



With 1,300 supermarkets under his purview, **Yakov Yarmove** is one of America's most influential executives in the kosher segment of the retail food business. As the kosher buyer for the SUPERVALU chain, his decisions heavily impact the kosher market, and make sure kosher products are available in the far-flung corners of the US — a change from the days when he was a kid and for years drank only powdered milk

BY **Barbara Bensoussan** PHOTOS **Danyel Duncan**

# THE GROCERY GUY







**LOOKING AT THE OUTSIDE** of the Jewel-Osco supermarket in Evanston, Illinois, you'd never guess that inside lies another "jewel": a swanky, 6,000-square-foot kosher store-within-a-store that's about as close to Pomegranate as you're likely to find outside greater New York. On display in the bakery section are 47 varieties of *pas Yisrael* bread; a huge kosher deli offers a mouthwatering assortment of cold cuts. There's a "Taste of Israel" section proffering authentic Israeli products. The meat department is so expansive it garnered Chicago's "Best Kosher Butcher" award five years in a row, and there's even a glatt kosher Chinese takeout restaurant with the predictable name Ten Li Chow.

This is definitely a far cry from the out-of-town supermarkets I grew up with, where "kosher aisle" meant about two feet of shelving stocked with little more than matzoh, canned soup, and jarred gefilte fish. But the man behind this gleaming retail mini-empire is Yakov Yarmove, a jovial, six-foot businessman who once thought he'd make a career being a military chaplain. But Hashem had other plans, and today Yarmove's business card reads "Corporate Business Manager of Ethnic Marketing and Specialty Foods" for Supervalu Inc., the Minneapolis-based parent company of Jewel-Osco, Albertsons, Acme, Shoppers, and seven other grocery chains across the US. As the buyer of all the kosher products for some 1,300 stores in 39 states across the country, his buying decisions have made a major impact on the national kosher market.

Yarmove's job keeps him on the road close to 40 weeks a year, and *Mishpacha* was able to catch up with him recently in New York (he lives with his wife Miriam and six children in Chicago).

"Before every Yom Tov season I make a point to visit our top

**"We need new items. I'm always asking myself what's doing well in the nonkosher market that can be mimicked for the kosher side"**

**— Yakov Yarmove**



kosher stores with our regional merchandising teams," he says. "We also check up on the competition. This job requires thinking like a battlefield general — you have to manage from the ground, not from the air."

Yarmove is dressed the part of a savvy businessman: neat beard, stylish eye-glasses, checked shirt, leather jacket. Once a Chabad *shaliach*, Yarmove brings all the zeal and outreach skills of that experience to his current career, even down to the jokes ("Lots of people out there are GI Jews," he announces. "Gastrointestinal ones...."). He has a voice that would've served him well in radio announcing — a resonant, voluminous baritone inflected with a perfect middle American accent, a voice that loves to talk about Yiddishkeit and his campaign to bring kosher to the far corners of the American *midbar*.

**21<sup>st</sup>-Century Shopping** Supervalu is one of the three largest traditional grocery chains in the US (the others are Kroger and Safeway), although none of them has a significant presence in New York. "In New York, the retail grocery business is primarily regionally controlled," he says. But he sees big potential for kosher expansion in other states as *frum* families increasingly look

to move out of town. "New York has become too expensive, so more and more people are moving out," he states. He's working on opening smaller versions of his Evanston flagship in Las Vegas, Boston, Passaic, Baltimore, and other yet-to-be announced sites.

Shopping for groceries has changed over the course of human history: from village markets to city pushcarts, from family groceries to larger chains like A&P and Pathmark. The mom-and-pop stores that used to be standard are less common. (Although Yarmove claims the kosher ones still have their place: "They're convenient, and they often extend credit to families that need to use it; they'll carry a lot of the *heimishe* brands, and do things like repackaging kosher products on site.") But today, even the larger supermarket chains are finding themselves at risk of being supplanted by big box stores like Walmart and Target, warehouse stores like Costco and B.J.'s, and Internet shopping. So for traditional chains like Supervalu, bringing back the customers is vital for their survival.

