Thursday evenings at the Tomche Shabbos warehouse draws Jews from all walks of life.

literally nothing — I mean, maybe some crackers and cream cheese, but there was really nothing there. That’s when we decided to hold a dinner — not so much for the money but to raise awareness and Tomche Shabbos’s profile. That dinner enabled us to provide for everyone on our waiting list as well.”

‘Headquarters’

After moving from place to place, the burgeoning Tomche Shabbos ended up in Mr. Friedman’s two-car garage, where it

remained for about five years.

“It was such a *zechus* for me to have it in my garage, and it was amazing for my children as well. Deliveries started coming in early each week — eggs on Monday, milk on Tuesday, vegetables on Wednesday. The entire Thursday night volunteers would be packing boxes. Before Yamim Tovim we set up tents on my front lawn in order to be able to handle all of the goods.

“Right after we began, a non-Jewish woman who was my neighbor came over to me and asked what was going on at my

“It was such a zechus for me to have it in my garage. Deliveries started coming in early each week - eggs on Monday, milk on Tuesday, vegetables on Wednesday. The entire Thursday night volunteers would be packing boxes.”



house; she thought I was running some kind of a supermarket! So I explained to her what we were doing and said that I was sorry if it bothered her. I even offered to move it away from my house, but she wouldn't hear of it—she was so impressed, so touched. The next week she baked two apple pies and brought them over for us to distribute! It was such a tremendous *kiddush Hashem*.”

Mr. Friedman allowed Tomche Shabbos to use his garage indefinitely on the condition that its next location would be a permanent one. Not long afterward, Mr. Bernie Englard became a Tomche Shabbos board member, and a few years later they purchased the massive warehouse where Tomche Shabbos is currently located. Mr. Englard, still on the board and a key decision maker, also comes to the Thursday-night packing sessions as often as possible.

“I try to go as often as I can, and I bring

my grandson along. I wish I could do it all the time,” says Mr. Englard.

Sophisticated Organization

In the last twenty years Tomche Shabbos has grown into a sophisticated operation with a variety of programs, hundreds of volunteers, and an annual budget of about \$2.3 million.

Each Wednesday the massive Tomche Shabbos warehouse begins to fill with women and girls who do all of the initial preparation of the boxes, labeling and filling them with nonperishables. The next evening the work is seamlessly picked up by men and boys, who finish packing the boxes and ready them for delivery. Each box has a sticker with specific information about the needs of that family, such as special food or *hechsher* requests.

By 10:15 p.m. the drivers show up. Driving in pairs, they divide up the seventy-six different routes, with some

making as many as ten stops. The anonymity of the clients is so important to Tomche Shabbos that each family is assigned a number, and no volunteers know for whom they are packing boxes. In addition, drivers are sent to neighborhoods with which they are not familiar, further protecting the identity of the recipients.

“People are often very embarrassed to accept our help,” explains Mr. Rosenstock, “but these are economically tough times, and the fact is that there are many — far too many — people who unfortunately really do need these food packages. A businessman recently called me and told me that it took him all day to dial my number.

“Sometimes our volunteers will drop off a box and the next day we'll get an angry phone call: ‘You guys made a huge mistake — I do not need this box!’ So I'll apologize and say that the driver made a



Preparing for Pesach



“The totality of debt owed to Monsey-area kosher supermarkets is \$3.6 million. People have astronomical supermarket bills that they just cannot pay, and often we try to negotiate a deal with the supermarket to somehow pay off those bills.”



mistake and that we're really so sorry, and I tell them to just keep the box or else it will go to waste. The next week I'll receive an even angrier call — 'Again? You guys made the same mistake again? We don't need this box!' And again I'll apologize for the driver's clumsy mistake. The third week we don't get a phone call anymore. Such scenarios have played themselves out quite often.

“People are really suffering, but they can't bear to ask for help. The totality of debt owed to Monsey-area kosher supermarkets is \$3.6 million. People have astronomical supermarket bills that they just cannot pay, and often we try to negotiate a deal with the supermarket to somehow pay off those bills.”

Rabbi Moskowitz explains, “So often I will get a phone call that starts off describing a poor family whom the caller

knows, saying that the person is just calling to find out how our services work. They'll ask me, 'Who knows about it? How discreet are you?' and so on, and then at the end of the phone call, after I've assured them, they'll say, 'Well ... you see, it's actually me. Can you help?'”

When Yamim Tovim come around, the need for help intensifies. This year Tomche Shabbos purchased ten thousand pounds of matzah and made deliveries of twelve boxes of food each to more than nine hundred families.

