

Correspondence: B'Nai B'rith, 1972 August-
Delayed Jewish Religious Institute
September



Flood Cor

B'NAI B'RITH ^{of}

DELAWARE • NEW JERSEY • PENNSYLVANIA • WEST VIRGINIA

DISTRICT GRAND LODGE NUMBER THREE

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August 25, 1972

Hon. Max Rosenn
United States Court of Appeals
Third Circuit, Post Office Bldg.
Wilkes-Barre, Pa. 18701

Dear Max:

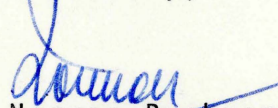
Thanks so much for taking the time to chat with me when I was in Wilkes-Barre last week. The counsel and advice you offered has been heeded and hopefully steps will be taken to implement the program we discussed.

I also thought you would want to know that Bryan Shoemaker, B'nai B'rith's consultant on Federal Disaster Programs, is now resident in Wilkes-Barre. The Jewish Community Center has graciously provided him with working space and other staff support services. Bryan has your name and will undoubtedly call you to introduce himself.

For all of us in the District and for those in the Supreme Lodge who are aware of your untiring efforts in behalf of the flood victims of the Wyoming Valley, a heartfelt "thank you".

Jeanne and I send our warmest good wishes from house to house.

Cordially,


Norman Buckner

NB/rc

cc: Sanford Cohen
Solomon Rosenbaum



B'NAI B'RITH

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DAVID M. BLUMBERG
President

Flood

September 19, 1972

Dear Brother President:

It's the stench that still clings to your memory weeks after, the relentless reminder of a numbing scene.

You look out on it from a street in Kingston -- can a heap of rubble and oozing muck still be a street? -- and the destruction is so endless and overpowering you resist believing what you see.

But there it is: house after house twisted and torn. . . cars and boats and station wagons crushed and strewn like litter. . . a cellar in its place but the home it once bore tilted incongruously a hundred yards away.

And the junk. Thousands upon thousands of tons of fetid and decaying junk that only weeks before had been household furnishings and clothing and toys and books and keepsakes -- the joys and hopes of families like yours and mine.

Neither newspaper stories nor the occasional news telecast of the ravages of Hurricane Agnes prepare you for a first-hand look at the storm's shattering impact on Pennsylvania's Wyoming Valley. The day I spent there at the urging of its B'nai B'rith lodges -- they weren't anxious for sightseers, they were pleading for help -- was a gnawing experience, a confrontation with widespread human misery. I had never before seen such massive devastation, not even among the bombed-out towns of Europe in World War II.

Kingston is a "bedroom suburb" across the river from Wilkes-Barre. More than half of the valley's 1,600 Jewish families lived there. "This was a real pleasant town," my guide said. "Real neighborly. It has 6,000 homes. But now. . ."

Not all of the 6,000 homes had been damaged or destroyed by the flood. Twenty weren't.

My guide was a leader of the B'nai B'rith lodge in the area and he kept repeating -- as though the miraculous had touched him -- that he was "one of the lucky ones." His new two-story home was still erect on its foundation. The wild storm had flooded it, the waters reaching high into the second story, pflundering all of his family's possessions and leaving a wake of silt and mud that -- this was two months after the storm -- still had not been completely removed. He couldn't move back yet. But as he gratefully said, his house was still standing.

So many others weren't. Like the caved-in shambles of a \$60,000 house my guide pointed out. It belonged to his close friend. It was utterly destroyed. "The same with his business in Wilkes-Barre," I was told. "Every item in stock in his store -- more than \$100,000 worth -- all washed away."

Later, I met him. He and his family were crammed into a government-owned trailer. An outdoor camp stove was their kitchen. "A new life-style for us," he said sardonically. He was in his fifties, with three children. His oldest son had cancelled plans to enroll as a third-term law student. In some ways, this seemed to pain him most of all. He was alternately glum and hopeful, like so many others trapped in the same circumstances. "I wish I were broke," he suddenly blurted. "That way a guy can start clean." But there was an unpaid mortgage, unpaid bank loans for his store's inventory, things like that. He wasn't just broke, he was deeply in debt. And homeless. "What does a guy try now?" he wondered.

A few tried suicide. Perry Shertz, a past president of B'nai B'rith District 3, has a home in Kingston that was severely battered. But what still leaves Perry unnerved is the recollection of a wife shrieking in terror and Perry and others rushing to discover her husband with his wrists slashed. They got there in time. "But the experience still haunts me," says Perry.

