

# JEWISH JOURNAL

Our Annual  
High Holy Days  
Food Issue

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## JEWES AND WINE

**Rob Eshman talks with Covenant Wines' Jeff Morgan about the roots of an ancient love affair**

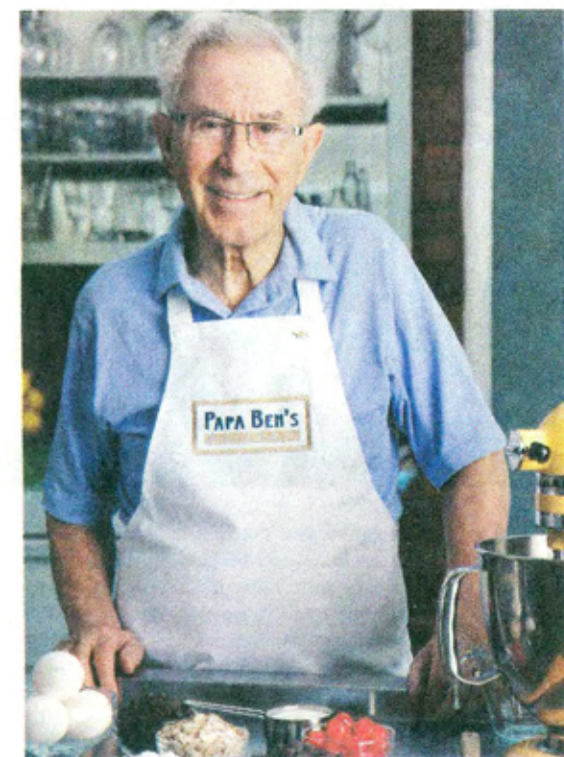
# HIGH HOLY DAYS FOOD

## MAKING COOKIES ... AND A DIFFERENCE

by REBEKAH BLUME, Contributing Writer

Left destitute overnight when the Nazis confiscated his life savings in 1941, Ben Lesser's father, Lazar, used a 100-pound bag of flour and some salt — a housewarming gift from a friend — to bake pretzels for the local bars in Niepolomice in southern Poland.

While his family of seven subsided on wheat husks, normally fed to the pigs as waste, Ben Lesser's father went on to become the town baker, and the family was able to support themselves in spite of the country's harsh anti-Semitic laws.



Ben Lesser started Papa Ben's Kitchen, whose kosher mandelbread is available at Whole Foods and Gelson's. A Holocaust survivor, Lesser also founded Zachor Holocaust Remembrance Foundation.  
Photo by Alexander Stanger Photography

Lesser's parents and three of his four siblings did not survive the Holocaust, but the lessons he learned in his father's kitchen did. The 85-year-old survivor of multiple concentration camps — who spoke about his experiences last month at the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust (LAMOTH) — founded Papa Ben's Kitchen, which makes five varieties of kosher mandelbread, in 2011.

The company, whose products became available in stores last year, doesn't just exist to satisfy the American sweet tooth; Lesser created it, in part, to support the Zachor Holocaust Remembrance Foundation, a nonprofit he founded in 2009. It provides pins that read *zachor* in Hebrew ("remember") to audiences at Holocaust educa-

tion events. (More than 30,000 pins were distributed in just its first few months, according to its Web site.)

"We give pins with the message that now you are responsible for the story you have heard today," said Lesser's daughter, Gail Lesser-Gerber, president of Papa Ben's Kitchen.

Lesser was born in Krakow, Poland, in 1928, to a middle-class family involved in the production of kosher wine, syrup and chocolate. The family left for Niepolomice in 1941, according to Lesser's Web site, to avoid joining the Krakow ghetto, where most of his extended family would perish.

Two years later, at age 14, Lesser escaped to Hungary — his parents were reported by a neighbor and shot before they could join him — only to endure the horrors of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the labor camp Durnhau, a night at Buchenwald, and then Dachau, as well as a death march that lasted at least two weeks in February 1945. Upon liberation, he fell into a starvation-induced coma that lasted about eight weeks.

After the war, Lesser was reunited with Lola Lieber-Schwartz, his only surviving sibling, and settled in the United States. He eventually found his way to Los Angeles, where he met his wife and went on to become a real estate agent. Now a great-grandfather who has retired to Las Vegas and written a book about his life ("Living a Life That Matters: From Nazi Nightmare to American Dream"), Lesser gives speeches about his Holocaust experiences at universities, libraries, prisons and government institutions across North America.

Despite having no formal training in cooking or baking — and no written recipes from his father — Lesser has baked from memory throughout his life, using the smell and texture of the dough as his guide. He brought the treats to card games with buddies, and passed them out as party favors at his 80th birthday party. Friends kept asking why the family wasn't selling Lesser's mandelbread, remembers Lesser-Gerber.

"Everyone loved my dad's cookies," she said.

