

Tikkun olam is a tool to combat antisemitism

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By Stephan Kline June 6, 2024

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February 12, 2024, was my first day as CEO of Nechama- Jewish Disaster Relief. An attorney by training, I worked in the Jewish nonprofit sector for nearly 25 years before taking this role. I was drawn to Nechama's work because of its values — primarily how *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) is the foundational principle for all the work we do.

Nechama is a natural disaster relief organization, bringing *nechama* (comfort) to those affected by hurricanes, tornadoes, flooding and other extreme weather events. For myself as CEO and for thousands of others as volunteers, Nechama provides the opportunity to engage in literal *tikkun olam* as we help rebuild communities significantly impacted by these disasters.



NECHAMA volunteers in Puerto Rico in 2018. Courtesy/NECHAMA

To the bystander, our work is not exclusively Jewish, and we often get asked, “Why Nechama? Aren’t there already many other disaster relief organizations, most with much larger operations?” The answer to this question is extremely important.

Nechama’s goal is not to mimic our peers. One disaster relief agency, for example, has four 757 cargo aircraft that it can deploy at a moment’s notice. Another has a mobile housing unit that can comfortably fit 28 professional responders. Nechama will never operate like that. We are small but nimble, with an excellent reputation for marshaling motivated volunteers, providing strong leadership and quality tools, and being able to provide effective relief beyond our size. We also have a scalable model that allows us to quickly expand our capacity as needed in response to a huge weather event.

What defines Nechama is not our size, but being the only national Jewish organization in the United States dedicated to natural disaster response.

We don’t take that role lightly. We know that Jewish Americans are facing a precipitous rise in antisemitism. In 2023, American Jews witnessed more than double the amount of antisemitic incidents reported in 2022, according to the [ADL](#); and there has been a 337% increase in such incidents compared to the previous year just since Oct. 7.

Nechama’s core work is often centered in communities with little to no Jewish presence. While we are delighted to serve Jews in communities decimated by disasters, our focus is on the individuals with the greatest needs, regardless of their background. Historically, over 90% of our clients are not Jewish. Our motto is: “We do this restorative work not because you are Jewish but because we are.”

During our recent deployment to Hodenville and Bartlesville, Okla., in early May, we helped with debris and brush removal in towns hammered by strong tornados. One client told a Nechama volunteer that they had never knowingly had a conversation with a Jewish person before. Our volunteers, who drove up to two-and-a-half hours each way from Tulsa and Oklahoma City, were delighted to help out their non-Jewish neighbors at this time of great need.

Our response to the original question of “Why Nechama?” is that we are not simply a disaster aid and recovery organization. By showing up and caring for all communities, regardless of faith affiliation (or lack thereof), we demonstrate to other Americans the value of the Jewish people in society. Jews support their neighbors and are there for them when they need help the most. Although our deployments rarely make headlines, we know that those we serve have lasting positive impressions of the Jewish community.

The fight against antisemitism requires a multi-pronged approach including education, activism and legal battles. But we must not forget that promoting *tikkun olam*, a value we hold dear, is also a key tool in combating antisemitism. For Nechama, we choose to embody that value with disaster relief work, but there are numerous other service options community members can choose from as well.

Jewish presence in moments of need is guaranteed to have positive ripple effects on society, particularly when that need is not exclusively Jewish. I strongly encourage everyone to invest more time in providing direct services to their neighbors. Your time is needed now more than ever to engage in *tikkun olam* and help strengthen relationships with our fellow citizens at this perilous point in our history.

Stephan Kline is CEO of Nechama – Jewish Response to Disaster.