The people who keep such doleful records tell us that Hurricane Agnes was the worst natural disaster in American history. It was also, in its fury, a Jewish tragedy. Seven out of every eight Jewish families in the Wyoming Valley were among its hapless victims. Only 200 of its 1,600 Jewish families escaped the floodwaters that, at some points, spread its havoc six miles wide. The estimate of average damage to each home -- this does not include a family's possessions -- is more than \$20,000. Just two families in the entire valley carried high-premium flood insurance.

Do statistics say anything? Consider this: Some 900 of the valley's manufacturing plants, retail shops and other businesses are Jewish-owned. More than 800 were seriously damaged -- many totally wiped out. Some were million-dollar enterprises, others ma-and-pa stores. Some were firmly established, others new or marginal, owned by a Jewish family laboring hard to make a living. The storm was indiscriminate.

Three months after the storm, fewer than 200 Jewish families could return to their homes. The others were still scattered, some living in temporary trailers, others in motel rooms, most with kinfolk in other cities. Scores of families had to be broken up, a husband and wife finding shelter with one family, their children with another. Elderly Jews and poor Jews were left uprooted. And 600 once affluent Jewish families are now poor Jewish families. They lost everything.

All this in the Wyoming Valley alone. And it doesn't stop there. The Jewish communities of Harrisburg, Pa., of Elmira, N. Y., and elsewhere also felt the brunt of the storm. Scores of Jewish-owned retail stores in Elmira were wiped out.

The worst of it is the incalculable toll to the human spirit. The repelling smell of the mud and slime and rotting garbage that stays with me is memory's trick, a morbid reminder of the desperation and melancholy despair that I had seen, and the grim existence for so many. It is a saddening sight: business and professional men who had made their mark, now lining up for unemployment insurance, or clothing handouts, or food stamps. "Nothing crushes them more," my guide said. He didn't have to say it. It was written in their faces.

In 1971, the Jewish community of Wilkes-Barre and Kingston raised \$950,000 for its local Jewish federation. It supported a number of synagogues, a modern Jewish community center, a splendid Jewish day school. Its Israel Bond sales were proportionately high. It prided itself as a "giving" community.

The center, the day school and three of the synagogues were extensively damaged. So were Jewish centers in Harrisburg and Elmira. The damage, all told, was close to \$2 million.

What now? Can a community with physical damages of some \$2 billion, with one of every three workers suddenly jobless, ever revive?

The answer rests largely with massive government assistance. But Federal aid currently available is far from adequate. And for those in desperate need, painfully slow in coming.

Still, just as there is a Jewish dimension to the disaster, there must be Jewish response to it.

B'nai B'rith has become part of that response. We have pledged \$500,000 through a B'nai B'rith Hurricane Agnes Disaster Fund. We are pledged to raise it immediately. We need you -- and your colleagues in the lodge -- to redeem that pledge.

Your first reaction might be: What good can \$500,000 do -- a pittance against billions of dollars of losses?

You're right, it can do very little to replace the physical losses.

But it can do its share to meet some very vital and very human needs for Jewish families who are lost and struggling.

It can, for example, pay for a temporary office in Wilkes-Barre, staffed by a highly skilled specialist, a former government deputy director for disaster relief operations. B'nai B'rith did that a month ago -- and we have been blessed for it ever since. You would be astonished by the number of persons, even experienced business men, who are bewildered by the loan process of the Small Business Administration or by the way to apply for aid from some other Federal agency. Our specialist on the scene has been cutting through the bureaucratic maze, getting quick action for scores of families each week.

The fund can provide special loans and scholarships so that a Jewish student -- like that third-year law student -- is not cruelly cut off from his hopes and career.

It can rent or buy space heaters. Winter is coming. There are families living in the upper story of their homes without heat, the lower level demolished.

It can help restore some of the damaged institutions, to make them again centers of a restored Jewish communal life.

A half-million dollars can mean many such Jewish "deeds of loving kindness," on a one-to-one basis with a stricken family.

Whatever we do is being coordinated with the relief programs of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, which has allocated some \$2 million, and of other national Jewish agencies.

No one is more consciously aware than I am of the demands for funds that B'nai B'rith makes to your lodge. We operate, sometimes precariously it seems, as a \$17 million-a-year Jewish enterprise. That is our commitment -- ever dollar budgeted -- to the expanding Jewish programs which give us purpose as an organization. So demands for funds are perhaps inescapable.

