



## HURRICANE SANDY ANNIVERSARY

# Rebuilding the Ark

BY AHUVA APPELBAUM

*Many community organizations rose heroically to the work of rebuilding lives in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy. One of these is the Jewish Community Council of Greater Coney Island (JCC-CGI), which serves thousands of people a year in a wide range of capacities, and whose reach of services extends far beyond Brooklyn.*

*Like much of Coney Island, the main offices of the JCC were devastated, along with all their contents — with damage estimated at \$1.5 million — and with nothing salvageable except the exterior walls.*

*Except JCC-CGI could not suspend its services to seniors, Holocaust survivors, at-risk youth, and others who depend on them on a daily basis. So... they kept on, without missing a day.*

*On April 28, 2014, one day short of 18 months after Superstorm Sandy hit, JCC-CGI staff returned to offices. In place of devastation was a brand-new facility. In advance of Hurricane's Sandy second anniversary, Hamodia interviewed Rabbi Moshe Wiener, executive director of JCC-CGI, to hear his recollections of that traumatic chapter.*

### How would a snapshot of the JCC look the day before Sandy?

The day before the hurricane we were at full functionality as we always had been; nothing was happening weather-wise that would have impacted on that. We were at that point serving up to 2,500 individuals a day in a wide array of services — five senior centers, one of them an Innovative Senior Center, vocational services, educational services, technical assistance services to nonprofits throughout the city, our adult literacy services, our home care services, afterschool services, services for home-bound elderly.

### And then?

Destruction was total. The water level in our main offices was six feet high. Everything below that was totally destroyed. Hydraulic pressure pushed up the foundation of the building — and caused the sewer pipes to break. The full-size refrigerators and freezers in one of our senior centers

were tossed around like toys ...

Thousands and thousands and thousands of pages of records documenting all the services we provide were destroyed. The computer system, the telephone system, all our equipment, all our furniture — everything.

There was nothing left of our offices except the external walls, and inside nothing but sand. Even the sand had to be excavated to dig up the sewer pipes under the building!

The two upper floors of the building, where the senior center is located, were unable to be reached. There was no elevator. The stairs had collapsed...

Even besides that, the whole infrastructure of the building had been destroyed. The electricity had been destroyed. Plumbing was destroyed. The heat, the air conditioning, telephone lines.

It took until the middle of March (2014) to restore the basic infra-

Hamodia spoke to a few of the caseworkers on the front lines before, during, and after Superstorm Sandy — Esther, Aliza, and Hudi — about individuals in the community who were severely affected by the disaster and its aftermath. From their 1000+ caseload, they shared some of their reflections.

**Esther:** The cases we want to discuss are residents of Sea Gate.

**Aliza:** One client lived a block from the ocean. She's living in her house now, *baruch Hashem*. She gave me a little tour of her house. We saw all the cracks in the walls — perhaps from the settling, or the mold, or whatever caused it.

It's ongoing; it's not something that happened two years ago and it's over. It's still happening for everybody who encountered it, and especially for the Holocaust survivors. It was very traumatizing.

This specific client had told me that to her it was even worse than the Holocaust. [In a concentration camp] she knew that every morning she had to wake up for roll call and follow the routine, and so on. Here, it was so unexpected. They had to just pick up and leave their home, the same way that she had to in her youth.

So her childhood trauma has resurfaced. It really threw her whole life off track — the same way it had been thrown off then.

**Esther:** Let's not forget you're talking about people who are in their 80s and 90s.

**Aliza:** She's living alone now; she no longer has any family in her home. We send cleaning help to her house once or twice a week, which is

very helpful for her, just one less thing for her to worry about. Right after the storm we helped her with a little bit of fixing up. In general, she turns to us if there's anything that she needs, and we're right down the block, so it's very convenient for her.

**Esther:** We have a couple in Sea Gate who also live a block from the water. They did not want to leave. They were among the last people to leave Sea Gate. All his *sefarim* were destroyed. Everything was destroyed. Everything. They were on the first floor, and we helped them with their furniture, to get their house back ... it was months before they came back. This man was on dialysis. We provided them with transportation to get to dialysis, but he was uprooted as well.