Before Yamim Tovim, another Tomche Shabbos program, Chodesh Food Outlet, opens its doors.

Chodesh Food Outlet

Dovid Wanounou began volunteering at Tomche Shabbos seven years ago, getting involved, like so many others,

through his children. Today he voluntarily runs the food outlet, which sells essential food items before Yom Tov to *rebbeim* and *kollel yungeleit* at or below cost price.

"Around seven years ago my daughter's class took a field trip to the Tomche Shabbos warehouse. My wife was doing carpool that day and had my other daughter with her as well," says Mr. Wanounou. "They all got excited about helping and started collecting food to donate to Tomche Shabbos. I told them that if they collected food, I would help pack it, and it sort of became a family project.

"It's become very popular in my shul as well; today I'd say about 20 percent of the members of my shul, Kehillas Yeshorim in Wesley Hills, are involved.

"I started off just packing boxes, and then when they decided to open the Chodesh Food Outlet, Alan asked me if I would run it, which I agreed to do. It's basically a store where we sell food at tremendously discounted rates. People pre-order the food, and then they come to the warehouse, where there are checkouts manned by volunteers. We help a few hundred people, and although right now it's open only before the Yamim Tovim, we

hope eventually to open it on other days too.

"The greatness of this program is that it helps people, yet the recipients are still paying something and feel that they're contributing as well. I have heard from so many people how the program has really alleviated their situations. I feel enormously fortunate to be a part of such a great project."

Unintended Benefits

As with many good deeds, Tomche Shabbos activities have unexpected benefits.

Explains Mr. Rosenstock, "When one of our volunteers went to a house to deliver a box at night, he noticed the smell of gas. This family's utilities had been turned off due to nonpayment, but eventually the gas was turned back on and was leaking through the house. He quickly woke up the whole family, saving them.

"I could talk all day about the amazing stories that I have witnessed in my years with Tomche Shabbos."

Innovations

Since the economy took a turn for the

worse a few years ago, the number of financially distressed individuals has skyrocketed, forcing many people to turn to relief organizations for help. In recent years Tomche Shabbos began helping people pay their utilities, sometimes lending families generators while a deal is brokered with the utility company on a particularly high bill. Rabbi Moskowitz describes situations where a family may have their electricity shut off and sit in the dark for a few days before they muster the courage to call for help.

The rate of foreclosures and evictions has also gone up, and Tomche Shabbos works hard to keep families in their homes, often putting them in touch with

"It's basically a store where we sell food at tremendously discounted rates. People pre-order the food, and then they come to the warehouse, where there are checkouts manned by volunteers."

A volunteer places a roll of frozen gefilte fish into a waiting box.



20 | Hamodia April 10, 2013



Packing chickens into boxes before Pesach.

qualified tax attorneys and accountants who volunteer their time. One of the newest innovations is a program called Partners in Parnassah, which helps out-of-work people find jobs.

“The Rambam says that the greatest *tzedakah* you can do for someone is give him a job,” says Mr. Rosenstock, “so we decided that we would try. To date we have filled eighty-four jobs, and those are all ones that have been kept for at least three months.”

Mr. Gerald Issacson* is one person who thanks Tomche Shabbos for his current job as a category manager for a major supermarket chain. Because of his many connections with kosher food merchants, Mr. Issacson tries to return the favor to Tomche Shabbos by brokering deals for food with the kosher merchants he knows.

“It’s really a terrific organization, and

*Name has been changed to protect privacy.

as a recipient of their help, I am so grateful to Alan Rosenstock for what he’s done for me.”

Yaakov Gold* is another man who thanks Tomche Shabbos for the job he holds today. “They do so much *chesed*, and they do it in the right way. One aspect, which is obviously important, is providing people with Shabbos food, but they also do job placement. I was fortunate enough to be a recipient of that help, and today I have a job with a wonderful *heimishe* firm. And these are not just ‘make-work’ jobs — this is a career.

“They do everything in the most dignified manner. You always have to have *emunah* and *bitachon* in Hashem, but it is so reassuring to know that His *shalichim* are right at your side. It’s so important to help people help themselves. When someone has a job, his outlook on life is better, his family life gets better — everything just snowballs in a positive

way. I couldn’t say enough about Tomche Shabbos.”

Aside from job placement, Tomche Shabbos also operates nighttime education courses taught by community volunteers. The classes offer basic business skills, as well as training in programs such as Microsoft Word, Excel, and Quickbooks. The classes are free, but participants must pay a deposit that is not returned until they have completed the course and submitted a resume.

“We still send out that food box,” says Mr. Rosenstock, “but we spend more time trying *not* to have to send out that box. When a person walks into his home with a paycheck, he’s another person.”

