



Living in the Margins

Food banks, handouts and unemployment are realities for an alarming number of Toronto Jews living below the poverty line *By Jordana Divon*

Galit Menahem has vivid memories of the night her life dissolved into a nexus of sirens, flashing lights and police cruisers.

The Israeli-born mother of three stood paralyzed as a flurry of friends and family members tore through her Thornhill home, grabbing whatever they could – clothing, passports, health cards – and stuffing it into garbage bags.

“I was in shock, watching my life turn around in one second,” the striking, hazel-eyed 43-year-old recalls, of that October

night in 2004. “I saw garbage bags flying down the stairs and then people walking out of my house with my babies dressed in white pajamas, sleeping with their mouths open. It’s almost like I was on the outside looking in. And then, all of a sudden, you have no home, you have no marriage. Everything you worked for and you built is gone.”

One week earlier, a bruised and shaken Menahem had walked into the offices of the Jewish Family and Child Services (JF&CS) near Bathurst and Sheppard. Her seven-

year marriage had always been fraught with violence, but her husband’s temper had recently grown unstable, and she started to fear for her life. A concerned friend had given her the number for JF&CS, advising her to use it when she was ready. That afternoon, she made the call from a pay phone because she was afraid someone would overhear her conversation. An intake worker told her to come in immediately. Within days, she met with Debra Feldman, director of the Victims of Violence Program.



Galit Menachem, who lives with her three children in subsidized housing.

“I remember nothing of that conversation except for one thing,” Menachem says. “Debra said, ‘Galit, we will not let your kids go hungry.’ That’s the only sentence I remember because I was so emotional and crying. I was devastated, but now I knew there was a way out and my kids would not starve.”

Another phone call – this time to the local police – secured the presence of several officers who made sure she was safely escorted to her sister’s house. For the next year, she and her three children would share

a single mattress in a tiny basement room bordered by garbage bins, while the family waited for subsidized housing. Her future would be littered with food bank coupons, handouts, and a five-year court battle after her bank accounts were blocked and she was left without a cent. But at that moment, safe from her husband’s unyielding fists, all she could do was jump up and down on her sister’s driveway and shout, “I’m free! I’m free!” into the cool autumn air.

Menachem’s history of abuse adds another

tangled layer to the undercurrent of Toronto Jews living in poverty. Demographic research compiled by UJA Federations Canada in 2005 put the number of Jewish poor in the Greater Toronto Area at approximately 20,000, meaning anywhere between 10 to 12 per cent of the population.

Dalia Margalit-Faircloth, who heads the Jewish Poverty Action Group (JPAG), says of that 10 per cent, at least 2,000 could be considered the “working poor:” people who have jobs, but are still living on less than

\$22,000 per year, or \$30,000 for a couple.

And since the economic downturn two years ago, a generous percentage of once middle-class Jews have lost their jobs, homes and life savings. It's a startling statistic for those who cling to the antiquated and dangerous stereotype that all Jews are affluent and therefore "can't be poor."

Margalit-Faircloth deals with this stereotype more than she would care to admit. "When I tell people about the program I coordinate, they tell me it sounds like an oxymoron. They seriously ask, 'Are there poor Jews?'" She shakes her head in disbelief.

Unless one is directly involved in community service, it's easy to see where a myth like this can begin to take root. In the decades since World War II, a high proportion of Jews have established themselves as hard working, successful and entrepreneurial, placing a premium on education and professional achievement. In Toronto, the Jewish community is handily represented by lawyers, doctors, accountants and business owners, many of whom enjoy a high standard of living.

But outside the leafy, manicured neighbourhoods of Forest Hill, York Mills and Thornhill, a somewhat marginalized segment of the community struggles to put Shabbat dinner on the table each Friday night. They are recent immigrants, senior citizens, abuse victims like Menahem, or those who suffer from a host of mental and physical health issues. Many don't want the other 90 per cent to know for fear of marginalization.

"It's one of the greatest ironies of life that Jews who have suffered so much from anti-Semitism and racism tend to have a sort of inborn sense of superiority that makes it very difficult to accept people who are poorer, people who don't speak their language," says Margalit-Faircloth. "It's a sensitizing and an awareness that has to be built in, and I think it's part of the Jewish communal life responsibility to make people aware."

That awareness hit Menahem very hard in the weeks following her plight. Before she left her husband, she fit in comfortably amongst the other 90 per cent.

