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Gulf Coast Still Needs Jewish Response

By Simon Greer

On Aug. 31, as we marked the beginning of Elul, the Hebrew calendar's month of prayer, introspection and repentance, Hurricane Gustav was bearing down and once again drawing our attention to the Gulf region. During the High Holidays, our tradition guides us to reflect, pray and act.

Over the past three years, following the devastation of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the Jewish community has helped distressed communities rebuild in a myriad of ways. Hillel has sent more than 1,600 college students to the Gulf Coast region; United Jewish Communities and Jewish federations raised more than \$28 million for hurricane relief efforts by the second anniversary of Katrina; and Isaiah Funds, the first national interfaith partnership, was launched and is under way with \$4.5 million in loans and grants to spur Gulf Coast rebuilding.

Our community's response and our commitment to the region and its residents have been remarkable and will be essential in the coming months and years. Our thoughts and prayers are with Gulf Coast residents, as they face yet another displacement from their homes and lives. Forecasters are predicting more hurricanes will hit later this month.

While less disastrous than initially feared, Gustav brought \$10 billion in damage to the region, and a week later nearly half of Louisiana's homes still lacked electricity. Gustav's profound physical and psychological impact on community organizations around the Gulf could prove to be a major setback to the recovery and rebuilding work accomplished since 2005.

And yet, those affected are not giving up hope, and neither should we. An ongoing Jewish communal response will contribute to the creation of a strong, inclusive economy for New Orleans and Gulf Coast residents.

A viable economy requires investments in affordable housing, quality education, comprehensive health care and public transportation. Investments in social infrastructure, as well as physical infrastructure, are key to developing a successful economy in which old and new residents can have security and opportunities for success.

It long has been my belief that the people directly affected by government policies should have a voice in the decisions that affect their lives. Our inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness can only have meaning if the least fortunate of us also has the opportunity to seek the American dream of a better life. Every resident of the Gulf region should have a place and a voice in upcoming decisions about how to rebuild their communities.

In order to help facilitate this type of reconstruction program, many Jewish institutions and foundations are working with community partners on the ground to benefit low-income communities that were tragically impacted by the disaster and disproportionately affected by an inadequate governmental response. Millions in grants and loans are being directed to the Gulf Coast region to promote community economic development.

Just recently, an online microlending initiative, 8th Degree, was launched to help small businesses rebuild in Louisiana. Microloans, a successful instrument of change used internationally, can be a solution to the troubles of many on the Gulf Coast and are particularly well-suited to Jewish philanthropy. Microloans facilitated by credit unions serve to save the lives and neighborhoods of storm survivors as well as the communities in which they live. The owner of a New Orleans restaurant made the value of microloans abundantly clear to me not long ago as I stood in his busy kitchen and he told me how much his renovation had cost: \$6,000. Not \$1 million, as I might have expected, not even tens of thousands. No - a few thousand dollars and he was back on the job, feeding his family and his customers. Providing jobs, purchasing services, paying taxes - no longer struggling, he's now able to help others.

8th Degree offers an innovative way for individuals to make a direct and effective impact in the region's recovery.

It's easy to look at the enormity of the damage to the Gulf Coast and be overwhelmed; it's tempting to wait for others, or for a Marshall plan, to begin making our country whole again. But we've waited long enough. Now is the time to repair our world.

Maimonides explains the custom of blowing the shofar during Elul as a tool to rouse us from our complacency. After Katrina, we were not complacent. And we are not complacent now in the relief and recovery efforts to follow Hurricane Gustav. The victims of Hurricane Gustav need our chesed (lovingkindness) as well as our commitment to ensuring tzedek (justice) in their recovery. Our community is committed to supporting all Gulf Coast residents in rebuilding their lives.

Simon Greer is the president and CEO of the Jewish Funds for Justice.

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