



Superstorm Sandy

From Havoc Comes Humanity

Lending A Hand After Sandy

by Shira Frager

Kim Sentnor was with her parents and brother in Long Beach when water came pouring torrentially into her house, destroying everything in sight, from furniture to electronics to confidential files. Sentnor and her family swam up to the second floor of their 2-story apartment and waited with their neighbors for 24 hours, until the waters subsided.

The Sentnors were one of hundreds of families in the Five-Towns area drastically affected by Hurricane Sandy, which hit New York on Oct. 29 and destroyed schools, shuls, and homes.

Days following the hurricane, volunteers organized a community gathering to raise awareness and relief for victims of Hurricane Sandy living in the Far Rockaway and Lawrence area. Achiezer, an organization established to help those in need of emergency relief, arranged the event in 24 hours, which resulted in over 80 attendees.

"We started planning it yesterday at 4 p.m.," said organizer Ari Hoch, adding that they used email and announcements to publicize the event.

Hundreds of community members from Queens and other local areas filled the Young Israel of Kew Gardens Hills. Attendees wrote out money donations to those affected by Sandy, and made their way into the shul area to hear prominent rabbonim and government officials share other ways to help victims of the disaster.

According to Rabbi Yechiel Kalish, the national director of Government Affairs of Agudath Israel in America, the organization raised a good chunk of finan-

cial aid for those affected by the hurricane.

"We've raised over \$50 thousand tonight," he said. After a final calculation, however, volunteers concluded that Achiezer raised more than \$100,000



Rabbi Yaakov Bender, Rosh Yeshiva of Darchei Torah

that night.

The program began with Rabbi Blumblach from Yeshiva Ben Yisroel and Chofetz Chaim reciting Chapters 121 of Tehillim and the pasuk of Acheinu. The congregation repeated these words of chizuk and stood solemnly, acknowledging the gravity of the situation.

This was followed by speeches from Rabbi Yaakov Bender, Rosh Yeshiva of



Partial view of the large crowd

Darchei Torah, Achiezer Founder and President Rabbi Boruch Bender, and Rabbi Kalish. New York State Assembly member Phillip Goldfeder also added a few words of acknowledgment towards the conclusion of the program.

Volunteers had created a list of items needed for various schools in the affected areas, which were distributed to attendees, asking for their assistance. In order to encourage audience members to help those in need, Yaakov Bender related the story of the Mishkan.

"When HaKodesh Baruch Hu asked for donations, everyone came and [Moshe] had to say, 'Stop, we have enough.'"

Bender encouraged that we follow this behavior for the most recent disaster.

"When it comes to chessed and helping," said Bender, "You don't make calculations... you jump in and you do."

He pleaded to listeners to exercise all their efforts in helping with the re-

building of Jewish communities.

"We've collected close to \$2 million already from neighborhoods, from the people who give," said Bender. "We need at least 10 million to make a dent, to help these people."

Speakers shared stories of people affected disastrously by the hurricane. These included a Rebbetzin who lost her *sheitel* business, causing a major dent in her and her husband's financial stability, and a family forced to live in their car, serving soup in the car to their children as dinner.

"It's a very humbling experience," said Bender.

One woman who attended said she went to gas stations with her 8-year-old daughter and handed out brownies to those waiting in the endless lines, with the option of donating to the Hurricane Sandy cause.

"There is need - part of it is that children don't have an understanding of what's going on. This is a way to drive it home," said the woman.

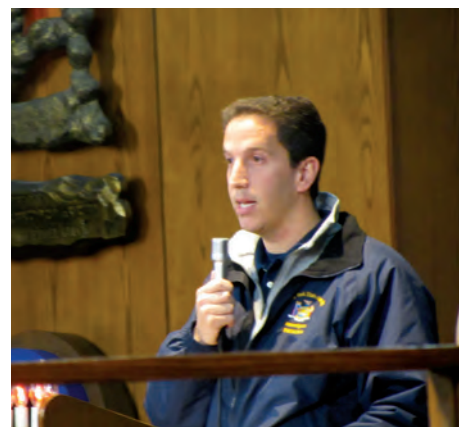
According to Bender, Achiezer's main concern is raising funds, more than clothes or food.

