

# From devastation to hope: The power of shared values

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## Opinion

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### LET'S WORK TOGETHER

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By

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“We do this restorative work not because our clients are Jewish, but because we are.”

When my colleague Stephan Kline, Nechama’s CEO, spoke these words at a disaster recovery conference in February 2024, people leaned in. Among them was Rev. Caroline Hamilton-Arnold from [Week of Compassion](#), who said she felt the same thing about her own commitment to her work for wholeness in a fragmented world. Two leaders from different faiths came to the same truth: people need help, and compassion knows no boundaries.



Courtesy/Nechama

Nechama and Week of Compassion volunteers restore a home in Western North Carolina in October 2024.

One year ago, Hurricane Helene devastated Western North Carolina. Homes were destroyed and communities shaken, yet hope remained, sustained by the outpouring of support from people of all walks of life who came to help.

It was also when Nechama, a Jewish disaster relief organization, and Week of Compassion, the disaster ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), began working together. Nechama's work is rooted in the Jewish value of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. Week of Compassion holds fast to its call to turn suffering into hope. Together, we've learned that shared values can build bridges even stronger than the homes we repair.

In Buncombe County, for instance, our joint teams spent two days working together on one woman's home — installing insulation, hanging ceiling drywall and carefully sanding and mudding, providing both physical restoration and renewed hope to the community. When she saw teenage volunteers from a Christian youth group working shoulder to shoulder with Nechama staff, she broke down in tears.

That is just one snapshot. We have experienced countless similar moments throughout the year. These experiences don't just change the families we serve. They change those who serve too.

One Nechama volunteer told us, "I came to help rebuild houses. What I didn't expect was the friendships I made with people of another faith who share the same drive to love and serve. That's going to stay with me forever."

But disaster zones bring challenges beyond the storm. After Helene, false claims and antisemitic tropes started circulating online — about aid being diverted to Israel, or even that Jews control the weather and were therefore responsible for the wreckage.

For most people in these communities, Nechama was the only Jewish organization they'd ever engaged with directly. By showing up in these communities and working shoulder to shoulder with people of every faith and background, we helped dismantle harmful stereotypes and proved that service transcends religion.

That's why our partnership with Week of Compassion is so powerful. Together, we're more than a sum of our parts: Volunteers gain new perspectives. Communities are better served. And compassion is amplified.

"I think the mission of Nechama... providing comfort and hope to communities by engaging volunteers, is the same mission we have," As Rev. Michael Weeks, senior pastor of Slash Christian Church in Hanover County, Va., shared. "We have far more in common than we have differences."

We don't do this for recognition. We do it because it matters, because it's impactful, and because it demonstrates that faiths working side by side can achieve far more than they ever could alone.

One year later, homes have been rebuilt and new connections formed — between volunteers, communities, and faith traditions. In a world that often highlights what divides us, this partnership reminds us of what unites us.

Disasters will keep coming, communities will need help and divisions will continue to make the news. But what if we invested more in opportunities for people of different backgrounds to serve together? Perhaps their service can restore hope not only to those who serve, but to our broader society at large.

We've seen what's possible. We've seen strangers work hand-in-hand and differences become strengths. That's the world we're trying to build, one act of compassion at a time.

[Tzlil McDonald](#) is the project director of combating antisemitism for Nechama – Jewish Response to Disaster.