

LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

Hurricane Harvey, the Mexico City Earthquake and the history of Jewish Houston

By MARK A. GOLDBERG, Ph.D.

In a three-week period leading up to the 2017 High Holy Days, major natural disasters ravaged historically Jewish communities in two major cities in the Americas, reminding us not only of our fragility, but also of the international and deep historical background of the Houston Jewish community.

As we all know, Hurricane Harvey swept through the city in late August 2017, waters rushing throughout the Houston area, intensely damaging the historically Jewish section of our city. The third major flood in three years, Harvey made this sprawling concrete city feel less like a beast and more like vulnerable prey. For me, the days that followed can be characterized only by mixed emotions, as I watched my hometown respond to such devastation. The pride and hopefulness at the Evelyn Rubenstein JCC, witnessing people of all ages collect, organize and distribute necessities to Jewish and non-Jewish flood victims came up against the powerful, tangible scent of mildew left in the floodwaters' wake and the images of piles and piles of memories stacked on curbs, block after block.

Three weeks later, an earthquake near Mexico City sent shockwaves into the massive capital, ravaging the sweeping urban landscape and ransacking buildings in neighborhood after neighborhood. Residents of the historically Jewish Colonia Condesa were shaken, both literally and figuratively. In minutes, the walls of my Tía Sonia's apartment became windows. The Jewish communities of the two cities responded in very similar ways: Neighbors came to each other's aid without hesitation, shuls opened their doors to other congregations, and the communities' institutions organized on a dime, working to transition from tragedy to recovery.

At the family level, both disasters also triggered similar responses. In this era of alerts and notifications, both times my phone jumped at the news, filling the WhatsApp screen with phrases like "Como están?" (How are you all?); "Todo bien GaD (Gracias a Dios)," (All good, thank G-d); and little yellow kissy-faces. This concern in the form of I's and O's instantly traversed the globe, crossing international boundaries at a laughable speed, highlighting the porousness of borders.

Every day we are reminded that Harvey is a contemporary story that still is unfolding, and there are numerous tragic stories that the "Houston Strong" image does not even capture. The Mexico City Jewish community also is still recovering. However, Houston and Mexico City are not connected simply by Mother Nature's recent cruelty, and the cross-border networks that link them are not new either.

About four decades before the texts traveled from one nation to another, Jews from Mexico City mirrored their parents' and grandparents' immigration stories (from Europe and the Middle East) and left La

Condesa and nearby Polanco for Meyerland and Fondren. The new arrivals slowly came together with other Latin American Jewish newcomers, forming their own community within a community.

For example, reminiscent of Latin America, where Jews melded their Jewish and Latin American identities, Jewish Latina and Latino immigrants in 1980s' Houston established their own specifically Jewish and Latino organization. Hebraica, as it was known, brought together immigrants from Mexico, Chile, Venezuela, Colombia, Cuba and Argentina, among other places. As my father, Jacobo Goldberg, a former member, recalled, Hebraica is where the community became a community. The bonds forged during those years are still apparent, visible, for instance, as Jewish Latina/os came to each other's aid in the wake of Harvey. The historic networks that link the United States and Latin America have had a lasting impact on how Houston's Jewish community has formed and how it continues to function as a community.

If we look further back, we can peel off another layer of what appears to be a late-20th century story, to see that, in fact, the history of these cross-border networks is much older. Well before Jewish Mexicans immigrated to the other side of the present-day U.S.-Mexico border, well before that line even existed, Jews settled in Mexico and moved along those same networks that now link the two nations. Expelled from Spain, conversos and Crypto Jews migrated to New Spain (colonial Mexico), many of them establishing themselves in what we now call the border region, in places like Monterrey; Nuevo León; and Santa Fe, N.M. New Spain's Crypto Jews have their own complicated history, which very much remains alive today among their descendants and Jewish Latina/os, broadly speaking.

As we arrive at the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Harvey, Houston Jewish community members are asking, where do we go from here, which is a historical question as much as it appears focused on the future. History is what makes this community a community, and it is a history not confined within the boundaries of the United States. It reaches across oceans, continents and nations, includes multiple languages, and even harkens back centuries in unexpected ways that are not always apparent when we think about what stories constitute American-Jewish history.

