

Mold, & Rot & truckloads of goodwill

Many Long Island residents thought the storm would be a repeat of last year's Hurricane Irene — dire warnings, but no real damage on the ground. So when floodwater surged into their homes, destroying their basements, washing away their cars and threatening to drown them, Rabbi Boruch Ber Bender found himself at the epicenter of the disaster. A month later, his phone is still ringing off the hook

BY *Barbara Bensoussan*
PHOTOS *Meir Haltovsky, AFP ImageBank*

Mishpacha

What large, lovely houses,

I think with admiration, as the car glides down a wide street in tony Lawrence, New York. Set back from the ample lawns are pillared, plantation-style mansions, mock Tudor domiciles, conservative Colonials. The landscaped bushes and trees look a bit threadbare, but that's to be expected on a chilly, sunny day in late fall.

They are fabulous houses ... but it seems there's nobody home. Nary a car pulls out of a driveway; nobody emerges to walk a dog. And the curbs of these elegant homes are piled high with trash, sometimes veritable mountains of garbage. A few of them have dumpsters parked outside, loaded with damaged furniture, broken boards, and pieces of sheet rock.

Just four weeks ago, you wouldn't have recognized this place as a street at all. When Hurricane Sandy came barreling through New York, this entire block was submerged under several feet of charging floodwater. The water has receded, but the homes inside are destroyed.

"Here it was so flooded that Hatzolah couldn't even get in," indicates Rabbi Boruch Ber Bender, the director of Achiezer, a community services organization that found itself at the epicenter of local relief efforts. "The cars were floating. There was a house that caught fire, but nobody could get to it. It just burned down.

"Look at that car," he points out. "See how it's all fogged up on the inside? It was completely waterlogged during the flood, and it's still wet inside."

Rabbi Bender leads us on a brief tour of some of the Five Towns areas hardest hit by Sandy. Tall, enterprising, and still fresh-faced at 30, Rabbi Bender has always been energetic; yet since the storm, he's turned into a machine in perpetual motion. The four-by-four he's driving is a rental replacement — his own car was put out of commission during the course of the relief effort.

We swing out of Lawrence and head toward some more modest homes in Cedarhurst, pulling into a development marked by a sign reading "Cedar Bay Park."

“Along with sections of Bayswater, Belle Harbor, Oceanside and Long Beach, this was probably one of the worst-hit areas,” Rabbi Bender says. “On the night of the hurricane we were getting calls nonstop from right here. People had been told to evacuate, but unfortunately many of them didn’t listen.”

This area is right next to the bay; you can see it from the last streets in the development, and the pungent smell of rot and seawater fouls the air. The houses here look forlorn and depressed, debris piled up on the curbs. A stubby tree with a trunk at least five feet wide lies upended on a lawn, its branches scraping the house.

There are trucks in front of several houses, bringing in construction materials, new boilers, insulation. A woman stands outside her house, watching unhappily as workers go in and out. “We fixed up the basement, and then they found mold. We had to tear it down and redo it,” she says.

One elderly widower here, who wasn’t well, couldn’t leave his home when it flooded. A group of volunteers waded through waist-deep water, littered with floating cars, unmoored refrigerators, and confused fish, to help get him out. “They found him in water up to his waist,” Rabbi Bender says. “But they were able to save him, and he’s alive today. It’s actually amazing there weren’t more tragic stories.”

Another family called Hatzolah in a panic as water rose nine feet high from the basement, driving them upstairs and threatening to start electrical fires. “My children are

going to drown! My house is floating!” the mother screamed over the phone. When Hatzolah arrived, the water rushed into their ambulance and they were forced to retreat. The waters miraculously receded at the last moment and the family was spared.

“Another mother put her kids into a garbage can and climbed over her second-story window, swimming toward Hatzolah and the firemen and pulling the garbage can along with her,” Rabbi Bender says.

