

How to Use a Crowbar

The crowbar is the perfect tool for demolition work. It gives you the leverage to pull out panels and moldings, the heft to smash wallboard, and a claw to pull nails. And, if you are willing to learn how, you can pray with it.

I spent Christmas week in Louisiana with my son Isaac, repairing homes in the area ravaged by Hurricane Rita. Our group consisted of eight adults and nine of their kids, all Jews from the Greater Boston area who came together through the Jewish Community Relations Council and TELEM: Jewish Youth Making a Difference.

Have you heard about Rita? Her big sister Katrina had quite the coming out party in New Orleans. It made a big splash and was covered in all the papers. Such a shame about her poor sister Rita. She had her party way out in the swamps and hardly anybody noticed. Like rival sisters, the devastations of New Orleans and Bayou country might vie for attention. But it is no contest. Millions have visited New Orleans and have an emotional connection with the city. It was devastated in indisputably dramatic fashion. The Cajun country devastated by Rita is a relatively forgotten corner where volunteer relief work is desperately needed.

We were greeted by Judy, with the Southern Mutual Help Association, an agency coordinating disaster relief in the area. Judy asked us each to explain why we had come. One member of the group told the story of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who had marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. at Selma. Heschel said that as he marched he “felt as though his legs were praying.” The concept of prayerful action would become the theme for the week.

Our crew consisted of three parents, three teens and a young woman named Danette. The work entailed cleaning out homes that had been flooded. The waters had subsided, but the homes were uninhabitable due to mold, ruined electrical wiring, and destroyed furniture. Once the house was empty, you could start pulling out the carpets, linoleum, paneling, walls and insulation to prepare it for de-molding.

While in Louisiana I met six homeowners who had been flooded out of their houses, four of them over the age of 70. Not one of them complained. All were stoic and resolute in the face of tragedy. One homeowner told us, “I knew Jews liked to help but I thought they only helped other Jews.” Perhaps we were repairing more than houses.

The last home we worked on was owned by a 73 year old woman the neighbors referred to as “Miss Ethel”. “Miss” was said with affection and respect and, as best I could tell, was used only for women who had achieved a certain age.

In those last days we progressed from prying with a crowbar to praying with one.

This kind of prayer is very effective in groups of two. You have a companion to assist you when you hit spiritual roadblocks like a recalcitrant molding or a dead animal hidden behind a panel. Danette took a more monastic approach. She would park herself in a room and methodically pry and scrape till it was cleansed.

Miss Ethel visited us on our final day of work. Tears welled up in her eyes (and ours) as she blessed us repeatedly. She came into the house and where we feared she would see destruction (for we had near gutted that house from four feet down to the floor), she saw hope. She told us of her daughter and her two disabled kids, the catering she used to do out of her kitchen, the room her granddaughter had marked with girlhood graffiti. She stood in her ravaged home and said, "I thought I had learned to let go of everything but I guess I needed to learn a little more, so God sent this flood to teach me."

After she left we worked with renewed purpose, racing against the fading light. We were doing this for Miss Ethel. And it was with sadness that we gathered our tools at the end of the day.

Soon we were home, trying to convey to our families the spiritual journey we had just taken. How we had gone to Louisiana to give but had instead received, how we had met people poor in possessions but rich in resolve and how, as Rabbi Heschel would have understood, there is more than one way to use a crowbar.