

ON THE GIVING SIDE

A kosher bakery in San Francisco is a shining light in a difficult neighborhood

BY DEVORIE KREIMAN

Frena kosher bakery opened in 2016 in downtown San Francisco. It's an oasis of Israeli-style treats, savory and sweet, under the *hashgachah* of the Vaad of Northern California.

A few months after the opening, a man walked in and told the owner, Isaac Yosef, "I want a job." His name was Carlos, and he threw around some Hebrew words.

Isaac asked him if he was Jewish, and he said, "No. I'm Mexican. I got out of prison three days ago. I learned Hebrew when I was there."

Newly released on parole, Carlos was disoriented. He said, "I've never had a job. I don't know how to bake, but I've always wanted to be a baker. I'm a hard worker."

Taking pity on him, Isaac said, "I'll hire you. You can start on Sunday."

During the Chanukah season, orders kept coming in for *sufganiyot*, and the staff had trouble keeping up with the demand. Carlos told Isaac that he had a friend, also an ex-convict, who was looking for a job. Isaac interviewed and hired him. It wasn't long before Carlos' friend brought in a friend, who in turn brought in a friend...

Isaac says, "At one point, I looked around my kitchen and realized that 90 percent of my staff were ex-convicts."

Carlos worked at Frena for a year and a half. He now owns his own carpet-cleaning business. Isaac remains in touch with Carlos and several of the others.

Over the years, more than 30 ex-convicts, both men and women, have worked at Frena.

As a *baal teshuvah*, Isaac is a big believer in second chances. "We learn all about that in the food business,

especially with breads, because they need special attention. Preparing breads can take all night. Sometimes someone makes a mistake and the entire batch is ruined, and we have to do it all over again."

This decision to hire ex-convicts has recently made the news, making a *kiddush Hashem* as people worldwide are learning about two Jewish men who are giving a chance to those who few if any are willing to help.

Isaac grew up in a secular family in Be'er Sheva. In 2007, after serving in the army for three years, he came to the United States looking for fun. He planned to stay for just a few months. He says, "I believed in G-d, but I was very far from everything Jewish. It was like being on a cliff, and you get to the edge and realize you are going too far..."

A non-religious friend invited Isaac to a Shabbat dinner. Then, six years ago, Isaac was bored and went to Chabad services. He met Rabbi Yosef Langer and became a regular at his Chabad House.

In 2016, at a Chanukah party, Isaac ran into Avi Edri and Yaniv, a fellow Israeli and a fourth-generation baker whose family has bakeries all over Israel. They noted that there were no kosher bakeries in the area. Together they made a business plan that Isaac says was as "simple as flour and water."

The name "Frena" came from Moroccan frena, fluffy flat bread baked on a stone in a brick oven.

Isaac says, "When Hashem opens a door, He opens it all the way." After he signed Frena's lease, he found out that Rabbi Langer was interested in opening a new Chabad *shul* downtown. Isaac helped Rabbi Langer find a building across the street and oversaw the remodeling

