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No food will be wasted if Joseph Gitler has his way

By [Orit Arfa](#)

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Joseph Gitler, founder of Table to Table. Photo by Orit Arfa

In the city of Ra'anana, in the center of Israel, the corporate cafeteria at the publicly traded Amdocs high-tech company is full of young executives and IT specialists finishing up their lunch break.

The cafeteria is the size of a fancy Las Vegas hotel buffet, with countless stalls dedicated to hot and cold salads, grilled meats, starches and even classic home cooking -- enough choice and quantity to satisfy the high-tech employees throughout their long workday.

But a kitchen worker pushes a cart back into the kitchen full of untouched filets of beef laden with gravy.

"You see what perfectly good meat this is?" remarked Joseph Gitler, founder of [Table to Table](#), an Israeli food rescue organization. "To think that would go to waste."

Rescuing excess food from Israeli corporate cafeterias on a daily basis is just one of the projects Gitler conceived about five and a half years ago when, as a new immigrant to Israel, he decided he must do something about the disturbing reports of poverty in Israel. He took time off from his job as a marketing executive at an Israeli high-tech company to spend time in soup kitchens and other charitable food providers, only to find they often didn't have enough food to provide.

"No one was thinking big on how to rescue food en masse," Gitler told The Journal from the cafeteria as Amdocs employees and visitors from London voluntarily packaged chicken and rice for transport via the Table to Table truck. "I simply opened the yellow pages, called catered events, and asked if they have extra food they'd be willing to donate. Most of them responded favorably. Actually, it was more than âyes.' It was: âWhere have you been?'"

The 33-year-old New York native initially went on a private mission to gather the unused food, packing it in refrigerators at his home in Ra'anana, where he lives with his Canadian-born wife and four children. He looked to City Harvest in New York and Second Harvest in Toronto as models of large-scale organizations dedicated to rescuing food.

"Within two weeks, the amount of quality food available was very self-evident, and I put a posting on local English internet listings saying âthis is what I'm doing, who wants to join me?'" he said. "And it ran from there."

Today, Table to Table is the largest organization of its kind in Israel, operating on an annual budget of \$2.2 million, funded mostly through anonymous donors. Altogether 35 employees and some 4,000 monthly volunteers now work to collect food from weddings and b'nai mitzvah, corporate cafeterias and army bases, as well as neglected agricultural fields. For every dollar spent, Gitler estimates Table to Table saves \$5 worth of food, not to mention uncalculated costs in energy consumption. On average it rescues 12,000 to 14,000 meals (defined as a protein and two sides) and 40 to 50 tons of produce per week. From the warehouse in Ra'anana, the food gets channeled through 106 nonprofit charitable organizations.

But, Gitler said, Table to Table has not yet tapped resources in northern and southern Israel, and recent poverty statistics have given him the impetus to expand.

According to a report put out last month by Israel's Welfare and Social Services Ministry, close to one-third of Israel's population cannot afford to buy essential food items, while 24,000 people eat in soup kitchens and 22,500 families turn to others to feed them. In Israel, food costs have risen by 6 percent in the last year. The push to get food to the needy is particularly strong right before a Jewish holiday. With Passover approaching, Table to Table is working with farmers to gather food required for the seder table.

"We got farmers who want to donate specifically for Pesach -- particularly lettuce. Lettuce is very expensive this year with because of shmita" (the practice of allowing fields to lie fallow every seven years), said Mark Eilim, the director of Project Gleaning, or Leket in Hebrew. Leket also attracts farmers who must abandon fields out of economic efficiency or who must leave-over fruit and vegetables not suitable for sale due to size or minor imperfections.

Leket started four years ago at the grass-roots level when Eilim, then a driver for Table to Table, was approached by a farmer who had persimmons he couldn't sell.

"He offered to let us take some off the floor," Eilim said. "There was nothing wrong with them. They just weren't the right size."

Together with some volunteers, Eilim gathered 25 tons of persimmons over a few nights. Today he oversees thousands of volunteers monthly -- including Birthright Israel participants, schoolchildren and even prisoners -- who harvest fields throughout Israel. high-tech companies turn to Table to Table for uplifting afternoon company outings.

At a large strawberry field in Hod HaSharon flanked by residential high-rises, a few dozen employees from the Israeli high-tech company worked to pick perfectly ripe, red and delicious strawberries in a field belonging to second-generation farmer, Efraim Yosef.

"I would have shut off the sprinklers, dried up the field," Yosef said. "Since I know people are coming, I continue to irrigate it."

So far his fields have yielded 9,000 baskets of strawberries for families for whom the fruit is a luxury. According to Eilim, most farmers donate a portion of their fields as an act of charity.

"If I could cause a child to smile when he sees strawberries in his refrigerator or on the table," Yosef said. "It gives me a lot."

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