"We've been living now for eight days in the *matzav* [situation] of *choshech* [darkness], the *matzav* of people left with nothing," he said. "These are stories we've heard about from people in South Florida, Bermuda, Texas, New Orleans. Suddenly, something not commonly seen in our neighborhoods, there's such a *matzav*," he said.

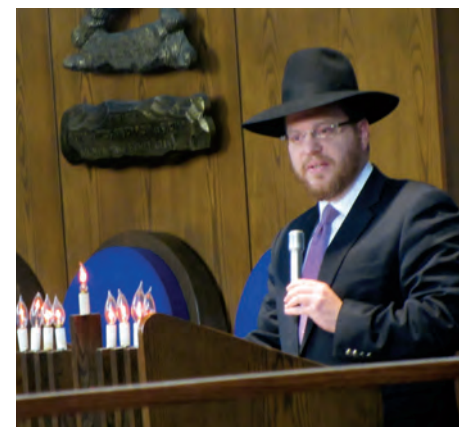
It's very, very difficult to ask for help," said Bender. This is why we need to be



Achiezer Founder and President Rabbi Boruch Bender



New York State Assembly member Phillip Goldfeder, who has been instrumental in helping those affected by the storm



Rabbi Yechiel Kalish, national director of Government Affairs of Agudath Israel in America

CONTINUED ON P. 85



Superstorm Sandy

From Havoc Comes Humanity

No Words

by Simcha Schonfeld

It is not often that I am at a loss for words, but last night was one of those occasions.

Yesterday afternoon, a friend asked me to join him and others in Belle Harbor, New York to assist with the post-storm cleanup. We were called to action by a special organization called Chasdei Lev, whose acts of kindness merit an article in and of themselves. We were provided an address and were unsure at first whether it was a private home, institution or some other facility as we headed that way. As it turned out, we were dispatched to a *shul* that was destroyed by the merciless Sandy. Our trip through Belle Harbor was heartbreaking.

The streets looked more like beaches than thoroughfares. An angry Sandy and a furious sea moved all of the sand from the shores to the streets. Or so it seemed. Every home was obstructed by a gigantic pile of everyday life on its lawn, waiting to be accompanied by the angels of sanitation to its final resting place. Walls, insulation, furniture, appliances, toys, computers and all of the staples of life as we know it could be found in these heaping mounds of loss, each representing years of work, effort and love wiped out by a brutal storm that showed no mercy.

But I was unprepared for what would greet us when we finally met our ultimate destination. Congregation Ohab



The destruction inside Congregation Ohab Tzedek in Belle Harbor

Tzedek is housed in a mighty structure of stone and concrete. It has undoubtedly scoffed at Mother Nature's fury on countless occasions in the past without even batting an eye. Surely Sandy could not bring this majestic House of the Lord to its knees. Sadly, that is just what she did.

Entering the *shul* on the lower level was not easy. The water was still about two inches deep and the stench of spilled fuel and rotting wood made breathing an unpleasant adventure. Nevertheless I joined cold, wet and tired friends, acquaintances and total strangers in clearing out this real life *churban b'ayyos* for hours into the unforgiving frigid night.

As I stood in the middle of the *shul*, maintaining my balance on planks that once supported *seforim* but now supported men, I was broken. The floor was covered in a thick soup of water, fuel

and thousands of pages of *shaimos*. Four destroyed *sifrei torah* were removed earlier in the day, together with pairs of *tefilin* left behind by worshipers who clearly expected to *daven shachris* last Tuesday the same way they had on Monday. However, the entire massive library remained as did some *taleisos*, the *pushka* and seemingly stray *atzei chaim*. To me, it was not mere pages of books floating in the water, nor mere garments and shelves that absorbed the displaced sea; it was thousands of years of history and the sincere dedication of my co-religionists that were wandering aimlessly about in muck and filth. The destruction of this divine home was complete and the books bursting with tradition and history were now saturated with the stench of devastation, misery and grief.

