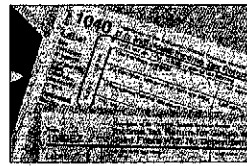


THEY DO THE PREP,
YOU HEAT AND EAT

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Bergen County Edition

Divine advice for Passover chefs

By JOHN CHADWICK
STAFF WRITER

The rabbis arrayed themselves around a telephone in a narrow second-floor office in Teaneck.

Passover was looming, and the phone was ringing.

Some callers were curious, others perplexed.

"Is it so big a sin?" a Rockland County woman asked.

She wanted to know whether she could serve pasta sauce that was kosher, but not kosher for Passover.

Rabbis stop callers from culinary sins during strict holiday

"That," Rabbi Noah Gradofsky replied, would be "a serious no-no."

But there was empathy in the rabbi's voice as he noted that "those of us who do eat kosher-for-Passover pasta sauce are not terribly enamored with it."

The woman, though grateful for the advice, wasn't terribly enamored

of all the rabbi's shopping suggestions.

"I won't go in there," she said of one store he named. "It's *schmutzy*." That's Yiddish for dirty.

Welcome to Operation Passover — a toll-free hot line that has become a lifeline for Jews nationwide as they begin the sometimes-daunting task of preparing for Passover.

The phone line, (888) MATZAH1 or (888) 628-9241, sponsored by the Teaneck-based Union for Traditional Judaism, operated through Tuesday. See **PASSOVER** Page A-19



BETH BALBIERZ/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Rabbi Noah Gradofsky, right, looking up the answer to a question while Rabbi Ronald Price took another call in Teaneck.

Passover: Rabbis help callers keep extra kosher

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The holiday begins tonight.

Last week, the hot line drew callers seeking advice about what, at first, might seem like minor details: Which brands of cocoa powder and tuna fish are kosher for Passover?

But these are matters not to be taken lightly.

Passover, which celebrates the ancient Hebrews' deliverance from slavery in Egypt, is the most widely observed Jewish holiday — and one of the most demanding.

Jewish law prohibits consumption of bread products during the eight days of the holiday. Many Jews prepare for Passover by cleaning their houses and removing all leavened goods — from sandwich bread to cereal to cake mixes. Traditional Jews eat from a special set of dishes and use only food marked

"kosher for Passover."

The highlight of Passover is the Seder, a special meal in which Jews symbolically re-create the story of the Exodus through prayer, song and food.

A tradition begins

About 20 years ago, Rabbi Ronald Price figured that Jews wanting to observe Passover according to the exacting standards of Jewish law could use a helping hand. So he set up a toll-free hot line that for one day put callers directly in touch with a rabbi.

He knew immediately that he was onto something.

"People were calling up and complaining, 'Why are you doing this for just one day?'" said Price, the executive vice president of the Union for Traditional Judaism. "They said, 'We start getting ready

two weeks before.'"

The hot line is now a tradition, drawing several hundred calls a year, from Queens to California. The rabbis added an e-mail address last year, prompting a passel of questions from Jews in France.

Price and his colleagues savor every question, giving each caller equal measures of technical advice and moral support.

"Oy vey, another one?" Rabbi Jeffrey Rappoport declared last week as the digital phone rang repeatedly for several minutes.

Some callers just want to talk, asking incessant questions that keep the rabbis tied up.

Others have strange queries, like the man several years ago with a skin ailment who wanted to know whether he could continue bathing in Aveeno oatmeal-based products during Passover.

Then there's the contingent of callers from Brooklyn and Queens who sound grateful for the chance to ask about Jewish customs while staying completely anonymous.

"They don't want their rabbis to find out what they don't know," Price quipped. "That's where we come in."

Unclear packaging

Indeed, figuring out what's kosher for Passover can be a baffling and bewildering undertaking, in part because of modern food-processing techniques.

Even a prepackaged bag of salad, the rabbi says, is suspect because the lettuce is often sprayed with a preservative that could be derived from a leavened product.

Complicating matters further is the explosion of new, kosher-for-Passover products — from window cleaners to canned pineapples.

"People are confused by it," Rappoport said. "They call up and say, 'Is this really kosher for Passover?'"

And there's little room for error. The prohibition against leavened products isn't merely an arcane custom. It's a biblical injunction meant to remind Jews of the experience of slavery. The ancient Hebrews, the Bible says, didn't have time to let their bread rise, so they ate unleavened bread, known today as matzo.

"Jews are required in every generation to re-create the event, as if we were there at the moment of

"Oy vey, another one?"

RABBI JEFFREY RAPPOPORT, AS THE DIGITAL PHONE RANG REPEATEDLY

redemption," Price said. That's why callers like Lisa Rudolf of Queens are hesitant to rely on the Internet for answers to their questions. Rudolf called last week, wanting to know whether she could use a well-known brand of tuna fish instead of a brand sold at kosher outlets.

"It's a matter of wanting to speak with someone you trust," Rudolf said.

As for the tuna, the rabbi said, the name brand is fine. Rudolf was relieved. "It's better tasting," she said.