Volunteers

Around fifteen years ago, Rabbi Avi Shulman of Torah Umesorah walked into the Tomche Shabbos warehouse and was amazed at what he saw — volunteers

from all sectors of the community, from Chassidic to Young Israel, standing shoulder to shoulder, working for the greater good. When he told his wife, Erica, about what he had witnessed, they both decided to do something for the cause.

"My husband came up with the idea, and I've been running it for all these years," explains Mrs. Shulman. "It's called the Simcha Fund, and basically it works as follows. In the old days people who made a *simchah* would invite the poor of the community to partake in it. Because that's not so practical today, we give the opportunity for someone who is making a *simchah* to sponsor a meal for a family or more than one family.

"When I hear about a *simchah*, whether it's a wedding or a bar or bas mitzvah, I send out a letter to the family explaining the concept of having the less fortunate of the community partake in one's *simchah*. To date, we have raised over \$100,000 for Tomche Shabbos through this campaign."

"There is a *Chazal* that says that when you make a *simchah*, the souls of the grandparents and the great-grandparents come from the *Olam Ha'emes* for the occasion," adds Rabbi Shulman. "It's brought down, however, that this only applies when *aniyim*, the poor, have been made part of the *simchah*."

Mrs. Shulman concludes, "A few years

into the project I was feeling a bit down because of what I felt was a lack of response. One day I got a return card from a letter that I had sent out, with a check for \$5,340 from a family that had made a bar mitzvah. I was so happy that I made a copy of the check and hung it up near my phone so that it would give me strength to continue."

The dedication of its volunteers to the Tomche Shabbos mission is nothing new, and they take their responsibilities very seriously.

"When people become drivers," says Rabbi Moskowitz, "I make sure to stress the fact that it is a real responsibility. It's not something that you can do once in a while — it is a weekly commitment. Two people man each route each week, so that if one person is out of town or has a wedding or another important event, his partner knows the route and will be able to cover for him."

Some volunteers, such as Mrs. Devorah Adler, have devised unique ways to raise money for the organization.

"My husband was packing on Thursday nights, and I wanted to help as well. So we came up with the idea of having little cards with \$1, \$3, and \$5 on them near the cash registers in kosher stores, so that shoppers could add an amount to their purchase that would be forwarded for distribution to the needy. That idea has since spread around

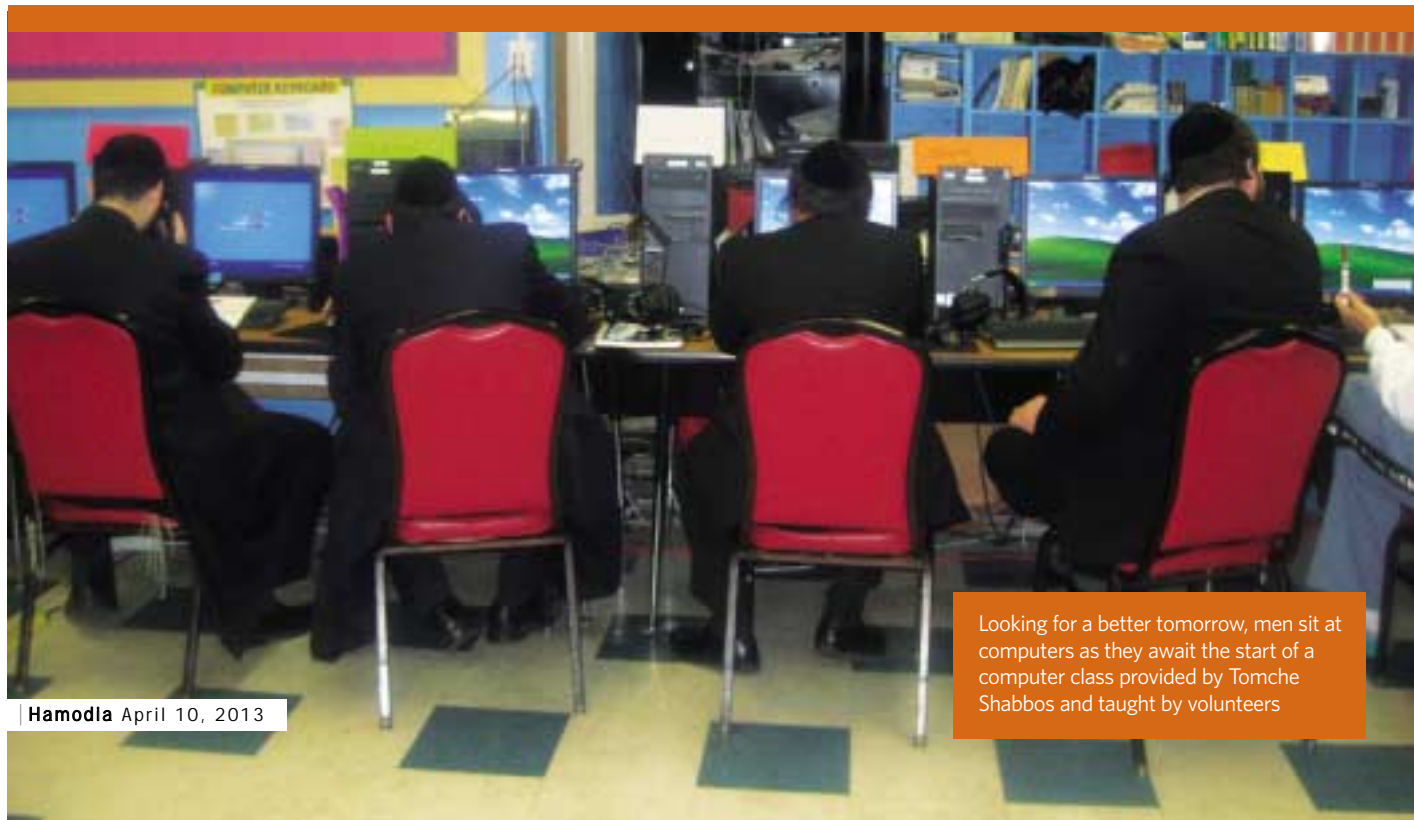
the world. Today each local store raises thousands of dollars for Tomche Shabbos with these cards. An elderly man, Mr. Kurt Lichtenstein, makes the rounds of the stores, collecting what they've brought in and restocking their supplies of cards."

