

Superstorm Sandy Reflections

Contributed by webtools
Sunday, 28 October 2012

Rav Uri Topolsky traveled into NY to offer aid and support to Sandy Victims. Below is his experience:

November 20, 2012 ~ 6 Kislev 5773

Dear Friends,

With your support and encouragement, I returned from New York today after visiting areas hard-hit by Hurricane Sandy. Here are some of my notes from the short trip:

Sunday, Nov 18, 6:00AM: Just made it through security at the New Orleans airport. I am sweating from all the layers I am wearing in preparation for a few very cold days in New York!

8:00AM: JetBlue shows live TV and I am watching the disturbing news out of Israel. The fighting in Gaza is intensifying. As I prepare to visit several NY Jewish communities devastated from Sandy, I realize the Jewish world is turning its focus to Israel right now, rather than to the hurricane recovery efforts. Part of my goal on this trip is to gather facts and contacts for a potential Rabbinic Mission to NY a month from now. But I am guessing that when I land my email Inbox will be filled with comments about a mission to Israel, not NY. It's hard to be attentive to more than one cause at a time…

10:45AM: I am in Long Beach at the boardwalk. The last time I was here might have been when Dahlia and I took a romantic stroll here the morning after our wedding. But today, there is nothing romantic about the scene. The beach seems to have moved three blocks inland. The boardwalk has been obliterated. There is a car sticking straight up in the air, held that way by mounds of sand that moved with the 14 foot tidal surge that ruined this neighborhood. I didn't realize it at first, but now I see that every car parked on the block with me has been totaled.

11:30AM: I bump into a group of high school students handing out bag lunches and coffee on a street corner. Turns out they were in New Orleans last week working with Habitat for Humanity.

12:00PM: Going door to door visiting with Dahlia's old neighbors in Oceanside. They have all lost their cars and their ground floors. Most have electricity back, but their boilers are ruined so no one can sleep at home in the cold. A few days before, one person had bribed a garbageman with \$50 to take all the trash from his curb – the truck was about to call it quits at the end of a full day after collecting from the house next door. Each story is heart wrenching. There are lots of hugs and tears.

4:00PM Visiting the Young Israel of Oceanside. They lost 3 Torahs in the floodwaters. The only usable part of this large synagogue where I have spent several Shabbatot with Dahlia is a small Beit Midrash on the third floor. I daven there Mincha and Maariv and speak to some of the community members, sending love from New Orleans.

10:00PM: After an exhausting day, I meet up with other colleagues and plan a joint effort for the next day – we will be going to Staten Island.

Monday, 6:45AM: After morning minyan in Riverdale, NY, I speak to the students of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School about our community in New Orleans and our own recovery story.

9:30AM: I head out to Staten Island with three colleagues (Rabbi Etan Mintz, Rabba Sara Hurwitz, and Shira Berkovits) to help clean out homes...

12:30PM: One homeowner jokes that our blue cleanup suits make us look like a nuclear response team. We are covered in muck and sludge from hauling the contents of his house out to the curb.

2:30PM: The air quality in the house we are cleaning out is making our heads spin. Our skin feels like it is burning. Time for some fresh air.

3:00PM: I stop by a home that has been moved off its foundation into the middle of the street. Two people died here the neighbor tells me.

5:30PM: I greet a U-haul that has just arrived from Canton, MA. It was driven by a young couple who had knocked on

doors in their hometown to collect winter coats and blankets. We take them into a distribution center and sort the items along with pallets of food, cleaning supplies, baby stuff, and more that has arrived throughout the day from all over. As we pull away, one volunteer at the center says to me, "Send our love to New Orleans. We know that at least you understand what we are going through."

Tuesday, 9:11AM: My plane touches down back in New Orleans. It is good to be home and I am definitely feeling thankful for all I have.

Rabbi Uri

Our students and alumni have been helping in Superstorm Sandy relief efforts. Below are some reflections of their experiences in the Lower East Side and other areas of New York.

AARON POTEK

Tuesday morning, Justin Pines and I each grabbed a friend, bought some water and food (sponsored by YCT), hopped in my car, and headed toward the Lower East Side. We dropped off the supplies with Rabbi Ari Hart, who was with a holy group of YCTers in an apartment complex without power or running water. I realized how disastrous this situation could become if this status quo was maintained for much longer. We walked to a temporary shelter in a school a few blocks away that a police officer heard might need help. Just outside of the school was a long line of families and individuals waiting to get on a few buses that were shuttling people to shelters on the Upper West Side.

There clearly wasn't enough room for everyone, and one man was yelling angrily. We spoke with some volunteers inside who said that the school's generator was supplying it with power, but that it could run out in the next hour or so. I looked around at all the people who had slept on cots in hallways the night before, some of whom hadn't been brought food all day, and I knew it was better they didn't know about this impending doom. I walked the hallways for the next hour or so, meeting with different people, hearing their stories, and offering them some hot tea. One woman lived across the street and was charging her phone, but when I told her that I had driven down to help out, she decided that she would come back that evening and volunteer herself. Others were in good spirits, all things considered, but appreciated the chance to just talk with someone.

