

Simhat Torah means 'Torah happiness'

They may be 'nonprofits,' but there's lots of reward in doing good & saving lives

• ARNIE DRAIMAN

A big part of Torah happiness (a literal translation of "Simhat Torah") is fulfilling God's commandments (the "big 10" and the other 603 as well). Here are a dozen ways to feel happy, do a mitzvah, and maybe save a life.

After 28 years of researching and checking out nonprofits in Israel, people often ask which are my favorites?" I can honestly say that there are about 50 to 60 nonprofits I can vouch for (sadly, though, that is out of more than 1,000 I have looked into).

Here are just a few of my favorite nonprofits – all certified with my 100% "stamp of approval." They are in no particular order and cover a wide range of causes.

• **Shachen Tov (the Good Neighbor Association)** was started and run by students of Hebrew University of Jerusalem more than 20 years ago. They provide food for people in need throughout the country. The most amazing thing is that the group remains an all-volunteer organization, so their overhead is virtually zero.

Shachen Tov operates in nine locations throughout Israel, and consists of 700 volunteers feeding approximately 1,000 families each week (and double that during holiday periods). In addition, Shachen Tov runs a mobile cafe for shut-ins, after-school tutoring for kids in need, and club rooms for at-risk teens.

CEO Moran Shelly explains, "The general policy of Shachen Tov is that families – who come to us via municipal social services – do not stay on our lists for long. We work hard to encourage and help families get over the hump and find employment so that they are able to provide for themselves." Trumot@shachentov.org.il

My Piece of the Puzzle, founded by two superstar wunderkinds Jenna Elbaz and Shaked Karp create magic by working with two population groups that are rarely seen together: at-risk teens and special-needs kids. Jenna and Shaked were summer camp counselors at Camp Ramapo in Rhinebeck, New York.

The camp is known for mainstreaming children with disabilities by pairing them with typically



MY PIECE of the Puzzle staff. (Courtesy)

performing kids. MPOP started by sending Israeli kids to Camp Ramapo, then opening their own overnight summer camp program in Israel, now attended by more than 100 kids! In addition, MPOP runs school-year groups throughout the country of 14 kids each (half at-risk teens and half special-needs kids).

Last year, MPOP opened a post-high school gap-year program with 30 kids (also half at-risk teens and half special-needs kids) spending six months in a preparatory program. They are trained to join the IDF or volunteer in the National Service Sherut Leumi programs. The IDF does not usually draft teens at risk or those with special needs, but under Jenna's guidance, this group will gladly be accepted. Jenna also trains the officers who will be running this unique unit.

Jenna explains that the magic is that "they get from each other what they need. They are in an environment that doesn't judge them. It doesn't matter if you are pretty or skinny or tall, you can just be yourself. And everybody wants love and everybody wants to feel part of it. One day you are the one who is helping, and the next day you're the one who needs help, and that's why it works so well." mypuzzlep@gmail.com

Reut Sderot is an exceptional organization that takes care of basic needs in the Gaza border town of

Sderot, operating every day for the past 30 years. The current population of Sderot is 30,000, but sadly, about a third of the people are known to social services and require food, medicine, emotional support and more.

Reut Sderot is a group of families who have moved to Sderot to help strengthen the city, demonstrating the Israeli spirit of being a *halutz*, a pioneer. They started with 80 families in 1993, and now there are over 500, with many on a waiting list.

Reut Sderot has become such a welcome group in Sderot that the current mayor is one of their members, as are many of the municipal officials and staff members. They have changed the face of the city from one of isolation and poverty, to one of being connected to the center of the country by the Israel Railways, a growing economic development and hi-tech park. They have also built and staffed many educational institutions in the city.

Odelia Porat, longtime Reut Sderot staff member, explains about living in Sderot under the non-stop barrage of attacks (more than 21,000 missiles in the last 15 years). She has seen her children regress at times like many of the children in Sderot, and she has thought often of leaving, but feels very strongly that she needs to stay. The vision of Reut Sderot has become her vision: strengthening the community.

Odelia adds, "This is the first time I really felt that I was living Jewish values, the highest values to live for, and that has helped us in dealing with our children. Our children hear the message, and feel strengthened by it as well." odeliab@reut-sderot.org.il

Amit LaDerech, A Friend Alongside, helps vulnerable discharged IDF soldiers from challenged backgrounds get a chance in life. More than 5,000 at-risk soldiers leave the army every year only to return to the same challenging reality from which they came. Amit LaDerech accompanies these young people on their new path, teaching them real-life skills, annually helping about 400 veterans through their programs.

