

Storm Keeps Long Island Jewish Shelter Short of Men for Prayers

By Peter S. Green on October 29, 2012

Bloomberg News

Moshe Najjar is having a lonely wait as the South Shore of New York's Long Island prepares for Hurricane Sandy to arrive. The only Orthodox Jewish man at a specially created Kosher shelter, he is a minyan of one, lacking the rest of the 10-man minimum required for many important prayers.

Evacuated from his home in Cedarhurst, one of the largely Orthodox Five Towns on Long Island's southern Atlantic coast, Najjar, 47, said today he was pleasantly surprised by the religiously appropriate shelter in the West Hempstead High School, where men and women can bunk separately and Kosher meals are served on paper table cloths.

"I was going to go to a hotel, but right now, the financials are not doing it for me," Najjar said, wearing a black trench coat and the traditional yarmulke, or skull cap of observant Jews.

"I'm looking for a job; I have some leads," he said. "Today, tomorrow might not be a good time to be having interviews."

Officials have ordered a mandatory evacuation of Long Island's Nassau County coast as Sandy's winds, combining with a nearly full moon and high tides, are expected to send water surging up to 8 feet deep across the Atlantic Coast and 11 feet or more on the North Shore, from the normally placid Long Island Sound. With 230,000 Jews, the fourth largest Jewish population in the U.S. according to the North American Jewish Data Bank, Nassau County opened the Kosher shelter to encourage people who might not otherwise have a place to stay.

'Accommodate' Customs

By midmorning, only 21 people had registered at the center, and Najjar was the only Jewish man. A clutch of elderly women sat chatting in a corner. Several dozen green cots, each with a white Red Cross blanket, stretched across the floor of the school gym.

"We're trying to accommodate their customs, and the shelter is open to all," said Susan Dubourg, a Red Cross volunteer managing the shelter.

Not everyone who had come so far appeared to be an observant Jew, she said. With separate sleeping quarters, the shelter can house up to 100 people, and in a crunch could sleep 300 if needed, Dubourg said.

"They are definitely well-prepared here," said John Rocchetti, 66, an Italian Catholic who grew up in Brooklyn's predominantly Orthodox Borough Park neighborhood, and was evacuated from his top-floor apartment in the seaside district of Far Rockaway.

Kosher Food

"I live in a Jewish neighborhood, and some of my best friends are Jewish," he said with a laugh. As a vegetarian, the retired school-bus driver says he likes the Kosher food at the shelter.

The lack of arrivals didn't surprise Chaim Shapiro, a West Hempstead resident who popped in to the shelter to see how he and his nearby synagogue could help.

"The community tends to rally around itself; people open their spare bedrooms to neighbors and family, so I'd guess there will be less than 100 people here," he said.

"If they get 10 men here, I'll tell them to bring over the siddurim and the Torah," he added, referring to prayer books and the scroll of the Old Testament.

When Hurricane Irene hit Long Island last August, Najjar and his then-wife and children didn't seek out a shelter. "She said, 'Let's go hide in the basement.' She did it, but, Baruch Hashem, nothing happened," he said intoning a Hebrew phrase praising the name of God.

While he follows the Yemenite rite, Najjar welcomed word from Alan Cabelly, a West Hempstead resident who invited him to worship at Young Israel of West Hempstead, an Orthodox synagogue which follows the Ashkenazi traditions of Eastern Europe.

Najjar smiled broadly when he heard there would be enough men for full prayer at the synagogue, a short walk through the wind and rain.