

# THE JEWISH JOURNAL

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## The Gleaners

**Food Forward can turn your  
backyard discards  
into food-pantry gold**

A story for Sukkot by Ryan Torok



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# Food Forward Gleans and Grows

Dawa Cappin, a longtime volunteer with Food Forward, picks oranges from a tree at a home in Northridge.

by RYAN TOROK, Staff Writer

**O**n a recent weekend morning, sunlight lit up a band of eager workers in jeans and T-shirts who had ventured into a backyard at a home in Northridge. They were there to pick oranges.

No, these were not the usual laborers who toil daily in the region's orchards. These were San Fernando Valley suburbanites willing to volunteer a few hours of hard work gleaning the ripe fruit of heavily laden trees so that it could be transported to food banks. While some of the workers set up ladders and then climbed up to begin picking, others used long wooden rods attached to baskets to gather the bright orbs, dropping the bounty into cardboard boxes or stuffing it into canvas bags slung across their bodies.

All of the volunteers came on behalf of Food Forward, a local nonprofit that Southern California homeowners can call to get their trees harvested for free, with the provision that all the fruit is then donated by Food Forward to hunger relief organizations. It's a win-win proposition.

On this October morning, it took 10 volunteers just two hours to pick approximately 1,200 pounds of oranges from four trees — and that's a small pick.

Since Food Forward got its start in early 2009, its troops have harvested approximately 575,000 pounds of fruit from more than 300 sites.

That's "2.3 million servings of fruit," Rick Nahmias, the organization's founder and executive director, said proudly. "And of course every week that goes up."

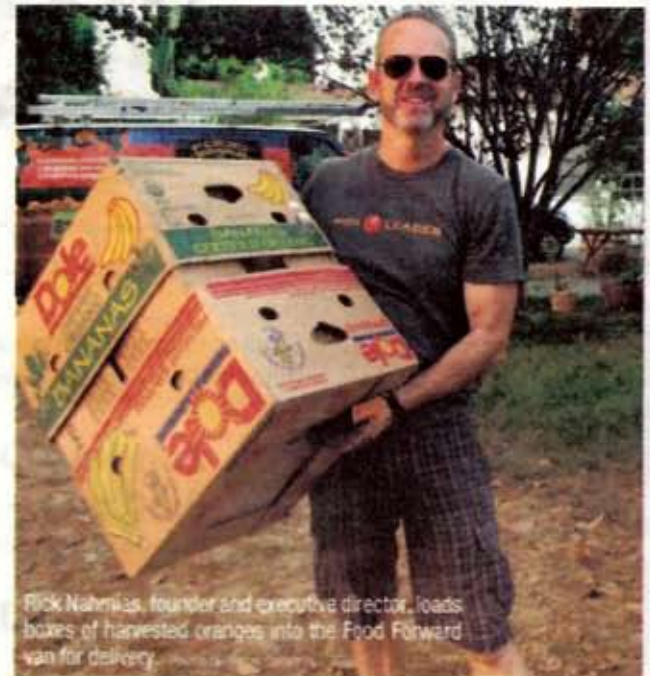
Food Forward donates nearly 100 percent of the fruit to more than 20 food pantries and agencies throughout Los Angeles and Ventura counties, the first of which was SOVA.

Currently, the group organizes about 15 to 20 picks each month — most often in Northridge, Granada Hills, Chatsworth, Reseda and other areas of the San Fernando Valley. Before the region was developed into today's suburban sprawl, it was nearly all orchards, and thousands of fruit trees in residents' yards still yield an overabundance of citrus year round, thanks to the warm climate.

In this harvest season of Sukkot, Food Forward's generous yet utilitarian mission seems more relevant than ever. Calling itself a "gleaning" organization, it recalls the Bible's instructions to farmers to leave the corners of their fields unharvested, so that the food might be picked by the less fortunate.

There are two sets of volunteer/donors in the Food Forward equation: the property owners and the pickers. If a property owner has a fruit tree and can't consume all the fruit that the tree bears, he can go onto the Food Forward Web site and register a tree. Food Forward responds within 48 to 72 hours, providing a volunteer visit to determine whether the fruit is ripe enough for picking. If it is, Food Forward sets up a date and time for a team to come for the harvesting.

Picks usually take place on weekend mornings, or in the eve-



Rick Nahmias, founder and executive director, loads boxes of harvested oranges into the Food Forward van for delivery.

nings during the week. After the work is done, a Food Forward leader will drive the harvested fruit to the pantry or pantries, or those agencies will send their drivers to pick it up.

In late September, Van Nuys resident Kelly Lichter donated the fruit of her orange tree for a weekday evening pick.

"It was very important for me to donate," Lichter said. "I don't like to waste things."