**If you had to pick one memorable situation that encapsulates Hurricane Sandy for you, what would it be?**

**Hudi:** I remember looking at a huge stack of applications for assistance, and when you go through each story, each one is heartbreaking. You're reading from each person, "My washing machine was destroyed, my sewing machine, my vacuum cleaner, my basement flooring. ..." You didn't know what to pick to help them with, because we don't have unlimited funds. There was just a huge stack of files that every day we would scan through, and scan through, and scan through — and the next day there would be more. Sitting in that chair in the corner, freezing cold, at a folding table, with piles and piles of help folders in front of me. I think that would be the memory [that typifies Sandy for me].

structure of the building so that the upper floors were able to be reopened. Therefore it wasn't until mid-March that the senior center in the building, our Coney Island Seaside Innovative Senior Center, was finally able to be reopened as an innovative senior center (a particular category of senior center with enhanced services, of which there are only 10 in all of New York City) for the first time since the storm.

On West 24<sup>th</sup> Street, two blocks away, is another one of our senior centers that was also on ground level. It was also devastated. The difference was that the structure of the building was not impacted — only the content was destroyed. The water level was "only" 4 feet high, not six feet high.

**For how long were services disrupted?**

It's very important to distinguish between the disruption of these two of our senior centers and the disruption of our overall activities. We were providing full care to over 700 people a day all over the borough of Brooklyn. That was all coordinated out of this office. It was all run through the computer system and the telephone system of the staff that works in that office. We provided, last year, more than 70,000 trips to 4,000 seniors in the borough of Brooklyn. And all of that is coordinated out of this office. Two senior centers were impacted ... but the impact is much greater: All 17 CUNY campuses and an additional 30 colleges, their work experience requirements are all coordinated out of this office as well. So were our adult literacy programs that take place in 30 different locations. None of that could function without the staff, the computer system, the telephone

system and all the infrastructure of the organization.

What's amazing, phenomenal, extraordinary to the greatest degree is that within days, all of our programs and services except those two senior centers were fully functional.

**How did that happen?**

It happened through a combination of the amazing resiliency and dedication of our staff, who worked around the clock, and the implementation of advanced technology. We fortunately had appropriate backups of our entire computer system. Besides the offsite backups, our comptroller met me in the office the day before the hurricane and we — literally with our hands — carried out our supplemental backup computer. We set up remote desktops. Anyone who had an internet connection was given instructions to connect to a remote desktop computer system, and all the functionality they had at their desk in their offices was available to them.

**How long did that take?**

It was within a few days. At the same time, a cloud-based telephone system was installed. We had the same extensions, the same voice-mail systems — to a caller from the outside, it was almost invisible.

**What was the impact on individuals?**

The population that was immediately impacted was our home-care clients. Many of them who were in the hurricane zone had no electricity, no telephone, no elevators. It was a process of reestablishing contacts and restor-

ing services. ... The day after the hurricane, the Department of the Aging, that deals with City Meals on Wheels, was there. We made arrangements with caterers, and in the streets, or in senior citizens' housing developments that gave us space, we immediately began distributing food.

Any of the seniors who attended our senior centers who were depending on us for their daily meals were able to get food.

The Department of the Aging reached out to us and said that we should spend whatever was necessary to get our senior centers up and running, and whatever FEMA will eventually reimburse us, they would cover the difference.

And that's just what we did. Our Haber House senior center, the one on West 24th Street, within a few weeks was fully operational again. For several days we had had cleaning crews coming in around the clock, removing all the destroyed furniture and equipment, sanitizing the place and replacing kitchen equipment and table and chairs so that we could begin serving food again.

**How did the staff remain so motivated in the face of such a crisis?**

The staff are amazingly dedicated people who care to their depths about the clients they serve. Their response was extraordinary. Everyone gave all the time and effort they possibly could for 18 months, functioning in temporary, makeshift, cramped, locations until our offices could be rebuilt. It wasn't just a few days of hardship.

**At this point, it's hard for people to remem-**



Sandy destroyed all but the outer shell of the JCCGCI's main offices. Its brand new facility opened in April 2014, built on the same site.

