



Growing a business

One man's idea that sprang from the heart has blossomed into a flourishing enterprise

• By ANN GOLDBERG

Sometimes you can look back on a day or a moment when life suddenly took on a new, significant turn. For British immigrant Richard Kovler, it was one morning in 1992, while the intifada was slowly killing his small jewelry and stationery business.

He was walking his dog in the park and chanced upon a fellow dog walker, Harry Cohen. A Holocaust survivor and retired gardening and forestry expert from the US, Cohen had recently retired to Israel looking for a quiet life but was frequently called upon for advice and guidance. Although he still enjoyed his field, Cohen was feeling his age and couldn't cope with the physical demands of the work.

On the spur of the moment, Kovler offered to give him a hand. He had time to spare and not much business, so what did he have to lose?

To his amazement Kovler, who had never so much as cut the grass outside his London home, found himself thoroughly enjoying working the soil. Tilling the earth of the Land of Israel appealed to both his Zionist and religious feelings.

Kovler's original business didn't pick up and Cohen had plenty of work for him, so after a few months he started working full time with Cohen. An eager and happy apprentice, Kovler absorbed everything Cohen had to teach him.

Over the following three years, Kovler became expert in flowers, plants, gardening, landscaping, garden design and installing sophisticated water systems. When Cohen officially retired, Kovler took over his work and eventually opened up his own flower store in Jerusalem's Katamon neighborhood to complement his gardening design business.

But the political turmoil in this country can and often does wreak havoc with small, non-essential businesses. 2001, the height of the second intifada, found Kovler's flower business at its lowest ebb. A few days before Pessah, Kovler told a

neighbor that, unlike most years when he and other florists were rushed off their feet with work, this year he hadn't had a single order to fill. This was probably because people were in no mood to think of flowers with terrorist attacks one after the other. The neighbor suggested e-mailing her relative's community in Teaneck, New Jersey, to see if they would like to send flowers for Pessah to family and friends in Israel.

Ready to put any good idea into practice, that night Kovler composed the first e-mail of his life. Speaking honestly and straight from his heart, he described the terrible economic situation, how small businesses were crashing day after day, and with Pessah just a few days away, many people had no idea how they were going to get through it. A gift of flowers, he suggested to his readers abroad, would "show family and friends in Israel that you care, will cheer them up, and will provide work for local florists."

The next morning, Kovler found NIS 18,000 worth of flower orders on his e-mail.

Overwhelmed by the tremendous response, Kovler immediately contacted fellow florists all over Israel to share the orders and the income so that hundreds of people had a far happier Pessah than they could have expected.

The pre-Pessah situation had taught Kovler something important. A flower shop is not a business that can support an inventory. You have to have a shop full of

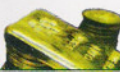
flowers; but if you don't sell your flowers, you end up throwing them away.

So Kovler decided to give up his shop, thus freeing himself of the need for an inventory and releasing him from his enormous financial overhead. He started to work with the Ramat Rachel nursery and flower shop through his Web site (www.richardsflowers.co.il) and from word-of-mouth recommendations from satisfied customers.

In his spare time, Kovler was visiting terror victims in hospitals and seeing first-hand the tremendous financial, as well as medical and psychological, problems they were facing.

His orders from the US continued to increase. But Kovler, a man with a lot of





integrity, realized that Americans, who were used to paying upwards of \$70 for a bouquet of flowers, were spending far more than was necessary. So he suggested to a customer that he could send a beautiful

flower arrangement for \$40, and that was all she needed to pay. But if she wanted to, he asked if she would like to donate the other \$30 to a terror victim. Almost all his customers agreed, and many added on a larger donation.

Thus began the second branch of Kovler's business. It had started out of his honesty and his desire to help others and has resulted in his having tens of thousands of dollars to distribute to organizations that help terror victims.

Sometimes Kovler sends details of specific items that are needed by patients and their families, and communities in America use him as the conduit for often large sums of money they have raised, knowing that it will all go directly to a

very worthy cause. Kovler himself also donates a percentage of all his overseas business to victims of terror.

It may not have been his intention, but this has also helped his flower and gardening business flourish. Fellow Jews in America are happy to give business to an English-speaking immigrant in Israel, to whom they can talk in their own language, whom they can trust, and who is honest with his prices and generous with his time, heart and money.

Kovler saw his business flounder at various times and, like a good businessman, took steps to diversify so that if one aspect encountered difficult times, there would be others to balance it out.

As well as ordering flowers, customers abroad have asked him to buy gifts for weddings they aren't able to attend. In that way, he started up his Web-based gift service.

Kovler also provides all that is necessary when setting up and designing a garden from scratch, including building a terrace or patio and other building alterations that may be required. He and his team also do house renovations.

People have always called Kovler for gardening advice, even without placing any order, and he's always happy to help. He also gives talks on caring for plants and gardens to many organizations.

Rosh Hashana 2007 heralds the start of shmitta, the seventh agricultural year when the land is not allowed to be worked. Kovler has spent much time learning all the halachot dealing with this so he can advise all his gardening customers on work they can and cannot do during the year and can prepare their gardens appropriately. He is also on the look-out for florists all over Israel with whom he'll be able to work when he has orders to fill next year so that the customers know they are receiving flowers grown under the correct conditions. His hands-on experience during the last shmitta, seven years ago, enabled him to collaborate with a rabbi who is writing a book on the subject.

Kovler's work ethic has gone a long way in helping him succeed with his business, but he has also discovered that the secret of success in this country is flexibility, adaptability and diversity. ■