

NEW / ROCKLAND

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93 years  
1931  
2024

IN THIS ISSUE  
SUMMER DINING

# Jewish Standard

THEJEWISHSTANDARD.COM



## GOOD PEOPLE HELP GOOD PEOPLE

Naomi Eisenberger talks about her work supporting small nonprofits

# Cover Story



The Jerusalem-based JLM Food Rescuers salvages food for people in need.



Naomi Eisenberger

## ‘Her default is yes’

Naomi Eisenberger makes the Good People Fund matter

JOANNE PALMER

**N**ot all charities and nonprofits are big. Not all of them need huge infusions of cash from single donors, big foundations and funds, and other large organizations. Not all of them have to be filtered through a logistically and bureaucratically necessary but still time- and soul-sucking set of requirements.

Some of them are small and nimble. The help they provide is less systemic than individualized and

personal. Their creators can use mentoring to guide the internal fires that propel them.

Both kinds of organizations are necessary, but the smaller ones can be less visible.

Naomi Eisenberger sees them. And her background as a serial entrepreneur, shul leader, and volunteer has developed her internal Rolodex, taught her to listen intently, and equipped her to provide those nonprofits with the help they need.

Her 17-year-old Good People Fund has given more than \$23.2 million to support 242 programs, spent



BirdieLight reaches high school and college students across the U.S., educating about fentanyl and distributing test strips.

In Israel, Shutaf provides special-needs kids with time away at overnight camp.



not quite five percent of what it's raised on expenses, and because some donations are designated for administrative costs, has spent nothing else on overhead.

That's not bad for an organization that until this year has had only one employee – Naomi Eisenberger.

So who is she?

To begin with, Ms. Eisenberger's got deep roots in New Jersey. "I'm from Caldwell," she said. "My parents came from Manhattan and the Bronx to Caldwell in 1932. My father, George Kaplan, came with his brother-in-law to start a men's clothing store, and he and my

mother, Molly, basically became pillars of the Jewish community."

Caldwell was a small town then; much of it was farmland, Ms. Eisenberg said. "My parents were one of the first Jewish families in town. They opened a small synagogue, Agudath Israel" – now it's a prominent, flourishing Conservative shul – "and my father was president there."

Men's clothing stores seemed to run in the extended Kaplan family's DNA. Ms. Eisenberger's father's store, the Caldwell Men's Store, "stood in the middle of

Bloomfield Avenue until 1996," Ms. Eisenberger said; in 1986, she and her husband, Gerry, bought it from her father.

After she graduated from public school in town, Ms. Eisenberger went to Montclair State, and then taught history in Whippany Park High School. She and Gerry moved to Millburn. Then they had children – two of them, Andrew, who now is married, the father of three children, and an oncologist at Columbia Presbyterian, and Sara, a former social worker, the mother of three daughters, who lives nearby in Short Hills – and she



Waves of Hope provides water therapy and unexpected healing to disaffected young Israelis.

became a serial entrepreneur. “I started a plant decorating business, and then I had a needlepoint finishing business, and then I became a kosher caterer,” she said. It was the 1980s, and those businesses were on trend. People decorated their houses with plants, they loved making needlepoint but didn’t know how to turn the finished product into something usable, and it was possible to run a catering business out of your own kitchen. “I was following trends, and I did things that I was good at and cared about,” Ms. Eisenberger said.

She was also learning a great deal about working with people, figuring out what they wanted and what they needed, and how to adapt as time, technology, and the world around her changed.

In 1991, her children were in college, she had just been diagnosed with breast cancer, and she was the newly elected president of her shul, Congregation B’nai Israel in Milburn. “I was in the rabbi’s study” – that was Steven Bayar, now rabbi emeritus – “just about to go on vacation, and I saw some books on his shelf written by Danny Siegel.

“I had never heard of him.”