Founder Nahmias, 46, grew up in Los Angeles, and, after graduating from New York University with a double major in film and religious studies, he worked as a researcher and writer for Arianna Huffington. While working for Huffington, he read Eric Schlosser's book "Fast Food Nation," which reminded him of the documentary "Harvest of Shame," which he had seen while in college. The film focuses on the plight of agricultural workers and sparked Nahmias' interest in food justice, particularly migrant workers.

Meanwhile, Nahmias had written a screenplay that garnered some notice in the industry, and his path to a film career seemed all but destined, even as he also interned for director Mike Nichols, famous for films such as "The Graduate" and "Charlie Wilson's War."

However, when he took a cooking class in Napa, Calif., he began thinking about where food comes from and started cooking more thoughtfully, leaving his job with Huffington and enrolling in the Epicurean School of Culinary Arts in West Hollywood.

While in cooking school, he also took photographs of California's migrant laborers, traveling from Calexico to Sacramento to document their struggles.

Between 2002 and 2008, Nahmias built his own freelance photography company, shooting marketing materials for Cedars-Sinai, American Cancer Society and other organizations. He also made another art-and-advocacy series of photographs, "Golden Gates of Grace: Prayers of the Disinherited," exploring the religious practices of the marginalized; the work is currently on view at the First Congregational Church of Los Angeles, in downtown Los Angeles.

The idea for Food Forward came to Nahmias in January 2009 as he was walking his dog around his neighborhood in Valley Glen, on a route he'd traveled countless times before. At this point, however, as his dog was aging, the walks were getting slower.

"I started looking up and saw things I never saw before," he said, counting them off — tangerine trees, walnuts, pomegranates — and

suddenly he “realized how much of that is just going to the squirrels.”

Troubled by the waste, he called a friend who lived nearby and owned a tangerine tree. He asked her if he could harvest the fruit off her tree — she readily agreed — but before starting, he did a quick Google search for the nearest food pantry.

It turned out that the closest one was SOVA, in Van Nuys. So Nahmias posted an ad on Craigslist, inviting volunteers to help him harvest his friend's tree. Of the four who responded, one showed up. Together, they harvested 85 pounds of tangerines and gave it all to SOVA.

Nahmias continued harvesting in his neighborhood, each time dropping off the bounty, usually about 100 pounds, to SOVA. Then came a breakthrough: In February, Fred Summers, director of operations at SOVA, received a phone call from a property owner in Chatsworth who had a three-acre orchard with 300 orange trees and was looking for a way to donate the fruit to SOVA.

“It was extremely fortuitous,” Nahmias said, “and Fred made that connection” between the Chatsworth property owner and Nahmias’ recent harvesting efforts.

“Fred and I saw that property together — we were a little intimidated by the scale of the property,” Nahmias said. “We’re talking 300 trees, not all of them in great shape, but, still, 300 trees.” There was at this point no formal organization called Food Forward, just informal efforts on an irregular basis.

“But, we said, ‘Let’s go for it,’” Nahmias remembers.

The job required more than 50 volunteers, far more than what Nahmias had been able to pull together up until that point. Calling upon the Slow Food network — whose membership is committed to supporting good food — and Craigslist, and by posting fliers at Starbucks, they came up with enough people who wanted to help.

Nahmias’ first “big pick” — as he calls it — took place in March 2009.

“It yielded not only 6,000 pounds, but our first core of serious volunteers,” he said.

One of them was Erica Kenner, who would later become one of the organization’s six board members and a driving force behind the success of Food Forward. Working as a full-time volunteer, Kenner has forged relationships with property owners throughout the Los Angeles area.

She has a “very high and well-deserved reputation” in the food justice community, said Gary Oppenheimer, founder and executive director of AmpleHarvest.org, a New Jersey-based resource for gardeners who have excess produce and want to find pantries in need across the country.

A month after that first monumental pick, Nahmias’ organization was finally christened Food Forward, although it did not receive its own official 501(c)(3) nonprofit status until about two months ago; up until then, it was sponsored by the Los Angeles Community Garden Council.

The recipient base expanded in June 2009. After meeting with Richard Weinroth, president and CEO of MEND (Meet Each Need with Dignity), which has a food bank kitchen in Pacoima and was founded by Catholic and Protestant church members, Food Forward started donating to them, as well.

“I think they have become one of our biggest donors,” Weinroth said. “I want to say they’ve given us well over 100,000 pounds since our inception.”

Given the cutbacks facing agencies like SOVA, Food Forward arrived on the scene at an opportune time.

“It’s a vast untapped natural resource,” SOVA’s Summers said. “Rick and his group have found a way to tap into it. It is a tremendous boost.”

So far this year, Food Forward has donated 58,000 pounds of fruit to SOVA. It has also donated to Project Chicken Soup, the American Diabetes Association and the Downtown Women’s Center.