It’s In The Genes As the sixth child of Rav Yaakov Bender, *rosh yeshivah* of Yeshiva Darchei Torah in Far Rockaway, Reb Boruch Ber grew up in a home where community service was a natural part of family life.

“My father was first and foremost a father to us,” he says, “but we knew we had to share him with the world. If it wasn’t the yeshivah that claimed his attention, it was some *chesed*. He was a founding member of Hatzolah of Flatbush and then Far Rockaway, and since I was five I have memories of him running out on a call during the Shabbos meal.”

Be it genetics or environment — and most likely both — the elder Rav Bender’s inability to say no to anyone in need was transmitted to all of his children (seven boys and one girl). One brother balances his *rebbe* position with his work with divorced families; one started a yeshivah in Lakewood where his sister helps out; another is the *rosh kollel* at Darchei, and yet another works alongside his father in the yeshivah.

His mother was the mainstay of the home, and the children developed tight relationships among themselves. Boruch Ber went through his father’s yeshivah, where Rabbi Zev Trenk was notably his *rebbe* and *menahel*. His Darchei career had one unusual twist: when he was 18 and about to begin *beis medrash*, the *rebbe* for the special-needs eighth-grade class left the yeshivah for health reasons, and the administration decided perhaps Boruch Ber could take over.

When Rabbi Strickman called him in to offer him the job, he was floored. “You’re joking,” he said. Instead, he was told to prepare to begin the next day. “Overnight, I became the youngest *rebbe* in the history of Darchei Torah,” he says.

He admits it was tough — learning on the job with a group of challenged 13-year-olds, then running across the parking lot and pulling off his tie to go learn with his peers in *beis medrash*. But today, he calls it “an experience I’ll always cherish.”

“The boys I taught are grown now, and some of them are married,” he says. “But they still call me ‘rebbe.’ There was one boy we worked very hard with — he couldn’t read straight and his social skills were lacking. I don’t usually cry at weddings, but when that boy got married, I cried at his *chuppah*.”

That first year went so well that Boruch Ber was invited to continue the position, but he passed it up to spend the year in Eretz Yisrael at Yeshivas Mir, where he became close to Rav Elya Boruch Finkel, *ztz”l*.

Upon his return from Eretz Yisrael, Rabbi



“The mother put her kids into a garbage can, swimming toward the firemen and pulling the garbage can along with her”

Bender continued learning while simultaneously completing a BA, and spent three years working as a part-time *rebbe* at Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim in Brooklyn. After marrying his wife, Suri, the couple returned to Yerushalayim and Yeshivas Mir. There, along with his cousin Yitzzy Shaingarten, he merited to learn *b’chavrusa* with Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel five nights a week in the Rosh Yeshivah’s dining room.

He was deeply marked by Rav Nosson Tzvi. “On Monday nights he would give a *shiur klali*,” he recounts. “When I first came to Eretz Yisrael I didn’t know Yiddish well, but that didn’t make a difference to me. He’d be up there between two *shtenders*, with the microphone. His voice would be shaking and he’d be rattling around, his glasses slipping off his nose. I’d sit there transfixed in the second row ... it tore my heart out.”

He remembers one evening when he and his cousin were learning with the Rosh Yeshivah, and noticed he wasn’t feeling well. “Rebbi, maybe you should lie down,” Boruch Ber ventured.

“No, I’m learning,” Rav Nosson Tzvi replied.

“He was shaking so badly he cut his hand under the table,” Rabbi Bender recalls. “But he ignored it — he just took a tissue for the blood and continued. I saw such an extraordinary combination of *tzaar* and *simchah* at the same time; such perseverance despite hardship. He became my example of how a person copes with illness.”

It was during that *shana rishonah*, when he and Suri had returned home to spend Pesach with their families, that something happened to change the course of Boruch Ber Bender’s life: he suddenly collapsed, stricken with an inexplicable illness.

“It was some kind of stomach issue, but they weren’t sure what it was,” he says. “I was sent from doctor to doctor, 13 referrals in all. I ended up having two surgeries and some long hospital stays. Although I had lots of friends and Hatzolah connections, I was absolutely miserable. I couldn’t function.”