Yarmove says one attraction is to offer specialty items people can't find in more mass-market venues — the reason kosher marketing has taken on new relevance. While some of his more far-flung stores





**“Ten years ago, if you had offered me sushi, I would’ve said, ‘Su-what?’ ”**



have a kosher aisle only four feet wide, others, like Evanston’s Jewel-Osco (which services 3,000 Jewish families in the West Rogers Park area) offer complete, one-stop kosher shopping.

Another draw to bring people into a store is to turn grocery shopping from a humdrum chore into a form of entertainment, a veritable feast for the senses.

“Have you ever been to a Whole Foods?” Yarmove asks. “It’s like a nonkosher Pomegranate-style store on steroids. Stores like Whole Foods and Wegmans succeed in making food shopping a complete gourmet experience.” In Evanston, he consciously sought to imitate this model of shopping-as-theater, piping in Jewish music during holiday seasons, giving out free calendars, even equipping the Chinese takeout restaurant with glass windows that allow customers to observe the chefs dicing and stir-frying. He wants his stores to look sharp, so he works closely with the Supervalu architects. The Evanston store caters to every kosher foodie caprice, and even to the eccentricities of its *frum* clientele’s schedule — for example, the kosher deli stays open till 1 a.m. on Thursday nights. (The store itself is open 24 hours a day).

“In an out-of-town community, having this kind of store is big news,” Yarmove says. “It also has great crossover appeal. You hear nonkosher customers saying to each other, ‘Hey, look, they even have New York-style knishes!’ ”

In all the stores Yarmove oversees, he’s happy that he’s able to open opportunities both to local kosher businesses, like Zelda’s Sweet Shoppe in Chicago, and to Israeli companies. An order from Yarmove is no small potatoes: with 1,300 stores under his direction, it can make all the difference in turbocharging a budding business. Israeli food producers are well aware of his buying clout; every time he visits Eretz Yisrael, Yarmove finds a contingent of vendors waiting for him.

“I’ve learned my lesson,” he says. “In this business, you have to under-promise, and over-perform. But my mother is Israeli and I adore our Holy Land, so I’m very proud to be able to support Israeli business.”

While we tend to think non-Jews wouldn’t care whether their food is kosher or not, Yarmove was taken aback when one well-respected industry VP told him, “Kosher is very important to nonkosher consumers.” The gentleman went on to explain, “Imagine that a customer walks down the aisle, say the health food aisle, and sees two products that seem equivalent in cost and quality. All things being equal, he’s more likely to buy the product with the kosher certification. We even have the numbers to prove it.”

With the range of kosher products now so diverse and international, the potential for crossover marketing includes people with special dietary needs. For example, many lactose-intolerant consumers make a point of buying only pareve-certified bakery items. There’s also some crossover purchasing from halal-observant customers, who tend to buy from their own butchers when available, but if not are permitted to buy kosher meat.

**Almost a Chaplain** While kosher certification today has become so popular that it’s a selling attribute even for non-Jews, Yarmove remembers the kashrus restrictions during his own childhood in Cincinnati, where his father, writer, and editor Rabbi Hillel Yarmove, was an English professor at the University of Cincinnati. “I grew up drinking powdered milk,” he says, “because there was no *chalav Yisrael* in Cincinnati. We had to stock up on it during trips to Cleveland.”