One of the program participants explains, "When you enlist in the army, you only think about survival. You don't have the opportunity to think about the future or even ask the question 'What am I going to do when I grow up?' You only think about how you can get back on your feet, settle your debts, and cope with all your concerns and fears. These thoughts make you feel hopeless and this hopelessness paralyzes you, and then you cannot do anything."

CEO Amit Shapira explains, "Every discharged soldier is assigned a personal volunteer mentor who helps him or her build a personal plan by setting goals, determining courses of action to achieve [education, employment, financial management, etc.], developing practical skills as well as assistance in exercising rights.

"In addition, the young people participate in workshops and professional content meetings that support their personal plan and give them the tools and knowledge that will help with being a contributing member of society." info@amitladerech.org

The Shira Pransky Project helps immigrants in Israel get access to the healthcare they need, informs them of their rights, and overall, explains everything you need to know about healthcare in Israel. They recently joined with Yad L'Olim and are now the Yad L'Olim Healthcare Division in memory of Shira Pransky.

Shira's husband, Gabe, saw the difficulties they were having navigating the Israeli healthcare system during her fatal illness, and decided to create

an organization that would help others. He realized that there were many more avenues of support that had not been utilized simply being unaware of the rights, benefits, and support that could have eased their burden.

Their website offers dozens of healthcare guides on a variety of topics, and they have translated into English hundreds of pages on the Kol Zechut (Know Your Rights) website related to healthcare. They also have healthcare advisers who are only a phone call or email away to help answer any and all healthcare questions. Ayala Laub Waltuch has been running the SPP for several years, and continues to direct its activities with Yad L'Olim. healthcare@yadlolim.org

The (new) Eckstein Fund was created by Joelle Eckstein in memory of her husband, Rav Yechiel Eckstein (they are not affiliated with the programs Rabbi Eckstein started). They are a "Social Welfare 911," running a hotline operated by Hadas Tsarfati. Anyone in the country can call (*9779), helping people in need find what they need.

This is one of the most effective and efficient nonprofits there is. They do thorough background checks on each person and family requesting assistance, and then do their best to solve the issue via one of the other nonprofits already working in that field. They have contact with more than 600 organizations. However, they also fund, on a one-time basis, specific items for a person or family in need (for example, a fridge or bed or food package). info@k-eckstein.org

HAMA (Humans and Animals in Mutual Assistance) – Avshalom Beni is Israel's foremost animal-assisted intervention therapist. He founded and directs HAMA, and uses techniques not commonly seen. Animal-assisted therapy and intervention takes many forms, from "petting therapy" to service animals to therapeutic horseback riding.

Avshalom developed a system at first using cats and dogs and now adding rabbits and parakeets and even goats. He has clients opening up and moving through the therapeutic process in pronounced fashion. It is a complementary therapeutic approach to conventional medical, psychological and educational treatment. Many of the animals have been rescued and rehabilitated from human abuse, and they have in turn become important facilitators of human recovery and rehabilitation.

HAMA works exclusively in the public sector in partnership with and under the auspices of social welfare agencies, hospitals and educational institutions helping children, adults, and families. It has been proven effective with ADHD parent-child groups, father-child groups, Holocaust survivors, alcoholism and drug addiction groups, and many more. beni.avshalom@gmail.com

Mar'eh Center for the Art of Judea and Samaria (a project of the Ariel Development Fund) is the brainchild of Ophra Shoshtari, a US-born and educated art curator. Ophra saw that there was no permanent public art space in Samaria and felt it was simply unacceptable that people who live there don't get an art education don't know how to approach art, and don't go to museums.

"I think that the average person is focused on their life, without much time or energy to examine the world and reflect it back," she explains. "Artists, on the other hand, pay attention to that and then create something and show it. Simply put, good art makes you think."

Ophra's project, Mar'eh (meaning "the look"),



AMIT LADERECH mentors and mentees. (Courtesy)

is an art space in the city of Ariel. It is a home for art, a platform for local artists, and brings art from elsewhere to the residents, so that they can learn to interact with art. There are programs for adults and children including lectures, workshops, educational programs, gallery shows, meet the artist events, and much more.

When asked about the influence of her Judaism on her art world, Ophra explains that growing up Modern Orthodox afforded her to see the world critically, and one could look at art and religion "with a critical eye and still be respectful, wanting to learn more, and see where change can occur." Christian art and the influence of the Church on many artists influenced her more to stay Jewishly strong, and not less. ophrashoshtari@gmail.com

Amal Tikva ("Hope" in Arabic and Hebrew) is an organization that provides a wide variety of services to the entire field of peace-building organizations, and helps them have a stronger strategic vision. Meredith Rothbart, together with Basheer Abu Baker, a Palestinian accountant, co-created Amal Tikva when they saw that the field was very disorganized and often fighting for the same funding.