The multiple referrals didn’t help him. Finally, one doctor managed to figure out the problem, and resolve it after almost six months of trauma.

“I’m great now, I’m healthy, *bli ayin hara*,” Rabbi Bender declares. “But that’s why I’m absolutely driven to help people get good medical recommendations. In my case, referrals didn’t give me the instant clarity I needed.”

“Today, when people call me at Achiezer for referrals and they tell me how lost they feel, I can tell them in all honesty, ‘I lived through this experience. I know what you’re going through.’”

One-Stop Shop Achiezer today is housed in a modern space on Central Avenue in Lawrence, with gray walls, glassed-in partitions, and track lighting. It’s wheelchair-accessible and has a private entrance in the back for people coming in for mental or even physical health issues. The executive office, a flight of steps above the ground floor rooms, is dominated by a large photograph of Rav Elya Boruch Finkel.

“My *rebbe*, when I first came to the Mir,” Rabbi Bender says fondly. “That photo was taken at a Melaveh Malkah. He was *niftar* several hours later, at the age of 60.” He pauses, then adds, “It’s very hard not to have him anymore. Everyone needs a *rebbe* he can feel close to like that. We named one of our sons after him.”

Achiezer didn’t always reside in such an expansive quarters; it began in one small room as a community liaison-type operation comprised of Rabbi Bender and one secretary. Originally, Rabbi Bender had conceived the idea of creating an organization that could be a “one-stop shop” for any sort of crisis.

“Many *rabbanim* and *balabatim* were frustrated,” he explains. “There were many different, specific organizations here for issues like cancer or kids at risk. But if a person had a crisis, there was no one place to go where all his different needs could be addressed.”

He jokes that he’s a frustrated doctor, although as a Hatzolah member, he has had some medical training. But when he started Achiezer, most of his early work centered around medical referrals, or “recommendations,” as he prefers to call them. He consulted with Rabbi David Greenblatt of the Davis Memorial Fund, and they came up with a comprehensive form that explored everything from the client’s medical history and insurance coverage to whether a doctor’s office is wheelchair-accessible to whether a doctor is easily reachable and has a good bedside manner.

A tragic medical foul-up led Achiezer to expand from doing mostly physician recommendations to hospital recommendations as well. Rabbi Bender’s sister-in-law, who worked at Bnos Bais Yaakov, told him that the school’s librarian, a Mrs. Lefrack from Bayswater, was doing very poorly in a small local hospital after contracting an infection. She asked him to get involved, and it soon became clear that the woman’s medical team leader was inexperienced and mishandling the case. Rabbi Bender patched together some connections, and managed to get her transferred to a different hospital.

“Well, we don’t play the role of G-d,” he says. “The poor lady didn’t survive in the end. But I’ll never forget that her surgeon said to me, ‘If only I’d gotten to her sooner...’”

That catastrophe was the catalyst that impelled him to move ahead on hospital recommendations and outreach. “We wanted to set up a whole safety net for families with a medical crisis: help them navigate insurance issues, provide food for the sick person’s family if they need it, help with transportation,” he says. “We set up *bikur cholim* rooms in Long Island hospitals.”

Just over a year ago, when forecasters began predicting the worst for Hurricane Irene, the organization responded to about 500 calls, mostly for help transporting the handicapped,



THE HARDEST MONTH
Rabbi Bender consults with Congressman Gregory Meeks (above); Senator Charles Schumer, Rabbi Bender, and Assemblman Phil Goldfeder at the temporary Achiezer headquarters (above right); Aron Zelig Rosenberg of Herb Olitsky Consulting Sevices, who spent all week providing technical support to the volunteers (right)



CALL IT A LOAN

In record time, Achiezer created an emergency hurricane relief fund to serve as the central fund for the Five Towns. Rabbi Bender calls it “the biggest campaign in the last 50 years,” and its trustees include some prominent names, as well as a third-party auditor to ensure complete transparency. The CAF (Community Assistance Fund) so far has given out \$3 million: about 700 families received emergency cash assistance of \$2,000 to \$3,000 to survive the days immediately following the storm, and some 200 families have signed up to receive \$10,000 to cover the expenses needed to allow them to return home: mold removal, new boilers, wiring, etc.