Being one of the most powerful men in the US kashrus business wasn’t exactly in his plans when Yakov Yarmove was growing up in the Midwest. His father Rabbi Yarmove had become fully observant in Israel, marrying an Israeli before returning to the US. The family’s neighborhood shul was Lubavitch, led by Rabbi Zelig Scharfstein *ztz”l*, and as a youngster Yakov became close to him. After spending a year in yeshivah at Telshe (where he fondly remembers Rabbi Yitzchok Schwartz as his outstanding eighth-grade *rebbe*), he told his parents he wanted to continue his learning in the Lubavitch *derech* he became accustomed to. They voiced no objections,

and sent him to continue his yeshivah studies at the Yeshivah Achei T’mimim *mesivta* in Pittsburgh. (Yarmove’s younger brother was sent to Yeshiva Torah Vodaath; he currently lives with his family in Lakewood). Yakov continued *beis medrash* studies in the Tomchei T’mimim Yeshiva in Morristown, eventually enrolling in a *smichah* program in the “770 yeshivah” in Crown Heights.

With a natural penchant for being involved with people — helping with chaplaincy work in two hospitals while in yeshivah in Pittsburgh — Yakov became a civilian chaplain with the US Coast Guard when he went on Chabad *shlichus* to Miami. “You need an ecclesiastical endorsement to hold that position,” he explains. “I was fortunate to get one from the Jewish Welfare Board.” Only his young age — 20 — and his beard disqualified him from becoming fully enlisted.

Age 20 seems awfully young to be dispensing comfort and counsel to people of greater age and experience, but Yarmove says he learned early on that “the key is to be *mekadesh sheim Shamayim*.”

“You do your best to connect to each person,” he says. “And you have to show people that not every *frum* Jew is a fiddler on the roof; we’re real people.”

He fully expected to continue in the military chaplaincy, seeing himself working as a first lieutenant in the Air Force. But when Operation Desert Storm broke out in 1991, he found himself faced with a difficult decision: the beard that had helped bestow him the legitimacy to assume a chaplain’s job was now a barrier to enlisted service in the military. After some soul-searching, Yarmove decided to keep his beard and withdraw. “I refused to start compromising,” he avers.

While the chaplaincy fell through, Miami offered something even more valuable: a *shidduch* with his *ezer k’negdo*. In addition to her other fine qualities, Yarmove’s wife, Miriam Leah, has the distinction of coming from a family of 16, *bli ayin hara*, which tied a world record for the most girls born in a row (11). Following the wedding, the couple moved back to Cincinnati, where Yakov briefly took a job marketing credit cards.



# THE TOP 10

## KOSHER ASSUMPTIONS

As a marketing executive of a chain with over 1,300 stores around the country — many of them in areas where there isn't much Jewish traffic — Yakov Yarmove hears a lot of reactions to "kosher" and provides a checklist for all those Americans who are intrigued by the kosher aisles. These are the most common reactions:

### Right or Wrong?

**1 Kosher means the rabbi blessed it.**

Maybe, if you count the blessings on *shechitah* and *hafrashas challah*, but mostly wrong

**2**

**Kosher food is a lot more expensive.**

No comment



**4 Kosher meat and poultry is sooo salty.**

Right, due to the requirement to salt the meat in the koshering process



**Osem Mini Mandel is Jewish popcorn.**

Maybe, if you put popcorn in your soup

**5**

**Pareve means lactose-free.**

Right. And this is a big deal among lactose-intolerant consumers



**7 Passover products are gluten-free, a great time for celiacs to shop.**

Partially right. But watch out — only *non-gebrochts* items are gluten-free

**8 Apples are part of every Jewish holiday requirement.**

Almost wrong (only Rosh HaShanah)



**Kosher food is only eaten around the Jewish holidays.**

Wrong, of course. But many people are surprised to learn that Jews actually eat kosher food every day of the year!



**Kosher is healthier**

Maybe. It's probably true for meat and poultry, and it's generally insect-free

**9**

**Passover Coke is the real deal.**

Right. It's made the old-fashioned way, with cane sugar instead of corn syrup, to avoid the problem of *kithiyos*

"What are the options for a *frum* young man if he has no professional experience?" Yarmove asks rhetorically. "Our system is trying to address it, but we need to find more ways for Jewish men to find solid ways to support their families." His own baby step up the ladder came when he took a job as the manager of the kosher sections of a grocery store in Cleveland.

