



NECHAMA
JEWISH RESPONSE
TO DISASTER

STRATEGIC PLANNING: Building NECHAMA'S Bright Future

[NECHAMA - Jewish Response to Disaster](#) is the only national Jewish organization that offers sustained direct recovery services exclusively within the United States to mend broken lives and repair damage caused by hurricanes, tornados, floods, and other natural disasters. While disaster relief is essential for the survivors of natural disasters and their communities, disaster relief also provides NECHAMA and the Jewish community a platform for combating antisemitism and sustaining Jewish continuity. **Following substantial growth in 2024 and the first half of 2025, NECHAMA's leadership engaged in strategic planning to help prioritize the new building blocks for our bright future.**

BACKGROUND

NECHAMA was created in the wake of the great Des Moines flood of 1993. Learning of the 50 deaths and \$15 billion in damages to the Iowa capitol city, one Minneapolis philanthropist contributed funds to the recovery but wanted to do more. He noticed that the major faith-based disaster relief organizations (virtually all disaster relief organizations then and now were faith-based) were basically just providing relief to their own parishioners. He wondered who provided service for others in the community and where were the Jews, who typically are very giving people. This philanthropist drove back to the Twin Cities, recruited three friends, rented a truck, borrowed tools, and again headed south to Iowa. The four friends spent the next two weeks mucking out basements and helping to restore houses.

Physically demanding and spiritually uplifting, that experience started a grassroots movement to create an organization based on the value of *tikkun olam*. [Here](#) is a wonderful film that details NECHAMA's origin story. Originally composed solely of volunteers and focused on natural disasters in the Upper Midwest, NECHAMA expanded its reach in 2005 with the calamitous Hurricane Katrina. NECHAMA's leaders decided to use their ability to mobilize volunteers, skill in providing disaster response, and trailers full of tools to help out. The organization deployed multiple times over the next two years providing assistance for New Orleans' Ninth Ward and Mississippi's Gulf Coast.

NECHAMA's leaders knew there was no other entity like it in the Jewish community and they made the decision to become a national organization led by a small professional team. In the two decades since Katrina, NECHAMA has provided disaster response and recovery services in 35 states. Growth was steady through 2019 as the organization continually expanded to 20 employees and, eventually, reached a \$2 million budget.

Then COVID hit and the NECHAMA model of congregate working and congregate living while on deployment was not feasible. NECHAMA retreated to its home base in the Twin Cities and was forced to drastically reduce the size of the staff as donations dropped off. Between 2021 and 2023, NECHAMA survived by developing a new partnership with a local United Way in suburban New Orleans that paid for all costs of a lengthy Hurricane Ida deployment in St. Charles Parish.

NECHAMA – P.O. Box 17249 Saint Paul, MN 55117 - www.NECHAMA.org

Meanwhile, NECHAMA's board had been quietly raising funds to allow a new rollout at the beginning of 2024 and they hired a new Chief Executive Officer.

In the spring and summer of 2024, NECHAMA undertook a series of small deployments to respond to tornadoes, floods and hurricanes and then committed to a large one following Hurricane Helene. Since last October, almost 1000 volunteers have worked with NECHAMA in Western North Carolina (many multiple times) and NECHAMA also launched new projects to combat weather and disaster-related antisemitism and to build Jewish engagement. The organization has grown dynamically as the NECHAMA professional team expanded from one staff member at the beginning of 2024 to 10 today, and a budget that grew from \$500,000 to \$1.6 million.

Although NECHAMA had last engaged in formal strategic planning in 2019, shortly before COVID hit, in 2021 the board adopted three overall priorities which still center the organization today:

1. NECHAMA humanizes Jews and represents Jewish ideals in communities shattered by disaster;
2. NECHAMA provides a platform for volunteers to explore their identities and purpose; and
3. NECHAMA spreads hope and offers tangible support to people and communities in desperate need of assistance.

In the past two years, the organization has continuously worked to advance these priorities.

