

מה שתשיב

www.mahshetashiv.com

בס"ד

Grenfell

“And you shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord.” (Leviticus 19:18)

It has been a very tough week in West London. The New West End United Synagogue is a just over a mile from the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower in North Kensington. My first thought on hearing the horrific news was how I could help to get aid to the victims and provide for the local residents. It became clear that the only way to gain information was to contact the local charities and faith organisations on the ground.

Having had extensive major incident training as part of my work as a chaplain at Canary Wharf, I knew that rushing to the scene of a major incident is almost never the right thing to do. Sure enough, I quickly established that local residents, shops and businesses had already ensured that enough food and drink was available for the emergency services and volunteers.

The closest Jewish community to the Grenfell Tower is Holland Park Synagogue, an independent Sefardi community with close connections to the New West End; we share a cheder and often host communal events together. I contacted their rabbi, Rabbi Avraham Labi and ascertained that they were organising their own collection while coordinating collections from other shuls. They had liaised with the local authority to determine what the actual needs were, and were therefore able to ensure that the goodwill of people across London could be focused towards helping those who needed it the most.

On my first visit to the area, I met with Rabbi Labi and Laurence Julius, a member of the executive from Holland Park who has spearheaded the response from the Jewish community. My colleague Rabbi David Mason from Muswell Hill Synagogue directed me to his friend, Rev Mike Long who had moved from Muswell Hill to run the Methodist Church in Notting Hill. I spoke with him and to local volunteers to offer my support.

My last visit there, together with Rabbi Mason was a very different experience. The TV crews have moved on and the volunteers with food parcels and bottled water have gone back to their lives. But the surrounding streets are now filled with local residents who want answers.

The walls of schools, libraries and churches are adorned with the faces of people still unaccounted for. One local pastor explained that the reason it is taking so long to recover the bodies is that the Police sniffer dogs can only stay in the wreckage for twenty minutes at a time, because the smell of the burnt debris is too overpowering for them.

The community is hurting.

We all care and we all want to help. We all empathise with a community that has been struck and devastated by tragedy with lives lost, lives shattered, homes destroyed and survivors traumatised. We all want to feel useful and many people have asked me what the Jewish community can do to help.

Jewish law demands that we bury our dead as soon as possible. Yet until the burial has taken place, close relatives are exempt from all positive commandments in order to focus on

preparing for the burial. Only after the burial takes place do the relatives become aveilim (mourners) and begin the formal process of mourning. This is the time for them to sit shiva, to mourn at home for seven days and receive visits from friends and family with offers of help. Only when the dead have been buried can their loved ones fully grieve, and only then can well-wishers offer sincere comfort.

The residents of North Kensington have not yet buried their dead. The grieving process for this community is only just beginning. In the coming weeks and months, as the true scale of the destruction becomes apparent, there will be more than enough room for the love and support our community is craving to give.

In the meantime, hold these people in your thoughts and prayers, and take some small comfort that at times of national tragedy and grief, the religious, cultural and political differences between us soon vanish, leaving behind only humanity, compassion and love.

Besorot Tovot and Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman, Rabbi of the New West End United Synagogue.

If you have enjoyed this article and would like to donate to help the Mah Shetashiv team, please use your smartphone to scan the QR code, or visit our website at:

<https://mahshetashiv.com/donate-to-mah-shetashiv/>

© Mah Shetashiv 2023

