



I began my 20 years of service as a paratrooper in the IDF in 1984 and very quickly came to understand that Israel's mandatory military service has, in large part, made our young country the global powerhouse it is today. That experience, in the service of country, is of immeasurable value. Learning through service is an education unlike any other.

Tikun Olam – Repairing the world is something I learned in the IDF; Israel has become a number one responder to natural disasters around the world. Teen Relief Missions (TRM) has learned from this and has been responding to natural disasters for over 20 years. We educate the teens about what it means to repair the world and what it means to be an ambassador of the Jewish people.

And like the IDF experience, it's impossible to overemphasize the impact that TRM has on their teen volunteers as well as on the ravaged communities they serve. I am still able to picture the tearful thank you the Minnesotan brothers gave the TRM volunteers for saving their elderly father's life. TRM teens had repaired the father's furnace before an impending snowstorm, making it possible for him to stay in his home. When another one of our groups returned a year later, the brothers embraced them, welcoming back the "Jewish group from New Jersey."

The sense of purpose and satisfaction teens feel when giving to others in many ways makes them the true beneficiaries of these missions. I have been awed and inspired at seeing the hearts and minds of Jewish teens transformed when given the opportunity to live Jewish values. They return infused with a sense of purpose and often take on leadership roles in their own communities. Many point to the mission experience as the reason they are teaching in Jewish schools today.

When I led the first mission to New Orleans in 2005 after Hurricane Katrina, I could never have imagined that over the next fifteen years we would run over 300 missions with more than 5,000 participants to places like Kentucky, Texas, New Orleans, and Puerto Rico. Additionally, I hadn't known we would get the opportunity to partner with stellar organizations.

After our successes with TRM, we expanded and have now become OU Relief Missions (OURM) and run the same quality programs, now offered for people of all ages; college students, young professionals, families, and our over 60s populations. With this, we have also expanded internationally offering humanitarian aid to orphans in Romania and Rwanda, as well as India. The requests keep coming in and our population is always ready to answer the call.

Today, with the establishment of the OURM, I am proud to carry on the tradition I was part of in the IDF. With this new venture OURM we will be able to expand the opportunity for more Jewish individuals of all ages to help more people heal after a natural disaster.

We're just getting started and we hope you'll join us on this life-changing journey.

Ethan Katz

Rabbi Ethan Katz
Founder and Director of OU Relief Missions





We are proud to announce that we have renamed this program The Fred and Rose Distenfeld OU Relief Missions.

Fred and Rose ZT'L dedicated their lives to honing their sensitivity to the needs of others. As exemplars of Chessed, they served as unparalleled role models for their children and grandchildren.

This dedication is sponsored by their children Dr. Aviva and Gershon Distenfeld who have been involved partners in the relief missions for over a decade.



OU Relief Missions are transformative volunteer experiences that empower participants to make an impact and contribute to something bigger than themselves.

Through these relief missions, individuals gain a new perspective, connect to the Jewish value of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), and experience a newfound desire to help those in need by being taken out of their comfort zones and placed on the front lines in the aftermath of natural disasters.

OU Relief Missions first mission dates back to 2005, after Hurricane Katrina struck Louisiana.

Since then, OU Relief Missions has run more than 300 missions, with more than 5,000 participants volunteering in disaster-stricken areas like Minnesota, North Carolina, and Texas. In 2017, OU Relief teens were on the first flight to Houston after Hurricane Harvey. Today, OU Relief Ready Teams — individuals who have been trained and prepared to deploy on short notice — are often the go-to resource for many relief organizations including Habitat for Humanity and Repair The World.

This coming year, OU Relief Missions will expand from forty to fifty missions, broaden the volunteer base to include teens, young professionals, adults, and retirees, and increase the base of organizations partnering with us.

OU Relief Missions prepares Ready Teams to be on standby for when natural disasters strike.

Ready Team Mission Preparation is an area of the relief missions program that prepares groups of 10-15 participants for missions. Individuals who are part of these groups receive extensive training in planning, logistics, and team leadership, as well as preparation for working with victims.

After disaster strikes, the Ready Team is mobilized to hit the ground running during the most critical time, providing immediate relief.

Ready Teams meet throughout the year to maintain an awareness of what it means to provide service to others by learning about Jewish attitudes towards helping those in need and why Israel is the number one responder to natural disasters. The participants also develop expertise in a multitude of areas including logistics management for setting up an on-the-ground base.

