

## Witnessing Haiti: A Call for Transparency in Disaster Relief



<sup>[1]</sup>  
Tevel B'Tzedek Israeli volunteer therapist  
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Special to the Jewish Week

We all watched in dismay when Haiti was struck with a devastating 7.0 earthquake; the consequences of this natural disaster intensified by Haiti's status as the 2nd poorest nation in the Western hemisphere. One hundred days later, hundreds of thousands are living in tents in refugee camps without sanitation as the devastation and fear continues with little signs of progress.

The Madoff ponzi scheme revealed that major segments of the Jewish community had ceased requesting transparency, and innocent individuals and organizations suffered as a result of this negligence. Now in a post-Madoff world we must raise the bar. We are already more watchful with our personal finances, no longer allowing others to invest our money without having a clear idea of where it is going. We should demand the same for our donations to others. Now that we've been burned as a community, we must have new standards: personal and communal.

When I was in Haiti last week, I was overwhelmed by the lack of accountability. One role that I played in Haiti was as a representative for the Disaster <sup>[2]</sup>



Accountability Project [2], an organization which calls for transparency and accountability in the allocation of donor and government funds to disaster relief projects. Organizations have received millions of dollars from governmental and philanthropic sources but have provided little to no transparency in the allocation of their funding to the daily human needs in the area of disaster.

The physical, emotional, and spiritual demands on the ground in Haiti are great, and our monetary contributions to the relief effort are imperative. We must, however, give responsibly and resist the urge to throw money at the problem then look the other way. I know that after I give tzedakah, I sometimes feel relieved and comforted, satisfied that I have fulfilled an obligation. But the requirement does not end here.

Jewish law has very stringent standards for donor transparency. For example, the Talmud (Peah 3:7) says that a charity fund must be collected by two people and distributed by three. The Torah commands that tzedakah allocations are taken extremely seriously not only in quantity but also in the distribution process. Another Talmud (Shekalim 3:2) explains that one could not wear shoes or a sleeved cloak when bringing an offering lest they be suspected of hiding some for themselves. One must take active preventative measures to ensure there are no public suspicions of how the money is used. Charitable money must be very carefully allocated only to those who take seriously their sacred role of addressing the needs of the vulnerable and are willing to be accountable to public measures of success. Much of the Jewish community has blindly poured into Haiti disaster relief without demands of transparency. Our culture of trust should be supported by a culture of accountability.

While in Haiti, I regularly noticed banners representing American philanthropic organizations but was unable to locate staff leading their work. I wasn't on the ground for more than 30 minutes before an executive director of a disaster relief organization informed me that some of the largest recipients of American philanthropic dollars are yet to be seen as active partners on the ground addressing the very real human needs for food, medicine, sanitation, education, and hope. It is unclear where those dollars are going. Donors often receive heart wrenching stories explaining the need to donate more but not updates on how the dollars are being allocated and measures of success for those allocations. Requesting billions of dollars from the government and philanthropic citizens and then neglecting to offer reporting is unacceptable. Now is the time to reverse this dangerous trend.



The Department of Homeland Security, FEMA, American Red Cross and other relief and philanthropic organizations must ensure that their procedures balance the need for swift responses with the sacred imperative to avoid unwarranted spending, fraud, and excessive overhead. Pouring

aid into the wrong channels too quickly can potentially cause more harm than good. American food aid often wipes out the local agricultural industry leaving the country less sustainably independent.

The disaster response to Hurricane Katrina was a case study in the inefficient management of critical resources involving both taxpayer dollars and millions in contributed funds. There must be a system in place to ensure that billions of philanthropic dollars are not being wasted and are assisting those in desperate need.

We should begin to demand transparency concomitant to our philanthropic giving. During my visit to Haiti, I met with NGO leaders and urged them to commit to documenting their work daily to inform the public of what is being done. In turn, groups would be publicized on a relief transparency [blog](#) [3] and elsewhere. Transparency produces higher efficiency and a greater imperative to follow through on commitments made since public observation will demand greater results. We must contact NGOs that we contribute to and demand higher transparency and accountability for how they are allocating their resources and press them to share their outputs, outcomes, and measures of success.

Demanding that non-profits offer transparency, while necessary, is not the only thing we can do to help the survivors of natural disasters. I urge you to consider donating more than your money; take the next step and offer your skills on the ground. I was inspired by this possibility by [Tevel B'Tzedek](#) [4], one delegation of volunteers I met with that was doing tremendous work. From within one of the largest refugee camps in Haiti, this group, predominantly made up of Israeli therapists, educators, and international development students, is organizing trauma-relief programs, educational and leadership sessions, and community programs for refugees to keep spirits high amidst tensions and stress. The hope and love they provide amidst the foul smell, excessive garbage, bugs, and destitute poverty of the refugee camp is nothing short of heroic. The [American Jewish World Service](#) [5], an organization that leads the Jewish community in this work, has allocated serious time and resources to assisting in a sustainable way, as has the [JDC](#) [6].

Now, 100 days after the devastating earthquake in Haiti, we must not forget our sisters and brothers still living in intolerable conditions. We must give more generously, but learning from the mistakes of the US government and many NGO's, we must also think more critically about our giving. This means tracking our donation dollars, demanding higher standards for how funds are spent, and volunteering in addition to donating. I personally am very worried that the hundreds of thousands currently living in tents in refugee camps will remain in those conditions indefinitely if we don't raise the standards of accountability for how the government and our philanthropic organizations are engaging in disaster relief work. Together, through disaster relief reform we can positively affect others in their most vulnerable time for generations to come.

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