

Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma devastated more than 120,000 square miles of land and possessions; they also shattered lives of people living along the Mississippi Gulf Coast and those of us who watched from a media distance. Watching people on TV who either chose to ride out the storm or were so disadvantaged that they had no means to escape its ravages tore at our hearts and enraged us because of the inadequate response to a true humanitarian need. In actuality the magnitude of Katrina alone was 90,000 square miles, the size of Great Britain. No one institution or agency could have provided an adequate response. Among the lessons learned from these disasters are the absolute need to be prepared for disaster, have a plan of action, build relationships and alliances in community so that they could be activated in time of need.

The alliances are essential in the immediate follow-up and for long-term recovery. In a matter of hours Katrina destroyed what could easily take 10 to 20 years to rebuild and repair. The Jewish community responded immediately. A network had been in operation prior to Katrina's landfall. Five thousand Jewish households evacuated to Houston, TX among 250,000 evacuees. Other evacuees fled across America. United Jewish Communities in coalition with Jewish denominations, federations, community-based organizations were on-site to comfort and greet people as they fled the deluge. These organizations are also part of the short-term and long-term recovery efforts.

I was sent to the Coast on a two year grant. The position is: Rabbinic Pastoral/Trauma Chaplain – Hurricane Katrina Relief. I am employed through the New York Board of Rabbis working directly with Rabbi Stephen Roberts, past President and co-founder of NAJC, who administers the United Jewish Communities grant. I live in Gulfport, MS and am chaplain to Jewish religious, professional and lay leadership in Mississippi and Louisiana.

The recovery is painfully slow. Segments of the population have successfully rebuilt structures, but everyone endures the vestiges of trauma and all still live among the debris. This chaplaincy work calls for compassionate listening, knowledge of trauma and its impact even on the unborn. Skills in hospice and end-of-life are helpful. Our professionals also suffered damage and yet they are giving caring attention to their constituencies. That is why this position is affectionately called "Caregiving to the Caregivers." A poem written by a survivor offers a clue to what our colleagues were dealing with after the storm:

Let us see eyes of peace, eyes of wonder, eyes of joy, eyes of surprise.
Let us see eyes of hurt, eyes of forgiveness, eyes of pain, and eyes of love.
But never again, Lord; this I pray, never again
Let us see eyes without hope.

Please join us for my session at the NAJC 2008 conference as we explore how this chaplaincy can bring Presence to people who struggle to rebuild their lives.