**How Should a Faith Community Respond?**

In his prayer last week Dwaine spoke of the Surfside condominium tragedy and for people to be supportive of one another. The nation, and particularly those of us who live in Florida, recognize the depth of the tragedy. When the death toll is finally completed, the fatalities will be second only to the losses in the World Trade Center.

While the tragedy cannot be overstated, some positive stories have emerged, mostly related to how people have come together as a community to help one another. Specifically, there have been many stories about the Jewish community coalescing and helping the families of the victims. Below are two articles describing this in more detail

The Bible is clear about how the faith community is to help one another in time of need. For our discussion, read **Acts 2:42-47** and **Acts 4:32-37** (below). Then, during our class we will discuss two things: (a) what is the obligation of a faith community to assist in time of tragedy / need? and (b) what lessons can others learn for how the faith community reacts?

**Acts 2:42-47**

**42**And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. **43**And awe[[d](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+2&version=ESV#fen-ESV-26981d)] came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. **44**And all who believed were together and had all things in common. **45**And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. **46**And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, **47**praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

**Acts 4:32-37**

**32**Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. **33**And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. **34**There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold **35**and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. **36**Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, **37**sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

**Surfside’s Jewish community grows closer after tower collapse: ‘It’s three degrees of separation’**

Washington Post, June 30, 2021|

SURFSIDE — Jewish congregations in the Miami area have a growing mi sheberach, a list of Hebrew names included in a public prayer for those in need of divine good, especially those requiring healing. The [number of Jewish missing or dead in last week’s building collapse](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/06/25/miami-building-collapse-live-updates/?itid=ap_laurareiley&itid=lk_inline_manual_2) at 8777 Collins Ave. has crept to nearly 50, almost a third of the total number.

The disaster has rocked Surfside’s Jewish community, a cohesive and interconnected group mirrored in just a few places in the United States.

“It’s three degrees of separation,” said Surfside resident Leon Weinschneider.

“Everybody here is pretty close, Jew and gentile alike.”

Casualties have been disproportionately Jewish because about a third of Surfside residents are Jewish.

According to Ira Sheskin, a professor in the geography department at the University of Miami who has done 50 [demographic studies](https://www.jewishdatabank.org/databank/search-results?city=Miami&state=Florida&year=2014) of U.S. Jewish communities, the four towns that make up the North Beach Zip code 33154 (Surfside, Bal Harbour, Bay Harbor Islands and tiny Indian Creek) have a total population of about 14,600, of which 5,000 are Jewish. He says 34 percent of that number describe themselves as Orthodox, 24 percent as Conservative, 18 percent as Reform and 24 percent as “just Jewish.”

“Only between 2 and 3 percent of Americans are Jewish,” Sheskin said, “and nationally only 9 percent of Jews are Orthodox, so 34 percent is a very high figure.”

Some of this, he said, is because of chain migration, the process by which migrants from a particular place follow others from that place to a new destination: Sheskin says 30 percent of the area’s Jews are Hispanic, most from Venezuela, Colombia and Argentina.

But this is just part of the story.

When his family was relocating to South Florida in 1996, Leon Weinschneider knew he wanted to be within walking distance of a synagogue.

In Surfside,a town of about 5,600,he found a home right across the street from one. The oceanside community is home to more than 10 kosher restaurants, six synagogues and a kosher grocery store all within a few walkable blocks. Its community center, a beachfront facility with a water park, has kosher food service.

“It’s utopia here,” said Weinschneider, a real estate agent who is Orthodox. “It’s a garden of Eden.”

The walkability is crucial for religious Jews, who abstain from work and technology from sundown Friday to after dark on Saturday, the Jewish day of rest called Shabbat. They avoid activities including handling money, preparing food, using electrical switches and driving.

Surfside is built to accommodate those practices, with restaurants serving Shabbat meals prepared and paid for in advance. Multiple buildings are equipped with elevators that operate automatically, allowing for their use without electrical switches.

And for Orthodox Jews who want to leave their homes on the Sabbath, there is something called an Eruv, a ring of string that demarcates a neighborhood and represents a symbolic extension of the home. The [Eruv in Bal Harbour](https://www.yicbh.org/visitors/eruv)includes a walking path in Surfside where Orthodox Jews can carry things on the Sabbath.

In short, said Sheskin, “there’s the Orthodox infrastructure.”

Perhaps the most important piece of this is the residents themselves, many of whom live in high-rise condos and apartments. Sixty percent of Jewish people in that Zip code live in buildings five stories or more — a fact that augurs greater connectedness and interdependence.

“You see people on the elevator, you know your neighbors,” Sheskin said.

This was evident in the hours just after the collapse. Surfside resident Marie Hamaoui, a physics teacher at Stanford University’s Online High School, [awoke at 4 a.m. June 24](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/06/26/collins-ave-miami-condo-collapse/?itid=lk_inline_manual_29) to the sound of helicopters.

“I texted Bianca Senker, the president of the sisterhood at Young Israel of Bal Harbour, [one of Surfside’s Orthodox synagogues], and they had already started to make lists and establish chats to make it easy to spread news,” she said.

