



TENUFA BAKEHILA project manager Yoram Arad (center) with a site work team.
(Photos: Tenufa Bakehila)

GABI NACHMANI: Willing to help with repairs.



The little NGO that could

• CARL HOFFMAN

The late American anthropologist, essayist and raconteur Loren Eiseley used to tell a story about waking before dawn one morning and walking along the beach to see the sun rise.

As he strolled along the water's edge, Eiseley noticed some misty, faraway motion on the beach. As he got closer, he could see a boy sifting through the debris left by the tides. Eiseley approached and saw the youth pick up a starfish and heave it into the ocean, then another and another and another. Eiseley asked the boy why he was doing this.

"The tide washed the starfish onto the beach and they cannot return to the sea by themselves," he replied. "When the sun rises they will die unless I throw them back to the ocean."

As the young man went to pick up another starfish, Eiseley surveyed the vast expanse of beach stretching as far as the eye could see. Starfish littered the shore in numbers beyond calculation. The hopelessness of the youth's plan became painfully apparent and Eiseley said, "But there are more starfish on this beach than you can ever save before the sun comes up. Surely you cannot expect to make a difference."

The youth paused to consider Eiseley's words, and then threw another starfish as far as he could into the ocean. Turning to Eiseley, he said simply, "Well, I made a difference to that one."

For the past 25 years, a small but very dedicated, tireless and somewhat quirky non-profit organization has been making a difference to thousands of often desperately poor families and individuals, ill and elderly citizens, victims of terrorism and Holocaust survivors. The group helps families who have immigrated from Ethiopia or Eastern Europe, families of soldiers, people with physical or mental disabilities, single parents, among many others in cities throughout Israel.

Their principal means of assisting these pover-

ty-stricken people has been to repair, renovate or in some cases to almost complete rebuild their dilapidated, unsafe homes at absolutely no cost.

As of this writing, Tenufa Bakehila – "Momentum in the Community" or "Building Hope" – with its small team of full-time staff and volunteers, has repaired more than 4,500 homes and counting. As stated in its informal mission statement, "With skilled hands and warm hearts, our tradesmen and family counselors help Israel's neediest families get back on track and move toward a brighter future. Our efforts produce decent and safe homes for deserving families, creating positive momentum that helps them break out of the cycle of poverty."

The organization began a quarter-century ago with one young man offering to do free home repairs for people in his working-class Jerusalem neighborhood. Born in 1956 to immigrant parents from Egypt, Gabi Nachmani spent much of his childhood in an orphanage after his father died.

"The house we grew up in had a leaky roof," he recalls. "Every winter we had to move the dining room table to another spot in the kitchen. The doors didn't close properly and the electricity was bad. My father passed away when I was eight and I was sent to an orphanage. When I came back, it was to a home that needed a lot of fixing."

"So my brother and I became the fixers of the house. And there were a lot of people in the neighborhood, immigrants speaking many languages, and we became fixers for them. Later we decided to form a group of volunteers to work on homes on Fridays. We put signs on buildings advertising our willingness to help with repairs."

AFTER SERVING in the IDF's Golani Brigade, earning a bachelor's degree in agriculture and working a brief stint in the US for the Jewish community of Denver, Colorado, Nachmani returned to his roots and started Tenufa Bakehila, an organization that renovates hous-

es and also tries to fix the lives of the people who live in them.

They not only work in close cooperation with local welfare departments and other NGOs, but also offer the services of their own full-time professional in-house social worker. Asked if she sees herself "renovating people" while the rest of the staff and volunteers are renovating their homes, social worker Avigail Gast Strenger replies, "I would never use the expression 'renovating people.' We're simply trying to help them take another step forward in whatever areas they need. This can be anything from getting new furniture to getting new training and employment. Each family's needs are different."

Strenger provides us with a recent example of meeting a family from a home being renovated, assessing their situation and deciding upon ways they could be helped. "They are a nice young couple, both around 30, underemployed and often unemployed, with five children and talking about divorce. I could see that the two had a lot of positive energy between them, but the strain of their situation – no work and five children, some with special needs – was simply overwhelming them." So she got them to agree to counseling sessions with her. Those sessions have begun, Strenger says, and so far, so good.

"The difference between my work and the work of a municipal social worker is that I have the luxury to spend a lot more time with each individual family. A municipal social worker has maybe 300 cases and often hasn't been to their homes. Another advantage that I have is that I come in after our workers have been there. The workers have already developed a relationship of trust with the family. So my work is much easier."