“It’s crazy to think that what was a little thing I tried in a neighbor’s yard has now scaled to the point where almost two dozen agencies depend on us for fruit on a weekly basis,” Nahmias said.

For pantries to qualify as recipients, they must be able to provide refrigeration to preserve the fruit, be able to provide tax receipts to Food Forward and have a means to distribute the pro-



Food Forward volunteers, with the organization’s managing director Meg Glasser, front row, left.

duce.

The operation and transportation also cost money, and these days, the Durfee Foundation and the Jewish Venture Philanthropy Fund are among Food Forward’s biggest financial donors.

In October 2009, the Jewish Venture Philanthropy Fund awarded Food Forward \$25,000 — an unexpected gift, Nahmias said. He recalled what Evan Schlessinger, co-founder of the Jewish Venture Philanthropy Fund, said around the time of the grant: “You are the first group that is not Jewish by identification [that we are giving a grant to]. You are the first group that we are soliciting rather than soliciting us.”

MAZON, a grant-making organization that describes its work as a “Jewish response to hunger,” also recently awarded a \$5,000 planning grant to Food Forward to develop a farmers market recovery program.

Food Forward’s success also may seem improbable, given its size. Nahmias works with only two paid staff members: Meg Glasser, managing director and Master Gardener, who develops partnerships with recipient agencies, and Max Kanter, the volunteer coordinator, who works hands-on with fruit pickers.

nization of its kind in Los Angeles. In Northern California, there are two gleaning organizations: Village Harvest in San Jose and Backyard Bounty, which also operates in Santa Barbara, Santa Maria and the Santa Ynez Valley.

Randy Baer, a 56-year-old cinematographer from La Canada, was among the 10 volunteers on the Oct. 1 pick in Northridge. His reason for signing up? “They make it very easy to volunteer,” he said as he picked some low-hanging oranges off a tree.

To pass the time, volunteers made small talk — chatting about a wedding, movies, schools. Koa Cano, a senior at Chaminade High School, in West Hills, stood on a thick branch and swung around, grabbing oranges with both hands.

When he was back on the ground, Cano unloaded his bounty into a box that already held about 50 oranges, “This is my favorite part,” he said.

“It’s a group activity and an opportunity to meet a lot of people you wouldn’t otherwise have reason to interact with,” said Dawn Coppin, 38, who also raises funds for the Los Angeles Public Library and volunteers as a picker for Food Forward twice a month.

When they’d finished the harvest, the volunteers loaded some

**“It’s crazy to think that what was a little thing I tried in a neighbor’s yard has now scaled to the point where almost two dozen agencies depend on us for fruit on a weekly basis.” — Rick Nahmias**

Nahmias himself didn’t take a salary until April of this year, and he is only a half-time employee while also continuing to work on his photography.

He calls David Levinson, founder of Big Sunday, his mentor, and the two have met over lunches, with Levinson giving some guidance.

“I think he’s a great guy, and I think what he’s doing with Food Forward is really cool,” Levinson said recently.

Despite all that Nahmias, who is Jewish, has done for SOVA, he says he does not see Food Forward as in any way a specifically Jewish organization.

“I think there’s absolutely a place for nonprofits that create Jewish identity, but when we’re talking about issues of feeding people and the engine that Food Forward is, and the thousands of volunteers that get involved, I want that to be something that everybody feels welcome at,” Nahmias said.

But, he said, he’s ready to welcome all who are willing to work: “We have The Jewish Federation come out and do picks with us. We embrace faith-based groups.”

Nahmias also never dreamed that one day he’d be running a nonprofit. “I have to be honest, I had absolutely no experience doing this,” he said. “You learn as you go.”

For now, however, Food Forward appears to be the only orga-

of the 15 boxes of oranges into the Food Forward van, a Ford decorated with pictures of orange trees and displaying the Food Forward logo — somewhat resembling the Scooby-Doo Mystery Machine. The license plate: FRTMBL1

Beyond the group’s obvious accomplishments, Nahmias also sees Food Forward as a means of building community. And in that, it has become, at least to some extent, a victim of its own success. Too many homeowners are signing up and have to go on a waiting list these days. The list now numbers 25 waiting to have their trees picked.

“I think the biggest setback right now is we are overburdened with properties,” Nahmias said. “We need more people who would become pick leaders ... to get out once a month and lead a harvest.” Pick leaders must complete a brief training, including shadowing a pick leader.

At the same time, Fruit Forward is also trying to find more fruit trees to glean on the Westside, where there are far fewer trees than in the San Fernando Valley.

Nahmias said his organization’s ability to develop new programs is one of its best attributes.