Wednesday morning I drove back down to the same area with Avram Mlotek, who had organized a group of volunteers through a contact at the Education Alliance. Frustration at the fact that things were unorganized there quickly turned into dread when we realized that some of their elderly clients were stuck in their apartments 20 floors up and had not been contacted since the storm 2 days earlier. We went over the protocol for an emergency situation, should we encounter one, and then we split off to different buildings. I hauled water and snacks up countless stairs, knocking on doors in pitch-black hallways to check in on the residents. Some accepted the supplies but didn't want to talk. Others had questions about when the power and water was coming back. One woman reached out her hand to shake mine and said "It's just good to feel another human."

My prayers are with everyone affected by the storm, especially those who cannot return to their homes and continue to sleep in shelters, as well as those who are still without power as the temperature continues to drop. The recovery work will be a massive undertaking, and it cannot be done by government employees alone. I was proud of the work my colleagues and I accomplished, and I hope we can continue to help others in need and be a real kiddush hashem.

Will Keller

Over the past week my friends and family keep asking how the storm affected me. They were asking if I lost power - if our house has flooded and the like. But the storm's reach was much greater than just knocking down power lines. We woke up Tuesday morning and a quick news search on the web revealed that we in Riverdale had certainly gotten lucky. Millions were without power, countless homes were flooded and many lives were destroyed. I was shocked. I had never been so close to such a large natural disaster. I now know I wasn't alone - surfing the web, marveling at the damage done and not sure how to feel and/or what we could do to help.

I continued to feel lost until I found in my inbox an email from Rabbi Linzer our Rosh HaYeshiva. His email included his and Rabbi Avi Weiss's hopes that we were all safe but also immediate ways we could help, by carpooling to the Lower East Side to help those in need. My wife, Yael, and I jumped into action - prepping a backpack but feeling confused because we weren't sure what to bring with us - what would people be in need of?

We traveled down with Rabbi Ari Hart who was serving as command central - texting, calling and coordinating all the groups we were heading down with.

We arrived on the Lower East Side and began handing out: water, batteries/flashlights and candles to elderly people stuck in their high rise apartments without power. It was a physically and emotionally grueling process - carrying flats of water up 15 story buildings to check on people. Some were fine - they had shopped before hand and had the supplies they needed. Others were not as fortunate. We met people who were totally caught off guard - without supplies and feeling frantic not knowing how long they would be stuck in their dark apartments. Some people simply needed human interaction - they just needed somebody else to show they cared and lend any help they could. Others were in serious need - we walked into one apartment where an elderly woman and her aid were both in need of medical care and didn't know how to get the help they needed.

My experience of the storm was one of chaos in many ways with many emotions swirling around inside. We were all completely physically exhausted and feeling mentally drained. On the other side of that coin - having just moved to New York is was inspiring to see the City pull together as people leaped to support each other. It was comforting to see that when people are confronted with a disaster nearby they often commit themselves completely. I was proud to work with organizations like Uri L’tzedek, Recovers.org, Occupy Sandy and others. While I pray that a disaster like this never happens again I am comforted knowing if it does our community will pull together and do whatever it can to help those in need.

Jordan Soffer

In the days immediately following the hurricane, several students trekked down to the Lower East Side hoping to help, though unclear just how. The damage was shocking; trees laid across Broadway, water flooded the streets, and uncertainty was paramount. As we climbed the dark stairs of powerless buildings, we greeted folks who had been paralyzed by the devastation. On the 20th floor, I aided a woman who had run out of her dialysis, and whose full time aid was growing impatient. On the 18th floor I met 2 elderly sisters who had run out of water, we're scared and lonely, and had no clue where to turn. Each floor offered a new story, each story a new tragedy, yet with each tragedy a new glimmer of hope. Prime Minister Netanyahu often quotes the Lubavitcher Rebbe as saying that a single light can illuminate an entire room; in this difficult time, helpful neighbors, caring friends, and a few eager volunteers sought to be the light amidst profound darkness.

Justin Pines

On Wednesday, 12 of us (5 or 6 YCT guys, organized by Avram Mlotek) went down to the Educational Alliance office in the Lower East Side to help check on and distribute food to elderly people who were trapped in high rises along the East River. We were given a list of 'clients' and climbed various flights of stairs, knocked on doors, and checked in on people and offered them assistance with supplies or around their apartments. For example, Jordan and I met a wife and her ill husband, stranded on the 20th floor with no electricity and limited supplies. They called us 'angels' and we sat with them for a bit and heard about their stories. We gave a phone to the wife, who finally was able to speak to her son in Connecticut. We were touched that she rushed to ask him how he was doing before he had any chance to ask her.

We also came across various other people in the building who were not clients - helping people lift gallons of drinking and plumbing water up flights of stairs, and helping a neighbor of a client contact an ambulance to help with an ill person.

All day Sunday and Monday evening, I had the merit to join a hedge fund manager named Roy on the upper west side who is running a supply center out of his home. About 30 of us purchased and packaged various supplies (two bags of food and cleaning supplies for about 100 families) and then drove them to Far Rockaway to one of the areas most heavily hit by the storm. We then worked with locals to unload the massive u-haul into a library-turned-food distribution center. Since then, Roy (who has been quoted in the NY Times) has single-handedly been coordinating grassroots efforts out of his home almost around the clock and making runs to Far Rockaway to distribute supplies. He has built a network of volunteers over Facebook to help this cause.

Last Wednesday I volunteered in the morning and came straight to school and stayed through night Seder and Rav Linzer's shiur, and Monday I was here until 8:30 and then went straight to Roy's house to package goods and load vans. It has been a super intense two weeks of learning and volunteering and I am very proud to be a YCT student, where we are empowered to do both!