"We had money, we had everything we needed," she recalls, with a shake of her dark curls. "Everything that a Jewish couple in Thornhill could want, with the cars, and the boat, and the business and the Mercedes. Everything was happening for us and all of a sudden I was homeless with three kids."

Although her husband was ordered to pay child support, he took off to Israel after

the verdict, and Menahem has yet to see a dime. There is a warrant for his arrest if he ever tries to re-enter Canada. Menahem credits the generosity of the Jewish community for helping her get back on her feet. "There is no doubt in my mind that if I did not have the Jewish community behind me my life would have been different."

Inspired by the emotional and financial support she received, Menahem went back to school and graduated with high honours from George Brown's Women Abuse Counselor Program. This fall, she begins her studies to become a paralegal so she can continue to help other victims of abuse navigate the legal system, and give back to those who have given so much to her.

Organizations like JPAG and JF&CS can often act as a buttress between poverty and destitution. The supplemental financial assistance they provide tops up monthly government social assistance programs, like Ontario Works, which most of the time barely covers basic housing.

Simon Kalkstein, a veteran social worker who deals with the city's most impoverished Jews, says social assistance often fails to take big city living into account.

"The maximum they can get, unless they're given some special things based on circumstance, is \$585 a month. That's not very easy to live on if you think about how little income that is," he says from his office, where he typically puts in 100-hour workweeks. "To this day there are people struggling with whether to pay their utilities or pay their rent. They have to make choices: what do we let slip this month in order to make sure there's food on the table?"

Similarly, Avrum Rosensweig, president of Ve'ahavta, works with individuals who don't even have tables to put food on. They often don't have any food either. And while the number of homeless Jews is relatively low (official statistics vary), Rosensweig paints a bleak portrait of their struggle to survive.

"What I often tell people is like this: think of those times in your life that have been extremely difficult or challenging. You generally multiply them by something very big, and think about what those times may have been like had you not had any support whatsoever," he says. "Or think about what it may be like to live in a home where the abuse is so bad that it's better to live in a ravine. That's homelessness."

In his years of social advocacy, Rosensweig has seen both a Jewish proclivity for

generosity – or *tzedakah* – and a tendency to exclude the poor. "The Torah says you take care of the widow, the orphan and those people who are poor and are in need, but in our society so often people seem to feel as though because you're homeless, you're a bad person. We correlate the two."

Zipporah Greenberg* has never been homeless, but she came pretty close. The 28-year-old was finishing her graduate degree in social work when her fiancé woke up one morning, packed his things and left, claiming he "needed his space." Aside from the emotional fallout, Greenberg had been financially dependent on him since she quit her job to go back to school in 2007.

"Obviously I was devastated. I thought I was going to marry this son of a bitch!" she says with her dry sense of humour. "So he moved out and he was paying half the rent, he was making payments on my car. My OSAP (Ontario Student Assistance Program) was about to run out and I freaked out. I couldn't pay my rent. I didn't know what to do."

Even if she dropped out of school, she didn't have enough money to live on.

This wasn't the first time Greenberg had been abandoned. Her mother disappeared when she was still in diapers, leaving a husband and four children without so much as a goodbye. When she returned six years later, the family learned she had run off to Florida with another man, but at the time all they knew was that she was gone.

"It affected us all differently," she says. "I'm naturally a depressed person, so I just cried all the time. I just used to cry, cry, cry. Even the teachers would call my dad and say, 'your daughter is really upset, can you come and pick her up?'"

Of course, her father didn't come to pick her up. His job as a foreman meant he was out of the house by dawn and home well after dark. Zipporah's 11-year-old sister assumed the role of principle caregiver, doing most of the cooking, laundry and housework until she moved out of the house herself at the age of 16. By then, the children were looking after themselves.

"My brother and I were walking ourselves to school when we were six years old," she recalls. Her mother returned before Zipporah's ninth birthday. Within three months, she left again – this time to marry a wealthy, but abusive man from Lithuania. "That's my mom," says Zipporah, tucking a stray blonde hair behind her ears. "I love her to death, but she's a very difficult woman."

Research compiled by UIA Federations Canada in 2005 put the number of Jewish poor in the GTA at approximately 20,000, representing between 10 to 12 per cent of the population



“I don’t like to ask you for a dime, I don’t like to ask him for a dollar, I don’t even like to ask for a cigarette from nobody.”

