

Passover on the Shores of the Atlantic Ocean

One thing is certain. Halifax is not a bastion of kosher food. Over the years things have gotten much better as the world has gotten smaller, but if one keeps kosher and cholov Israel (term which refers to all dairy products, including cheese and non-fat dry milk powder, which derive from milk that has been milked under the supervision of an observant Jew), Halifax is not where one would envision as their go-to city.

Enter Bassie Feldman, the Chabad emissary to Halifax. Together with her husband Rabbi Mendel, they have become the kosher food lifeline for many in the Jewish community there, especially for Passover.

Over twenty years ago, the Feldmans were sent by the Lubavitcher Rebbe to set up a chabad house in Halifax. Keeping kosher then and now is, as Bassie said, "Challenging." It's incredible how one word can summarize a huge part of the lives of so many people.

When they first arrived, there were a few stores that carried basic canned kosher food and a few items for Passover. Although things were basic, they were fine overall. The issue became the constant changes in store management. Although Kosher food became more available, as the staff would change in the stores, so did the variety and amount of what was brought in each time. The community's food supply was reliant on the choice of what the current manager decided to bring in. While they can get more food than years ago, they remain at the mercy of the stores. Unpredictable is the word used by Bassie many times in our interview.

There's one more ingredient to add to the recipe of challenging and unpredictable. When stores realized that kosher food was in demand, especially for Passover they would email or fax the synagogues and community center when a shipment arrived. Those institutions would in turn send a message to their congregants. Imagine everyone running to the store to get the jam, yogurt or Balsamic vinegar that had just arrived for Passover? Add to the confusion that the quantities always remained a mystery and you have absolute chaos.

Given these challenges here's an amazing fact: Bassie Feldman is world-renowned for her delicious baked goods and unbelievable Shabbos and holiday dinners, which she cooks in her own kitchen, often for a few hundred people. So how do they get hundreds of chickens, tens of briskets, gefilte fish, hamburger meat, milk, cheese and other food that many of us take for granted?

Creative Planning

Aside from doing her own catering and teaching classes both to the community and online, Bassie is the food organizer for many in Halifax. Most of the food is shipped from Montreal, with each shipment, fresh, frozen or dry costing \$230. As well, it is forbidden to ship something frozen with something dry or something fresh with something frozen etc. All three categories must be shipped separately, upping the cost of transportation considerably.

So where does Bassie find food for Halifax? In the closest city which is Montreal. Bassie has become adept at finding the best products (& ideally prices) available for kosher food right here in our city.

So let's say she finds gefilte fish in one place, chickens in another and brisket yet somewhere else. If she shipped everything separately it would cost a small fortune. Enter Montreal's Kosher Quality. They have gone over and above the call of duty to help another Jew by allowing Bassie to store the food she finds in other stores, in their freezer. This allows her to amalgamate her shipments, saving the community a serious amount of money. Cite Kacher has also been very helpful in properly packaging cakes to be shipped. Incidentally fresh cut fish, packaged and frozen was ordered from a fish monger in Montreal. This had to be done due to the kosher stringencies when buying pre-cut fish for Pesach. It was delicious as was the tasty custom gefilte fish they made especially without potato starch for the Feldman family (a Minhag of theirs). How ironic that living on the Atlantic Ocean where at least salmon is purchased as fresh as can be, they were shipping Atlantic salmon caught off their shores, shipped to the Montreal fish store & then right back for the holiday.

To understand how really difficult it is in Halifax, picture this: In big cities where kosher food is readily available, one shops over a very extended period of time for their Passover food, the bulk of which is put out right after Purim. This enables many people to buy early and if they so choose, cook and freeze. Not so Bassie. She cannot ship anything until the last product comes into the store, which could be as close as a week before Passover. Again, the shipping costs would be prohibitive if she shipped every time a new product appeared on the shelves.

How It Works:

Some members in the community give Bassie their food lists, share in the shipping costs but rely on Bassie to organize everything else. Of course not everything runs smoothly all the time. One year she ordered cases of frozen gefilte fish. There was a miscommunication somewhere along the line, and the fish was left to defrost. Then it was shipped. By the time it got to Bassie, it was spoiled. So who's going to – pardon the pun – eat the cost of this fish? In the end, Kosher Quality came up with a solution, sent Bassie more fish and everyone was happy.

The Feldman's have anywhere between 30 and 130 people for their Seders plus serving meals during Chol Hamoed (intermediate day of Passover) to tourists, university students and anyone else who needs food during Passover. They have to be prepared for any eventuality and therefore run their Chabad house like a mini army and their dining room like a mess hall, of course peppered with Bassie's love for a beautiful table and presentation perfection. If you are ever in Halifax, look up the Feldman's. They will welcome you with open arms, even during the stressful holiday of Passover. And – you will be served like a king and queen!