


By Leah Milstein

Going Behind the COSTUMES!

AN INTERVIEW
WITH THE
COSTUME GMACHS!



It may not be one of the four main mitzvos of Purim, but the costume gmachs get a lot of schar for all of their time, work, and funding to help us dress up! Thank you to Tzilah Raczkowski of the Keren Reva costume gmach in Baltimore and Hennie Goldstein of the Toms River costume gmach for taking us behind the scenes of what's involved in manning these invaluable operations.

Thank you so much for taking out the time to speak with me as you're getting geared up for the season. What inspired you to start a costume gmach? How has it evolved over the years?

TR: I first started the gmach in 2013 after seeing requests from people looking for specific costumes for their Purim themes. By that time I had amassed a large collection of costumes for my family, as well as costumes I had bought on sale over the years and had lent out. Friends generously donated some costumes as well.

When I first launched the Gmach, we didn't have an official system in place. One year we had such a rush of people coming all at the same time that we needed Chaveirim to help control the traffic. It was very overwhelming and we needed to make a better schedule to control the crowds. We've since instituted appointment slots and let in a limited number of people at a time.

In 2019 we offered a soft opening a few weeks before the Gmach would officially open. It was a big success and we're doing it again this year. The soft opening is by appointment only and we charge an admission fee which goes to tzedakah. People love it because they can get help and attention, avoid the crowds, and get first pick on the costumes they want. After the soft launch, we open the gmach on Sundays and Motzei Shabbos a few weeks before Purim. For the first two Sundays it's by appointment only, and then we open to the public at set hours.

Over the years we also developed a better system for tracking the cos-

tumes and the deposits. It's now all tracked in our computerized system and the website bookings go into Excel. It's much more organized and streamlined this way.

HG: I started the costume gmach 12 years ago in Brooklyn, although I, and the gmach, have since moved to Toms River, New Jersey. The idea came to me when I was pregnant with my oldest and suffering terribly from Hyperemesis Gravidarum (HG), which is a severe and extreme form of nausea. I was feeling so sick and miserable and wanted to find a project that I could take on in the zchus of a healthy pregnancy and baby, as well as give me something uplifting and joyful to work on and keep my spirits up. Purim was approaching, and I knew that costumes were expensive for many families. I came up with the idea to start a Purim costume gmach and it really lifted my spirits.

My grandfather helped me get started by funding the initial costumes. I bought costumes that I thought would be popular, although I underestimated the demand for kallah gowns. That first year I was busy ordering more and more little girl kallah dresses!

My friend ran the gmach for the first year as I was still suffering from HG. By the second year, I realized that I needed to put a system in place. People weren't returning the costumes on time or were returning them in dirty and in bad condition. I didn't want to charge people money - it is a gmach, not a rental - but it couldn't be hefker. We instituted a \$10 refundable deposit per costume that gets returned when they bring

back their costumes up to a week after Purim. We get the handful of people who lost or misplaced their costumes until a year later, but for the most part, it works.

For the first few years, the gmach was in my small two-bedroom apartment, and it literally took over the entire apartment. For a month each year, we were living in a costume gmach! I had kids running in and out of the bedrooms while their mothers were looking through the costumes. Now that we moved to Toms River, the gmach moved with us and operates out of my mother's spacious basement nearby, so we have more room.

I originally started the gmach as a zchus that my pregnancy should go well and to keep my spirits up - and B"H I've been able to continue it for twelve years. I've been open every year except when I was expecting and confined to my bed, and last year during Covid. My father had passed away from Covid, and I'm considering making the gmach as a zchus for his neshama.

When do you start preparing your Gmach for Purim? Is it open during the year?

TR: The gmach preparation work starts right after Chanukah! The first thing I do is to read over my notes from the previous year to see if there's anything we should do differently this year, or if there is anything that we need. Was something not working out? Do we need more racks or hangers? Are there any costumes people asked for?

I make sure that the woman who hosts the gmach in her basement can do it this year, that our volunteers will be available to help again, and call our website pro to update the site for this year.

Then we gather the costumes. During the year the costumes are stored in individual

Ziploc bags in 50-60 storage bins in people's attics. We get wonderful bochurim volunteers to shlep the costume bins down, and then we sort them. We're doing the sorting already in December. I prefer to start early and give myself breathing room than to be stressed last minute.


The gmach is in someone's basement. We have a room with five double racks just for baby costumes, another room with two racks of gowns and dresses, and then a large playroom with two racks of adult costumes, and tons of tables with bins of them. Each bin contains a category, such as police size baby to medium, police size large to adult. As the season progresses and costumes are taken, we're constantly re-sorting and cleaning up.

Our gmach first opens to the soft opening appointments, and then for a month before Purim, we're open on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Motzei Shabbos with appointments. From Purim until Pesach we're busy with the costume returns, and then it's quiet. I'm not really busy with the gmach during the year, though if I see popular costumes or racks on sale, I may buy them.

I do get costume donations throughout the year, but I put them into the attic for storage until we begin sorting the costumes after Chanukah.

RG: I start working on the gmach after Chanukah. It's not open during the year and the costumes are reserved just for Purim. The costumes are all stored in large storage containers during the year.

I start by going through what I have, sort through the costumes to see if we need to add anything, what costume themes we'll have that year, and make sure I have enough hangers and racks. It becomes a whole family project!