Actually, Yarmove had a hand in kosher food entrepreneurship since he was a kid, selling kosher candy and snacks in his elementary school in Cincinnati (until the school put a stop to it). "And in Morristown, I owned the yeshivah commissary," he says. "I established some great relationships with many of the kosher vendors."

He stayed at the supermarket for two years, until it closed. From there, he was offered a position with Price Chopper, a chain in up-state New York that numbers over 100 stores in six states; his job was to help grow the kosher segment of the business. With their one-year-old baby in tow, the Yarmoves moved to Albany, where Yarmove says he learned to do everything from butchering sides of meat to slicing deli and stocking shelves.

Today, he says the experience he gained from those early jobs has proven invaluable. "The best people in the business start at the bottom," he says. "I worked the cash register, mopped floors, bagged groceries. I learned how to deal with the public. You become a better person and a better businessperson because of that hands-on experience. I once had to do a presentation to a group of our VPs, and they were truly engaged because they felt I was presenting on their wavelength, that I really understood the business from every angle."

Yarmove moved steadily through the ranks at Price Chopper, until he ended up working at the corporate level. He still holds great admiration and gratitude towards the chain's owners, the Golub family, whom he describes as "wonderful, classy Jewish people who were a pleasure to work for and are big *baalei tzedakah*." He might have stayed with them permanently, but for the fact that his oldest child had reached fourth grade and needed

a higher-level yeshivah education.

That's when he got a call from Albertson's, a national grocery chain based in Boise, Idaho, which ran some 2,300 stores. Albertson's was interested in boosting the kosher section of its business, and needed someone to help grow the seeds of the kosher sections they'd already planted. Fortunately for the Yarmoves — since Boise is even less distinguished than Albany for its Jewish education options — he was invited to work with a base team in Chicago, where he has remained since 2002.

The move created enough buzz in the business world that Yarmove found himself featured on the cover of the *New York Times* business section. "And I hadn't even done anything noteworthy yet!" he marvels. Nor did he have any secular business credentials; he holds a BA and MA in religious studies from his years at accredited yeshivos, and picked up the bulk of his computer skills on the job. He does admit to having "a natural propensity for numbers ... we have people who assist crunching the numbers, but I need to fully understand what's going on myself." In 2006, Albertson's was sold to Supervalu, and 1,300 stores came under his purview as director of kosher sales.

**Kosher Foodie Trends** Yarmove's enhanced and expanded kosher sections represent, in microcosm, all the changes in the kosher world in the past 25 years. The Orthodox population has exploded, driving higher sales volume, and the kosher consumer has become more sophisticated.

"Ten years ago, if you had offered me sushi, I would've said, 'Su-what?'" Yarmove says. "But kosher consumers today, like consumers in the larger market, are interested in what's new and exotic. Society has generally become more high-tech, more porous, more food-oriented." He says there are also a lot of *baalei tes-huvah* who entered the religious world with broader food horizons, and ask him to obtain kosher forms of items they remember from nonkosher days.

Needless to say, the surge of new food

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interest means opportunities for entrepreneurs, who often approach him asking what the coming trends are, and what they should do next. Yarmove suggests they be innovative. “We don’t need another variety of gefilte fish, when there are already 25 kinds on the market,” he says. “We need new items. I’m always asking myself what’s doing well in the nonkosher market that can be mimicked for the kosher side.”

Some of those nonkosher trends have led to kosher versions of the same products. Gluten-free foods are suddenly all the rage; Yarmove cites statistics that only eight percent of the people buying gluten-free are doing so for real medical reasons; the rest think it’s healthier or slimming. (“It’s chic — even the celebrities have been seen running to buy it,” he says.)