“I think that’s why people were drawn to it at the beginning, and maybe still are, because it still pivots very quickly.” Among

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## 'MetaMaus'

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book in ways that should embarrass them. "It was very clever and funny," wrote one famous figure, then at Knopf, "but right now we are publishing several comic strip-cartoon books, and I think it is too soon to take on another one."

Spiegelman, by contrast, is an acute observer of the culture in which he lives and works, which helps to explain how he was able to navigate so deftly through the minefield of a comic book about the Holocaust. His editor at Pantheon, for example, feared a backlash from the Jewish community and recommended that he "just move to the country for a while and lie low," but it turned

out that America — if not Israel — was ready for a Holocaust comic book.

"If anything, I guess my fellow American Diasporists could accept the self-deprecating image of Jews as cute, fuzzy rodents," he observes. "But I think that one of the reasons Israelis were never quite comfortable with the book is that the image of mice contains the stereotype of Jews as pathetic and defenseless creatures."

The author acknowledges that the critical and financial success of "Maus" changed his own life, but he also discloses the moral burden that came with the honors and the royalty checks: "I'd incurred an obligation to the dead." In "MetaMaus," he has discharged that obligation and, at the same time, he has enriched our experience of his important work in a rare and significant way. ●

## Arts Complex

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Monica Municipal Airport has been friendly to Govrin and Frumkin's art world.

In fact, Govrin created a sculpture of Donald Douglas, founder of the Douglas Aircraft Co., for the airport's Douglas DC-3 Monument Plaza in 2009. Beverly Hoskinson, who worked for the Douglas Aircraft Co. for several decades, helped arrange the commission.

"Judging by the person he is, and the heart he puts in his work, he was the logical choice,"

she said.

Santa Monica Art Studios, Hoskinson added, is "a wonderful thing for the airport, and very integral for what a lot of us would like to see the airport be. Just a gathering ground for all parts of the community."

The occasional planes flying overhead, the pilots coming in to check out art — Govrin loves the environment.

"It's fantastic," he said. "It's a fun energy."

The open-house exhibition runs for two days — Saturday, Oct. 15, 6-9 p.m.; and Sunday, Oct. 16, 1-5 p.m. For more information, visit this article at [jewishjournal.com](http://jewishjournal.com). ●

## Dimension

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my life, I was really interested in music. I studied piano until I was 6, and I loved recording myself. But then I went into dance, and at certain points I really missed the world of music."

Shechter was born and raised in Jerusalem. He studied dance intensively from the age of 15, and after three years joined the celebrated Tel Aviv-based troupe Batsheva. "But then," he says, "when I was 21, I thought, just a second — I don't know if this is what I want to do with my life, and I left the company."

Teaching dance in schools in order to make a living, he decided to take up the drums, and before long it occurred to him that he just might be able to fuse his two creative passions.

"Getting into choreography," he says, "one of the more attractive things for me was that I would be able to do the music for it. I remember when my first piece, the duet "Fragments," was first performed, my girlfriend at the time asked me, 'Are you excited?' And I answered: 'I'm really excited about people seeing it — but more than that, it's unbelievable that 500 people will sit in a theatre and will listen to

my music!' So I have to say I'm deeply excited about presenting music plus dance. It's not a secondary thing."

Shechter has been based in the UK since 2002, when he moved to London both to escape post-9/11 turmoil at home and to work with fellow Israeli Jasmin Vardimon. He was associate artist at The Place from 2004 to 2006, during which time he began to make a name for himself as an exciting choreographer-for-hire, and in 2008 founded his own, terrific troupe, while also finding time to whip up a cracking little piece for the opening of the second series of the British Channel 4's teen-drama "Skins."

Watching just 10 seconds of Shechter's company in rehearsal — with its fluent and belligerent mixture of hunched frames, clenched fists and elaborately simian floorwork — is enough to tell you whose steps you are watching. Indeed, his movement has a clarity that his attempts to explain "Political Mother" sometimes lack. He talks, for example, about his aim to explore "how people feel inside, not experiences themselves but the emotions buried under them."

It's clear that he is aiming typically high.

For more information or to purchase tickets, visit this article at [jewishjournal.com](http://jewishjournal.com). ●

## Food Forward

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these is Can It!, created to bring in revenue that can go back into the organization. It produces jam from a portion of the harvested fruit, which is then sold online and at the Farmer's Kitchen in Hollywood and at Clementine in Century City. Glasser is overseeing an effort to sell the

jam to more bakeries, restaurants and specialty-food locations, particularly in the San Fernando Valley.

Nahmias remembers his early experiences of being up in a tree, surrounded by all the fruit, which to him meant, simply, so much potential to help people.

"It's beautiful and maddening, because you realize you're not going to get to it all," he said.

"But that doesn't mean you shouldn't try." ●

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