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Once the gmach opens, it's by appointment only. It's better for everyone when each person gets individual attention, no one is fighting over the same costume, and it's easier for me to keep things organized. When too many people are there at once, it can get overwhelming, and it's easy to lose track of the costumes that get taken. We've had some that went missing over the years. I check out each costume, write down exactly what is borrowed, and take their refundable deposits.

From where do you get your costumes?

IR: We buy a lot of the costumes - the money the gmach receives goes right back into the gmach. We have a wholesale account with Dress Up America and I buy a lot of costumes from them. We also offer the community our wholesale account. If someone wants a costume that we don't have, they can buy it from Dress Up America using our

account to get the wholesale price and then donate the costume to us after Purim.

We also get donated costumes. The kids' gown gmach gives us the gowns when they are worn out, which makes for beautiful kallah and princess dresses!

I'm particular about the costumes I carry in the gmach. We don't stock superhero costumes, but if we receive any as donations, I give them to Camp Simcha or to the local Chai Lifeline.

HC: I buy most of the costumes new, but we'll accept donated costumes in very good condition too. Over the years, family members and others have given money to help fund the gmach or donated as a zchus, which I use to buy the costumes.

We don't charge any money for the costumes - I understand it's a big expense for many families. For some families, the expense of buying costumes isn't as much of an issue as the space and hassle of storing them, and they're happy to give a donation to the gmach when they return the costumes. Though we don't receive many donations, anything we do receive goes to buy new costumes for the gmach.

What sizes do you carry?

TR: We have costumes for all sizes and ages, from infants through adults. We have senior citizens who come too and love dressing up for Purim. You can dress up at any age! If you don't want to do a full costume, you can put on a cute t-shirt.

HG: We carry all sizes and have costumes for all ages.

What are some of the popular costumes people request? Any interesting themes or ideas that you've seen families put together?

We have a great volunteer who always first asks people whether they're looking to fit a theme, or if they have any requirements. Some families for example, don't dress up as non-kosher animals.

Some popular costumes that always go are little girls' gowns, kallahs and fairies. Police, firemen, and soldiers always go with the boys, and food costumes and plush baby animal costumes are always popular. People seem to especially like the baby monkey costumes. Pilots and flight attendants are another favorite. We have a nice stock of pilot costumes - the name label was misspelled and they were discounted much cheaper.

Sometimes a costume is very popular one year and then doesn't go the next. One year, mad scientists were in, we invested in a bunch of those costumes, and the next year they didn't go. The Angry Birds and Morph costumes were a big hit a few years ago, but not recently. We donate costumes that have fallen out of favor to Camp Simcha.

A few years ago we invested in a number of Where's Waldo costumes. That year, the siyum hashas made them very popular - the costumes were all gone on day one!

Some people like car-seat safe costumes that are not plush or simple costumes like Thing 1 and Thing 2 and emoji t-shirts.

Some families come in with one idea in mind, see the costumes, and leave with something else entirely. We've seen lots of creative themes. One girl wanted a Statue of Liberty costume. Her siblings picked other USA-related costumes like Uncle Sam. Someone did a school theme and dressed the baby as an apple. We've gotten requests for baby mouse costumes to go with a mad scientist theme and baby parrots for a pirate theme.

Last year we didn't open due to Corona. A family with a large white van wore caps and gave out ice cream from their car! That was an original idea.

HG: Kallahs are hands-down the most popular costume, although Hello-Kitty is also popular with the little girls. The boys all love the police, hatzolah, and SWAT costumes. Farmers and animals are always popular, although I see the character costumes don't really go here in Lakewood.

I love seeing the unique and creative themes that people put together. Over the years I've seen Sheishes Yimei Bereishis, colors, milk and cookies, Goldilocks and the three bears, and a family of bugs.

Do you have any tips or advice for our readers?

TR: It takes a village to run a gmach, especially one of our size. In 2020 we lent out over 1200 costumes!

There's so much chesed involved. A generous community member hosts the gmach in her basement. A woman does our website free of charge, another manages our spreadsheet of reservations, and yet another volunteer calls the people who



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are late in returning the costumes after Purim. We have a volunteer who sorts the deposit checks that we have to cross-reference and give back when the costumes are returned.

There are so many chesed opportunities that can be done, even from your own home. It may only take the women an hour or two to make the phone calls for late-return costumes, but it is a huge help for us. An hour of sorting through costumes can be an invaluable help. We have a lot of older single volunteers who enjoy helping out in the gmach. It's a nice social outlet and an opportunity to meet people in the community.

Another way you can help your local costume gmach is by donating costumes. If you're cleaning out your closets, consider whether your dated, out-of-style suits and dresses would make a great Purim cos-

tume! Bochrin like to use different, funky suits and jackets as costumes. You can be part of the chesed too!

The gmach is named for my mother-in-law, Reva Raczkowski and it's l'iluy nish-masah, Sora Rivka bas Yehuda Aryeh Leib. While we don't raise money, there is a deposit that becomes a late fee if the costume isn't returned on time. Many people donate the deposit to the gmach and we raised \$3000 in 2020 for Jewish Caring Network.

Tizku L'mitzvos and thank you for stepping in to fill this need for your community! 🕒