

# JEWISH LIFE

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## NAME:

Leanna Cossman

## OCCUPATION:

Registered Nurse

## CONGREGATION:

Sinai Temple,  
Champaign, Illinois

## FAVORITE ACTS OF *TIKKUN OLAM*:

Right after Hurricane Katrina I organized a food drive at our temple to contribute to the URJ Jacobs Ladder Project, which collected, warehoused, and distributed necessary provisions to hundreds of displaced families.

I drove the truck filled with 1,000+ pounds of donated food down to URJ Henry S. Jacobs Camp in Utica, Mississippi, and then volunteered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services in Baton Rouge as a nurse in the disaster response. This led to a new chapter in my life: joining the Illinois Medical Emergency Response Team (I've been deployed during the Decatur ice storm, Chicago heat wave, and other state disasters); serving as a volunteer nurse at URJ Camp Kalsman, and volunteering with Remote Area Medical in Tennessee (which provides free medical and dental care to uninsured Americans). After the earthquake in Haiti, I also participated in emergency responses, helping with orthopedic injuries in January 2010, triaging in emergency tents in Port-Au-Prince in April 2010, dealing with the cholera outbreak in November 2010, and working in a hospital



ON STAND-BY WITH A NATIONAL GUARD HELICOPTER, JULY 2010.

emergency room this past February.

In Haiti I met Kevin, a four-year-old Haitian boy (the size of an American two-year-old) who was orphaned when his mother died in the earthquake. He was unconscious, sick with cholera and badly dehydrated. I gave him litre after litre of IV fluids until finally he gained consciousness. Each day, he became a bit stronger. On the third night, I brought him some food from my bag and he discovered a love of peanut butter. Every morning, Kevin and I would sit outside the medical tent and watch the sunrise together. As we listened to the roosters crow, I would sing him songs in English and broken French, and he would point to things, asking me to teach him the English words. By my last morning in Haiti, he was repeating the words after me, and helping me to learn

them in Creole. Then he called me “mommy,” and I cried. It hurt to leave him. I still carry his picture in my wallet. I worry that he and many other Haitian children will never reach their full potential.

I think it is very important to help others in times of crisis, even though my absence causes hardship for my children and my husband, and disaster response work can be dangerous. Sometimes, too, the task seems overwhelmingly futile—but if I can do work that is meaningful to me, and it helps one person to live, or live better, then I am doing my part to repair the world.

**FAVORITE JEWISH EXPERIENCE:**

Attending a Kol Nidre service in a Baptist church in Baton Rouge right after Hurricane Katrina. More than 10,000 people were missing, and I’d spent the day speaking with family members who’d lost a loved one and taking DNA samples to help identify the bodies in the morgue. It was emotionally draining to hear so many

stories of death and loss. That night, the Jewish people in the area gathered in the church which had offered their building for services because all the synagogues had been damaged. A doctor named Hal and I showed up wearing our scrubs. Hearing the mournful sound of the cello evoke the Kol Nidre melody somehow brought us a sense of calm in this place of chaos and death. I have never been moved like that before or since. Every year I think of that service and the people who were touched by that storm.

**FAVORITE JEWISH BOOK:** *The Narrow Bridge: Beyond the Holocaust.* Rabbi Isaac Neuman shares how he managed to find light in the darkest of times, maintaining his faith and observing Jewish rituals in concentration camps while knowing his family had been murdered—an enduring reminder of how faith can help you to be a better person and to practice Judaism no matter where you are. □