



“This project has bonded us at the core of our values,” says Avivah Litan (third from left) looking at the Talmud with friends (from left) Jocelyn Krifcher, Aviva Tessler and Anne Clemons

Comfort in a Crisis

Aviva Tessler visited victims of terrorism in an Israeli hospital, and what she saw broke her heart. Her group, Operation Embrace, has touched and healed hundreds of lives and brought new meaning to her own. BY STACEY COLINO

A 23-year-old college student was buying a slice of pizza with her best friend at a bus station in Hader, Israel, when there was a terrific blast. Through the rubble, the smoke and the screaming, she realized her friend had been killed instantly. It was only when she tried to stand up and flee that she realized her own legs had been blown off.

This young woman is just one of the many victims of terrorism that Aviva Tessler, 41, met while living in the war-torn country of Israel with her husband, a rabbi, for six months in 2001. “She had burns over her whole body,” recalls Tessler, who would accompany a rabbi friend as he visited the wounded in hospitals. I thought, What can I do to help her?”

Tessler e-mailed her friends back in Maryland and asked them to chip in to buy the woman a portable computer with a DVD player and movies for her to watch on it. “Her face lit up,” says Tessler. “She was amazed that strangers could be so generous.”

Tessler was inspired, and she cites the Talmud, a collection of Jewish law: “If you help preserve one life, it’s as if you’ve preserved the whole world.” When Tessler returned to the US, she and friends Anne Clemmons, 44, Jocelyn Krifcher, 42 and Avivah Litan, 48, launched Operation Embrace (www.operationembrace.org), a project to improve the lives of those injured in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The women speak at synagogues, business groups and schools in and around Washington, D.C., asking for people to call or write letters to victims. Some donate money that Operation Embrace uses to buy DVD players, games, movies and other necessities for those who are bedridden.

Tessler estimates that the project has offered comfort to nearly 800 victims and their families. “Operation Embrace has taught me to think beyond myself and my community;” she says. “It has given me a greater appreciation for the many blessings I have.”