On the day we visit the group in a rundown neighborhood of Kiryat Malachi, staff and volunteers are busily working on the apartment of an elderly Russian immigrant. Tenufa Bakehila spokesperson Noga Fisher tells us that he has been living alone there for more than 10 years, drinking heavily, and rarely going outside. Aside

THE TENUFA
Bakehila team.



from apparently never cleaning the place, the old man suffered from a compulsion to hoard things – literally everything from bottles to tin cans to old unwearable clothes and unusable furniture. “The situation was so bad in his apartment that everybody in his building was suffering from the smell,” Fisher says.

We arrive to the scene of staff and volunteers removing piles of reeking garbage from the apartment, scraping years of grime from the floors and walls, pulling clogged and rusted pipes from kitchen and bathroom walls while trying their best to cope with the dirt, debris and odor.

Remarking on the presence of some young volunteers from the local area, Nachmani says, “We’re not only helping the families in the apartment, we’re also helping the volunteers. We took kids who were delinquent in their teenage years, went into the army, and after the army couldn’t really find themselves because they didn’t have the proper education in high school or any way to get into the market. We took them into the organization, taught them the trade and skills of home fixing, and then have them as workmen on our job sites. This has been an amazing success.”

He points to one young man, describes his delinquent past, and says he is now their work foreman for projects in Kiryat Malachi and Kiryat Gat. “We took someone who was lost, who everyone thought was a nobody, and not only turned him into our work foreman doing the home fixing, but someone who is dealing with social workers, the head of the welfare department and all of the suppliers.”

BUT THE star of this operation is clearly a somewhat grizzled, 50ish-looking Yaron Arad, the organization’s national work team director, who seems to be everywhere at once: cleaning the bathroom drain, fixing the shower, cleaning the bathroom floor, repairing a door, and telling me how he has recruited people on Facebook to help change door locks.

This kind of recruitment through Facebook has become one of Arad’s major skills, displayed daily through the more than 60 Facebook charity organizations of which he is a member. He asks for specific kinds of help, such as roofers, and gets responses for that and almost everything else. “I got a call today from someone who wants to donate furniture – second-hand but in excellent shape. I also got someone

to bring all of the old man’s clothes to the laundromat to have them cleaned and ready for his return.”

Other people are calling him with offers of dishes and kitchenware. Arad is nonetheless keeping what he calls the “psychology of the assistance” in mind, wanting to keep a few salvageable pieces here so as not to completely disorient the old man when he comes home from the temporary accommodations where he was moved at the start of the renovation work.

To date, Tenufa Bakehila has repaired more than 4,500 homes and currently operates in 11 cities: Kiryat Gat, Kiryat Malachi, Binyamina, Hatzor, Beit Shemesh, Jerusalem, Hadera, Or Akiva, Pardess Hanna, Ramle and Lod. Tenufa’s work crews now carry out essential repairs for approximately 350 families throughout Israel each year.

Due to financial constraints, however, the organization is able to respond to only one-third of the cases referred to it. To increase its range and impact it must constantly raise money from donors both here and abroad. “We have about 40 foundations that give us money, mostly small family foundations,” Nachmani says.

Projects in Kiryat Malachi and Kiryat Gat are funded in large part by JNF-UK. Why? Naama Fuss, the JNF-UK representative in Israel explains. “Our support for TK is part of our strategy to support the periphery in Israel. We have worked for many years in the Negev, strengthening communities there in every aspect of

their lives. We invest in people. So we have a partnership with TK which helps people from underprivileged backgrounds. Just by giving these people a small push, they can make big changes in their lives. They look at the problem holistically, involving them in the renovation of their homes, and the assistance of a social worker really gives them a restart in life.”

Not content to restrict their work to 11 cities and respond to only a third of those turn to them for help Tenufa Bakehila has developed a “grand plan” that encompasses all of Israel. Nachmani’s assistance paradigm has always revolved around the idea of first helping families, then neighborhoods, and finally, cities. Now, he is talking about the whole country, declaring “For one million dollars a year, we can wipe out all of the hardest cases of housing poverty in the heart of Israel within five years.”

In the meantime, Tenufa happily confronts one project at a time. Says Nachmani, “I run a cost-efficient organization of 13 employees, meeting with mayors and welfare departments, donors, chasing money all the time. But one thing I don’t give up on, I have a toolbox in the back of my car. And every single time we come to a home and I see that I can do something, I pull it out and I fix something. This is the biggest joy in my life actually being in the house, doing the work, and seeing the eyes of the families that all of a sudden have a functioning shower, a working faucet, or an electricity socket that isn’t dangerous. It’s amazing, and I love it.” ■



SOLDIER’S HOME
before and after
work.