Though the conversation was limited, the significance of the loss was clear to

us all. We spent hours wading through filth and fumes not merely to clean the home of people (that was done the previous night by many in attendance, though not by me) but to respect the home of a People. The purpose was to gather the *shaimos* and provide as respectful a disposal as possible under the trying circumstances. That goal was met. By night's end, the walls lay bare and the toppled benches and broken chairs were alone in a large room that once housed sacred books but now could only lay witness to the devotion of its former inhabitants and the love shown by those who came after it lay in ruins.

As I passed a bag of waterlogged *shofaros* to the next person on the assembly line last evening, I was reminded of a profound thought of Rav Shneur Zalman of Lidai. In a long and majestic *maamar*, the Baal HaTanya explains that the *shofar* of Rosh Hashana represents the cry of the soul that continues where the power of words ends. Language is limited and its ability to convey raw emotion virtually non-existent. The soul however is limitless and can feel far more than words can ever express.

Last night my soul wept. But it did not weep alone. It wept together with those in attendance, with those who lost so much and with the millions of souls that have wept for millennia hoping and praying that their most recent pangs of anguish would be their last. Let's hope this one truly is.

Lending A Hand After Sandy

CONTINUED FROM P. 84

proactive and do whatever we can to help those affected by the hurricane.

Bender compared the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy to the destruction of Sodom.

"In a sense I feel like the inverse of the *Bnos Lot*, the daughters of Lot, thinking that the whole world around them was gone," he said. "Nobody [was] left except for themselves and their father. They lived in a bubble."

Bender contrasted the behaviors of the daughters of Sodom to the local community. "We in Kew Gardens Hills are actually the inverse to that bubble," he said.

Indeed, the Queens community has lent out a hand, and more. Rab-

bi Moshe Rosenberg of Etz Chaim in Queens brought a handful of members from his *shul* to volunteer at Queens College. Part of the campus is being used as a refugee facility for those who were affected by Sandy.

"They let us circulate, talk to people, see if we can fulfill needs," said Rosenberg.

In seeking further opportunities to help on a more individual level, Rosenberg recalled hearing about a boy who has cancer and was undergoing chemotherapy. After the storm, the boy and his mother had needed to find a place to stay that would provide heat, to satisfy the physical needs of the boy. Rosenberg was already hosting a family affected by Sandy in his eight-mem-

ber household, but he had volunteered to host these additional two people. Rosenberg emphasized the impact others can have on victims by offering to help.

"If you look on Facebook you'll find there are all kinds of opportunities," he said.

To close the program, Assemblyman Goldfeder expressed his gratitude to the community for offering their services, and to the individuals who had spent full days and nights repairing the damage and reaching out to those in need. He encouraged audience members to get further involved in the cause.

"We need a lot of help, not just in the form of a dollar," he said. "Obviously that helps, but you never know - there's an expertise, there's something you can offer, there's something that you can lend, there's a way that you

can benefit all of our communities."

"Write a check first, do everything else second because that's what's needed," he said.

As for Sentnor, she and her family live by her aunt in the Bronx while they rebuild their lives. Sentnor, a college senior, lives part-time in Queens, where a portion of her belongings remain, unharmed by Sandy. She expressed appreciation to those who had and are continuing to reach out... It's amazing how much clothing I got after losing, like, my whole wardrobe," said Sentnor.

This is the purpose of Achiezer, its participants and volunteers.

Those who wish to make a donation towards Hurricane Sandy may write a check to Achiezer, 334 Central Ave, Lawrence, NY 11559, or make a payment online at www.achiezer.org.