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Story #1

Kosher bakery finds sweet success with its employees with disabilities

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GAITHERSBURG, Md. Some of the trainees at the Sunflower Bakery can't read the recipes. Others need a reminder to shave. Several had to practice before they could manage the bus ride to the bakery on their own.

The idea that this suburban bakery could make adults with cognitive disabilities into employable bakers surprises even some in their own families. Perhaps more surprising: the Sunflower bakers must work within the strictures of Jewish dietary laws, assuring customers that the products they make are certified-by-a-rabbi kosher.

By giving people who have had few breaks in their lives a chance for a real career, the four-year-old nonprofit bakery aims to sell \$240,000 worth of raspberry jam bars, brownie lollipops, bar mitzvah cakes and other goodies this year.

But this month, it's all about the hamantaschen — 25,000 of them to be exact.

Jews serve the traditional cookie for Purim, which begins on Saturday evening (March 15) this year. Though the bakers have battled a host of obstacles in their paths toward independence, in the weeks before Purim, success takes the form of a perfectly folded triangle-shaped hamantaschen.

“I made 1,100,” said Wilhsia Kimmakon, 20, who explains that she learned to place them on the cookie sheets “with just the right spacing.” The task is a fitting one for Kimmakon, who, despite intellectual disabilities, does well with structured, repetitive tasks.

She has also learned a bit about Purim. The hamantaschen takes its name from the three-cornered hat of the evil vizier Haman, who sought to exterminate the Jews of ancient Persia. Purim commemorates the commoner Esther’s rise to the throne, and her brave and successful efforts to save her people from Haman’s plan.

It is one of the Bible’s great reversal-of-fortune stories, and one that resonates at the Sunflower Bakery. The theme here is making the very most out of the most humble ingredients.

Zeke Koster, 39, can’t read the hamantaschen recipe. Before he came to Sunflower, he cleaned bathrooms. “He’s never ever been fired but he’s always had menial jobs, so he’s never had a positive feeling about what’s he’s doing,” said his mother, Marilyn Koster.

“At Sunflower, he feels so good about himself and what the potential down the road is,” she said. “He’s like a flower opening up.”

Sunflower staffers, who met Koster in November, realized that he needed extra time to repeat a recipe — and repeat it and repeat it — until he got it right. Koster, who is now on track for a job in a real-world, for-profit bakery, took it upon himself to fit in more cookie-making practice at home.

“Put egg at the corners,” he gently advised a visitor to the bakery whose hamantaschen triangles often unfold into circles. “It’s like glue.”

Other students at Sunflower live with autism, ADHD, anxiety, bipolar disorder and depression. The bar for them is high enough. Why add kosher, and its many rules, to the mix of challenges?

“We keep kosher,” answered Sara Portman Milner, a social worker who co-directs Sunflower with Laurie Wexler, a friend from her synagogue.

They guessed the market would support a kosher bakery, since there are so few of them. But just in case, the two friends commissioned a study, which confirmed a niche waiting to be filled in metro Washington. They and two other friends each contributed \$500, and founded Sunflower in the kitchen of Beth Sholom, their synagogue in Potomac, Md.

Sunflower is a Jewish bakery in that everything is kosher. One homework assignment, no matter the religious background of the student, is to go to a supermarket to search out the kosher symbols on various products.

But it is also Jewish in that the bakery takes its cues directly from Maimonides, the 12th-century rabbi. “On his ladder of ‘tzedakah’ (Hebrew for “charity”), the highest rung is to enable a person to become self-sufficient and not have a need for charity,” she said.

Students learn to bake, yes, but they also learn basic skills like getting to work on time, washing their hair before they arrive, and speaking up for themselves. Some pass a National Restaurant Association food-handling test that can help assure future employers that they would be assets in the kitchen.

“You need to have pants that have a belt,” Portman Milner recalls telling one student. “Your pants can’t be falling down while you’re baking.”

Sunflower hopes to open a store beyond its 1,100 square feet of industrial kitchen. For now, it delivers orders or prepares them for pickup at seven locations. To date, it has graduated 24 students, who now work at area restaurants, bakeries and supermarkets.

Sunflower’s budget, \$530,000 this year, comes partly from local government grants and several Jewish foundations. It employs 10 professionals, including executive pastry chef Liz Hutter.

Hutter — the non-Jewish former executive pastry chef at Washington’s Watergate Hotel — has tweaked many of her recipes to make kosher versions. No Sunflower products may contain a speck of dairy, which makes them more versatile under kosher law because dairy and meat can’t be eaten in the same meal. That means no butter, no cream cheese.

A “parve” dessert — which contains neither milk nor meat — can be served after any kosher food. “Ganache without cream,” said Hutter with a smile. “That was interesting.”

And delectable, Portman Milner promises.

“We don’t mind if a customer first comes to us because they’ve heard about our cause,” she said. “But we want them to come back for the quality of our products.”