Sammy “Solo” Kohn

While Greenberg’s family life remained chaotic, education became a way of proving her self-worth. The tall, lanky teenager threw herself into her studies at Brock University with near-obsessive fervor, often studying two weeks before a test. She was months away from completing her Master’s degree when her fiancé left and she fell into a clinical depression so severe there were times she couldn’t leave her apartment for weeks. Help from her family was not an option. Her father died when she was in high school, and dealings with her mother remain complex.

“It’s a toxic relationship,” says Greenberg, matter-of-factly. “She’s like poison, and I can’t live with her, so that wasn’t even an option.”

The honours student was forced to seek temporary financial assistance to finish her studies. While she is enormously grateful, the experience has been difficult. “I felt terrible. I still feel terrible,” she says, recounting the first time she approached the agency for help. “When I have to go there to pick up my cheques every month, it’s embarrassing. I put my sunglasses on, I slip in, I slip out. I don’t want to see anyone. It’s uncomfortable.”

Greenberg insists the first thing she will do once she gets back on her feet is give

back. She graduated last June, and has gone on close to a dozen job interviews.

Greenberg’s struggle to find work, even with a graduate degree, is indicative of an economic climate that has thrust many into poverty in the past two years. Jo Michaels, manager of communications at JF&CS, has seen an increase in people applying for aid – particularly amongst the elderly – while her available funds have stagnated.

“We’ve actually had to stop giving because we don’t have anymore funding,” she says with visible emotion. “Three hundred and ninety one seniors accessed our Holocaust Survivors Emergency Fund last year, but that’s a decrease of 20 per cent because of depletion of funding, not because of depletion of need. It’s a constant struggle for more funding. And it’s absolutely heartbreaking, because the last thing you want to do is put these people on another list.”

Part of the pressure felt by Michaels and other agency workers regarding supporting the elderly in Toronto, particularly survivors, has to do with the realities of an imperfect system. When the Material Claims Conference was set up in the early 1950s, its goal was to procure restitution for victims of the Holocaust. In many cases, it succeeded, and thousands of Jewish agencies worldwide rely on grants to assist their survivor populations. Countless others are still hoping to receive a response to their application before they succumb to old age.

In the meantime, a staggering number of survivors, like Sammy “Solo” Kohn, are living out their final years in poverty. Sitting at his favourite coffee shop near the tiny downtown apartment he rents for \$480 a month, Kohn pulls out the frayed, yellowing envelope that contains the record of his Claims Conference application. A letter dated July 19, 2001, confirms his application was received. It’s the last he’s heard from them. “I don’t mind,” he says with a good-natured chuckle. “At my age, what do I need anymore?”

Poverty isn’t foreign to the 70-year-old Bucharest native. Kohn was five years old when he met his father for the first time. Kohn Sr. had been shipped off to a Nazi labour camp before his son was born, and even though he was lucky to survive, he was left with nothing. “We didn’t have any food, and it was very hard [to] find vegetables to eat,” he says in his heavily accented English.

They were caught at the Polish border trying to flee the country, and were sent home. Only they didn’t have a home. Under

communist rule, Kohn’s family, like many others, lived in a state of abject poverty difficult for North Americans to comprehend. The family of four shared a single mattress in a tiny cellar until the mother died and there was a little more room.

Kohn ended up in Toronto on a visa in 1968 after life in Romania became unbearable. With his third-grade education, he was only able to procure wage-labour work. He happily toiled as a taxi driver until an accident 10 years ago damaged his back and ended his career. It was the first time the tough, ruddy-faced survivor had asked for help in his life.

“I was [always] the man with the budget,” he says with an easy grin. “I don’t like to ask you for a dime, I don’t like to ask him for a dollar, I don’t even like to ask for a cigarette from nobody.”

Kohn manages to comfortably stretch the few hundred dollars he lives on each month because it’s more than he ever had growing up. His only vice is smoking, and he spends most of his days at the “JCC” with friends, or chatting with the cast of neighbourhood characters who have become like family. At night, he goes home and watches movies on the TV for which he pays \$30 a month.

He considers himself very lucky. **fn**

*Names and details have been changed to protect her privacy.

Jordana Divon is a freelance writer in Toronto.

Looking to Help

Check out these agencies that help Toronto’s Jewish community

United Jewish Appeal
416-635-2883

Jewish Family & Child Services
416-638-7800

United Chesed of Toronto
416-250-7373

Ve’ahavta
416-964-7698

National Council of Jewish Women
416-633-5100

Hadassah-WIZO
416-630-8373

Out of the Cold
416-669-OOTC

MAZON Canada
416-783-7554

STUFF Canada
416-596-6822

Kehilla Residential Programme
416-932-1212