In addition to the critical support Ready Teams offer, the participants themselves are often the most impacted after seeing the enormous difference they've made in disaster-stricken communities.

IN THE WORDS OF OUR VOLUNTEERS



"This is definitely a trip that I will never forget. It was the perfect balance of fun activities, helping others, and experiencing new cultures. I would do anything to go on this trip again, and be with the same group of amazing people that I met during these few days."
—Julia N.



"I gained a greater appreciation for *chessed* work. I now think about my actions in a whole new way and reflect on what I can do to make the world a better place."
—Evan H.

"It's hard to describe this trip because it was so amazing and meaningful. Doing *chessed* over the trip makes you realize how much you can do - and *need* to do - to help people in need."
—Aliza K.

"The recent trip to Puerto Rico made me recognize that *chessed* is anything that helps make someone's life a little easier, that makes them smile. It doesn't have to mean building a whole house; it can just be laying the foundation. As I was leaving, my only thoughts (besides "when can I go to sleep?") were, "I don't need to travel to do *chessed*, because *chessed* is right around the corner," and "What can I do at home to help others?"
— Charna R.

"I sat down with a group of kids and taught them how to write their names in English onto their hats while they taught me how to write mine in *Morahti*, their native language. Seeing the pure joy on each of their faces will be etched into my memory for a long time."
— Joseph S.



"The trip to Puerto Rico opened my eyes to the world beyond my local community. It taught me the value in helping people in need and doing things for others even though I never met them and will never see them again. It made me feel good about the assistance we provided and also expanded my interest in *chessed* as a whole."

—Ahuva A.



"One moment that was eye-opening for me was when we saw a little boy's reaction and he said enthusiastically, 'This is my new house!' For us, we just went in and did some hard labor, but for him, we made him a home."

—Abby G.

"Seeing the smiles on the faces of Levid and his friends when we finished the job was incredible. It felt great to know we helped people who really needed us."

—Matthew L.

"It is great to know that we are helping the Puerto Rican community rebuild and that our work is really making a difference. I hope I can continue with charity work in the future."

—Jonah G.



"I'm extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to go to Puerto Rico and directly impact lives after Hurricane Maria totally devastated the island. Going with OU Relief Missions made it all the more meaningful, as we were able to represent Judaism in a place where the majority of the population had never met a Jew before. All our work showed that even a small group of people can make a large difference. Hopefully, we will all remember this when opportunities for *chessed* arise in our own communities."

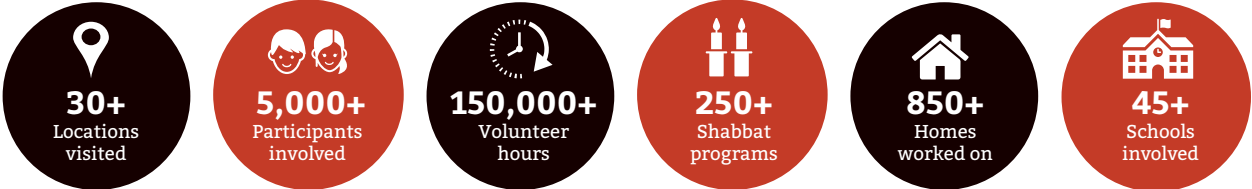
—Naomi K.

"We always think about making a difference in the world, but most of the time it's nothing more than a thought. This trip gave us the perfect opportunity to turn our thoughts into actions and create something so great out of nothing. It was an inspiring experience, where I learned just how grateful I should be for the life I have, and how much of a difference I can make in someone else's life."

—Kayla S.



OU relief missions have run over **300** missions to **over 30** different locations across America and internationally.



RELIEF MISSION GOALS



Developing leadership skills and instilling a genuine passion for volunteering in their own communities and around the world.



Increasing awareness and compassion for those less fortunate while deepening their appreciation for their own lives.



Strengthening their Jewish identity and connection to Jewish values through an immersive, hands-on experience of *tikkun olam*, as well as follow-up activities.

Houston, Texas

NCSYers Salvage the Remains of a Texas Synagogue After Hurricane Harvey Hits Hard

After Hurricane Harvey slammed Texas in 2017, OU Relief Mission participants were among the first who traveled to Houston to provide comfort and relief to the hundreds of Jewish families whose homes and synagogues were demolished by the floodwaters.