STRATEGIC PLANNING, MISSION AND VALUES

Beginning in the Spring of 2025, a new expanded board of directors and the chief executive officer decided to take stock and specifically engage in strategic planning before expanding the organization further. NECHAMA reached out to current stakeholders in the Jewish community including past and present volunteers, former board members and staff, organizational partners, and funders, as well as those in the non-Jewish community - partners in the national and state Volunteers Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) movement and prospective non-Jewish funding partners – to solicit input on how and where NECHAMA could be most impactful in meeting the needs of the Jewish community and beyond.

The board devoted a number of meetings to strategic planning in the spring and summer of 2025, and strategic planning formed the centerpiece of a board retreat held at the Asheville Jewish Community Center from June 9 to 11, 2025.

As part of this process, NECHAMA adopted a new mission statement: “NECHAMA, rooted in the Jewish principle of *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world), engages volunteers in disaster relief, rebuilds people's lives, provides comfort and hope, and represents the Jewish people and our values.”

NECHAMA then updated its values statement to buttress the organization. Here is the complete statement:

NECHAMA - Jewish Response to Disaster's commitment to healing and rebuilding communities is deeply rooted in Judaism's timeless wisdom and ethical imperatives. For Jews, the *Tanak* (the Hebrew bible) and the *Talmud* (a compilation of law and tradition, completed around 500 – 600 C.E.) are the primary sources that teach us how to live a good and just life.

Here are seven key values that particularly inspire NECHAMA's work, defining our unique approach to disaster response and community engagement:

Tikkun Olam - Repairing The World תיקון עולם

We don't have to look beyond the daily headlines to see the brokenness in our world. The Jewish answer has always been to take action, and NECHAMA aims to do this, one rebuilt home at a time.

Rachamim - Compassion רחמים

At NECHAMA, our interactions with clients, coworkers, volunteers, and community members are guided by genuine compassion and a caring concern for others.

Lo Ta'Amod - Don't Stand Idly By לא תעמוד

We are commanded to "not stand idly by the blood of our neighbor." The rabbis in the Talmud interpret this verse as an obligation to come to the aid of others, even at a risk to our own lives. NECHAMA responds rapidly and with passion to assist our neighbors in need.

Mipnei Darchei Shalom - Building Relationships מפני דרכי של

The Talmud teaches that the Jewish community is obligated not only to help and care for Jews, but for all. NECHAMA provides support to vulnerable communities in the United States recovering from disasters, regardless of religion.

Ahavat Ha-Ger - Love the Stranger אהבת הג

The Torah's most repeated commandment is to love and care for the poor, the widow, the stranger -- those who are most vulnerable. Maimonides, a 12th-century rabbi & scholar, declares that we are commanded to love the stranger just like we are commanded to love God. When we rebuild a home, we aim to treat that family, those strangers, as representatives of the Divine.

Gemilut Chasadim - Acts of Loving Kindness גמילות חסדים

Ethics of the Fathers, a collection of proverbs from the *Talmud*, teaches that "the world is sustained by three things: Torah, prayer, and *gemilut chasadim*. By responding to disasters and serving others, NECHAMA strives to bring God's presence into the world.

Tzedekah - Charity/Justice צדקה

The Hebrew word for charity, “*tzedakah*” is derived from the word “*tzedek*,” justice. The Jewish tradition requires that we each share what we have with those who have less, to ensure that everyone has food, clothing, and shelter. We are asked to give generously not only of our money, but also of our time and talent to make the world better. When NECHAMA assists a family, we fulfill the biblical commandment: “Justice, justice you shall pursue!”

Finally, here are the new strategic priorities that emerged from this process which the NECHAMA board adopted on August 19, 2025:

1. Expanding Operations Capacity

NECHAMA will expand its operational footprint to ensure that the organization has the necessary infrastructure and capacity to:

- Mount two significant deployments simultaneously (or one major and several minor deployments) and
- Launch mitigation projects in prioritized communities¹, particularly during blue sky periods, when disasters are less likely. These projects will seek to prepare for and minimize harm caused by future disasters, help clean up past disasters, or work in disaster-adjacent spaces.

