



**on your mark**

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# From My Closet to Yours



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BY ALIZA BLOOM

Meet Jessica Katz of Yad Leah, an organization that transforms hand-me-downs into hand-me-ups

**I**f you'd told me years ago that I'd spend my days immersed in the world of clothing, rubbing shoulders with manufacturers, retailers, and even fashion influencers, I would have laughed. I never enjoyed clothes shopping. I never followed trends. And to this day, I still can't tell you what's in style.

But Hashem clearly has a sense of humor.

I grew up in Teaneck, New Jersey, with parents who told me I could accomplish whatever I set my mind to. That confidence found direction during my high school years in NCSY, where I learned how to turn energy into real communal action.

Today, I lead Yad Leah, an organization that connects American clothing donors, along with major manufacturers and retailers, with Israelis in need. Honestly, I stumbled into this work by accident, and I have never looked back.

## From Dining Room to Nonprofit

The idea for Yad Leah started in my home in Passaic, New Jersey. I was looking for meaningful chesed projects that I could involve my five children in. I wanted something hands-on, something that would really help them understand what it means to give.

And then the phone rang. One of my closest friends, Karen Thaler, who'd made aliyah to Beitar, was visiting the United States. She mentioned that her cousins in the Five Towns had offered her beautiful, high-quality clothing, but none of it fit her children. And then she said it casually, "Even if my kids can't use it, I'm sure someone in Israel can."

That is when it hit us — we could collect clothing from people in America and get it to Karen to distribute in Beitar. We decided to just try it without overthinking it. I've always lived by this: If you have a good idea, pursue it. Don't assume it's too hard. You'll be surprised what you can accomplish.

The response was immediate. People always have clothing they're done with but don't know where to send it. I told them to drop it off at my house and I'd get it to Israel. Simple as that. My living room became an unofficial sorting center. My kids were completely in. We were folding, packing, and stuffing huge boxes right on the floor. It became a real family project.

Soon, we shipped the boxes of clothing to Israel. Karen received them and began distributing high-quality American apparel throughout her community in Beitar.



**I don't just read magazines — I analyze their ads.**

When *Mishpacha* arrives, I somehow end up studying the ads first. Logo placement, font size, messaging, layout... even sheitel ads. My kids groan, "Mom, just read it!" But when you work in fundraising and marketing for Yad Leah, every ad becomes a mini case study.

We named Yad Leah after Karen's grandmother, whose principle was simple: Share what you have, even the smallest things, and lift others up. That principle became the heart of the operation.

Eventually, my husband said, "This is incredible, but the clothes are taking over our house. You need a bigger space." That's when I realized this was becoming something much bigger than I'd envisioned.

Now, we operate out of a 15-thousand-square-foot warehouse with seven full-time employees, raise close to one million dollars annually to sustain the work, and have become an official non profit.

And in Israel, Karen went from working out of her living room to running the Yad Leah Israel operation. Word spread and the *gemach* kept growing. Today, we have more than 26 Yad Leah branches, from Tzfas in the north to Ofakim in the south. Our staff, trucking partners, and volunteers keep everything moving and reaching those who need it most.

## Our Volunteers

Last year alone, over 70 school and shul groups came to pack boxes, and about five thousand volunteers participated in clothing drives or came to the warehouse during vacation days. Every time I see someone step up, I'm reminded that one idea, pursued, can grow into something you never imagined.

If clothing is stained, ripped, out of style, or covered in camp or school logos, it goes straight to recycling. We sort into dozens of categories, including boys', girls', women's, men's, coats, shoes, gowns, and suits, so every box is packed thoughtfully for the community that will receive it.

The atmosphere during our Pack for Israel experiences at the warehouse is lively, fun, and full of energy. Volunteers work in groups — school classes, shul groups, families, or friends — sorting and packing donations. Sometimes they recognize clothing as their own or a friend's, and sometimes they just spot something they really want for themselves. They sometimes ask if they can keep these treasures. We say no, but it's a compliment that the clothing we send is

the kind our volunteers would actually want.