For Jewish Latina/os, Southwest Houston became a home away from home, and newly arrived immigrants formed a new segment of the community, shaping Houston's Jewish history in profound ways that continue to resonate. Harvey reminds us of this past. Thus, when thinking about what comes next, we must strive to remember all of the histories that have made this community what it is today.

Dr. Goldberg is the director of the University of Houston Jewish Studies Program. □

JCC

From 4A

"Our J-Ride program lost both cars in the flood," Steinberg continued. "J-Ride has become a lifeline for seniors no longer able to drive, and Alan Helfman, president of Helfman Motor Sales, immediately replaced the cars so J-Ride could continue."

"In order for our team to come together as well as it did, the culture of collaboration and serving others had to exist before the emergency," Dobrolecki added.

"The teamwork among the various agencies in the community was absolutely incredible, and we had unbelievable leadership," Greenblatt said. "There were plenty of tears, but this team has a strong sense of pride."

Innovation was key. The J's tennis center was repurposed for many uses, including housing the 200 children served by the Bertha Alyce School. "We made it work," Friedman said, "along with collaboration with The Shlenker School and Congregation Beth Israel."

Steinberg said, except for exercise classes, Fitness Center services slowly but surely were re-established and, because the Fitness Center was no longer available to their members, YMCAs across Houston opened their doors to their members through 2017. Remarkably, the State of Israel even sent funding to replace the Fitness Center's equipment,

which had been lost.

"We were tired, overwhelmed and hungry for normalcy," Greenblatt remembered. "We had an unveiling of a plaque, showing our appreciation for the [Israeli] donation. That's when we realized how much people need us to be here."

The entire staff had high praise for Joel Dinkin, its unfaltering leader. "He had so much on his plate, but he would tell us, 'Go home.' He took time to check on us, and that resonates," Dobrolecki said. "We work hard for people who value us, and as our leader, Joel never lost sight of our mission, continued to be a motivator and cheerleader while always being sensitive to our needs."

"Personally, I found resilience I didn't know existed, as well as some surprising vulnerability. Most of all, my faith in humanity was restored," Greenblatt commented. The community, entire nation cared about us – people we didn't know from countries around the world.

Of all the outreach and programming the JCC provides, Dobrolecki said the experience had its unexpected positives. "We saw the best of people, providing childcare, supplies, mucking out homes, even opening their homes to relative strangers."

"Today, we also are closer as a team," he pointed out. "We are thankful for each other, our leadership and, as Teri said, we realize we're stronger and have a new understanding for the word, 'resilience.'" □



Bertha Alyce students are happy to be back home in their post-Harvey classroom, thanks to IAC. Front: Kayla Steinberg, Sunny Lerman, Mila Caughey and Eliya Shabtay. Back: Charlie Bormaster, Jonah Rose, Elliott Rambow, Holden Schwartz and Oliver Golenternek.

IAC steps up to rebuild preschool devastated by Harvey

Less than one year after opening its doors, the Israeli-American Council Houston Region demonstrated a remarkable ability to mobilize in support of the larger communities in the region.

In the immediate wake of Hurricane Harvey, the national organization created a Harvey Relief Fund and sent more than 100 boxes of goods, donated from the IAC's nationwide community. At the same time, local community members opened their homes to those in need of temporary housing, and organized and participated in local food drives.

Since September 2017, the IAC has reached its goal to fundraise \$25,000 to rebuild part of the Bertha Alyce Early Childhood Education School (in the Evelyn Rubenstein JCC), which was destroyed during the flood. The funds came from a community-led donor campaign that was partly matched by the IAC's national board in Los Angeles.

"I was powerfully moved by the response from the Israeli-American community,

which has shown a remarkable commitment to supporting those affected," said Guy Cohen, IAC Houston Regional director. "I think it's a testament to the spirit of our Israeliness. When we see a problem, we roll up our sleeves and get to work. The \$25,000 we raised was exactly the amount that was required to rebuild a damaged classroom at the JCC, and we're looking forward to seeing that building fully occupied with young children and supporting community members very soon."

Other recent IAC partnerships in the community included celebrating Israel's 70th Anniversary of Independence with the ERJCC, the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston, the Consulate General of Israel to the Southwest and other Jewish organizations at a major event with more than 1,000 attendees, a torch-lighting ceremony and live music, arts and crafts, and games for children.

For information about the Israeli-American Council, visit israeliamerican.org. □

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