

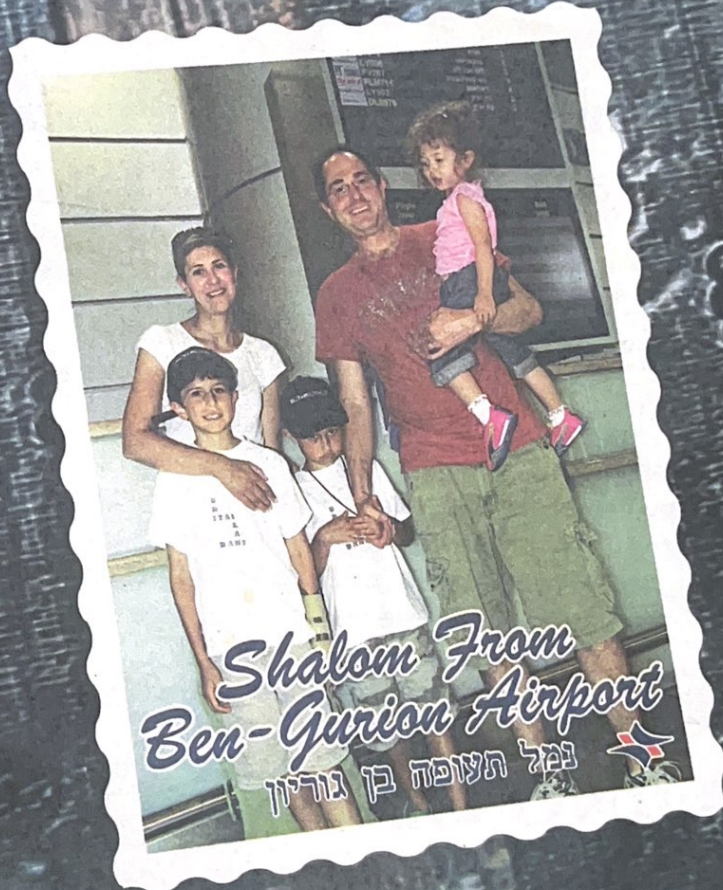
# THE JEWISH JOURNAL

OF GREATER LOS ANGELES



Volume 21, Number 23 • 3-9 Av 5766 • July 28-August 3, 2006 • [www.jewishjournal.com](http://www.jewishjournal.com)

## Going on Faith



**A Family Moves Back to Israel in a Time of Crisis**

by Amy Klein

**Rallying in the Hot L.A. Streets**

by Marc Ballon

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## FOCUS ON PHILANTHROPY

# A 'Nice' Idea Blossoms Into a Group of 'Niceaholics'

by Rebecca Raphael

Debbie Tenzer was having lunch with several girlfriends when the conversation got heated. "We all had such different views on where the country was headed. There was so much anger and so much scary news in the post-Sept. 11 world," she says, recalling the devastation from hurricanes and the tsunami, terrorism threats, difficulties facing Israel and escalating deaths in Iraq. "I wished I could pull my head in and hide like a turtle."

But that's hardly what Tenzer, a mother of three and marketing consultant, decided to do.

She thought to herself: "I can't single-handedly end world hunger, but I can donate some cans to a food bank. I can't fix the entire school system, but I can donate my kids' old books to the library."

So she did, and her kindness was empowering.

"I realized that if you have the ability to help other people, you're in a pretty good place," says Tenzer, who lives in Los Angeles with her husband of 29 years. "It's not always easy, because basically, we're selfish creatures, many of us struggling every day. We have to make a choice, and it starts by doing just one nice thing."

Tenzer decided that every Monday, she'd do something nice for others.

"It's the hardest day of the week," she explains, "so I wanted to start off with something I could feel good about, a personal victory," even if it was only a five-minute gesture like making a card for senior citizens in nursing homes.

Her friends were inspired by her idea, so she sent an e-mail to 60 of them with her suggestions for kind acts they could easily do, too.

