

Shabbos: A haven in a hurricane

By Rabbi Daniel Coleman

After considerable preparations, many Orthodox New Yorkers sat down to Friday night dinner in the company of friends and strangers alike as Irene prepared to hit. Shabbos necessitates and cultivates a mindset of advance strategic planning. For example, my wife will frequently plan and shop for the ingredients of our Shabbos meals on Wednesday and cook them on Thursday. Additional preparations on Friday involve being mindful of our home's electricity consumption by pre-setting specific lights and electrical devices. Computers and phones that often serve as distractions from connecting with our immediate friends, neighbors, and Hashem, are switched off. These weekly preparations and planning process are invaluable transferable skills to have when it comes to hurricane readiness.

Shabbos emphasizes being and connecting, instead of doing or going. Since travel is proscribed, it is an ideal time to reconnect with those nearest (literally) and dearest, spend time with Hashem and community in Shul, and look in on neighbors that may not have family living close by. The opportunity to get to know those we so quickly walk by during the week need not wait for the onset of a hurricane. Rather it is to be enjoyed each week. Added benefits of not travelling last Shabbos include 1) no one had to worry about being caught on the road in a hurricane 2) The prospect of mass transit shutdowns and limited mobility due to hurricane conditions did not threaten to disrupt plans.

Since the days of Avraham Avinu, Jews have valued the concept of hospitality. The particular variety that Avraham modeled was providing for strangers. He would indeed be proud of websites such as Shabbat.com that match guests looking for hospitality all over the world with hosts interested in making room in their homes free of charge. Although advance notice is preferred, many shuls have a committee or individuals that ensure every new face is greeted and invited to a local home for a meal. I have been blessed to be a guest at several Shabbos tables where the host or hostess would specifically set an extra place (or several) in anticipation of last minute guests. Hosting a family displaced because of Irene afforded another opportunity for following in our forefather's footsteps.

Friday night davening is introduced with seven tehillim, representing the days of the week. These set the tone for Shabbos, praising Hashem as the Ultimate Creator. "The voice of G-d is upon the waters, G-d...thunders...upon vast waters...G-d breaks the cedar trees...making them dance...G-d sat enthroned at the Deluge." (Psalm 29). After acknowledging Hashem as the Ultimate mover and controller of nature, the Psalmist closes by inviting us to recognize the Image of G-d within us by reflecting on and sharing our own inner strengths and our ability to affect and change our surroundings. In its own way, Irene invited us to do the same.

Jewish homes all over the world welcome in Shabbos with (at least) two candles, a symbol of light and joy. Many take time to offer personal tefillos and consider those in their lives that bring them light, trying not to let another week go by simply taking the people and blessings around them for granted. In New York candle-lighting became even more poignant last Shabbos, and allowed a few moments to set aside the concerns of the week. Of course, there was an ancillary benefit. With candles now lit, anyone losing power due to the hurricane would be prepared.