They and many international donors were certainly more interested in seeing groups work together as partners instead of as rivals. Amal Tikva works with about 18 organizations, continuously monitoring and evaluating them, and adds new NGOs and new opportunities for the NGOs they serve.

When she first encountered Israeli-Palestinian leadership programs, she thought it was "just another social action" issue. Instead, there was her "aha" moment. She understood for the first time the effect of the Zionist dream on the Palestinian people, as well as having to come to terms with her hyper-Zionism, having made aliyah, and how that reconciles with the Palestinian people.

"I'm Israeli, Jewish and Orthodox, and can only work from within my identity," Meredith explains. After the 2014 Gaza War – Operation Protective Edge – there was a significant increase in the number of

religious Jews wanting to take part in coexistence and peace-building programs. She is one of the few religious Jewish women running a cross-border peace-building organization.

She recently spoke to the UN Security Council and said, "The UN has passed resolution after resolution. But in order to build peace between Israelis and Palestinians, I ask you to consider investing in social peace. Commit to investing in the infrastructure needed for real peace. Help us build a multilateral inter-entity." info@amal-tikva.org





MPOP STAFF and kids. (Courtesy)

Crossroads does outreach to English-speaking street kids in Israel. I know what you are thinking. Are there really that many English-speaking street kids in Israel? They see about 1,000 clients each year. Many are those students on various gap-year programs (including Orthodox seminaries and yeshivas, university and youth-movement year-course programs) while many are children of immigrants or others who feel more comfortable with an English-speaking crowd. Hanging out on the streets is not good for anyone.

Crossroads, founded by Caryn Green and now run by Robbie Sasoon, has a staff of social workers who spend several evenings and nights a week on the streets, meeting the kids, trying to help as necessary. In addition, Crossroads has a drop-in center, where struggling teens can participate in various programs including job training, art and drama workshops, music and cooking and more. The drama program, led by CB Davies, has been so successful that they are now putting on shows a couple of times a year at the Khan Theater in Jerusalem. robbie@crossroadsjerusalem.org

Matnat Chaim – One of the few organs you can donate while still alive is your kidney. Matnat Chaim is Israel’s foremost organization for kidney donations. It was started by Rabbi Yeshayahu Heber, a kidney recipient, who sadly passed away last year from COVID. Matnat Chaim focuses exclusively on altruistic,

i.e. voluntary, donations. Vice president Judy Singer started as one of those kidney donors and stayed involved to assist the organization.

Judy decided to donate a kidney when she discovered that “many people were on dialysis, which wreaked havoc on their lives since they needed to be in the hospital two to three times a week, and then spend a day recuperating from the very exhausting experience. And people on dialysis were not only desperate to get back to their normal lives, but just to

live, since kidney disease can be fatal.”

Judy tells us that the donor’s life changes as well – that being able to save someone else is a very powerful and empowering act, echoing the words of our sages from 1,000 years ago: “Rabbi Yehoshua taught that the person in need does more for the donor than the donor does for the person in need.” (Leviticus Rabbah 34:8)

Matnat Chaim is responsible for helping 1,300 people donate kidneys in Israel. They currently do more than 200 a year. There are about 900 people on dialysis who are on the waiting list for a new kidney, so despite the incredible growth and awareness that Matnat Chaim has created, many people in Israel still need help. info@kilya.org.il

IDF Girlfriends – A young woman is crying, sobbing uncontrollably over in the corner at a house of mourning. Shiva is the week of mourning after someone dies, and while being comforted, she says, “No, I am not related. He was my boyfriend, and was killed during his IDF army service.”

How does one define the relationship before marriage? And what happens when the worst unthinkable thing does happen? Sadly, many girls (and a few boys) become “widowed” when their partner is killed during their IDF service.

These girls have no official status. After all, they are “just” the girlfriend. And so, the idea germinated with Phyllis Heimowitz, whose daughter Michal had lost her boyfriend in battle. Phyllis, along with her other daughter Tamar, created the IDF Girlfriends organization for this group of people, and help them grieve with proper support. tamar.richter@gmail.com

May you continue to enjoy the happiness and joy from Simhat Torah all year round.

The writer has been engaged in tzedakah (charity) work in Israel for nearly 30 years. A recognized expert in micro-philanthropy, he counter-intuitively agrees that there is no such thing as “micro” philanthropy, just the same as there is no such thing as a small good deed. ■



OCCUPATIONAL CENTER Reut Sderot. (Courtesy)