“We’re calling it a loan, since many people are uncomfortable accepting *tzedakah*. If someone does have the wherewithal to repay it, the money will be used to help others still in need,” Rabbi Bender says. “It won’t fix their lives completely. But it’s a start.”

FEMA clinics run by Efraim Diamond, Carmi Gruenbaum, and Asher Schoor have been aiding people to receive services and compensation, and insurance professionals have volunteered their services to advise people how to make appeals. Trucks arrived bringing \$50,000 worth of donated furniture, and donated clothing and linens continue to pour in. It’s a measure of Achiezer’s efficiency in coordinating the manifold Jewish *chesed* organizations — Hatzolah, Shomrim, Chasdei Lev, Chaverim, and the many yeshivah and shul groups — that when New York state homeland security commissioner Jerome Hauser arrived to assess the situation, he told Rabbi Bender in amazement: “In my 40 years of service, through nine administrations, I’ve never seen a community operation like this.”

ill, or elderly by ambulance to safer locations further inland. About 70 people were transported by ambulance that week, and Rabbi Bender remembers working through the night for a good part of the week.

But Irene, at least in the Five Towns, turned out to be much ado about nothing. Thus, when the forecasters began making their dire predictions about Sandy, residents were skeptical. Many didn’t listen to orders to evacuate. “Nothing, *nothing* could have prepared us for what happened,” Rabbi Bender says.

On the morning of Sunday, October 28, Rabbi Bender and his wife celebrated the bris of their third child, Yehuda Elchonon, named for Rabbi Bender’s grandfather, Reb Yehuda Elchonon Diskind z”l. Two hours later, Rabbi Bender was in the Achiezer office, meeting with every local community organization to discuss all the what-ifs and contingency plans for the approaching storm — just in case it really turned out to be something.

By Monday afternoon, with the winds high and the rain unrelenting, Rabbi Bender’s wife suggested they move from their home in Far Rockaway to a home a few blocks away that’s on higher ground, with fewer trees. Meanwhile, calls began to trickle into Achiezer, but they were nothing unmanageable.

It was around 8 p.m. on Monday evening that everything changed. Suddenly the high tides and storm reached a climax, heaving up the bay to spill into all the low-lying areas of the Rockaways and Long Island.

“The phones went crazy,” Rabbi Bender says. “We got 500 calls that night. People were panicking as the water rushed in. Other people were helping themselves to boats they didn’t own to help rescue families stuck in houses.”

Since the storm had damaged the office’s phone lines, all 16 phone lines plus all the computers had to be moved posthaste out of the Achiezer office into Rabbi Bender’s home. The Benders, like everybody else in the neighborhood, had lost power, so a generator was hooked up. The team worked by the light of a single bulb to answer calls for help and coordinate rescue efforts. At any given moment, there were about 30 people in the Bender

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home helping out, including Achiezer trustee Lloyd Keilson, fundraising director Rabbi Yehiel Kalish (who'd been graciously "loaned" to them by Agudath Israel of America), and Assemblyman Phil Goldfeder.

Between Monday night and Wednesday, all efforts were focused on rescuing those in danger. "We were getting 1,300 to 1,500 calls a day," Rabbi Bender recalls. By Thursday, Achiezer had transferred some 330 families out of flooded homes, arranging for many of them to be bused to Queens, Brooklyn, and elsewhere. Attention then turned to meeting the basic needs of those remaining: food, clothing, shelter.

Most people in the area, even those unaffected by flooding, were left with no power or heat. "We saw parents feeding their children hot soup in their cars with the heater running, before going inside to put them to bed in an unheated house," Rabbi Bender says. "But that was unsustainable, because once you ran out of gas there was nowhere to go to fill up the car."