End story #1

Story #2

Mommy, minister and unmarried: Single mothers in the pulpit

| July 31, 2014 |

When Philadelphia’s St. Paul Baptist Church hired the Rev. Leslie Callahan as its first female pastor, in 2009, she was nearing her 40th birthday and the tick-tock of her biological clock was getting hard to ignore.

She delighted in her ministry but also wanted a husband and children in her life. The husband she couldn’t do much about — he just hadn’t stepped into her life.

“But it was clear to me that I was going to do everything in my power to realize my dream of becoming a parent,” she said.

Now Callahan is mother to 22-month-old Bella, who was welcomed joyously by what the pastor describes as “a pretty traditional Baptist church.” She describes Bella’s arrival as “a divine regrouping,” a different answer to her prayers than the traditional mommy-daddy-baby model she had envisioned.

Ever since unmarried sitcom anchorwoman [Murphy Brown](#) shocked much of the country in 1991 by deciding to raise her baby on her own, the culture has changed. Once unthinkable and later unacceptable, single mothers by choice today are met with less judgment.

In fact, according to federal statistics, more than 40 percent of births are to unmarried mothers. But what if, like Callahan, the single mom by choice is a minister, or a rabbi?

The phenomenon is impossible in traditions where serving as clergy is off-limits to women, including the Roman Catholic Church and most Southern Baptist churches. These prohibitions have drawn upon traditional views of women as mothers, and married ones at that.

“There’s nothing that points up the traditional conflicts that religious groups have put forward between ordination and womanhood than motherhood,” said Ann D. Braude, director of the [Women’s Studies in Religion](#) Program at Harvard Divinity School.

But even in houses of worship that have accepted women in the pulpit, an unwed mother can still unsettle the pews. “Traditionally, motherhood by Christians and others was viewed as a vocation, and you can only have one vocation: You could have the ministry or motherhood as a vocation, but not both,” Braude said.

While their numbers are few — and no one is keeping count — some female clergy are concluding that their congregations can handle their choice. “These women are putting forward the possibility that not only can you have a vocation to ministry and a vocation to motherhood, but that marriage is not necessarily a part of that,” Braude said.

But the path from pastor to single mom still seems to matter. For Callahan, she chose adoption.

“I definitely feel that God brought Bella and me into each other’s lives,” she said.

Did she ever consider assisted reproduction or donor sperm? St. Paul’s had already taken a big step by giving the pulpit to a single woman. To ask the congregation to accept a pregnant single woman — “I didn’t think it would be a fair thing to do,” Callahan said.

For many congregants, a pregnant single mother leading the congregation would cross a line that an adoptive mother would not, Braude said. “Religion conveys ideas through symbols, and the presence of a pregnant woman at the pulpit is a very challenging set of symbols for some religious people to bring together,” she said.

Rabbi Felicia Sol chose assisted fertility to bring her 4-year-old son and 2-year-old daughter into the world.

Her vision for her life was the Jewish version of Callahan’s: rabbi mom plus dad plus children. But in her 30s, with no prospective husband on the horizon, Sol made a plan for a family. She knew it could work at her congregation, B’nai Jeshurun, the progressive New York City synagogue where she has worked for the past 18 years.

“I don’t know that I spent a lot of time worrying about other people’s opinions,” said Sol, whose story was included in a recently released documentary about Jewish clergy who opted for single motherhood: [“All of the Above: Single, Clergy, Mother.”](#)

She — like the other women interviewed for this story — knew she had the financial means to support a family on her own.

But Sol, now 43, still worried. She still wanted a husband. Would having children on her own make people think she was not interested in men? And while most parents struggle to balance work and children, the feat is harder still for public figures whose work is to nurture a congregation.

“That’s what I had the most anxiety about,” Sol said. “As a rabbi, I have pressing responsibilities for a community. I don’t have a 9-to-5 schedule. I don’t have weekends off. Would it be possible for me to do this without having to hire so many people that I would never see my children?”

Sol did figure it out, and gives great credit to her parents, who help care for their grandchildren on Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath. Colleagues at the Conservative synagogue understand that she isn’t always as readily available as she was before her children were born. And importantly, she said, she herself — no longer a rookie rabbi — more easily sets limits at work.

But just because a potential minister mom lives in anything-goes New York City doesn't mean her congregation is going to be thrilled with her pregnancy.

The Rev. Beverly Bartlett, associate pastor of Manhattan's Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, had made a motherhood pact with herself when she was in her 20s. If she were still single in her mid-30s, she would try to have children on her own.

In her 40s, she learned that her chances to have a successful pregnancy were not good but that a toddler in Nepal needed a home. Emily, now 10, is the minister's daughter. "The church," said Bartlett, "is her extended family."

And what if Bartlett became pregnant, instead of adopting?

