



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 15 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 200 missions with more than 3,000 teens 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 like Habitat for Humanity and Repair the World.

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







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 250 missions, with more than 4,000 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 TEENS



"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.



"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 has run over 250 missions to over 20 different locations across America and internationally.



20+
Locations
visited

4,000+
Participants
involved

100,000+
Volunteer
hours

200+
Shabbat
programs

500+
Homes
worked on

40+
Schools
involved

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.

SPOTLIGHT ON

NEW JERSEY NCSY'S FRED AND ROSE DISTENFELD Z"L

RELIEF MISSIONS

Rochester, Minnesota

Teens Volunteer in Minnesota to Help Areas Ravaged by Red River

In October 2010, the Red River in Rochester, Minnesota overflowed, causing heavy damage to nearby homes. Within days, two teams of volunteers were deployed and on the scene, offering help and leaving a lasting impact no one could have predicted.

One morning, the group passed two brothers desperately working to repair their house. When the OU Relief Mission participants offered to help, the men were overjoyed. It wasn't until after they spent the day ripping apart floors to drain the water so the furnace could be used that they truly understood why.

When they finished, the brothers cried tears of gratitude, explaining that their elderly father lived upstairs, and thanks to the efforts of the OU Relief Mission volunteers, they would now be able to use the furnace before the impending snowstorm next week.

"You saved our Dad's life," the brothers said. The teens left such a lasting impression that the following year, when OU Relief Mission brought a new group of teens, the brothers greeted them with a hug, welcoming back the "Jewish group from New Jersey."



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.



Puerto Rico

Teens Travel to Puerto Rico in the Aftermath of Hurricane Maria

Twenty OU Relief Mission participants traveled to Puerto Rico, in partnership with PR4PR, last May after Hurricane Maria devastated the island, leaving many families living in temporary tents.

Working in poverty-stricken areas, the teens spent hours scraping tar off of the roofs and delivering wood frames to build houses. They also made meaningful connections with the native Puerto Ricans, who struggled for words to express the depths of their gratitude.

In just a few days, the group accomplished what would have taken the Puerto Rican community months to complete.

Before leaving, the students spent Shabbat at the local Chabad house, which brought renewed energy and enthusiasm, and a feeling of kinship amongst their fellow Jews.



New Orleans, Louisiana

A Decade After Katrina, NCSY Returns to Louisiana

It's been over a decade since Hurricane Katrina hit Louisiana, but its effects are still apparent in much of the city. Consequently, a group of OU Relief Mission participants returned to New Orleans in February 2019 to continue the rebuilding efforts and offer words of strength and comfort to those who were still grieving.

Volunteering for several hours a day with Habitat for Humanity, the teens helped construct houses and worked with Green Light to install free energy-efficient light bulbs. To get a firsthand look at the hurricane's lasting impact, they visited the Ninth Ward, a neighborhood that was completely destroyed by floodwaters, resulting from the failure of the federal levees during Katrina.

In between their volunteer efforts, the participants visited the local synagogues and cemetery and met members of the Jewish community to connect and offer emotional support. It was a true show of Jewish solidarity, one the teens won't soon forget.



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.



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 Meehler, 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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