In one hard-hit shul, teens worked tirelessly to sort through and salvage what they could from the ruins of torn *siddurim*, *chumashim* and talmuds, while setting aside the rest for *genizah* (holy burial).

Remarkably, the group discovered one remaining *Chumash* intact amidst the wreckage. In a moment that could only be described as life-changing, the teens stood there together, and read the holy, timeless words aloud.



Costa Rica

Costa Rica- Five Soccer Balls and a LEGO Wall

During our relief mission to Costa Rica, we visited a small school serving primarily Nicaraguan immigrant children. When we offered our help, the staff was stunned—they couldn't understand why we had come. We explained simply: "We are Jews, and we're here to help."

They immediately called their head of school, a Jewish woman from Miami, who was moved to tears. "This," she said, "is the Judaism I fell in love with."

The school had just one damaged soccer ball, so we bought five new ones. When the students asked if we could build a LEGO wall, their excitement was contagious. We also provided English lessons and helped establish a vegetable garden—vital, as for many of the children, the school lunch is their only full meal of the day.



Puerto Rico

Since Hurricane Maria, OURM has continuously sent volunteer groups to support the people of Puerto Rico

In partnership with over a dozen local organizations, our efforts have included everything from demolition and rebuilding to revitalizing neighborhoods, constructing disaster relief centers, and supporting a wide range of food distribution programs.

We've also been privileged to spend over 30 inspiring Shabbatot with the warm and welcoming Chabad of San Juan, deepening our connection to the local Jewish community.

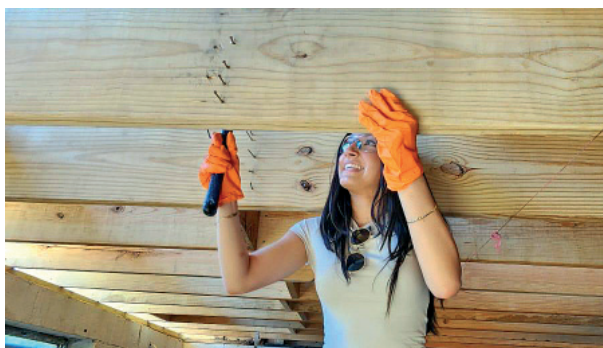


New Orleans, Louisiana

Rebuilding New Orleans: Two Decades of Impact

Though it has been over two decades since Hurricane Katrina devastated Louisiana, its effects remain deeply visible throughout New Orleans. Since 2005, we have been committed to supporting the city's recovery by bringing groups of dedicated volunteers to help rebuild—slowly but surely—with the goal of restoring hope and strength to this resilient community.

Our volunteers spend several hours each day working with **SBP**, helping to restore homes severely damaged by flooding. We also partner with **Green Light New Orleans**, a nonprofit focused on sustainability and energy conservation. Their initiatives include installing free energy-efficient lightbulbs, cultivating gardens in local nurseries, and, most recently, painting and installing rain barrels to conserve water and help prevent future flooding.



To gain a deeper understanding of the hurricane's long-term impact, participants visit the **Lower Ninth Ward**, one of the neighborhoods most devastated by the storm.

In addition to volunteer efforts, participants connect with the local Jewish community—visiting the synagogue, the historic Jewish cemetery, and spending time with community members to offer support and solidarity.

Of course, no trip to New Orleans is complete without a taste of its culture. Our groups enjoy the vibrant nightlife of downtown and savor iconic local treats like beignets at **Café du Monde**.

To date, we've brought over 100 groups to New Orleans—and we remain committed to this vital work.

Since Katrina unfortunately there have been a number of significant hurricanes that have hit NOLA especially Ida to which we sent over 30 groups in a period of two years to help with the recovery.

Romania

When war broke out in Ukraine, OU Relief Missions sprang into action to assist the children of the Tikva orphanage in Odessa. After the orphanage was relocated to Romania, we sent over a dozen groups of volunteers to bring joy, warmth, and stability to children who had endured unimaginable challenges.

Our volunteers ran a variety of engaging activities, including carnivals, arts and crafts, sports, and outings—like taking the children bowling. For Shabbat programming, we organized Shabbos parties, games, and uplifting onegs that brought warmth and spirit to their week.

