

NY synagogues struggle to find aid after Sandy

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miles dixon/metro

The Judea Center in Howard Beach has been able to raise only \$400 on its own. Rabbi Marjorie Slome returned to her synagogue, West End Temple, in the Rockaways after superstorm Sandy to find a clear water line five feet above the floor and all of their sacred books, including the Five Books of Moses, waterlogged and ruined.

The only good news, she said, was that she had taken the Torahs to her home in Brooklyn the Sunday before the storm.

After the storm, she and her family visited congregants who hadn't evacuated, she said, while other friends went around delivering coffee and bagels, "just to check in and make sure everybody was OK."

"Then we moved on to: OK, great, now what do we do?" she recounted.

Slome said she had never been in a hurricane before, but that people in New Orleans whose synagogues had been destroyed by a similarly bad storm, Hurricane Katrina, gave her good advice.

"Whether FEMA will grant us any kind of money is still very much in the air," she said, acknowledging that it is a "complex legal question."

A?matter of church and state

Because FEMA is a federal agency, religious institutions may be prohibited from applying for government aid because of federal laws barring the meshing of church and state affairs.

"The way I look at it is, I'm not asking for the government to subsidize any religion education — but I do know that if there were a fire in my building, the firemen wouldn't pull up and say no we can't go in because it's a religious institution," Slome argued. "I think a flood is the same thing."

FEMA's Donald Caetano said, "The best thing they can do right now is go to the Small Business Administration and register for assistance."

When asked about constitutional issues, he suggested: "Another option is potentially public assistance as a private nonprofit organization."

Synagogues suffer across the city

An investigation by the Jewish daily newsletter Forward found that at least 63 synagogues in the New York area were battered by superstorm Sandy, sustaining damages ranging from missing roof sections to ruined Torahs. The costs of repairs and reconstruction may reportedly reach as much as \$5 million, as Rabbi David Bauman of the Temple Israel of Long Beach told Forward. Bauman said his synagogue had insurance, but that "insurance companies have outs for everything."

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