

*Flowers. Who doesn't love to receive a bouquet? At any time, in any situation, a bouquet of beautiful flowers goes a long way, bringing joy and spreading good will. Richard Kovler is a man of flowers. He's also a man who has established a modest, yet effective, chesed operation growing out of his flower entrepreneurship. Richard's customers know that his flowers have a power beyond their beauty, contributing to the lives of those in need.*

# FLOWER POWER

Growing up in Edgware, just outside London, young Richard never dreamed that he would one day be a florist and garden expert in Eretz Yisrael. “I remember my father, of blessed memory, would always try to get one of us boys to mow the lawn. But even though the garden was our territory for playing and for chasing the dog, we wanted nothing to do with gardening.”

Mr. Kovler senior, who had a real estate company, grew up in London’s East End. As a teenager in the 1930s, he had joined the barricades that prevented Oswald Mosley’s Black Shirt Nazi Party from marching through and destroying Jewish businesses. He was a proud Jew and proud to instill Jewish values in his own four sons, raised within the Orthodox United Synagogue. He had a great love for Israel and encouraged his children to support Israel at every opportunity.

Richard, the second oldest, had a happy childhood. As a teenager, he was head of Edgware’s Bnei Akiva. But when he was eighteen years old, his father passed away. “I’d been working in a real estate office. My older brother and I had to help earn *parnassah* for our family. There was no money for luxuries in our home.”

It was a natural progression of his upbringing that Richard should settle in Israel twenty-three years ago, when he was twenty-five years old. He worked at Bank Mizrahi in Jerusalem and later went into business. But one sunny morning, a walk in San Simon Park in the Katamon district near his apartment changed the direction of his life.

“It was 1989, during the first Intifada, and business was pretty bad here. I used to walk my dog every day. I met a man named Harry Cohen, who was also out walking his dog. Harry was a Holocaust survivor; as a child, he’d been hidden in a convent in Belgium. He was rescued by his one remaining family member, an uncle, and was brought to America where he worked in gardening and forestry, graduating in horticulture at UCLA. After a life of hard work, he retired to Israel. But many people were coming to him for advice, as well as offering him gardening and horticultural projects.” “I came here to rest!” Mr. Cohen told Richard. “Not to work all the time!”

“Maybe I could help you with one of your projects?” Richard found himself offering.

**Change of Plan:** “After my first day in the garden, I realized I really loved working outdoors with the earth and the flowers. I’d never done anything like this

before. If I had done this type of work in London I would have given it up after a day. But while I was planting new seedlings in the soil of Eretz Yisrael, something stirred inside me. An oak tree in London never caught my attention. But a tree in Eretz Yisrael - well, how can you compare it? Working the soil that day in Jerusalem made a big impression on me.”

Mr. Cohen had enough work to keep Richard busy for three full years. In fact, after a short time working together, Richard retired from business and started working fulltime as Mr. Cohen’s apprentice. “It was a great relationship. I learned so much from him. He taught me everything he knew, including how to install sophisticated water systems.” After three years, Mr. Cohen handed over all projects to Richard, who by then had a reputation as an expert on garden design, and as someone who was friendly and reliable, as well. A few years later, Richard invested in a flower store in Old Katamon. He hired talented florists and became a businessman again, overseeing garden designs and renovations.

One of Richard’s skills is to look ahead and nip potential problems in the bud. In 2000, with *shmittah* only months away, Richard discussed with two renowned *shmittah poskim*, Rabbi Aberman *shlita* of Bayit Vegan and Rabbi Keilav, *shlita*, all the complex halachos regarding the selling of flowers and maintenance of gardens, and prepared himself well for his customers. Word soon spread that Richard could be relied on in matters of halachah as well as customer service.

“*Shmittah* is a real challenge - but one that is manageable. People invest in their gardens. They don’t want that investment to go to pot during *shmittah*,” Richard explains. “People also like fresh flowers, for Shabbos and for gifts. They can still have these flowers during *shmittah*, but customers need kosher answers, a kosher service, and a kosher product. I spent months researching and preparing for *shmittah*, six years ago. I wanted to do the right thing by my customers.”

“I found the whole process of learning about *shmittah* fascinating. I also knew it was my responsibility as a Jew to provide the best kosher *shmittah* service during that year. One of my main sources of fresh flowers during *shmittah* was from the Jewish flower growers in Gush Katif, who knew the halachos. And I also bought imported plants and flowers from Holland.”

Some of the most frequently asked questions about *shmittah* included: Am I allowed to water my garden and flower boxes during a *shmittah* year? Even if I can’t plant anything new, can I at least maintain the flowers and trees that I al-

ready have in my garden? If I grow plants on the balcony of my apartment, six stories up, do I need to keep *shmittah*? Can I pick flowers from my garden and put them in a vase on my Shabbos table?

