

Keeping Warm

Life At A Shelter For The Homeless In The Temple, Atlanta

By Vida Goldgar Editor, Southern Israelite

It wasn't one of our bone-chilling, near-freezing nights, but the wind was stiff and penetrated my warm coat.

That night, as every night since early November, 18 of Atlanta's homeless -- nine couples -- would have a hot meal and a warm bed at the night shelter in The Temple, Atlanta's largest Reform synagogue and one of the oldest members of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

Other homeless persons would find accommodations at Shearith Israel Synagogue (Conservative) and various other shelters in the city. Not everyone would find a place. Perhaps others would, for reasons of their own, prefer the shelter of a viaduct.

I had volunteered for "shelter duty" months earlier. In mid-February my turn came.

It was Friday evening. For the post-service Oneg Shabbat, elegant pastries were already arranged on silver trays. On the second floor, there was more substantial fare--fried chicken, slaw, a tantalizing vegetable casserole and green peas, all prepared and brought in by volunteers -- for the shelter residents.

In addition to the volunteers from The Temple and other Reform congregations, Tony Goodwin, a young Temple member, serves nightly. He said that almost 4,000 meals have been served to 51 couples since November. Tony leaves for work in the morning after the "guests" have breakfasted and leave (operating under citywide regulations, they must leave by 6:30 a.m.) and every night he's back to take charge and make the volunteers' jobs easy.

The Shelter Doors Open

When the "shelter" doors were opened at 7:30, the homeless were waiting. Two by two they climbed the steps, nodding greetings to us. They looked tired and mostly dispirited. One headed for the washing machine with a small bundle of clothes, others toward the shower. Several men

hurried to the restroom to shave, others to their designated rooms for a few minutes' rest before dinner.

By dinner time, the mood lightened a bit. Several of the men reported that they'd found construction work that day through the labor pool. Others had a clue to possible jobs. I had not expected them to be so young. Most seemed to be in their 20s and 30s. I was touched when I noticed two couples walking down the hall hand-in-hand.

One woman was concerned because she had been offered working the 2 to 10 p.m. shift at a convenience store north of the city would not allow her to get back to the shelter before the doors were locked for the night. "But I want the job so, I guess we'll go back to sleeping in the truck until we can get a stake to find a place," she said. And she was worried about the cost of gasoline to make the round trip. Then, in a quick change of mood, she talked proudly of how her husband exercises every morning when he gets up to stay in shape.

The two men who had found work that day asked to be awakened at 4:30 so they might be lucky again the next day. Another, who had struck out, wanted to get up at 4.

I was reluctant to ask them what had brought them to this sad state of affairs. Even so, a conversation with an articulate black man gave some clues. He and his wife had left their North Carolina home after hearing about the "great opportunities" in Atlanta. Foolishly, he says now, they blew their \$600 savings on \$50 a day hotel rooms because they didn't know where else to stay. Even so, they both got jobs and a place to live.

All would have been well, he said, if they both hadn't gotten sick at the same time. They lost their jobs, then the apartment. Now, he says, they're both trying to find work and the shelter gives them a place to sleep in the meantime.

But even when these people do find work, it takes a while to accumulate enough money for the deposit that accompanies apartment rent. And rents aren't cheap.

A Vacant Room

The night I was there, one of the rooms was vacant. Did the couple who had been staying there give up and go home? Were they in trouble? Did they find work? No one knew, but everybody hoped for the best.

The program is built around volunteers -- those who cook, those who serve and those who contribute funds. Though dozens of volunteers serve the program, there's always room for more. It's a rewarding experience. Edythe Scherer must think so. When Esther Rawn, coordinator of volunteers, called her to assign a particular night, she said, "Oh, that's my birthday." Then, before Esther could offer to reschedule, she said, "And I can't think of a better way to celebrate it."

Though none of the couples appeared to be derelicts in the way we usually think of "street people," no doubt some who pass through the doors have problems with alcohol or drugs or mental disabilities. As Esther Rawn puts it, "Most were born with three strikes against them." Tony Goodwin says, "The idea is to help them help themselves."

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JERUSALEM (WNS) — A Trauma Research Center, believed to be the largest of its kind in the world, has been established at the Hebrew University-Hadassah Medical School. The staff of 100 researchers will study various aspects of trauma caused by injuries in military and civilian life.

TEL AVIV (WNS) — Spanish sculptor Eduardo Chillida has been named the winner of this year's \$100,000 Wolf Foundation prize in sculpture. Chillida, 60, is best known for his large sculptures and his most recent major exhibitions have been a retrospective show at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, at the Guggenheim Museum in New York and at galleries in Madrid and Barcelona.

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