

TBM workers train in Israel; partnership enters next phase

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Ten Texas Baptist Men volunteers took their expertise in mass feeding to Israel recently to learn how to provide those services in a culturally appropriate manner in Israel.

Two results emerged—more kosher-trained volunteers and a readiness to move to a second phase in the Israeli-TBM partnership.



Texas Baptist Men volunteer Ken Van Huss enjoys the challenge of learning to cook and prepare food in a culturally appropriate way in Israel. (TBM Photo)

After the latest TBM trip to Israel, more than 100 TBM volunteers are trained now for emergency food distribution in the country, said John-Travis Smith, TBM associate executive director and liaison with Israeli

leadership. Several hundred trained volunteers are needed.

The effort is part of a TBM partnership with Emergency Volunteers Program in Israel to provide meals after crises such as natural disasters and terrorist attacks.

Israeli leaders reported the training experience has been “fabulous,” Smith said. They affirm how TBM has been willing to adapt to the particular kosher requirements in Israel.

“I think it went wonderfully,” said Gary Finley, team leader. “We went over there to learn from them how to prepare meals based on their culture and traditions, and I think we showed them that we’re able to do this.”

The team “did whatever needed to be done, and I believe our Israeli hosts were impressed by the professionalism TBM brought to the table,” Finley said. “We showed we could prepare meals efficiently and in the way they need them to be prepared. We were willing to work.”



TBM volunteer Jackie Grey appreciated the learning opportunity as she was trained

to prepare and serve kosher food in Israel. (TBM Photo)

Team member Jackie Grey said: “Everything was amazing—fabulous people. I learned loads.”

Now, both Israel and TBM are ready to expand the effort, which is preparing for “any kind of emergency,” Smith said. “Israel is overdue for a 100-year earthquake.” And terrorist attacks and forest fires pose threats, as well.

TBM began the relationship about four years ago with a desire to serve, Smith said.

“We are prepared to provide food to anyone,” he said, and TBM has done just that in its initial deployments to Israel.

In 2019, TBM volunteers served meals at a hospital and along the Gaza Strip border fence.

“We fed Israelis and Muslim Bedouins, anyone we encountered who needed food,” Smith said. Earlier this year, TBM volunteers helped feed Ukrainian refugees in Israel.

For the training, “every day we would practice cooking and feeding at different surprise locations to stretch our ability to be mobile,” Joe Crutchfield said. “We cooked different kinds of food than we normally do.”

The menu included falafel and humus, traditional Middle Eastern foods, and a kosher hamburger, which has no cheese but includes a “secret sauce,” pickles, tomatoes and sauerkraut-like layer.

“Everything is prepared fresh. Nothing is frozen,” he said. “We had to slice pickles and pita bread. And they trained us on how to put these meals

together in a traditional kosher manner.”

The dynamism of the volunteers surprised their Israeli hosts, Crutchfield said.

“They were amazed. They were not expecting 65- and 70-year-old people to work like we do,” he said. “We’re blowing them away. It is a shocker to them that we came to serve them and that we work so hard to serve them. It has an impact on them as to why we are serving.”

TBM volunteers serve as a means of sharing the love of Christ with anyone in need. There are restrictions on evangelistic efforts in Israel, but the volunteers are free to answer questions.

A TBM operations center near Jerusalem serves as the center of TBM activities in Israel. It is outfitted with sleeping facilities, a training center, a warehouse, and a mobile kitchen in which food is prepared.

Phase Two of the partnership means growth of the operations center and the need for more trained volunteers, Smith said. Three more mobile kitchens are now being built in Israel, and plans call for a total of eight. Sleeping facilities are being expanded, and the warehouse is being equipped.

“We will double the capacity that we can have there now,” he said.

The volunteers will come from TBM’s cadre of workers already trained for work at home and from new recruits from churches that have not yet served with TBM for the Israeli effort.

“We need more people to volunteer for training,” Smith said.

In a serious emergency, TBM could need 300 to 400 people per month, with volunteers rotating in and out for one or two-week stays, Crutchfield said. And, as with disasters at home, not all trained volunteers are ever available

at the exact moment of need in a disaster. As a result, a larger pool of kosher-trained volunteers is needed.

An actual callout for the Israeli teams may not actually be to Israel itself, Smith said. EVP responds to emergencies in other parts of the world, and the organization could need kosher-trained volunteers for such a callout in another country.

“TBM volunteers bring to any disaster or emergency a distinct sense of calling,” Smith said. “Our love for God and others moves us to serve our neighbors in every way possible, and Scripture makes clear that our neighbors are any people in need. This is woven through the very fabric of TBM service.”

Finley called the project a “great opportunity to provide help, hope and healing in a land and with a people that are so special to our faith.”