Richard’s research and ongoing relationship with the *poskim* before and during *shmittah* enabled him to answer all these questions and more, with confidence. Now, with the next *shmittah* year only one and half years away, Richard is again researching halachically suitable sources for flowers and plants for his customers.

**Sharing his “Kriyas Yam Suf”:** *Erev Pesach*, 2001, the flower business came to a standstill for Richard and all his florist friends in Israel. The terrorist attacks in Jerusalem, one after another, had affected everyone’s morale. Businesses were crashing, left, right, and center. “It was a frightening time,” Richard remembers. “People didn’t want to go out at night. The fear of terrorist bombings kept them home; the sound of police and ambulance sirens were constantly echoing around Jerusalem. The atmosphere was bleak. My friends and I were hanging on, hoping not to lose too much money, but more importantly not to lose our businesses. Usually, one week before Pesach, we were all rushed off our feet, night and day, to fill the flower orders for Pesach. But not that year.”

The Gemara teaches that Nisan is a time of miracles. Richard Kovler experienced his own personal Kriyas Yam Suf, his “splitting of the sea,” on *erev Pesach* 2001 - which also became a *yeshuah*, a salvation, for many other people: Three days before Pesach, he received a call from a customer in his neighborhood. “She asked me if I knew anyone who could fix a leaking water system in her rooftop garden. I offered to help, and popped over straightaway. ‘How can you have time to do this for me now, Richard?’ my loyal customer asked.

“Well, Mrs. P., I have no orders for Pesach this year,” I said.”

Clearly perturbed by this turn of events, Mrs. P. gave Richard a wonderful idea: “Maybe you’d like to e-mail all

the families in my Teaneck community. Maybe they’d like to send flowers to their friends in Israel to cheer them up this Pesach. We’re all feeling pretty rotten here. The situation is very upsetting. Here’s the central e-mail address. Why don’t you drop them a letter and see if anyone is interested?”

Richard returned to his two-bedroom apartment and asked his wife if she would help him send an e-mail. “I had never sent an e-mail in my life, or used a computer for that matter,” Richard admits. “But Mrs. P.’s idea sat well with me. We were having a tough time here, and I knew how much a bouquet of beautiful flowers could cheer someone up. I wrote a letter from my heart.”

Richard’s passionate letter was e-mailed to the Teaneck community late that night, three days before *erev Pesach*. By eight a.m. the next morning, Richard had over \$3,000 worth of orders for bouquets of flowers or potted plants to be delivered before Pesach to all parts of Israel. “I was dumbfounded! I could clearly see that I had just experienced a miracle, a real gift from G-d. But I couldn’t dwell on it too long. There was work to do. I handed out the jobs to all my florist friends. By *erev Pesach* every order was delivered. All my friends had a piece of the ‘pie,’ so they could buy everything they needed for their families for Yom Tov.”

“I’d been working in a real estate office. My older brother and I had to help earn *parnassah* for our family. There was no money for luxuries in our home”



Avital's favorite flowers



Richard Kovler has a big heart. Everything that comes his way, he shares. Most people might have kept these precious orders to themselves. Everyone needs *parnassah*, to make a living; everyone has bills to pay. Richard also had a pile of bills and a shopping list for Pesach. But Richard cares about every Jew that he encounters on his path, as well as about every flower and garden.

I wanted to see and hear for myself about Richard's latest flower operation, which focuses on *chesed* and *tzedakah*. So, on a balmy morning just after Pesach this year, I met Richard Kovler at Victor's Nursery in Talpiot, about twenty minutes by car from Jerusalem's Old City. This nursery is now Richard's flower resource and florist base, since he closed his store in Old Katamon. He and his team of florists in Talpiot now process all his orders.

When **Mishpacha** photographer Moshe Stern and I arrived, we found Richard in his element, holding a potted rose begonia in one hand, while discussing with a customer her garden aspirations as they moved through the beautifully stocked greenhouse. When they had completed their on-site meeting, we took a short stroll through each room in the nursery, listening to the names of the plants roll off Richard's lips like water cascading from a mountain spring.

"Let's go see some of the gardens that I designed," Richard suggested. "And on the way, I'll tell you how the *tzedakah* project got started."

As the taxi moved slowly through traffic, Richard explained that he sells his bouquets to overseas customers at local Israeli prices. "I was noticing a phenomenon among my international customers. They'd phone me and ask me to deliver plants or bouquets for about fifty to sixty dollars. No one in America would think of spending less on a bouquet. But here in Israel, you can send a beautiful bouquet for thirty to forty dollars. So one day, I decided to suggest to one of my customers that I send a bouquet for forty dollars and perhaps he would like to donate the rest to a terror victim. I had become active in visiting hospitals to cheer up terror victims, and I knew a lot of families who needed serious financial help.