The family needed to cover the cost of Lesser's unsubsidized speaking engagements and the Zachor foundation. They finally decided to take their friends' question to heart.

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## Cookies

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The result is Papa Ben's Kitchen, for which Lesser and his family developed multiple recipes. Available at Whole Foods and Gelson's, the cookies come in various flavors: original family recipe, minty dark chocolate, chocolate espresso bean, lemon blueberry with poppy seeds, and spicy chipotle with ginger and dark chocolate.

A pastry chef prepares their products at a bakery in Costa Mesa, Calif., in Orange County.

Lesser-Gerber remembers her father, with his old-fashioned mentality, proposing he knock on the door of Ralphs grocery stores with some of his mandelbread and ask if they wanted to buy some.

During his recent visit to speak at LAMOTH, Lesser read from his book while a diverse crowd listened with rapt attention to stories of beatings, intimidation and executions, but also of human dignity and courage.

Lesser recalled how he bribed the cook at Durmhu with diamonds he had smuggled in his shoes to get his uncle a kitchen job rather than the hard labor forced upon other prisoners — breaking apart boulders to make gravel. This experience, he said, taught him the importance of saving valuables for emergencies, and of making personal connections. Both of these were lessons he would find important later in life as a businessman in America.

Most of all, he learned from the concentration camps that to succeed, he had to understand what was expected of him, and simply get it done

no matter the difficulties. He said he remembers thinking: "Ben, if you want to live, you have to do it exactly the way they want you to do it."

And once in the United States, he knew that he had to work harder than others to be the best — his own education had been halted at age 11. So when he was working for UPS at one point, for example, he learned everything about the company so his employers knew they could count on him to do any job, at any time, including holidays. For a time, he worked two jobs and went to night school.

"Figure out how to be the best at your profession," he told the LAMOTH audience. "Don't be a clock-watcher. Give yourself all the way."

Despite his difficult life, Lesser-Gerber said her father always managed to keep a positive outlook on life.

"[He] wanted to live his childhood through us," she said. "He could not pass up a roller coaster without taking us."

Lesser never spoke about his experiences until asked by his grandson to appear at an elementary school event.

"The kids are so grateful," Lesser said. "They had no idea ... most of them are not being taught about the Holocaust."

Lesser said that his talks emphasize the importance of mutual respect and living peacefully. He said listeners go home "new, different people" who do not take their families for granted.

At each of his presentations, Lesser passes out Zachor pins to the audience, paid for by the skill his father taught him over 50 years ago. As Lesser-Gerber said about her father's company, "It's about making cookies and making a difference." ■

## Theatre Dybbuk

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the artists out of the synagogue. Artists, like prophets, are dangerous to a community's stability. So we dismissed them. And we are poorer for that. We need to restore the creative artistic spirit that once animated synagogue life. We need to bring the artists home," he said.

Theatre Dybbuk is part of a larger plan, he said. "VBS is working to create a home for the Jewish arts," Feinstein said. "Not just a place for artists to be, but a real dialogue and collaboration between the artist and the community. We are hoping to continue our relationship with Theatre Dybbuk in future projects. And we are hoping to extend this

collaboration into the visual arts, music, writing and other forms of creative expression."

"Ritual is a form of theater. It is meant to move us emotionally, to inspire us, to teach us," Feinstein explained. "The tragedy is that for some time, our ritual hasn't been good theater."

Henne, for now, is anxious to see how the new project will be received by the congregation and hopeful that it will have a profound effect on those who see it. "We don't know what the morning's going to bring," he said. "We're still in the middle of the night."

"Between Darkness and Light: Selichot" will be performed by Theatre Dybbuk on Aug. 31 at Valley Beth Shalom. Services begin at 7:30 p.m. Free. ■

## Bee Shortfall

Continued from page 34

the supply of honey, has dropped, she said.

"Beekeepers are having a hard time keeping their colonies alive," Lamey said. "We pay the beekeepers 20 percent more for their honey, and we have to, in turn, increase our price on retail sales."

"The bees are dying off, and with bees dying off it means the production of your honey is less," she said.

According to numbers from the National Honey Board — a research and promotion board under USDA oversight — since January 2006, the price per pound of honey has increased from \$3.88 to \$5.97, nearly 54 percent, far outpacing

the rate of inflation (16 percent) over that period.

The American Bee Journal, the oldest English language beekeeping publication in the world, wrote in its August bulletin that honey's record prices won't be dropping anytime soon, "especially if consumer and industrial demand for honey continues to be strong."

Lamey said that in the weeks leading up to Rosh Hashanah, sales of Bennett's honey, which is certified kosher by the Rabbinical Council of California, always increase.

At Delice Bakery, Bohbot said that leading up to the New Year, he gives away mini versions of his honey cake to all customers — even with the new normal of high honey prices. (He estimates his honey bill has gone up at least 50 percent over the last seven years.)

"It's crazy — every year." ■