As two-earner couples have become the norm, more and more kosher convenience foods have appeared to speed up supper preparation — frozen chicken nuggets, eggplant parmesan, waffles, pizza. When I suggest these are perhaps not as healthy as homemade dinners, he shrugs and says forgivingly, “For busy working mothers, sanity is also a health issue.” Time-pressed kosher foodies have also become heavy consumers of prepared dips, particularly for Shabbos meals.

At times, however, smaller business numbers just don’t make it worthwhile to produce a kosher version of a nonkosher item.

“Many years ago, the owner of a popular soup company thought he’d try to make tubes of cookie dough, like the Pillsbury tubes,” Yarmove recounts. “He did one day of kosher production and produced thousands of cases, but in the end he decided it just wasn’t worth it to kasher an entire plant for what was considered a relatively small run.”

Similarly, it’s often not profitable to produce gourmet dairy items that are *chalav Yisrael*. “The number of *chalav Yisrael* foodies is still

quite small,” Yarmove says.

So what’s the next great thing? With the flavors of this year’s Kosherfest still fresh on his tongue, Yarmove reflects. “I saw some new fish products — fish franks and fish salami,” he says. “Greek yogurt is big now, and there are even some *chalav Yisrael* versions of it that have come out. Packaged pastries are good sellers, especially in out-of-the-way places that don’t have kosher bakeries, and prepackaged lamb is also a boon to people in more remote communities.” He noted quite a few new mixes for cakes, sugar-free pies, and kosher frozen dinners.

For the gourmet, he says, the cheese market continues to expand: flavored cheeses, mozzarella balls, imported cheese. So does the market for cold cuts: there are now dried salamis, gourmet sausages, and specialty pastramis. For the health conscious, there are quinoa cakes and *chalav Yisrael* energy bars.

**Chometz-Free** Then, lest we forget, there’s always ... Pesach.

“It used to be considered a holiday of abstinence,” Yarmove says. “But now they’ve figured out how to make almost *everything* kosher for Pesach.” This year he saw 100 new Pesach items hit the shelves at Kosherfest, including kosher for Passover vodka. “There’s a general rule in the retail chain kosher business that outside of Pesach, 80 percent of your business is done from 20 percent of your stores,” he says. “But at Pesach, you do sales across the board.”

Ironically enough, being a Lubavitcher chassid, Yarmove himself uses almost no processed products during Pesach.

**Marbitz Kashrus** As you might expect from a person who was once involved in Jewish outreach, Yarmove sees his work as a grand opportunity to both

make a *kiddush Hashem* and to lure non-observant Jews to eat kosher food.

“Sometimes it’s a matter of accessibility,” he says. “I was once approached by an elderly Jewish lady who lives in one of the larger senior-occupied apartment towers just down the road. She yelled, ‘Mister, hey, mister! You know what? I always used to buy the Perdue chickens, but since you opened up, I buy only kosher!’”

Yarmove also gives seminars to educate Supervalu employees about kosher products; in the period before Pesach last year, he addressed close to 1,000 store directors. One of the participants joked, “I came out of here knowing more about Judaism than I do about my own religion.”

Yarmove is delighted when he can help new Jewish companies get off the ground, and before every major Yom Tov, he works with other kosher vendors to make substantial donations to Jewish causes. This year Yarmove was present as Osem endowed a missile-free playground in Sderot (about three miles from the factory that produces their export favorites Bamba, Bissli, and soup mini-*mandlen*).

*Supermarket News*, the leading industry trade journal, named him one of the 50 people changing the food market today.

“My picture was on the cover right next to [Walmart founder] Sam Walton,” he says, sounding amazed and a little uncomfortable at having unexpectedly encountered his yarmulke-topped face among the kings of nonkosher. But that hasn’t dampened his enthusiasm.

“At the end of the day, I truly love what I do,” Yarmove declares. “If I’m making it easier for people to keep kosher, if a busy kosher consumer can make dinner with a little less pressure, then I’m accomplishing something worthy.” ●

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