"My customer loved the idea. He said that he still wanted to spend the sixty dollars for his friend, but he would be happy to also give me eighteen dollars for a person in need! Since then, I always ask customers if I can donate some of their order money to needy families or terror victims."

The small seed of this initiative took root and flourished. Every month, Richard had a large sum to distribute discreetly.

Then one day, one of his customers phoned from America. A community had collected \$70,000 for terror victims and they wanted his help to make sure that the money went to where it was really needed.

"This was too big for me to handle by myself. So I contacted our neighbor and family friend, Avital Sharansky, and asked her advice on what to do. I was hoping she would help me distribute this incredible sum of money. Since I had started my small *tzedakah* fund, she had been giving me names of people who really needed help. She couldn't help me this time; she was in the middle of helping her husband Natan in his campaign for the next Knesset elections. But she connected me with a non-profit charity who helped me distributed the money."

Richard then told me about one of these families, whose daughter had been very badly injured in a recent bombing. "She had absorbed so much shrapnel all through her body that she couldn't lie down on a regular bed. She needed a special bed made of gel, which cost over \$1,000. I learned about this late at night and sent an e-mail to all my contacts in America. In the middle of the night, an e-mail came through from one of my customers who offered to pay for the bed."

We are in a small garden about twenty feet by twenty feet, next to a small house that sleeps guests from New York. "You see that area of bare weed surrounded by concrete, over there? That's what this space looked like before my team started working here," Richard tells us. The garden is charming and carefully designed. A pebbled path winds among the stone walls surrounding each bed of roses, lavender, hydrangea, gardenia, and other colorful blooms. A sophisticated water system keeps the area moist. A miniature bitter orange tree overhangs the pathway.

"It was a creative challenge, this garden," Richard says. "But isn't it just lovely?"

We agree. We all walk together to the Sharanskys' garden, ten minutes away, enjoying Richard's "flower talk" as we go. "That's a hibiscus," he points. "And that's an ornamental plum." Everyone greets Richard with a bright smile and a brief chat. At each house, we stop and peer at the gardens. Gardens that Richard has designed or re-bedded. Beautiful gardens.

We enter the Sharanskys' narrow driveway. "This is Avital's favorite flower," Richard announces, pointing to the bed of stunning orange nasturtiums. We walk through the dark green gate into the

courtyard. "And here are the roses I planted especially for Natan. You know, when he was in prison all those years, he dreamed of roses in a Jerusalem garden. And here they are." Richard inhales deeply of the floral perfume, and smiles.

As he talks of his wife, his family, his florist friends, of the Sharanskys who are so much part of his *chesed* flower projects, it's clear that Richard's friendships are as precious to him as his flowers.

"When I started with the *tzedakah* project, I decided that any money that comes in from Israel is *parnassah*. But any mon-

**“My customer loved the idea. He said that he still wanted to spend the sixty dollars for his friend, but he would be happy to also give me eighteen dollars for a person in need”**

ey that comes in from *chutz l'Aretz*, overseas, is a gift that has to be used for *chesed*. I even get calls now on *erev Pesach* from my international customers who tell me that this year they don't want to send flowers; they want me to arrange to deliver a set of flatware to their cousins instead, and could I please choose something appropriate. Then they describe the family and I get to work choosing something nice."

Richard is a family man, through and through. Three of his four brothers have settled in Israel with their families and he sees them regularly. His mother lives a few hours away. Richard and his wife, a descendant of a Torahdige family from Iraq who was born in India, live with their three dogs (which they rescued from abuse) and their colorful, chirpy parakeets. Mrs. Kovler works in the bone marrow research department at Hadassah Ein Kerem Hospital.

In their living room in Old Katamon a regal-looking, cream orchid stands on the breakfront. The canine family line up for their walk in the local park - the park where Richard Kovler met Mr. Harry Cohen, a meeting that changed Richard's life and the lives of many who benefit from these wonderful acts of "floral *chesed*." ■

Being creative in a small space



## PEOPLE ARE HAPPY TO HELP

Over the years, Richard has built up a network of connection to turn to when someone needs help. "I've found that people are quite happy to give *tzedakah* if they know what the money is going to be used for. For instance, over the past year they've helped towards three bar mitzvahs. They've helped a bride and groom who were married a week after being evicted from Gush Katif. They've paid for two *sheva brachos* for other Gush Katif refugees. We raised money towards buying a car for a terror victim who was so badly burned that she was embarrassed to go on a bus where people would stare at her as if she was a freak. We also helped an Ethiopian terror victim put down a deposit for the mortgage on a small apartment."

So far, due to the help of wonderful people in New Jersey, Richard has been able to provide six boys, from terror victim families or other needy families, with kosher tefillin in time for their bar mitzvahs.

"Although people give money to many worthy Jewish charities, once they've written a check they don't know where the money has gone. I've always found that if you let people know that their money is going towards a specific need, they can be most generous."