NECHAMA will expand its Operations Team by three FTE by hiring a Deputy Operations Director, a Senior Team Lead, and a Mitigation/Preparation Specialist as part of its permanent staff. During large deployments we will continue to hire temporary program staff to fill out the operations team. All members of the permanent operations team would join a major disaster and then half would split off to address a second one.

In the absence of any major disasters, the team will become more imbedded in blue sky activities, including by expanding our footprint from working with five state-wide Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) to 10, becoming more involved with National VOAD activities, working closely with the Minneapolis and other emergency management networks and county-based VOADs in communities where operations team members are based, launching volunteer training activities, and working on mitigation projects.

NECHAMA will seek to identify a roster of mitigation and preparation projects, potentially long term recovery, and disaster-adjacent projects that meet our skill set and would be of interest to funders and volunteers in priority communities. Ideally, these projects could be completed in three to 12 weeks and could be actualized relatively far in the future during a subsequent blue sky period. They would be managed by an operations team member. NECHAMA’s ongoing Los

¹ To become better known in the Jewish Community, to tap into more volunteers, to engage in mitigation, to help with fundraising, and to promote relevant virtual volunteering opportunities, NECHAMA will **prioritize** certain communities. Primary prioritized communities now include New York City, Los Angeles (CA), South Florida, Chicago (IL), and the Twin Cities (MN). NECHAMA will also focus on Atlanta (GA), the Bay Area (CA), Boston (MA), Cleveland (OH), and New Orleans (LA) as additional priority communities.

Angeles fire mitigation work to help prevent the spread of future wildfires at at-risk Jewish institutions in the community is an example of this type of project.

2. Volunteerism and Jewish Engagement

NECHAMA will recruit, retain and engage more volunteers.

NECHAMA intends to recruit at least 2,500 volunteers in years with one or more major disasters, with at least one-third representing volunteers who had previously worked with us at a prior disaster. NECHAMA will recruit at least 500 volunteers in years with no major disasters.

During the pendency of a major disaster and at the conclusion of minor disaster deployments, NECHAMA will disseminate a survey to learn about the volunteer experience. NECHAMA will also convene discussion groups or utilize other methodologies to learn more from individuals who repeatedly worked at NECHAMA sites.

During major disasters, NECHAMA will regularly disseminate inspirational stories about volunteers and convene volunteer appreciation events. This work will be managed by a full-time Volunteer Coordinator.

NECHAMA will elevate the recruitment, identity-building and education of Jewish volunteers, while continuing to be a welcoming destination for non-Jewish volunteers.

This represents NECHAMA's Jewish Education and Engagement Project which includes a number of key initiatives:

- Developing and disseminating educational materials that connect NECHAMA's work to Jewish texts, traditions, and ethical principles;
- Cultivating partnerships with synagogues, schools, local Hillels, and other Jewish organizations and their national affiliates to source more volunteers and raise awareness; .
- Integrating Jewish learning into volunteer orientations, emphasizing the values of *gemilut chassadim* (acts of loving-kindness), *tzedakah* (justice), and *tikkun olam*.
- Partnering with synagogues nationwide to host a Resilience Shabbat in October during Parshat Noach in Genesis (the inaugural program took place October 24-25 with participation in 100 communities); and
- Organizing immersive service experiences for schools, youth groups, and other organizations, combining hands-on disaster relief with Jewish learning and reflection; and
- Convening a group of clergy and other advisors to guide this work.

To manage this project, NECHAMA will hire a full-time Director of Jewish Education and Engagement.

In addition, NECHAMA has always been and will continue to be a hospitable home for many non-Jewish volunteers, who may feel more comfortable with NECHAMA's disaster response

operations, particularly for those who are LGBTQ+. NECHAMA will continue to actively engage in outreach to show we are a safe and respectful home for all types of volunteers.

