Ice cream is light and happy. Ice cream makes people smile. Ice cream should be an easy topic for all, not one that inspires sighs and furrowed brows.

For one woman, ice cream means a livelihood. It means she can stay close to her family. It means the community hasn’t deserted her in her time of need after she put hours of labor into providing for their welfare.

Yismach Yisrael (Hebrew for “Rejoice, Israel!”) is located at the side of the decrepit, slightly spooky Capitol Hotel, which seldom sees a visitor apart from charity-solicitors who come from all over the world for the generosity Lakewood is famous for. The dank parking lot on the side leads the way towards the back of the hotel, where Yismach Yisrael does business.

Until recently, that was the sole place for Lakewooders to enjoy sundaes, razzles, mochachinos and good old soft ice cream with sprinkles. Happy families and spirited teenagers brought light and cheer to the gloomy parking lot. The Frenchwoman behind the counter smiled at each customer and tried to meet the need as fast as possible.

But the little store was hit hard when within a week of each other, Sprinkles and California Swirls, both super-modern, colorful, child-friendly ice cream shops, opened their doors. Against 85 toppings, how could a little old-fashioned ice cream store on the corner compete? The customers began falling away, fast.

Caroline Fitoussi, owner, manager and full-time salesperson at Yismach Yisrael, moved from France to Lakewood, New Jersey along with her husband about two years ago. They came to follow their son, who had come across the world to study in the famed Lakewood Yeshiva. The mother’s heart in Caroline couldn’t bear to be so far from her son, but she just as firmly would not pull her son away from studying the Torah that he loved in one of the greatest yeshivas in the world. So Caroline abandoned her thriving business and followed her son across the world to build her life anew.

It took many wrong turns and false starts before Caroline found the business that would take off. When she heard from a friend that Yismach Yisrael, then the only ice cream store in town, was looking for a buyer to take over the shop, she jumped at the chance. And indeed, the Fitoussi family finally found its niche in the community. “With God’s help, we are finally on our feet,” she said at the time. “I can’t tell you how much we appreciate the business the community is giving us.”

But her relief was short-lived. Only a year after taking over Yismach Yisrael, full-page ads in local newspapers screamed things like, “Coming Soon! An Ice Cream Experience Like Never Before!” and “50 Flavors! 85 Toppings! 35 Shelves Stocked with Ice Cream Cakes!”

The headlines did not disappoint.

Sights at California Swirls, a self-serve yogurt shop, include kids delightedly pulling levers on machines labeled with tens of flavors and piling on toppings of all shapes, sizes and tastes. Customers lining up to pay, weighing their ice cream on the modern scale and sampling this or that new flavor. Tables full of happy children, not-guilty dieters, and drop-by shoppers from the downtown area.

The children of Lakewood have changed their allegiance to California Swirls.

Sprinkles boasts of an altogether different atmosphere. This is the store that’s open when the rest of Lakewood is closed. It’s where teenagers gather for a night out. It’s where those who want to be in on the local scoop congregate. It’s where the action never stops, not day or night.

The teenagers of Lakewood have changed their allegiance to Sprinkles.

With the majority of the town opting for high-tech machinery, shiny floors, and pink and blue tables, who is left to proclaim everlasting loyalty to the shop that served them when no one else did?

Almost no one.

“I feel bad for her and all, but I’m still not going there when I want a good ice cream and good time!” says Esther Klein, an exasperated teenager, of Caroline. “I mean, get real!”

Judy David, a mother of eight, visited both Yismach Yisrael and Sprinkles in one day.

“Believe it or not, the ice cream from Yismach Yisrael was tastier than the ice cream from Sprinkles!” she says. “But in the future I’ll probably go to Sprinkles because it has a much bigger selection.”

Bina Friedman, a vicarious ice-cream lover who anyone would call an expert on each of the stores, is concerned over Yismach Yisrael’s welfare. But her concern doesn’t extend as far as her taste buds.

“At the end of the day, it’s just more fun to go to Sprinkles!” she says with a guilty smile. However, she adds, she’s observed people walking into Sprinkles and then heading right back out the door rather than wait for forty others before reaching the front of the line. “My hope is that people decide to go to Sprinkles, and then see it’s too full, so instead they go to Yismach Yisrael,” she says. “Then Caroline is actually gaining business.”

Is there hope for the little ice cream store? How much longer can it keep its doors open? Caroline doesn’t know, but she keeps the smile on her face.

“God helps,” she says.

Yaakov Felsenburg, a chubby seven-year old boy who is often rewarded by his parents for good behavior or high marks with a trip to the ice cream store of his choice, provides a ray of hope. Yaakov recently went to Sprinkles after going to bed on time every night for two weeks. When he arrived- at ice cream rush hour- the line was out the door.

“Okay Ma, let’s go to Yismach Yisrael,” he decided. “I mean, ice cream is ice cream, right?”