

# GLEANNING THE LAND



Volunteers pick produce which would have otherwise rotted

Leket Israel, the country's largest national food bank and leading food rescue network, collects perishable produce and food from caterers, restaurants and straight from the fields, and provides nutritious meals to Israel's needy, including thousands of sandwiches to schoolchildren every day ■ Liza Rosenberg

Volunteers prepare sandwiches for needy school children



or experience in either rescuing food or working for a charity, and was merely reacting to what was happening around him. "Eight years ago, it was a bad time in Israel. Poverty started hitting you in the face, whether it was via the newspapers, television and so on," he recalls.

Gitler started doing research on food rescue, and discovered that while there were several organizations dealing with dry goods and other non-perishable items, there was no central address for handling foods that were perishable. In January 2003, guided by the belief that "allowing food to rot is shameful," he began collecting excess food from caterers and delivering to local social service organizations. Soon after, Gitler and Leket Israel initiated its nighttime volunteer food collection program, and the organization took off from there.

These days, Leket Israel has a distribution center and offices in Raanana, as well as a distribution center in the northern city of Nesher and a new one soon to be opening in Beersheva. Today, there are 80 employees, nine food transport vehicles and tens of thousands of annual volunteers.

Its budget is comprised solely of donations, and these numbers are growing. 30% of this money comes from within Israel – an increase from just 10% two years ago. The remainder comes from donors in a variety of countries such as the US, Canada, England and Australia. "For every dollar spent," notes Gitler, "we can supply three meals. Helping to expand operations makes a lot of financial sense." The organization has also recently applied for a government tender for the provision of food services, and hopes it will be one of the organizations chosen.

## Volunteers needed

Leket Israel is predicated on the fact that there is extensive need, and has initiated a number of projects to help meet that need. Through these projects, the organization currently rescues more than 700,000 meals and 13 million pounds of produce and perishable goods per year. The success of these projects is due in large part to the organization's 40,000 volunteers, whose ranks include everyone from tourists and immigrants to veteran Israelis, young Israelis doing National Service and individuals performing court-ordered community service. "There's always a need for new volunteers," notes Gitler.

At Leket Israel, the focus is not only on providing food for the needy, but also on trying to ensure that the food items it provides are healthy. "Part of our message is nutrition," remarks Gitler. "Most of the foods we rescue are fruit, vegetables and dairy products," he notes.

The organization has a nutritionist on staff who works with the selected charities and tries to help them improve their menus within their allotted budgets. "If we can help them to cut food costs, they can put money saved towards other uses," he adds. ►

"When it comes to food waste, who cares if you're the richest country in the world? Waste is waste," says Joseph Gitler, the affable, easy-going founder of Leket Israel. He started the non-profit in 2003 in response to the increasing levels of poverty he saw around him, as well as a means to alleviate the alarming rates of food waste.

"Israel is a Western country and the poverty we're talking about is Western poverty," notes Gitler. "People can eat properly here. We have enough food to feed everyone in Israel, yet not everyone makes the right choices and not everyone makes enough money to feed themselves as well as they should."

Gitler created Leket Israel (previously known as "Table to Table") as a one-person operation, and ran the organization from his home. He had no specific pri-





Joseph Gitler, the founder of Leket Israel, rescues fruit from an orchard

Leket Israel currently rescues more than 700,000 meals and 13 million pounds of produce and perishable goods per year, and supplies more than 7,000 volunteer-prepared sandwiches per day to underprivileged children

## A multitude of projects

The nighttime food collection program – “Nighttime Meal Rescue” – was Leket Israel’s first project to go national. In 2010, during the evening hours, nearly 800 registered volunteers collected approximately 350,000 excess meals from more than 200 banquet halls, caterers, restaurants and food courts throughout the country. This food was then transferred to local nonprofit organizations or placed in refrigeration for distribution to soup kitchens, shelters and other nonprofit organizations the following morning.

“Project Leket: Gleaning the Land” is the organization’s flagship project, sending thousands of volunteers and paid pickers out into the fields and orchards to rescue produce that would have rotted otherwise. Unlike other projects, where regular volunteers are preferred, pickers can volunteer whenever they have time. Many of these volunteers are from overseas, visiting Israel on a variety of organized programs and tours. “Volunteer picking is an activity that runs almost every day,” says Gitler. “It’s a great experience for anyone.”

Another one of Leket Israel’s more prominent projects is “Sandwiches for School Kids,” which provides more than one million sandwiches each year for underprivileged children. Early each morning, volunteers in the Raanana logistics center and many other volunteers all over the country prepare more than 7,000 sandwiches for children in schools all across Israel to ensure that these children receive a nutritious sandwich to eat during the school day. Leket Israel receives a great deal of positive feedback from school principals for its daily efforts.

“Food Rescue by Day” is similar to “Nighttime Meal Rescue.” Leket Israel volunteers and logistics staff collect excess perishable food items from corporate dining rooms, military bases, farmers, packing houses and corporate manufacturers. The food is then delivered straight to Leket Israel’s partner charities for distribution.

“Project Good Afternoon” matches up food establishments with local nonprofit organizations in the periphery, enabling volunteers to pick up excess perishable food and deliver it directly to organizations in need.

Leket Israel’s “Nutrition for Life” project educates “food insecure” Israelis and the agencies that serve them about the importance of good nutrition. The program offers various workshops, lectures and training sessions primarily for at-risk population groups, and partners with nonprofit organizations to improve the nutritional value of the meals they provide.

Through its “Food Safety Support” project, Leket Israel strives to ensure that partnering nonprofit organizations are able to properly and safely handle and store its food provisions. These organizations are provided with free professional assessments and capacity building grants to help identify and fund the purchase of critical infrastructure equipment.

Leket Israel also runs several projects that don’t deal directly with food distribution. One such project is “Cooperative Purchasing for Nonprofits.” This is Israel’s only joint purchasing cooperative for nonprofit organizations, and Leket Israel provides them with discounts of up to 25% on food commodity purchases – made possible through group buying and economies of scale, enabling more than 100 participating nonprofit organizations to save hundreds of thousands of shekels a year in food expenses.

## Looking to the future

Initially, Leket Israel sought out charities to work with. Now, there’s always a waiting list. The organization currently partners with nearly 300 different nonprofit groups. “We don’t want to bite off more than we can chew,” says Gitler. “It’s a heavy responsibility to provide food to so many charities.”

While Leket Israel partners with organizations throughout the country, it tends to be more active in areas near its distribution centers. Prior to opening its distribution center in Nesher, it worked with 20 organizations in the north. Since opening the center, that number has increased to 90. “The Beersheva center will give us the push we need to do more work in the south on both ends – receiving and giving,” Gitler notes. “The next step for us would be to have local representatives on the ground, letting us know what the local needs are and providing us with a better sense of how our organization’s services can help,” he says.

Leket Israel would also like to see a steadier supply of what Gitler refers to as “good” fruit and vegetables, and is considering the possibility of opening its own farm. This would provide Leket Israel with a greater selection of the produce it needs, instead of forcing it to rely only on whatever is being donated.

“I wish we had a reason to shut the whole organization down,” says Gitler ruefully. “People say ‘Wouldn’t it be great if you went out of business?’ From a poverty point of view, the answer is yes, but from a food waste point of view, the answer is no. Not allowing food to go to waste isn’t just about poverty; it’s also about environmental sustainability. For us though, it’s mostly about feeding the poor. We have no right to allow food to go to waste.” ■

For more information about Leket Israel, go to [www.leket.org.il](http://www.leket.org.il).