Beyond programming, our volunteers formed deep personal connections with the children. We helped put them to bed at night and said Shema with them. Educationally, we worked with Ukrainian-English workbooks to teach them English and offered Torah tutoring sessions, enriching their Jewish and academic growth alike.



India

At OU Relief Missions, we receive calls from organizations around the world asking for our help. When we were introduced to Gabriel Project Mumbai, we didn't hesitate to answer the call.

In India, our work has taken us to several regions, including the Kalwa slums and the rural area of Mokhada. There, we supported hygiene education for children, helped implement clean water systems, and assisted with school-based programs.

We also partnered with local farmers to improve agricultural sustainability by providing access to better fertilizers. Our teams donated a water pump to one village—allowing them to access well water—and funded a canoe for another, enabling residents to fish and support their families.



Rwanda

In partnership with the Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village (ASYV), OU Relief Missions brings volunteers to work directly with over 500 orphaned youth in a vibrant and healing environment. During this transformative week-long experience, our groups create and run engaging programs for the students, while forming deep connections through shared stories, music, and learning. Participants also explore the African safari, as well as Rwanda's powerful history, including the 1994 genocide, and engage with local women empowerment organizations to gain a broader understanding of the country's resilience and renewal. Through experiential education and meaningful exchange, participants leave with a deeper awareness of global responsibility and return inspired to bring that awareness into their own communities.



Ashville, NC

In the aftermath of Hurricane Helene in Asheville, North Carolina, OURM quickly mobilized emergency relief missions to provide immediate support.

Within days of the storm, our teams were on the ground, spending 2–3 days clearing homes that had been devastated. The local community was deeply appreciative of our swift response and willingness to help.

Since then, we have continued to bring volunteer groups to assist in rebuilding homes, organizing community barbecues, and creating meaningful connections. These efforts not only bring comfort and aid to those in need but also serve as a powerful expression of Jewish Values amongst communities that have never spoken to a Jew before demonstrating the impact of compassion in action.



Fort Myers, Florida

We have become familiar with the drill which is why as hurricane Ian was developing over the ocean, was when we received our usual call asking if the Jews are ready to deploy, we gave our routine answer, “of course!”

This deployment was different in many ways, the first of which being that it was post Covid. In addition to that, it was driving distance to Boca, Hollywood and Miami, it was also during our expansion which increased our readiness. This year’s missions are also taking place during the October 7 period, a time when we needed to be strong as a Jewish people.

Through all of this, we were still able to send over a dozen missions to Fort Myers. We also had various demographics participating with age groups ranging from 12-73. These groups were composed of participants from all over; Shul’s, local schools, young professionals and more.

Our groups had the unique experience of so many people coming up to us saying “we stand with you, and we stand with Israel”, “we pray for you in our church“. This has been a tremendous source of strength to our participants and a reminder to us that our purpose in conducting these missions is being fulfilled. We take it day by day, one kiddish Hashem at a time. Helping the world become a better place.

We once again had to return to the fort Meyers area post hurricane Milton.



ENDORSEMENTS

“ I thank God that I met the OU relief staff. Sending such amazing Jewish teen volunteers to my home. Seeing them work on my home that hasn't been touched since hurricane Sandy. It's such a blessing. It's hard for me to ask anyone for help, it's not in my DNA. Thank you OU Relief. Now I can focus on my job which is helping my community!”

— James Hodge, Leader of MLK Center, Long Beach, New York

“ I am thrilled to endorse OU Relief Missions, an exceptional initiative that has left an indelible impact on our HAFTR High School community. Our students have participated in two transformative missions with OU Relief Missions, one to Houston and another to Fort Myers. These experiences have been instrumental in shaping their character and worldview.

During these missions, our students rolled up their sleeves and got to work, assisting communities in the midst of recovery from natural disasters. They have been involved in rebuilding houses, providing food to the homeless, and even cleaning a synagogue that had been affected by a fire.

What sets OU Relief Missions apart is not just the tangible help they offer to communities in need, but also the profound personal growth they foster in our students. Participating in these missions has given our students a newfound sense of self-confidence and fulfillment. They have learned the value of service, empathy, and community, qualities that will undoubtedly serve them well in their future endeavors.

I wholeheartedly endorse OU Relief Missions and commend them for their unwavering commitment to making a positive difference in the world. Their efforts have not only benefited the communities they serve but have also empowered our students to become compassionate and engaged global citizens.”