Children have often gotten their whole family to volunteer, as in the case of the Magid family. When Moshe Magid was just seven years old, he decided to collect cereal for poor people. Soliciting from his family, then neighbors, and eventually his school, he eventually gathered enough cereal to fill his parents' SUV.

"When I met Alan at a local restaurant, I told him about how my son had become inspired to help," relates Mrs. Yocheved Magid, Moshe's mother. "He told me that he would love to meet Moshe. I thought he would probably forget right away, but later he called and asked when would be a good time to meet our son. He came over to the house in a suit and tie and met with him, told him how impressed he was with what he had done, and asked Moshe to be his partner in his work."

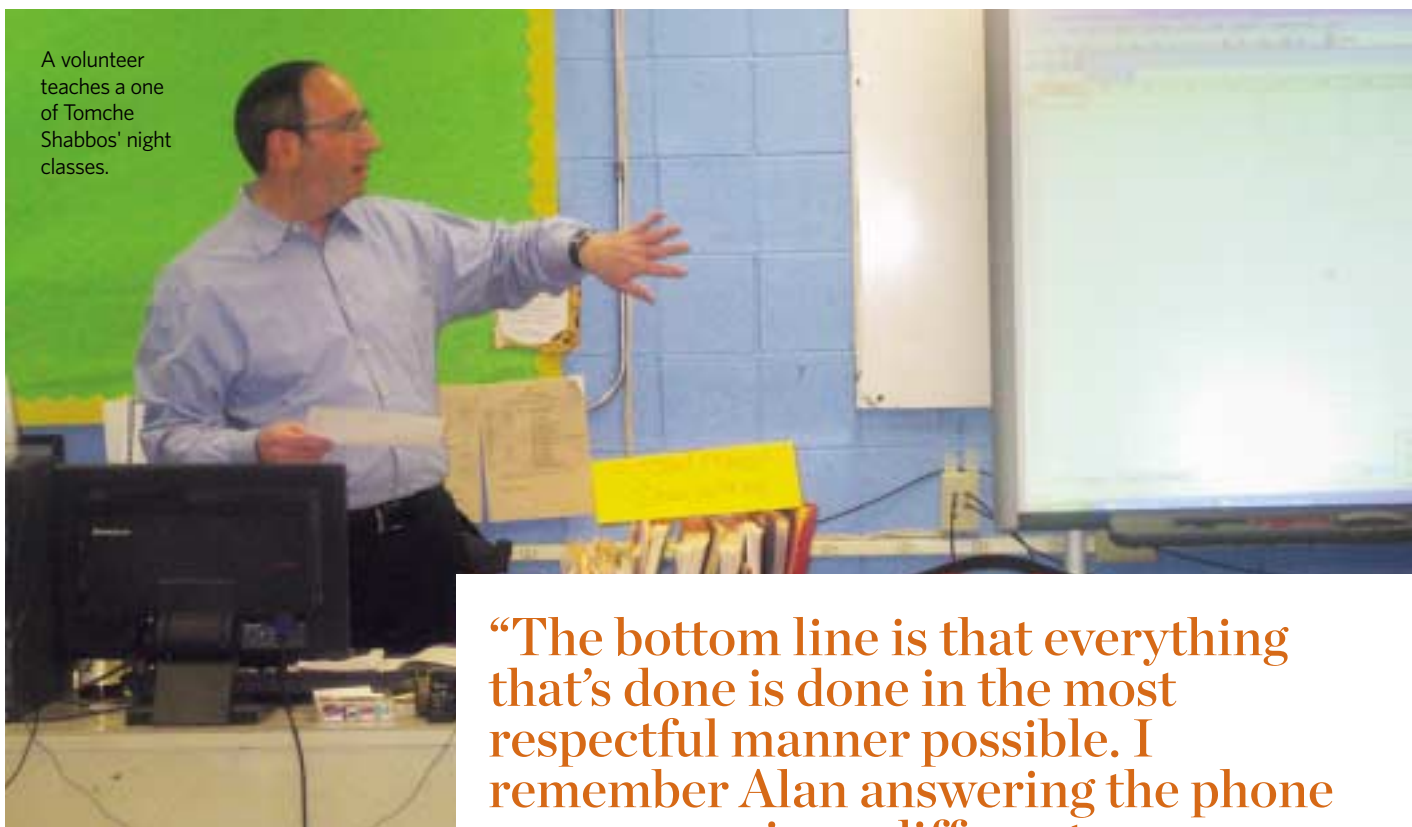
Mr. Levi Magid, Moshe's father, says that because of Moshe's excitement about the project, the entire family has become involved.