NECHAMA will seek to recruit significant cohorts of volunteers in prioritized communities. NECHAMA will focus on federations, synagogues, JCCs and other institutions in these communities identifying networkers and sourcing local volunteers for mitigation projects and broader deployments. For these cohorts, NECHAMA will also focus on younger Jews with strong networks but who are not necessarily connected communally with any particular Jewish institution. The cohort would collectively be denominationally expansive and otherwise reflective of the breadth and diversity of the local Jewish community. It would meet as a group participating in one field day per month (on Sundays) and one evening zoom meeting each month focusing on topics like disaster and the local community, climate change and its connectivity to disasters; combating antisemitism in the disaster relief space; engagement through *tikkun olam* and other core values; and preparation for and response to the next disaster;

As part of its volunteer recruitment efforts, NECHAMA will:

- Develop stronger relationships with national, regional and statewide Jewish and non-Jewish organizations that can help source volunteers;

NECHAMA will work with national Jewish organizations (JCC Association, the religious denominations, Hillel, Foundation for Jewish Camp, PRIZMAH and others) to make connections with local affiliates who could bring delegations to major disasters and help us recruit volunteers. NECHAMA will also seek out smaller but locally important events in strategically important communities that could provide significant exposure with volunteers. NECHAMA will work with non-Jewish partners in the VOAD movement and beyond to highlight the availability of our volunteer opportunities, and will identify websites where volunteer opportunities for disaster relief can be posted. NECHAMA will develop marketing kits for schools with service requirements and will reach out to them at the beginning of large deployments.

- Become a regular presence at relevant Jewish communal events like the Jewish Federations' General Assembly, the JCC Association Biennial, the important meetings of the Jewish denominations, and the Hillel Global Assembly;
- Develop methodology to recruit a number of volunteers who will readily deploy multiple times each year and identify their relevant skills;

NECHAMA will identify non-local volunteers who agree to deploy multiple times each year and provide some honorific for these volunteers, including recognition on our website. We may seek to provide specialized training for them. We also will seek to identify a group of individuals with very deep home fix it/contractor skills that we could take advantage of when NECHAMA works on home rebuilding projects.

- Recruit Nechama networkers who can help generate volunteers in their own communities as well as establish a cohort of NECHAMA ambassadors;

NECHAMA will seek to identify networkers with good personal and professional contact lists who can help get the word out and recruit volunteers for our deployments. Networkers may be professionals or volunteers and could be based at a federation, JCC, synagogue or other relevant institution. Ambassadors are those volunteers who care deeply about NECHAMA and are willing to recruit volunteers, speak publicly about NECHAMA, convene a parlor meeting, or work with us on a crowdfunding campaign. NECHAMA hopes to recruit 25-50 new ambassadors each year.

- Identify and convene skill-building training opportunities for NECHAMA volunteers, like chainsaw training clinics; and
- Develop corporate partners who could provide volunteer service opportunities for their employees.

3. Visibility and Communications

NECHAMA will become well known in the Jewish community by:

- Developing and unveiling a new website by the middle of 2026 (along with a strategy to ensure that its content is regularly updated);
- Participating in major conferences convened by the Jewish community, including by renting informational tables at those conferences;
- Seeking out and accepting speaking engagements within the Jewish community, particularly in prioritized communities;
- Pursuing an earned media strategy on relevant issues for the Jewish and general community and publishing more articles in the Jewish and non-Jewish press;
- Aggressively expanding the size of its email distribution list from 6,000 to 10,000 names (and subdividing that list for targeted distributions);
- Becoming a more frequent contributor on social media platforms including LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram;
- Hosting regular podcasts and zoom briefings and developing and distributing video content; and
- Refreshing its overall branding at the same time that we deploy a new website.

This includes highlighting and directly associating NECHAMA with the linkage between “Jewish” + “natural disaster,” wherever they may occur.