Danny Siegel is a philanthropist, poet, writer, and charismatic animating spirit behind the Conservative movement’s youth group, USY; he was the international president in 1962, and has influenced generations of once-young people ever since. Ms. Eisenberger had been a USYer, but she hadn’t gone on Pilgrimage, as the group’s summer trips were called, and she hadn’t been active on the national level. Somehow, she hadn’t been influenced by Mr. Siegel – at least consciously. “So when I saw these books, I asked Rabbi Bayar ‘What is this about?’ and he said ‘Take these books and read them on vacation.’

“I did, and I was blown away. “So I came back and said that we have to bring him here. Our plan was to start a tikkun olam committee – we didn’t have one then – so we hired him for a Shabbat as speaker in residence.

“Like most people, I was totally blown away.”

That was the first time they met, and they stayed in touch. “Then, a few years later, he asked me if I would like to volunteer for his organization, the Ziv Tzedakah Fund, and I said omigod yes! It kind of felt like being



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anointed.

“So I drove down to Rockville,” Maryland, where he lived, and I gathered up all the records, and I became the volunteer administrator.

“At the same time, we were running our family business, which by that point we had bought from my father.” It was a lot, even for someone as energetic as Ms. Eisenberger.

“I went to Israel with him in the summer, I became very interested in his program, I got to know the grantees, I went to CAJE conferences with him” – that’s the now-defunct Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education.

“And then in ’95, when we decided to close the store, I said to Danny, ‘I can’t continue to do this. I have to get a job. You either have to hire me or I have to go.’

“He was of the school that you don’t use donated money to pay anyone’s salary, but he found a donor who would pay a half-time salary.” So Ms. Eisenberger worked half-time for the Ziv Tzedakah Fund and half-time for the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, out of USCJ’s New Jersey office.

That didn’t last, though. She was far more interested in philanthropy than movement politics. “So I said to Danny, ‘Full time or nothing,’ and I

ended up working full time as the managing director of the fund.”

That lasted until 2007, “when Danny announced that he was retiring. ‘You’ll land on your feet, Naomi,’ he told me.”

When she began to work for Danny Siegel’s fund, it was raising \$250,000 a year, she said; by the time he shuttered it, it was raising \$2 million annually, and that money was doing good work. So “the night the board voted to close, I just blurted out, ‘This work is too important. We are doing too much good. Our donors believe in us. I’ll start over.’

“The next morning I got on the phone and called seven donors.

“I sat down with a friend and we wrote a business plan – he was my first board chair. We came up with a budget. I had to raise \$175,000 for each of the first two years. I reached out, and those seven donors I called gave me the money we needed to start.

“We incorporated in the state of New Jersey in 2007. We opened the Good People Fund on May 1. That was 17 years ago.

“My office then was in my son’s office. And it still is.”

What drives her?



Evan Robbins of Metuchen works with poor children in Africa through his organization, Breaking the Chain Through Education.

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# Cover Story

"This is not a job," Ms. Eisenberger said. "This is holy work. Literally holy work."

"I don't have a bad moment, because it is only doing good, and I get to hang out with the best people God has put on this earth."

"We seek out and support small grassroots organization in the United States and in Israel. They don't have to be Jewish – in Israel they can be Jewish or Bedouin or Muslim. We fund them."

"And we mentor them."

"Something that's common to all of them is they each have an individual or small group of people who are visionaries. People who have identified problems in the world and have found creative ways to solve those problems."

"That's the essence of what we do. These are people who fly under the radar. They are not people who big organizations will fund. Our goal is to make them more visible and help them outgrow us."

The Good People Fund purposely works only with small organizations. "We will fund only up to a certain budget size," Ms. Eisenberger said. "Most of them are volunteer-run; if there is any staff, it's a small one, but



Everyday Boston, led by a storyteller, is powered by the idea that stereotypes divide but stories connect.

often the founder is working alone.

"For the most part, they work in areas that are 'social-service oriented'" – she used air quotes there. Programs deal with refugee issues, women's empowerment, disabilities, hunger, poverty, hatred."