"The church probably could have handled it, but not without some discussion, and there probably would have been some people who would not have looked upon it favorably," she said.

Bartlett has spoken with only one other woman in the clergy who has embarked on single parenthood without a partner. She has heard of a second.

The Rev. Carolyn Gordon, who chairs the Department of Preaching and Communication at [Fuller Theological Seminary](#), said women preachers are still new in many congregations, and their presence is bound to bring change. The first wave of ordained women may not have considered unmarried motherhood an option, she said.

"But I would not be surprised to see more as time goes on," she said. "The women groomed for ministry are different now."

End story #2

Story #3

Green burials reflect a shift to care for the body and soul

| January 23, 2014 |

Growing up in small-town Georgia, John B. Johnson had family friends who ran the funeral home down the street, so the particulars of a typical American funeral — the embalming, the heavy casket and remarks about how great the deceased's hair looked — were all familiar to him.

When the time came, he assumed, his funeral would look much the same.

But Johnson, now 44, envisions a different sort of send-off for himself: a “green burial” that draws both upon his faith and his commitment to the environment. For Johnson and others like him, a green burial is a way to care for the Earth and answer to the part of his soul that recoils at the pomp of the average American funeral, and takes seriously the biblical reminder: “For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”

“It's the notion that Jesus was so humble,” said Johnson, an Episcopalian who lives in Washington, D.C. “I am a follower and I want to follow that example. I want my death as humble as I think Jesus lived.”

Johnson wants to skip the embalming fluid, which often contains methanol, ethanol and formaldehyde — a suspected carcinogen. He wants a plain pine box. And he would just as soon skip the grand procession, led by a gas-guzzling hearse.

There are no solid statistics on how many Americans choose green burial. But an indication of its rising popularity comes from a 2007 [AARP study](#), which found that nearly one in five Americans age 50 and older who have planned for a funeral have considered a green one.

The stereotype of these people, said Joe Sehee, who founded the nonprofit [Green Burial Council](#), is of a “Prius-driving member of the eco-chic” — a person who is well-educated, environmentally conscious, liberal and not too keen on organized religion.

But the stereotype, said Sehee — a former Jesuit lay minister — ignores a whole group of people who seek green burial in great part because of their religious or spiritual convictions.

Sehee, whose group sets standards for green burials, has worked with Catholic priests, rabbis and others who see it as an alternative to the funeral industry and a return to their religious traditions.

Green burial, Sehee said, recognizes that “there’s death, but there’s rebirth associated with it. And we don’t see any connection between death and life in traditional death care.”

Or, in the words of Maureen McGuinness, family service manager of upstate New York’s Most Holy Redeemer Cemetery, green burial “is a way for families to talk about resurrection.”

After fielding numerous requests from Catholics looking for a green burial, the Diocese of Albany set aside a wildflower-filled meadow at Most Holy Redeemer — one of its 16 cemeteries — and blessed it as a green resting place in September 2012. So far, 35 people have purchased grave sites, and about half of those have been used.

“When grandma dies and you come to this place, it’s all filled with life,” McGuinness said.

As in all Catholic cemeteries, all bodies interred in green graves at Most Holy Redeemer receive traditional Catholic rites.

But there is no embalming — or the embalming is with Earth-friendly chemicals only — and the caskets are made of untreated wood or other natural materials. For grave markers, the deceased’s name is sandblasted into a cobblestone. Deer and wild turkey roam the meadow, which is named for Kateri Tekakwitha, the first Native American Catholic saint.

The price of green burial is often lower than typical burials, sometimes by hundreds or thousands of dollars, McGuinness said, because there is no embalming and the casket — if there is one — is simple. Green burial also forgoes the concrete burial vaults into which caskets are placed.

The Green Burial Council has certified nearly 400 providers in 46 states. Some of them have religious orientations. And even some that are not certified consider themselves already green because their faiths have for millennia taken an ecologically friendly approach to death. Muslims and Jewish traditions, for example, eschew embalming and require quick

burials. A kosher casket is a plain wood box made without metal hardware. Muslim tradition specifies a simple shroud and does not require a casket.

But Sehee said religious funeral professionals often fall short of embracing their green religious traditions. He knows of Jewish cemeteries that require burial vaults and he has heard an imam lament that a funeral director serving his Muslim community pushes metal caskets.

“And there are Catholic cemeteries that won’t accept a body in a shroud, even though Jesus was buried in a shroud,” Sehee said.

Gilbert Becker was buried in a flannel shirt and overalls, the clothes he used to wear hunting, camping and fishing with his family. After he died last September, his Christian family placed his body in a casket carved from a fallen tree by his son and interred it in the woods at Green Acres Cemetery near Columbia, Mo. It just made sense, said his wife, Suzanne Becker.

“Gilbert and I always felt most close to God when we were out in the mountains or in the woods,” she said.

What “better place to camp out,” she said, “until the good Lord brings us up.”

End story #3