

OU Relief Funds: Where Do They Go?

By Stephen J. Savitsky



The year 2005 will surely be remembered as a time when nature went wild and unleashed a series of natural disasters. I am referring to the aftermath of the tsunami, which devastated parts of Asia; Hurricane Katrina, the storm that was one of the worst catastrophes in United States history, and the earthquake that claimed the lives of thousands in Pakistan and parts of India. Add to this the upheavals caused by the disengagement from Gush Katif and Northern Shomron, and we have a plethora of crises we have never before experienced in one year.

Each disaster brings with it the necessity for relief efforts, and consequently, the need to appeal to people of good heart to support these efforts. Here the Orthodox Union plays a significant role.

We at the OU find ourselves in a unique situation. The OU is a respected and trusted organization that the Jewish world looks toward whenever a crisis occurs. It is, therefore, our responsibility to take action when called upon. One of our most powerful tools is our web site, www.ou.org, which gives us access to hundreds of thousands of people from around the world. Whenever we launch an online appeal, we receive an outpouring of funds for the particular cause we have taken on.

The public can rest assured that money given to us for any cause will be disbursed with the same care and thoroughness that we have demonstrated over the last few months.

This opportunity comes with great responsibility, which we take very seriously. When we collect money for a cause, we deem it our obligation to disperse it to the appropriate people in an appropriate manner.

In the aftermath of Katrina and the disengagement from Gush Katif, both of which were followed by the establishment of OU relief funds, we received hundreds of requests for help

and suggestions for where to send the funds. But rather than impulsively respond, we took the approach that we have to act deliberately in order to responsibly serve as the emissary of the thousands of people who trust us to spend their money wisely and judiciously. *We must raise the money when the emotions are high but distribute it with objectivity.*

We have and will continue to have a fiduciary responsibility to the Jewish people. When there is great need, we have to ask ourselves a number of questions. Firstly, is there another organization that is more suited to respond to the particular crisis? If so, then the OU will channel the funds to that organization. Secondly, is the particular request a legitimate one?

In addition, we must ask another pivotal question: Do we allocate funds strictly to Jewish organizations or to the general relief effort as well? This question, which comes up often, arose again with regard to Katrina refugees. While we realized that our primary responsibility is to the Jewish population forced to flee New Orleans, a part of me felt that we should contribute to the general disaster fund set up by the American Red Cross.

Professor Richard Stone, immediate past chair of the OU's Institute for Public Affairs and a former New Orleans resident whose family still lives

there, joined me in a meeting with the president of the American Red Cross, Marsha Johnson Evans. At the meeting, which was sponsored by the Conference of Presidents, Ms. Evans spoke to us about relief efforts and about the strong pro-Israel position the organization has taken by withholding contributions to the International Red Cross, which refuses to recognize Magen David Adom. It seemed to us that we should contribute, to some extent, to an organization that has accomplished so much for so many people around the world and has shown support for Israel. While what we contributed to the Red Cross is only a very small percentage of that which we raised, it was important for us to show *hakarat hatov*.

The vast majority of the money raised for our Hurricane Katrina Relief Fund, which is administered by the OU in conjunction with the Rabbinical Council of America and Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future, went to benefit the Jewish community. A committee with representatives from the three organizations is in charge of distributing the money. Professor Stone is one of the OU representatives on the committee.

The committee allocated \$20,000 to Margolin Hebrew Academy in Memphis, which has taken in twenty-one New Orleans students, as well as an additional substantial sum to a special discretionary fund to assist New Orleans residents now in Memphis. OU Executive Vice President Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb personally present-

ed the checks during a visit to Memphis. We also took steps to bring ParnossahWorks, the OU's highly successful job-placement program run in conjunction with FEGS (Federation Employment and Guidance Service, Inc.), to Memphis and Atlanta to benefit those who fled and are jobless.

Not forgetting about our Israeli brothers and sisters who were uprooted from their homes, we determined, with the help of Rabbi Hershel Billet, *rav* of the Young Israel of Woodmere in New York and a member of the OU Board, and Roy Spiewak, an OU vice president, that the money raised would go to a *vaad* established by former residents of Gush Katif. Headed by Rav Yigal Kaminetsky, the former chief rabbi of Gush Katif, the *vaad* provides us with a continually updated list of expenditures, accounting for every dollar spent. The money is awarded in a non-political fashion, for humanitarian needs only, such as psychological services, clothing, blankets, loans, job retraining and similar necessities. The relief efforts in Gush Katif are still ongoing, and it is a worthwhile cause for those who have not yet contributed or who want to make an additional gift. For updated information on how the money is being distributed, check out our web site.

We are proud of our deliberate, thoughtful approach to allocating funds as well as the trust placed in us by our constituents. While there were many individuals and organizations with good intentions that raised funds to assist evacuees from both Hurricane Katrina and Gush Katif, many reacted too quickly and may have used their precious, limited funds in ways that were not to the best advantage of their beneficiaries.

We call on all to be diligent when they have the responsibility of collecting community funds for special situations. The public can rest assured that the money given to the OU for any future cause will be disbursed with the same care and thoroughness that we have demonstrated over the last few months.

That is our trust.

Likewise, even as we've learned great lessons about how to galvanize the Jewish world to deal with crises, we are fully cognizant of the fact that these situations inevitably produce unscrupulous individuals who look for tragedy to enrich themselves. We will be tireless in making certain that only proper beneficiaries receive our help.

That too, is our trust.

My pledge to you as the president of the Orthodox Union is if, God forbid, such events do occur in the future, and OU assistance is needed, we will act on your behalf to raise the funds and to make certain that they go to the right people at the right time. May Hashem protect the Jewish people as a whole from harm, and may 2006 be a year of tranquility for all people throughout the world. **JA**