Combatting hatred sounds like an amorphous task, but Good People has funded such groups as Civic Spirit USA, which teaches civics in faith-based schools as a sane way to understand how things should work; Fighting Online Antisemitism, an Israel-based nonprofit whose volunteers recognize and report cyberhatred; Road to Recovery, which takes sick Palestinian children through checkpoints to Israeli hospitals; Tag Meir, which, in response to the violent death of an innocent woman, brings Israeli Jews and Arabs together in mourning and then in hope; and Tribetalk, which helps prepare American Jewish college students to confront hate on campus.

As these programs show, Good People can respond to changing needs quickly.

"Because we are very small and nimble, we can pivot," Ms. Eisenberger said. So a few years ago, when it became obvious that hatred was becoming a problem, we went looking for programs that address hatred in creative, impactful ways.

"There is no shortage of programs like that. There are many people out there who are working very

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quietly but very effectively, and it is our honor and privilege to be able to help them.

“We have a minimal amount of bureaucracy, and our work is very hands-on. My days are spent mentoring and listening. When you are running a small organization, it can be a very lonely existence. You start to question yourself. ‘Why am I doing this? Does it really make a difference?’

“We have the ability to listen, and to give them perspective.

“And it’s not only me,” Ms. Eisenberger continued. “I have a board of incredible people, who are deeply committed to what we do, and who use their talents to help their grantees. We have more than a few young retirees on the board who have experience in finance or law or other fields, and who happily make themselves available.”

Although it might be a cliché, when Ms. Eisenberger says “We are a family,” you believe her.

The Good People Fund is ecumenical in its reach



Za'akah provides support and help to survivors of child sexual abuse in the Orthodox community.

but deeply Jewish in its ethos. “We say very clearly that we are based in Jewish tradition,” Ms. Eisenberger said. “Our logo says, in Hebrew, *maasim tovim* – good deeds – but religion doesn’t enter into who we support.

“This fall in New York, we will hold our first gathering

of all our grantees in Israel and the United States. It was supposed to be last November, but then October 7 happened. A very generous donor is underwriting most of the cost, because he knows, as I know, that bringing these people together, the energy and what they can learn from each other, will be priceless.”

The fund is also working on a program that will help grantees through the process of “creating a mature model of an operating nonprofit,” based on the assumption that visionaries don’t necessarily know many of the mundane details they – or someone else in the organization – will have to master to make sure that it runs smoothly, legally, and efficiently.

“We will share best practices, let everyone know that they are not alone, and know that whatever crisis they are going through, someone else is, too,” she said.

Among the many projects Good People has funded is one that identifies people who need help with expenses. The help it offers is both direct and anonymous. “That has allowed us to identify people who are smart but otherwise might not have been able to get higher education,” Ms. Eisenberger said.

For the last four years, a donor has put a young

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The Survivors Mitzvah Club gives financial support to Holocaust survivors in Eastern Europe.



Tag Meir, in Israel, brings people of different backgrounds together to talk and eventually to trust.



New York-based New Neighbors Partnership matches newly arrived refugee, asylee, and asylum-seeking families with local families who can pass along hand-me-down children's clothing and provide emotional support.

woman through law school.

"They don't know each other," she said. "I know both of them, but they don't know each other. We are working through a third party."

This is the Rambam's philanthropic ideal. Most people can't do it. "The donors do it at great personal expense," Ms. Eisenberger said.

There's a practical side to this. "I don't want people knowing that we do this," she continued. "The requests would be endless. Still, "What drives me more than anything else is kavod." Honor. Knowing that she's doing the right thing.

There is a tension to being unknown, though. It gets in the way of effective fundraising, and therefore

limits the amount of good the fund can do. The Good People Fund has expanded. It now includes a marketing and communications consultant and a director of engagement, Julie Fisher, with whom Ms. Eisenberger is excited to work. Ms. Fisher's husband, Dan Shapiro, was the U.S. ambassador to Israel, she ran her own small nonprofit, and the family lived in Israel for 12

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years, amassing yet more connections. That's a good thing.

"We are the best-kept secret, which is a problem," Ms. Eisenberger said. "More money allows us to help more people. We have the capacity for a certain number of programs. Our work is very labor-intensive. You are not just writing a check; with every check comes

phone calls and meetings. It's not onerous — but mentoring is just so important."