But this is not a plea to your lodge or its treasury. It is an urgent appeal to you, as its president, and to your brother lodge members to initiate a modest -- but so meaningful! -- campaign among yourselves.

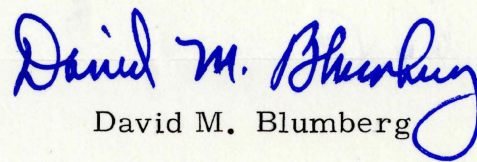
But quickly! Do it this week. A few of you telephoning the others in your lodge for small gifts of \$5 or \$10 or \$25. This is not meant to be an undue burden on any member. Yet collectively we can bear a very precious burden.

The brutal murders in Munich left us shocked and angry. And rightly so. The Soviet "education tax" on Jewish emigres rouses us to bitter protest. And rightly so. It may be that these man-made evils are more dramatic -- worthy of more front-page commentary -- than a nature-made disaster. I don't know. I do know what I saw in the Wyoming Valley. More than 1,000 Jewish families in desperate straits.

The checks you gather should be drawn to the B'nai B'rith Foundation and marked for the Hurricane Agnes Disaster Fund. In that way each gift qualifies as a tax-exempt contribution. Mail them to B'nai B'rith headquarters in Washington, D. C.

Do it no later than the first week in October. Time is a frightening barrier in this effort to help restore pride and dignity to a shattered Jewish community.

In fellowship and urgency,


David M. Blumberg

P. S. Is our mailing list awry -- you are past president of your lodge and the name of your successor has not yet been recorded in the national office? Don't let that mean delay. Your familiarity with your lodge membership is too valuable. Put your experience and personal leadership into this effort.

B'NAI B'RITH ^{of}

DELAWARE • NEW JERSEY • PENNSYLVANIA • WEST VIRGINIA

DISTRICT GRAND LODGE NUMBER THREE

226 S. 16TH ST., PHILA., PA. 19102 215/KI 6-6128

OFFICE OF THE
PRESIDENT

FROM: ABRAHAM BRENMAN, ESQ.

9 COLT STREET, PATERSON, N.J.

FOR: B'NAI B'RITH DISTRICT GRAND LODGE #3

PENNSYLVANIA, NEW JERSEY, DELAWARE & W. VIRGINIA

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

B'NAI B'RITH Initiates Drive To Aid Flood-destroyed Jewish Religious Institutions

An emergency meeting of the top-level Executive Board of the 120-year-old B'nai B'rith District Grand Lodge #3 was convoked by President Sanford Cohen of Fair Lawn, N.J. to gear up a four-state drive among its 35,000 members for the purpose of raising funds to assist over 26 synagogues and Hebrew schools which suffered major damage by flood-waters in many sectors of Pennsylvania.

"Our members in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware and West Virginia" Cohen said, "have already sent many truck-loads of food, medicines and clothing to the disaster areas to be given to victims of Hurricane Agnes, without regard to creed or race. There can be no distinction made among those whose homes and property have been swept away by the raging floods."

At the emergency meeting held last Monday at the home office in Philadelphia the 15 man Executive Board set up an Emergency Committee to urge

its 190 lodges in the four state area to secure prayer books, prayer shawls, Torahs (Scrolls of the Jewish Law) and other religious articles required for the functioning of Jewish observances and operations of religious schools.

The resolution adopted by the Board placed the full man-power of this District of the world's largest Jewish social service organization, squarely behind an immediate fund-raising drive to assist every religious institution which has been devastated in the Eastern Pennsylvania area.

In speaking for his total membership Cohen stated: "All good Americans have come to the aid of the tens of thousands who have lost homes and personal belongings. Our members have participated in this noble effort. But B'nai B'rith lodges in our four states have the additional responsibility of making sure that in every community affected, its synagogues and Hebrew schools will be equipped and ready to function in time for the Jewish High Holidays in September 1972".

He requested the almost 200 constituent units of the District Grand Lodge to make the succor of the Jewish institutions the top-priority for an all-out campaign during August, 1972 which was designated as "B'nai B'rith Flood-Relief Month" for every member and lodge. "We who have been spared must give of our substance to those who have suffered this disaster," said Mr. Cohen, "and B'nai B'rith will carry on with its century old policy of aiding all who have suffered."

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HARRIS, JIMMY EUGENE
BORN 10-10-1916
100 D WYOMING - JIMMY EUGENE