

Backyard Beekeeper

Sweetens New Year

By Janet Lubman Rathner

You won't find honey on Mark Muller's Rosh Hashanah shopping list, but that doesn't mean he goes without. Instead of stopping in the condiment section of the grocery store, Muller meanders out to his own backyard in Martinsville, N.J.

That is where a five-hive honeybee colony turns out 400 pounds of the High Holiday staple that Muller, a medical sales recruiter by trade and beekeeper by passion, gives away to friends and family as a New Year's gift. His son also turned to the personal stash when it was time to devise a mitzvah project for his Bar Mitzvah.

"He sold honey at our temple and raised about \$1,000, which he donated to Magen David Adom [Israel's national emergency medical, disaster, ambulance, and blood-bank service]," Muller recalls. "It was right before the holidays, it was for a good and worthy cause, and the rabbi was pleased...because honey fits in so well with Jewish tradition."

Muller, 47, has been raising honeybees as a hobby for years. He says he finds beekeeping a great way to unwind.

"Life is so hectic with work and everything going on, and when you go back to be with your bees, it's very calming because you have to be calm around them," Muller says.

That said, it takes a lot to ruffle a honeybee. Muller, who opens his hives once every couple of weeks—a show-and-tell frequently shared with neighborhood children—says the insects, unlike yellow jackets, wasps, and hornets, are not looking for a fight.

"Honeybees are pretty mellow. They're so busy with what they're doing, they don't care about you," Muller says. He says he's rarely been stung. In fact, the docile personalities of the bugs, their fascinating-to-observe, busy-as-a-bee work ethic, let alone the tasty end product, have turned his street into a hub of hive activity. "At least five families have [honeybee colonies] now," Muller says.

An Ancient Enterprise

Beekeeping has been around for centuries. The Egyptians buried sealed pots of honey with their pharaohs and the sweet stuff is mentioned

numerous times in the Bible.

But it wasn't until September 2007 that archeologists excavating the ancient city of Tel Rehov in Israel's Beth Shean Valley found proof for the Book of Exodus claim that the country is the "land of milk and honey": 30 intact beehives made of straw and clay dating from the 9th century BCE. The 3,000-year-old hives were found in three-tiered rows of three, leading scholars from Hebrew University to determine that beekeepers from the First Temple period were tending to approximately 100 beehives and annually harvesting at least half a ton of honey.

Today's honeybees—responsible for \$15 billion in added crop value (according to the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture)—are suffering. Mites and "Colony Collapse Disorder," a recent phenomenon in which worker bees inexplicably desert the hive, are exacting a toll. Muller, also president of the Morris County Beekeepers Association, says the problem seems to be afflicting commercial beekeepers who ship their colonies around the country to pollinate crops like orange trees in Florida and blueberries in Maine, more so than backyard enthusiasts.

"I think commercial hives are under stress," he says. "I mean, can you imagine if you were just getting settled in your house and, every three or four weeks, someone picks it up and moves you 500 miles? It would be very disorienting. I'm lucky; I've never lost a hive."

He appreciates his good fortune. "We're somewhat detached from nature these days and, with honeybees, you get a sense of the seasons with certain things going on," Muller says. "It gives you a good connection." ☐

