



On the Ground in Houston
By Avital Ingber

I arrived in Houston on Wednesday afternoon. As the plane was landing, I glared out the window trying to see the devastation and destruction. I was shocked to see that I saw none. It looked like the same Houston I had come to four times over the last six months. I had actually just been in Houston a few days before Harvey. I landed, deplaned and located my ride and we proceeded to take the highway into the city. We entered the neighborhood and drove on the street where the Federation building is located.

It stunned me. Every single house on the street had piles of debris on the lawn. All of the insides of these homes were now on the outside. The same neighborhood street which I had been on two weeks prior which led me to the Federation and JCC was unrecognizable. It took my breath away.

The devastation and destruction that I was witnessing left me at a loss for words. The emotion of seeing the entire contents of a home wrecked and unsalvageable filled me with such great sadness for the experiences of the families impacted. I had the privilege to go into a few homes and speak directly with families that have been affected by the flood. It was emotional to hear these personal and hear wrenching stories of both rescue and loss.

I spent the next day going to see the JCC, synagogues and individual homes. Seven major Jewish institutions (including three of the five largest synagogues in the city, a day school, an elder care facility and key community service groups) have been severely impacted by Harvey, and at least 1,000 Jewish families (though that number is expected to grow).

With school having just started and the High Holidays just around the corner, the Jewish community is scrambling to find places for preschools, Jewish day schools and High Holiday services.

The tennis center of the JCC, currently one of their only useable spaces on campus, had spent the better part of a week as a distribution site for basic necessities and cleaning supplies. It was now being set up as the space for the preschool to operate out of so that they may resume care on Monday. Because the program is so large, the Reform synagogue that had some damage to its sanctuary is also serving as a second location for the preschool. Almost all other programming for the more than 3,000 families that are members of the JCC has been suspended indefinitely.

What was truly impressive to see is the comradery that exists in the community. Even people who are impacted by the storm are helping others. I have never met a more welcoming, open and positive group of people who truly are a community. What struck me was the vision and hope

shared with me by every single person I met. Not one person had a complaint, even people who have now flooded two or three times.

One of the synagogues we visited was almost completely destroyed by floodwaters. There was very little salvageable in the sanctuary after more than 6 feet of water collected in the building. It was so sad to see a place that usually brings so much joy to people's lives in this awful state. From the sanctuary, we continued to the multi-purpose room. While parts of the sheet rock there had been cut out already, the room was in much better shape than the sanctuary.

Tears filled my eyes as I walked into this room and realized what had been done. I saw rows and rows of chairs. I saw an ark. I saw a portable lectern. It had been set up to hold services. For this community, it was so important that they have the opportunity to come together and pray during this difficult time so they made sure they were ready for Shabbat services. Even the most prominent members of the community had helped – cleaning, mopping, and scrubbing, whatever it took – to prepare the room for Shabbat.

I also had the opportunity to attend the first meeting of the flood committee of The Jewish Federation of Greater Houston. The committee acknowledged that Hurricane Harvey had inflicted damage far greater than recent natural disasters and that the response from the community would have to be significantly greater and faster than ever before.

They approved the immediate distribution of \$1.6 million in allocations to support urgent priority areas such as financial assistance, scholarship support and case management to those providing services including Jewish Family Service, congregational rabbis, day schools and preschools.

The destruction and devastation being experienced by this community broke my heart. The storm itself dropped more than 50 inches in three days – far more than any system could handle. There are also still parts of the city that remain underwater. No one, no community should have to go through this, but Houston is and they will keep their heads up while they do.

The outpouring of support from around the world is remarkable. I have never experienced the power of the collective in this most personal way. I and Houston will be forever grateful to JFNA, Federations around the country and individuals who just care. As of today, more than \$8 million has been raised by The Jewish Federation of Greater Houston and the entire Federation system. We have a lot more to raise and work to be done but this generosity is truly remarkable.

This is a city that I have come to love and a community that I have come to truly admire. The recovery will take time, possibly years, but the resilience of spirit that I saw during my visit makes me love this place even more. I know they will make it through. I know this community has what it takes to continue to work together and unite through this challenge. And that fills my heart with joy and makes me excited to be a part of what they will build from here.