### **ber the devastation, especially if they don't live in an area that was affected.**

Those living in Coney Island were all living in apartment buildings — developments — so they were without electricity, heat, hot water. That's bad enough. But their actual apartments and furniture were not affected. People who were living in Sea Gate, on the other hand, were totally destroyed and devastated.

One of our temporary sites was a trailer that we established for the Sea Gate community. This was funded by a grant from the Robin Hood Foundation and subsequently supported by the Superstorm Sandy block grant. Within a week or two we had several donated services functioning there. There were two legal aid organizations that made their attorneys available for emergency assistance. There were health professionals who were based in there until this past October, that were working with the local community to help address the trauma and emotional crises that people were experiencing.

People lost their homes, their possessions; they lost all their memories of decades, of their whole life — everything of sentimental value for them. So there was depression, there was despair, and many people were having tremendous difficulty coping.

### **Let's say that someone is 85 or 90 and a Holocaust survivor, and that person loses everything.**

To the credit of the [Holocaust] Claims Conference, they made special funds available for emergency assistance specifically for Holocaust survivors. And they also made an alliance between us and the German consulate, which provided some funds, and also some private sector support from two German-based organizations that enabled us to address the needs of the Holocaust survivors who were directly impacted by the hurricane.

In any case where financial assistance is necessary — besides the fact that our casework-

ers, our social workers are involved — in order to responsibly approve allocation of funds for emergencies for families, it requires my approval and also of our board, a special committee that reviews and approves these requests. So there were several of layers of review for those types of relief responses.

### **How is the Greater Coney Island community doing overall, two years on?**

Two years later there are still businesses that have been impacted. There are many, many homeowners who remain impacted. And unfortunately the Build It Back program until now has not been functional.

To the great credit of the new city council member representing the Coney Island area, Mark Treyger — who has taken leadership in Superstorm Sandy response — he urged the council speaker to create a special committee in the city council for Superstorm Sandy relief efforts, and was appointed chair of that. He was elected in November and took office in January, and convened the first-ever community based meeting of the City Council to hold a special hearing about the problems in the NYCHA developments in Coney Island, where the heat, the hot water, the basic functionalities were either not restored on a timely basis or were still problematic.

### **How do people live for two years without basic housing facilities?**

Many people had to relocate. There were people that couldn't, and there temporary generators, temporary heaters were installed. There were houses that were never rebuilt, there were houses where people were not reimbursed for money they borrowed in order to do the rebuilding.

### **Some say that Superstorm Sandy was a confluence of forces that may not come together again, so no offshore barriers or other structural protection is needed. Do**

### **you agree?**

Absolutely not. The danger, especially to the Sea Gate-Coney Island area, is immense. In 1991-1992 there was a Nor'easter that did tremendous damage. Afterward, thanks to Congressman Jerrold Nadler and other elected officials, the Army Corps of Engineers built the necessary jetties and seawalls that protected this community from any kind of devastating flooding for all these years. But that protection was destroyed during Sandy.

It requires a tremendous amount of engineering expertise to develop a system that's comprehensive and should not allow one area to be damaged while protecting a second area. Before Sandy, plans had been made and funds allocated to install additional jetties and seawalls protecting Coney Island and Sea Gate. Unfortunately, there were bureaucratic delays. If they had been implemented, then a lot of this destruction would not have happened.

If there would be another storm now, the damage would be many, many times greater than it was [during Sandy], because now there's absolutely no protection.

### **How would you sum up the experience of the JCC of Greater Coney Island since Sandy in 2012?**

With a quick anecdote: A few weeks after the storm, there was a meeting of high-level officials representing city agencies who were involved in community response and I, representing an organization in a community that was affected, was invited. As I walked into the meeting, I was introduced as "Rabbi Wiener from the Jewish Community Council in Greater Coney Island that was destroyed."

Immediately I responded that our offices were destroyed, but the Jewish Community Council of Greater Coney Island was fully operational and functional. And that was reality. The organization, its mission, its dedication, its vibrancy were strengthened as a result of the experience. ■