Most of our clothing comes from personal donations, but our drop-off centers are only located in Passaic and Teaneck. To reach people farther away, we bring the drives to them — what I like to call Drive-thrus. Communities like the Five Towns, Queens, and Great Neck host annual drives before Pesach. Volunteers set up in school or shul parking lots, hire a moving truck, and help unload bags right from donors' trunks. Families, teens, and neighbors all pitch in, making it an easy, fun way to take part in chesed.

The weeks between Purim and Pesach are especially busy for us. People are cleaning out their homes — not just for chometz, but also decluttering — and we take advantage of that energy by hosting clothing drives in many communities.

Although we only send clothing and linens to Israel, somehow pre-Pesach bags often contain just about anything. For a few weeks every year, our warehouse feels like the most unusual thrift store in America. We've seen some truly memorable submissions over the years: crockpot inserts with no crockpot, an actual crockpot lid with no pot or insert, VHS tapes (that had our teenage volunteers googling what a VHS even is), CDs, mystery cords to unknown electronics, personalized challah boards with impressively long family names, half-finished board games, stuffed animals that are adorable but not shippable, and mismatched socks.

Sorting it all takes time, but it's endearing. Pre-Pesach cleaning inspires decisiveness: If something is leaving the house, it must go somewhere meaningful. Behind every lone sock or odd item is someone who wants their clearing-out to become someone else's blessing.

And every so often, a wife carefully lines up two bags by the front door and tells her husband: "This one goes to Yad Leah. This one goes to the dry cleaner."

And somehow... they get switched.

Cue the panicked phone calls. But by the time we hear about it, those bags have already merged into hundreds of others. We do our best to track things



### I treat hiking trails like a memory game.

Show me a photo of a trail we've done, and I can usually tell you where it was.

Bonus points if there's a waterfall. In my book, it's not really a hike unless at least one waterfall makes a cameo. My family? They just roll their eyes and hope we don't end up climbing the wrong mountain again.



### I don't like gefilte fish, potato kugel, or cholent.

Yes, I know. In my family, this is considered a major flaw. Our neighbors even sneak over portions — just so my kids aren't deprived of "authentic" Jewish food. They all hope I'll have a change of heart. Spoiler: I won't.

down, but at that point, it is basically like trying to find one tiny sweater floating in a sea of generosity.

## The War Effort

After October 7, because we already had shipping and distribution infrastructure, we were able to help out immediately and get clothing to soldiers and displaced families right away.

We had an amazing Hashgachah pratis story with that. We had a shipping container with 2,400 boxes of clothing scheduled to arrive at the Port of Ashdod before Rosh Hashanah. We faced delay after delay, setbacks that made no sense and had never happened before. Karen Thaler, Yad Leah's director in Israel, was constantly on the phone with the shipping company, trying to move things along.

On Erev Succos, Karen received a call that the container had finally arrived, but it had been incorrectly sent to the Port of Haifa in the North.

Normally calm and patient, Karen demanded they correct the error and bring it to Ashdod, even if it meant arranging a special train.

Then October 7 happened.

When the ports reopened on October 10, the container was still in Haifa and perfectly positioned to be able to distribute clothing quickly to families from the north who had to flee their homes with nothing but the shirts on their backs.

Another moment that stands out from that period is when a mother named Yael came to our *gemach* in Maaleh Hever, a *yishuv* in Har Chevron, just before her son's unit went into Lebanon. He would not have access to laundry facilities, and she urgently needed socks and undergarments. She told me that without the *gemach*, she wouldn't have known what to do.

And then there are the regular children. Some need warm coats. Some need shoes for school trips. Some just want something nice to wear to a simchah. When they find exactly what they need, in excellent condition, it changes how they feel about themselves.

That is Yad Leah. We take hand-me-downs and turn them into hand-me-ups. We're not just clothing people. We're lifting them up. **Ff**