Part of this nexus is based on implementing the visibility strategy outlined above, but it will also be achieved through an expanded content focus. Whether a disaster occurs internationally, or it is a domestic one where the disaster is not large enough for us to mobilize or NECHAMA is already at capacity with current deployments, NECHAMA will publicize information about these kinds of disasters, although making clear that we will not deploy. We will seek to provide factual information, particularly on the impact of the disaster on the local Jewish community, provide information on how donations could be forwarded to NECHAMA and we would find a trusted partner to accept them, and which local nonprofits might be able to manage local volunteers who want to help out.

NECHAMA's communications team will expand by 1 FTE (a junior communications professional/content writer) to meet these needs.

4. Combating Antisemitism

NECHAMA will combat antisemitism through community relations, public affairs connected to disaster relief, and overall relationship building, prioritizing communities where we have deployed.

NECHAMA often serves in regions with little or no Jewish presence. For many residents, our volunteers are the first - and sometimes only - Jewish people they've ever met. While NECHAMA's work has always combatted antisemitism - one positive experience with a non-Jewish client at a time, through our Combating Antisemitism Project by hiring a full-time Director, NECHAMA will be more intentional in addressing this scourge, leveraging our visibility and community trust to challenge stereotypes and foster connection. Through meaningful service and intentional relationship-building with influencers, NECHAMA is confronting hate and fostering understanding.

NECHAMA will continue to promote relationship building with church leaders, politicians, journalists and other influencers in communities where NECHAMA is deployed or has previously deployed.

Devising public programing, drafting op-eds, convening webinars, joining meetings, and making public speeches that focus on the nexus between Jews and weather/disaster relief, NECHAMA will work in coalition with Jewish and non-Jewish organizations to help devise local solutions to this scourge. The website will include a dedicated resource hub for issues and tactics relating to combating antisemitism. NECHAMA will also work to recruit as many non-Jewish delegations (and individuals) as possible to join our worksites.

5. Board Engagement

NECHAMA will optimize board engagement, particularly for assistance with organizational fundraising, and will prioritize the identification of future volunteer leaders.

NECHAMA's board of directors will expand from 12 to 21 and members will:

- Join NECHAMA's new fundraising and finance committees, among others;
- Work with staff to develop and pursue connections with foundations and other types of funders;
- Assist with regular outreach and connectivity to larger funders and engage in general outreach activities for a year end campaign and High Holiday good wishes;
- Serve as ambassadors for crowdfunding campaigns; and
- Help identify new board and committee members from untapped Jewish markets, particularly those which NECHAMA is prioritizing.

6. Financial Operations

NECHAMA will continue to increase the organization's financial viability and financial stability by:

- Further diversifying NECHAMA's revenue streams: accessing funding from varied foundations, including non-Jewish ones, pursuing corporate philanthropy, and forming connections with DAF advisors etc.
- Relying more on restricted funds, including for more programmatic grants that can pay some of the ongoing costs of the organization;
- Laying the groundwork for future access to federal, state, and local public funds. While currently there is a terrible climate for federal funding, NECHAMA will build access to government funders into future deployments and our work in combating antisemitism.
- Engaging in contingency planning for an economic downturn and/or the absence of any major, highly visible natural disaster;
- Updating NECHAMA's finance policies and procedures; and eventually
- Hiring a new Deputy CEO to help manage the overall expansion of NECHAMA.

7. Expanded FRD

NECHAMA will holistically expand overall financial resource development prioritizing foundation giving.

NECHAMA will reach out to at least 40 new foundations each year that are not currently funding NECHAMA including by identifying friends of NECHAMA who can act as an intermediary to potential funders whenever possible. Most will be Jewish foundations but a meaningful number will be corporate funders, non-Jewish religious funders, and others.

As part of its efforts to expand FRD, NECHAMA will also:

- Attend more relevant conferences to access Jewish funders;

NECHAMA will attend (and potentially pay for booths) at at least 4 relevant conferences each year such as the Jewish Funders Network, the JCC Biennial, conferences of the religious denominations, the Hillel International Assembly, and the JFNA General Assembly.