— Ilona Diamond Coordinator, Student Programs HAFTR High School



“ The volunteers from OU Relief Missions have been crucial in helping advance Green Light's mission to build a more sustainable city. The groups have been involved in all our programs; they have helped install thousands of energy-efficient light bulbs, painted dozens of rain barrels, and improved access to healthy food through Green Light's backyard vegetable garden program. We highly value the long term partnership we have with OU Relief Missions.”

— Andreas Hoffmann, Executive Director of Green Light New Orleans

“ Working with OU Relief participants for more than a decade has been an amazing experience. These participants are helping so many people in their time of need. They are lifesavers.”

— Dan Hoeft, Site Supervisor, International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC)

“ We here in the Lower 9th Ward are so appreciative of OU Relief Missions! You all are helping out so many people here. Christmas came early. The kids here are so excited. If possible, I would hug everyone!”

— Burnell Colton, Community Leader Lower 9th Ward, New Orleans

“ Ezra Academy girls experienced a transformative journey when they traveled to New Orleans. This OU run chessed mission, infused values in the girls that are tough to teach on an academic level. Building homes, nurturing the environment, feeding the homeless and fostering Jewish identity were experiential moments that will live with them forever.

For these young volunteers, the trip to New Orleans was more than just a service project; it was an opportunity to connect with their faith, culture, and the wider world around them. As they rolled up their sleeves to assist in the construction of homes for families in need, they found themselves not only building structures but also forging bonds of solidarity and empathy.

Their commitment to environmental stewardship was equally commendable. Whether cleaning water barrels, priming water barrels or painting water barrels after being educated on the importance of the work, these young women demonstrated a profound respect for the environment and a dedication to the preservation of the water projects around the levies in the Lower Nine.

Yet, perhaps the most profound aspect of their journey was the internal transformation each girl experienced. Through acts of service and moments of introspection, they unearthed hidden strengths, discovered new passions, and deepened their understanding of themselves and their place in the world. In fact their interactions with the members of the community and in particular Burnell, of Burnell's market in the Lower 9 taught them the character trait of resiliency in ways they have never encountered before.

These girls carried with them not only memories of their impactful deeds but also a renewed sense of purpose and connection. The time they spent with Rabbi Katz in closing ceremonies demonstrated how potent the experience was and how powerfully they were affected by the five days of service. This type of hands on occurrence cannot be matched by classroom learning. The girls were forced out of their comfort zones and have grown tremendously because of it. We are looking forward to continued chessed projects (and another mission) in the coming months years...”

— Sima Fish, Principal, Ezra Academy



“ OU Relief Mission participants who participated in Act Now Houston's volunteer initiative lived their Jewish values of repairing the world. Over the weeks and countless hours that the teens helped to rebuild damaged homes, they not only increased their own competency, confidence, empathic understanding and moral character, but also strengthened community.”

— Sacha Bodner, Director of Social Action Jewish Federation of Greater Houston

“ SBP is tremendously grateful for the ongoing support of OU Missions volunteers. The enthusiasm and sheer impact of their service have been felt across the United States and in Puerto Rico. They are a great extension of our team and mission. Thank you to all OU Mission volunteers for helping us rebuild communities impacted by natural disasters, and bringing families home faster.

— April Meehleder, Director of Volunteer Programs, SBP

On-Site Partners

ACT Houston	Hike for KaTREEna	#Onehand #Apoyemos
Agahozo Shalom Youth Village (Rwanda)	Houston Food Bank	One More Child
America Investment	International Orthodox Christian Charities	Repair the World
America's Grow a Row	Inspiritus	Ronald McDonald House Charities
Burnell	Israid	Saint Bernard's Parish
Cafe on the Vine	Kosher Troops	Shalom Corps
Chefs for Puerto Rico	Living Lands and Waters	TECHO
Common Grounds	Lower Nine	Texas Baptist Men
Common Ground Relief, Inc.	MEVO Fresh Roots Farm	The Restoration Team
Fresh Food Giveaway	Midwest Food Bank	Tikun Hayam
Gabriel Mumbai Project (India)	Mi Patria	Tikva Children's Home (Romania)
Green Light New Orleans	NECHAMA	World Central Kitchen
Grill for IDF (Israel)	NOLA Tree Project	World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms
Habitat for Humanity	Northeast Recovery	
Harry Chapin Food Bank	Olam	
	One America Houston	



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