The Jewish community rallied to the crisis. Frank Storch, a Baltimore communal activist, arranged to send 130 generators to the area. Young Israel of Bayswater set itself up as a command post for helping residents in that hard-hit area; Yeshiva Sh'or Yoshuv in Far Rockaway became a temporary headquarters. From there, they distributed meals and clothing, and dispatched volunteers to clean up homes and properties. The White Shul, in cooperation with the local JCCRP, was another improvised hub.

By the weekend, volunteers began pouring in from neighboring communities — including a Brooklyn contingent galvanized by Chaskel Bennett — to help with the cleanup, donning plastic gloves and filling garbage bags with waste. Water and sewage were pumped out when possible, and more than 400 homes benefited from the kindness of strangers.

Within days of the storm, Achiezer had set up two medical clinics — one for adults, the other for children — staffed by Drs. Zev Carrey and Hilton Lightman. Care was provided sans insurance, appointments, or payments.

Using a master e-mail list, Achiezer was

THINKING OF EVERYTHING

When you're running to get a roof over your head and food on your plate, you may have little headspace to focus on anything else. But *chesed* isn't just about the bare necessities. At its finest, it's about being sensitive to the small things that make life better for people, and seeking ways to provide them.

Led by Mrs. Ettie Schoor, the Nivneh Division of Achiezer launched an operation called "Partners in Sandy," arranging for families from Lakewood, Baltimore, Manhattan, and elsewhere to "adopt" a family from the Five Towns for material and psychological support. To date, they've made a hundred "*shidduchim*," and the list is still growing.

For the youngest members of our community, for example, it may have been less painful to lose their clothing than to lose a prized toy.

"Where do most parents keep their kids' toys?" Rabbi Bender asks. "In the basement, of course. Think of how many children lost their most precious possessions," he says, looking like he could cry himself in sympathy. "But two local ladies involved in Mrs. Schoor's initiative, Aviva Paneth and Ilana David, have already arranged for truckloads of toys to arrive for these kids in time for Chanukah."

Now imagine another valuable item often stored in basements — seforim. Thousands of them were so badly damaged they had to be consigned to burial. Rav Yaakov Bender of Yeshiva Darchei Torah, Rabbi Boruch Ber's father, organized a *levayah* for one of three truckloads of seforim, with the entire yeshivah from grades one through *beis medrash* in attendance. It was a painful moment for both young and old.

Nivneh's newest project allows donors to provide household appliances and specific basic needs to families devastated by Sandy — right in time for Chanukah.

able to send out daily updates to 12,000 people containing critical information about shelter, LIPA (Long Island Power Authority) progress, and FEMA grants. That link to information proved a critical function.

"We set up a FEMA task force in the Achiezer office," Rabbi Bender says. "We collected a bunch of laptops and iPads and set them up so that families with no computer access could come and sign up for FEMA help. About 130 families took advantage of the service."

When FEMA officials came to Rabbi Bender's house to offer their help to the community, they found, to their surprise, that many people had already signed up.

One of the most heartrending calls came to Achiezer the Monday after the storm, from a hysterical woman in her 80s.

"We often got early calls, but this one came in at 7:15," he relates. "The woman was crying so hard she couldn't even talk. We made out that she was crying for help. We kept asking, 'What do you need? Do you need us to send Hatzolah?'"

She didn't need rescuing; she and her 83-year-old husband, a *talmid* of Rav Aharon Kotler, had

headed evacuation orders and left before the storm. But now they had just returned to their small, ground floor house to find her bibliophile and scholarly husband's extensive library — thousands of seforim and rare manuscripts and notes, over 60 years' worth — destroyed by the flooding. "He's beyond distraught!" the woman cried. "I can't bear to watch him! He's schlepping boxes out by himself..."