"We've all been involved for three years. My older daughter, who just had her bas mitzvah, helps each Wednesday, and we go



22 | Hamodla April 10, 2013

Looking for a better tomorrow, men sit at computers as they await the start of a computer class provided by Tomche Shabbos and taught by volunteers



A volunteer teaches a one of Tomche Shabbos' night classes.

“The bottom line is that everything that’s done is done in the most respectful manner possible. I remember Alan answering the phone years ago using a different name so that people wouldn’t feel uncomfortable speaking to him.”

on Thursday. It’s a great way to spend real quality time with your children. At first I thought we would just go now and then, but once we started, that was it. Moshe is really my motivation in all of this. The way I’ve seen my children mature through this is unbelievable; Moshe ran the meat packing for the Pesach distribution this year.”

As for Moshe, who is now ten years old and in the fourth grade at Yeshivas Darche Noam, he explains that he enjoys going to the Tomche Shabbos warehouse each Thursday because “it’s a *mitzvah*, and it’s also fun.”

With Dignity for All

The theme that runs through everyone’s description of Tomche Shabbos is the special dignity and respect that is shown to the recipients.

“One of the early stories,” says Mr. Rosenstock, “was about an elderly couple whose home was being foreclosed. We got them an expensive tax attorney from Manhattan who volunteered his services, and we were able to save their house and turn their financial situation around.

“At the time they promised not to borrow any money again; that was the deal. Well, a little while later they came to Tomche Shabbos and asked to borrow \$5,000. I was pretty taken aback and asked, ‘Why do you need this money?’

“This is what they told me. They had married off almost all of their children, and they had bought a set of furniture for each one. Now their youngest was getting married, and they wanted to give the couple the same send-off the other children had received. We ended up raising the money from a few people to lend this couple, totally separate from the regular Tomche Shabbos donations, but you see, what we’re dealing with here is not simply financial woes — these are human beings.”

A recently instituted program that highlights the organization’s special level of *tznius* is the Shivah campaign. A custom that originated in Germany and was adopted by Tomche Shabbos is that

whenever a member of the community is sitting *shivah*, an envelope containing cash and a locked box are left at the family’s home, no matter what their financial situation. The family may choose to use some or all of the money, returning any unused amount in the box. Because the box is not checked for long periods of time, no one, not even those who run Tomche Shabbos, ever know who took money from the *shivah* envelope.

“The bottom line is that everything that’s done is done in the most respectful manner possible,” concludes Mr. Friedland. “I remember Alan answering the phone years ago using a different name so that people wouldn’t feel uncomfortable speaking to him. He and Rabbi Moskowitz go to extremes to make sure people [retain their dignity] when they are receiving help.

“The result has been that this organization has touched thousands and thousands of lives in the most respectful