Ms. Eisenberger talked again about her motivations, particularly now, after October 7. "If I didn't have this work right now, I don't know what I would do with my anguish," she said. Now, she's "interacting with my grantees in Israel, trying to meet the challenge of

running their organizations while having lost family or friends, and living in a horrific environment politically, socially, and economically. The workloads of our grantees in Israel has increased. Something like \$1 billion in aid went to Israel, but none of it filtered down to the small programs we work with. They are dealing with significant problems. And the American

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Jewish donor community has some amount of donor fatigue.

"It's true that many Jewish donors don't give what they gave because they can't, not because they don't want to – but that doesn't make it better."

Reva Judas of Teaneck, the founder and head of Nechama Comfort, the organization that supports women and families whose babies have died or have had stillbirths, gets some funding from Good People.

"Naomi is really unbelievable," she said. "She is such a calming voice."

When she wanted Nechama Comfort to grow, Ms. Judas's father, Rabbi Sidney Green, who always was gifted at making good things happen, "was looking for ways to help me with funding," she said. "He googled, and found Naomi, and we connected. We met a few weeks later, and it was so natural being with her. We talked for a long time. And she said, 'You are a fit for

what I do.'

"She puts herself into this work wholeheartedly," Ms. Judas continued. "She doesn't just write you a check. She really wants to teach you. She wants you to be part of the process. She makes herself available as a mentor and a sounding board.

"And it's give and take. Sometimes she'll call me and ask me for advice.

"She is able to make anybody feel that they are the

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“She is absolutely for real,” Ms. Judas concluded.

Debra Orenstein is the rabbi of Congregation B’nai Israel in Emerson. “I love Naomi, and I love what she does,” Rabbi Orenstein said “I have invited her to my synagogue to speak to the Hebrew school. She is so relatable.

“When you talk about big problems in the world, it can be overwhelming. Massive amounts of money are needed. Her approach to tzedakah is targeted and personalized. It enables people to connect, and it also allows a few dollars to make a very big difference.

“It’s not as if we don’t need the bigger charities – we do – but this is not either/or. Naomi’s approach is really helpful both to the organizations that are running on a shoestring and the donors who can see how their money makes a difference.

Rabbi Orenstein has known Ms. Eisenberger for years, but they hadn’t been in touch until earlier this year, “when I read a beautiful email that she wrote about hope,” she said. “I was about to teach an online course about hope, so I called her to ask what if I were to teach it in partnership with the Good People Fund and raise money for her cause.

“The proposal was totally out of the blue. Everything was easy. There was no red tape. She just said, ‘Yes. Let’s do this.’

“What amazes me about Naomi is that she always has

her finger on the pulse,” Rabbi Orenstein continued. That was true when she ran her small business from her home, decades ago, and it’s true now, too. “She knows where the community is, and what it needs. I was very involved with freeing slaves, and she was very involved in that, too. When I first spoke to her about #MeToo, she already was involved with #GamAni,” Me Too in Hebrew. “She knew people’s stories. She is so remarkably plugged in.”

It’s not clear how that works, Rabbi Orenstein said. “It’s not that she’s in any kind of boys’ club elite. She knows those people, but she’s not one of them. But somehow she knows Jewish organizational life, writ large, in all of its different incarnations – the big, the small, the medium.

“She knows people, she connects with people in such an authentic and deep way that people share with her, and she shares with them.

“She is easy to partner with. Her default answer to so much of life is yes. That is rare. Most people who are in the difficult but enviable position of being able to grant money see themselves as gatekeepers. They feel they have to say no. But Naomi – who is always totally responsible about where and to whom she gives money – is always game to meet someone new, to try something new.

“Her default is yes, and that is what makes her so delightful.”

Learn more at [www.goodpeoplefund.org](http://www.goodpeoplefund.org).



Road to Recovery pairs Palestinians with Israelis who can drive them to medical care in Israel.

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