- Steward large donors, prioritize donor retention, and encourage donors to make larger gifts to the organization;

Annually, NECHAMA will identify a current list of individual donors to prioritize and will develop a plan to regularly touch them, including through individualized outreach by staff and board, group zoom calls, a giving society etc.

- Market NECHAMA to DAF sponsors and financial advisors, as well as individual DAF fundholders, utilizers of IRA Charitable Rollovers and owners of appreciated securities;

NECHAMA will meet with at least 10 Jewish DAF sponsors each year and at least 2 non-Jewish DAF sponsors. NECHAMA will create specific marketing/fundraising materials and include them on our (new) website to appeal to individual DAF fundholders and other potentially relevant funders.

- Recruit more recurring donors;

NECHAMA will develop a plan to incentivize recurring donors including recognition in some kind of giving society with a zoom meeting or other form of recognition. Some of this will coincide with the plan for stewarding larger donors.

- Activate a planned giving (bequests) program;

NECHAMA will develop marketing materials for relevant long-term donors and include them on our new website, will meet with several long standing friends of NECHAMA each year who may be interested in making a bequest, and ultimately may develop a planned giving society for those who pledge to make bequests to NECHAMA.

- Develop discrete fundraising programs for b'nai mitzvahs, weddings and other lifecycle events;

NECHAMA will develop appropriate marketing and programming (draft speeches, fundraising letters, mitzvah tool kits etc.) materials for inclusion on our website and will seek to identify and place information about NECHAMA on other websites and with lifecycle events coordinators that prioritize mission-driven organizations for mitzvah projects, weddings, and other similar events. NECHAMA may devise greeting cards that can be disseminated at various life cycle events. This will also be part of our overall synagogue outreach efforts.

- Coordinate parlor meets connected with film screenings;

For the next several years, NECHAMA will apply to enter at least six Jewish film festivals/year. In communities where we succeed in having a screening, NECHAMA will convene a relationship-building and fundraising program for the local Jewish community to take place before or after the film screening. NECHAMA will also utilize the documentary as a tool for other fundraising purposes including at parlor meetings.

- Pursue corporate philanthropy opportunities;

NECHAMA will seek to identify and apply for corporate giving from those who are already interested in or connected to giving for disaster relief, and those in disaster-adjacent and development spaces (home building/real estate financing). NECHAMA may reach out to

relevant corporations who are interested in volunteering with NECHAMA and then connect to them for giving opportunities.

- Expand the Rockers in Relief program (NECHAMA's annual battle of the bands fundraiser in New York coordinated with real estate law firm Hunton Andrews Kurth);

NECHAMA will identify national and/or New York-based funders to provide general sponsorship for the Rockers program, helping to defray some of the program's extensive expenses.

NECHAMA will also work to recruit additional attendees from relevant cohorts to help fill the room and to provide additional revenue including with members of UJA Federation of New York's Young Leadership Cabinet or its Real Estate Division's Young Professionals.

- Continue to utilize crowdfunding as a tool for future fundraising initiatives.

After identifying a stronger group of potential NECHAMA ambassadors, NECHAMA will launch a crowdfunding campaign as one of its annual campaigns every 12 or 18 months.

To flesh out these strategies and other applicable ones, NECHAMA will commission a comprehensive Development Work Plan from a respected consultant in the Jewish philanthropy field and will then expand its fundraising team by hiring a Chief Development Officer and a junior Associate Development professional.

Assuming that each of these seven priorities are funded and implemented holistically, collectively they will substantially expand our footprint, capabilities, capacity and impact on clients and communities. This will allow NECHAMA to provide more disaster response, serve as a stalwart resource for the Jewish community, and overall assist with the strengthening of Jewish community. Implementing these priorities will also lead to a more than doubling of our budget which is currently \$1.6 million/year to an estimated \$4.0 million.

If interested in supporting NECHAMA's expanded capacity needs, please contact Stephan Kline, Chief Executive Officer at ceo@nechama.org or 703/915-6002.