n rural Nepal a woman goes blind and is left by her husband alone to raise her children. Her oldest daughter is forced to go into prostitution, working as a ‘hostess’ in a bar on a trucking route, in order to help support the family. This is the beginning of a Jewish story because it is a human story. Volunteers from Tevel b’Tzedek, or The Earth in Justice, through one of their women’s programs in the village, stepped in. Upon discovering that she had never received medical care for her condition because the hospital was an hour’s drive and the care too costly, volunteers were able to get her to the hospital. Her diagnosis: cataracts. In most of the Western world, this is curable, but for her and her family it was a sentence to fall deeper into a cycle of desperation, poverty and prostitution. Tevel b’Tzedek covered the cost of her surgery; returning her sight and therefore enabling her to farm again and save her daughter from a lifetime of prostitution.

For this family, the effects are clear, but as Micha Odenheimer, the founder of Tevel b’Tzedek explains, “On the program participants, the influence of the program has been profound. They describe both a deepening of their Jewish identity and also an opening up of their perspective on a global level, as well as a strengthening of their commitment to working for social change. A number of our graduates have started projects back in Israel; others are studying international development, public health and other related subjects.”

The vision that has driven this project from its inception in 2007 was Odenheimer’s belief in the power of tikkun olam as a positive force for social and economic justice while simultaneously teaching the world that this is a core Jewish value. Tevel b’Tzedek focuses on aiding developing countries within a Jewish context. According to Odenheimer, “within the Jewish world and even in Israel, the idea of tikkun olam—fixing the world—as an important horizon in Judaism has become more and more accepted; so while we started out as pioneers out on a limb with what some people saw as an eccentric project 3 years ago, we are now much more in the center of things in the Jewish world.”

Odenheimer had experience reporting from developing countries where he had firsthand knowledge of how poor and vulnerable populations lived. This, coupled with his experience reflecting and learning within a Jewish context, fueled his initial impetus to get this program off the ground. He recognized a population with profound need and another with a tradition
of responsibility. To Odenheimer these two were inextricably linked – the question was how to impart this knowledge to young people. While traveling he came across thousands of Israeli backpackers throughout South East Asia searching for a way to connect with the developing world and looking for meaning. “I wanted the opportunity to influence this young generation and their culture of post army travel, and to strengthen their belief that they can help change the world for the better.”

The program was later expanded to also include Diaspora Jews. Including Diaspora Jews has added an entirely new dimension to the benefit of the program as Diaspora Jews and Israelis are given a forum within which to interact in a meaningful way and to use their unique perspectives to build on common values. Together, through Tevel b’Tzedek, they learn to create a community of the next generation of Jewry, one that is passionately engaged in social and environmental justice.

While the creation of this sense of community amongst volunteers is an added benefit, the clear beneficiaries are the Nepalese. Nepal was in fact chosen because not only is it a popular stop on the Israeli backpacker trail, but it is the poorest country in Southeast Asia. With so much need, deciding
where to focus resources is difficult. As the program develops, Odenheimer finds that they are becoming more and more effective. “We feel that slowly but surely we are understanding what we can do, how we can make a really substantial impact in areas such as agriculture, informal education, women's empowerment and so on. We now have something to give and have developed models that other international organizations are interested in,” adds Odenheimer.

**Tevel b’Tzedek** runs an intensive four month Nepal experience that will commence in February, but they are also currently accepting applications for three 5-week programs that run in October, November and December. The October cohort will be the eighth such program.

**Tevel b’Tzedek** considers itself an evolving program that is able to adjust in order to meet the needs of the beneficiaries. Drawing on core Jewish values, they use their resources to help communities move towards self-sustainability. They aim to approach giving with deep humility and the real desire to learn from those they are helping, so they can better learn how to repair our own societies. As Jews, **Tevel b’Tzedek** hopes we begin to actively take responsibility to ensure that others have enough food, clean water, shelter, healthcare, education and basic human rights. This is the *Earth in Justice.*

For more information about **Tevel b’Tzedek** and how you can help, see their website at [http://www.tevelbtzedek.org](http://www.tevelbtzedek.org).