One year later, her idea has evolved into a Web site, DoOneNiceThing.com, with thousands of visitors and a weekly e-mail that reaches people in more than 20 countries, including Afghanistan, Israel, Japan and Slovakia. Her self-funded site reinforces the idea that small acts of kindness can create lasting results and suggests simple deeds that appeal to both adults and children without usually asking for money.

She credits them with cheering up hundreds of hospitalized children, donating countless books to schools, libraries and hospitals, as well as backpacks to foster children who were literally carrying their belongings from home to home in a garbage bag.

"What kind of message does that send to them?" Tenzer asks rhetorically.

The ideas are often sent to Tenzer in the more than 200 weekly e-mails she receives from the site's members, whom she calls "Niceaholics" because, Tenzer cautions, "you get hooked."

Operation Peel Better, for example, encourages people to make or buy cards that she then sends to hospitalized children. "So far I've gotten 1,000 cards from all over the United States and as far away as China, and they're still trickling in," she says. The figure includes about 20 from her 14-year-old daughter.

"I brought some to UCLA Children's Hospital and sent others to St. Jude's Hospital in Memphis."

Pulling out a big batch in a manila envelope, she adds, "These are on their way to Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem, where sick children of all faiths lie side by side."

Pointing to a wall in her home office that's

covered with pictures, Tenzer says, "These are some of the heroes who are making life better."

She begins to cry as she talks about Mallory Lewis, with whom she spent the day at Fort Irwin near Barstow, the last stop before many of the soldiers are deployed to Iraq. "Some of the people we met were killed in the war. Maybe the last smile they had or their last taste of childhood was because of Mallory," she sobs, noting that Lewis, the daughter of puppeteer Shari Lewis, performed with Lamp Chop for no fee.

"I'm not usually so emotional, but these people remind me of a higher purpose in life," she adds. Getting teary-eyed again, she points to a picture of a young man who quit his job at a law firm to teach at an inner-city school, where he spent his free time helping students fill out college applications.

"Every one of them went to college because of him," she said.

While some of the "nice people" Tenzer has recognized are spearheading grass-roots efforts or starting nonprofits to help the homeless, disadvantaged children, AIDS patients, abused animals or drug addicts, others are honored for simply making people smile. Bob Mortenson, for example, a retired man in his 70s, takes a walk every morning carrying a bag of cookies so that he can share something sweet with workers in his neighborhood. And on her way home from work as a gynecologist, Karen Gross has a daily ritual of dropping off treats at her local LAPD and Fire Department stations.

"The one thing all the honorees have in common, Tenzer says, is their reaction to being praised.

"Every single one of them says something like, 'Oh no, not me. Other people do so much more than I do,'" Tenzer says. "This is the sign of a truly kind person."

When the kindness hits close to home, she's especially grateful and pleasantly surprised.

"You won't believe this," she says, explaining that her younger son, Ben, a college junior who's spending the semester in Barcelona, was recently pickpocketed. But within days, a taxi driver had found what remained of Ben's wallet, including his credit cards and ID, and called his university in the United States so that he could arrange to return it.

"There really are a lot of nice people out there," Tenzer says with a smile.

She attributes her sense of *tikkun olam*, healing the world, to her Conservative Jewish and Zionist upbringing in the Bay Area, values that she and her husband, an agent at Creative Artists Agency, have instilled in their children.

"I was always taught that we have a responsibility to other Jews and to the whole community," she says, praising her parents for being role models. "Tikkun olam is in my soul. It's just a reflex. It's what's expected of us."

But she's careful to point out that her site embraces people of all denominations and backgrounds.

"My goal is to unite people, not point out our differences," she says. "I never ask people their faith, but it often comes out."

Still, she admits that about half of all the people featured on the site are Jewish. "And I'm proud of that."

Like her honorees, she's also proud of her accomplishments, but won't take all the credit. "It's not all me by any means," says Tenzer, who's now working on a related book. "I just lit a match to get some light going out there. It's the people all over the world who are keeping it going." ●

Rebecca Raphael is a freelance writer and the supervising web producer for Rachael Ray's new talk show premiering this fall.

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