On the Receiving End: A Personal Reflection

Intil August 2005, the problems and issues addressed by the articles I edited for the *Journal* concerned me mostly because of their negative impact on the Jewish community or its other members. Sure, I was passionate about some issues, but the operative word was "other": they were problems happening to *other* people, and I approached them from the perspective of the helper.

After government incompetence caused the levees to breach in the wake of Katrina and my house flooded, and I lost everything on my first floor, and I had to move away so my son could have a school to attend, and I had to help him adjust to a new school and new community, and I was separated from my husband for nine months, and my city lay in ruins, I became the helpee.

Thanks to the incredible generosity of the American Jewish community, I am now restored to my familiar position as helper. In Baltimore where my son and I lived for the post-Katrina school year, his day school tuition and our apartment were provided to us free of charge. Our moving expenses back to New Orleans were fully reimbursed, and we received an interest-free loan to repair our home.

For that support, as well as for the hundreds of Jewish volunteers who continue to come to rebuild New Orleans, I will be forever grateful, and I am glad I have this forum to thank everyone once again.

But after having been the recipient of such generosity, I want also to share here the lessons I learned about how to give aid.

First, it is incredibly hard for people who are used to being on the giving end to accept aid, and that difficulty must be respected. In a conference call that I organized for my Rosh Chodesh group several months after Katrina—at the time, the ten

of us were in eight different cities—we spent about a half-hour agonizing over whether to accept the \$700 grant that United Jewish Communities was providing to every New Orleans Jewish adult. I decided to accept it, but several of my friends could not bring themselves to do so.

It is important to provide opportunities for people receiving help to pay it forward. It always felt good to give tzedakah; now, it feels great. It really should not be surprising that the recently concluded Annual Campaign of the New Orleans Jewish Federation raised nearly as much as it did pre-Katrina, with a donor base reduced by one-third. Nor that a recent Federation event to build a playground for an inner-city school attracted more than 250 volunteers.

These past two years also taught me what is the most challenging principle of giving aid—to listen to what people in need say they need, and to give accordingly, rather than giving what you think they need or what is easy for you to give.

It is difficult to write about this because it sounds so ungrateful, but at times volunteers and donors can be part of the problem.

When groups donate used books or used clothes, rather than giving Walmart or other gift cards as requested so that people can buy what they need, that is really not much help.

When well-meaning members of other Jewish communities come to New Orleans and want to get to know us and "feel our pain," it can sometimes feel as if we are on display in a zoo or must perform for them. This is particularly troublesome for our teens, who just want to put Katrina behind them; my 17-year-old son would rather undergo oral surgery than have to talk about the storm.

Even though I find it very therapeutic to revisit Katrina and in fact lead disaster tours several times a month for visiting Jewish volunteer groups, sometimes being "on" for visitors can be debilitating. Late last fall, in the space of a few weeks, we had several different groups visit our synagogue, all of whom wanted to meet and talk to us, when all I wanted to do was be left alone to pray in peace. Recipient fatigue can be as real as donor fatigue.

Yet, the overriding lesson of Katrina is the importance of connection—connection

to family and friends and, through Jewish volunteers and organizations, to the larger Jewish community. Knowing that the connection is unbroken makes all the difference.

So I hope and pray that Jewish volunteers continue to help rebuild New Orleans and that Jewish organizations continue to donate money to the city. Together we can be part of a renaissance in New Orleans.

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