"We calmed her down, and then sent a group of sensitive people down to help them clear out the house," Rabbi Bender says. "A *sheimos* truck came to take away the ruined seforim. But can you imagine? A lifetime of seforim, of *ksavim*, all destroyed?"

He says perhaps the hardest moment, for him, was about four or five days after the storm. "People were starting to lose it. Doctors couldn't get to patients; there was no gas; there were no stores open, nowhere to go. We were getting frantic calls from relatives of people in the area who couldn't reach their loves ones. One day we got 1,700 calls — it was crushing. It was humbling."

He says he could feel his shoulders sag as he asked himself how they were possibly going to

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get through this. He'd already been running on one or two hours of sleep a night for days. But then, somehow, he managed to square his shoulders and resolve: let's just keep going. "We realized people were all turning to us. It was an awesome responsibility."

After about ten days, power providers began the restoration process, lifting the spirits of people who hadn't been able to heat their homes or take a hot shower for days. Most, however, were obliged to throw out the spoiled contents of their refrigerators and freezers — a loss that Achiezer has tried to offset with thousands of dollars' worth of gift cards.

At this writing, a month after the storm, Achiezer is still getting hundreds of calls for help every day. The current focus is on finding long-term housing solutions for those who still can't go home, a population that includes many yeshivah *rebbeim* and kollel *yungeleit* who've been living in basement rentals and lost everything they owned. One brainstorm has been to locate "snowbirds" wintering in Florida to rent or loan their homes to the homeless (more than forty such arrangements have been made).

"The situation of people living in temporary housing is very hard," Rabbi Bender says. "We had a gentleman stop by the office recently to tell me how miserable he is. He's living in a friend's basement with his wife and kids. It's cramped, the kids don't have their own clothing or toys, they fight all day, his *shalom bayis* is deteriorating."

Another man came by to pick up six electric heaters, which Achiezer gives out to anyone in need. His house was badly damaged and his boiler had been ruined, but he said he preferred to live in his cold house with space heaters than have to ask someone else for shelter until the new boiler arrived. "All our lives we were givers," he said despondently. "Now it's very hard to have to ask for help."

As the days pass and progress moves with maddening sluggishness, it takes nerves of steel not to succumb to depression or irritability. Dr. Brucha Lowinger, Achiezer's coordinator of mental health, has been working tirelessly to help families deal with the trauma. A crisis hotline has been created in partnership with

Chai Lifeline to provide psychological support for those who need it in a private, dignified way.

"We're getting referrals from the schools," Rabbi Bender says. "They see the effects of the trauma in the kids."

"My father, Rav Yaakov Bender, likened this period to getting up after shivah," he relates. "During the shivah, you're only focused on the *niftar*, on your loss, and you might be in shock. But when the shivah is over, and you have to get up and start picking up the pieces of your life, in some ways it's even harder."

Just today, he received a letter from a widow. "Many people have had it much worse than me," she wrote, "but the storm took the siding off one side of my house, and broke a window and a storm door. I'm in my house over 30 years, and I barely make ends meet. The insurance company isn't answering my correspondence, and I can't afford to spend money on repairs."

His phone rings: it's the principal of a girls' high school in Far Rockaway. They're expecting 150 people for an open house, but they still don't have electricity, and the generator has no more fuel. Can Achiezer help them come up with 100 gallons of diesel fuel in the next few hours?

In his four years of working with Achiezer, Rabbi Bender hasn't yet had time to take a vacation, and it doesn't look like one will be coming anytime soon — he's already been away from his family for a month. "It's hard to weigh out my responsibilities to my family versus my responsibility to the community," he admits. "This past month has been the most tense, most difficult of my life. I don't know how I would have done this without my wife's support."

It would perhaps feel easier if there was an end in sight. But despite all the FEMA funding and insurance money and Achiezer fundraising, Rabbi Bender acknowledges that some people will never feel quite whole again. "There are still 3,000 displaced people," he says, admitting, "We can help, but we're limited."

"For some people, it will take years to get back to normal," he says. "For others, it will take forever." ●