Since then, Hamaoui has worked at the community center sorting and organizing donations of food and clothing. Orthodox women who escaped the collapse or were evacuated from their homes were in their nightgowns and not wearing their wigs or headscarves — they do not show their hair in public — so [even these intimate needs have been met by donations](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/06/28/surfside-disaster-acts-of-kindness/?itid=lk_inline_manual_32).

The area’s young people have also banded together. About a week before the collapse, Svia Bension, Efraim Stefansky and Zushi Litkowski — who met through the Shul of Bal Harbour — had started a young professionals organization called EZS Events. A group chat of members began lighting up within minutes of the building’s collapse.

“We were seeing what we can do to get people to wake up, get people involved,” said Litkowski. Soon, their organization had a completely different mission than what they’d imagined just days earlier, when they focused on planning Shabbat meals and other social events.

Working with Hatzalah of South Florida, an organization many call “the Jewish 911,” they launched a fund for those affected, *miamitragedyfund.com*, which pulled in $1.2 million in its first week. They worked almost around-the-clock, sleeping only a couple of hours a night and gathering for midnight meetings at a hotel where survivors have been staying.

From the shul, they’ve helped distribute food, clothing and necessities to the building’s residents — including special religious items needed by some in the Jewish community.

“It broke all of us,” Bension said of the collapse.

“Everybody knows somebody in that building,” added Litkowski, whose cousins were among those who escaped. Among the donations to the fund, multiples of one figure keeps popping up: 18. Each letter has a numerical value in Hebrew, and 18 is the numerical value for life, Bension noted: “Eighteen means life.”

“We believe in living, we believe in the future, we believe [that] the next day is going to be better,” Stefansky said.

Sheskin says 29 percent of those in the Surfside Zip code are 65 and older, and many rely on medications. Joseph Dahan, who grew up in Miami and now lives in Aventura, is the co-founder of Hatzalah of South Florida, the volunteer emergency medical service organization mostly serving areas with Jewish communities around the world. He says his organization has been on the scene since the very beginning, working alongside Miami-Dade Fire Rescue.

He said his team quickly became aware that displaced people had left their medications behind. He realized this would likely create additional emergencies if not addressed quickly,so the team brought in two doctors to get survivors the prescription refills they needed.

The pharmacists at Publix pharmacy agreed to help too. The “pharmacists said just bring them in and we’ll process them as fast as possible,” Dahan said. “We wrote several hundred prescriptions and turned them over to Publix.”

He says Publix took them and was ready to give steeply discounted prices at which point the Israeli Consulate swooped in to foot the bill.

Dahan and his team also put together a “task force” to connect survivors with their medication. He says they rounded up volunteers and cars and began chasing down patients and delivering their prescriptions.

“Whenever tragedy happens, it brings the bond of family unity together,” Weinschneider said. “You thank God you have each other.”

His grown daughter, Blima Friedman, said she recognized her high school math teacher among those missing from the building. She had struggled with how to answer her 9-year-old child’s questions about the tragedy unfolding blocks away.

“I asked my sister first,” Friedman said. “I’m like, ‘What do I say?’ She said, ‘Just tell him there was an accident that happened in a building and some people got hurt.’ “I said that to him. He said, ‘Did anybody die?’ ”

At synagogue in the days since, Weinschneider has said prayers for the people affected by the collapse. He has not been near the fenced-off perimeter around the site.

“It’s something that unless it happened to you personally you can’t begin to fathom the pain,” he said.

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A growing Orthodox synagogue, [the Shul Jewish Community Center](https://www.theshul.org/), sits just at the line between Surfside and Bal Harbour, and is part of a community supporting each other and their neighbors during the Champlain Towers catastrophe. The Shul helped spark religious Jewish life in the area, after its founder began leading prayers in the early 1980s. Rabbi Sholom Lipskar remembers that Jews were not welcomed when he first got to town, and now it's one of five synagogues in eight blocks in Surfside. Rabbi Lipskar spoke with WLRN’s Veronica Zaragovia.

**WLRN: Rabbi, can you tell us about the Jewish community of this area? What is it like for people who don't get to come here much?**

RABBI SHOLOM LIPSKAR**:**Once ... there was a house in Surfside where people would meet for a minyan on Saturdays, but otherwise there was no Jewish community to speak of. There was a non-Jewish community, a very assimilated Jewish community. In fact, when I first came here, my welcome was, ‘Who asked you to come? Why don’t you go back where you came from?” Literally. It was not such a great welcome from a lot of people, but it took a very short while until they realized that Jewishness is a meaningful, warm way of life.

And slowly people started to participate. And we started with a very elementary level. We had to have everything in English because people didn't know how to read Hebrew and they didn't know how to pray. And we had to put together a minyan. And one of the great things for a minyan was the fact that Jewish people love having a kiddush. So Saturday we had a great kiddush and slowly people started getting more involved.

Remember our first minyans during the weekdays, there was only two of us every morning, but we were there, two of us, that's all. There was myself and one other person in the basement of a hotel. And then there were three of us. And then we started our classes and slowly people told people that it's interesting. They started coming, participating, and we started having Shabbos in our home for Shabbat. We didn't live here, but we started making Shabbat here. And when we started making Shabbat together, it was for at least four or five years that every Shabbat we had people around our table and it started with two people around a table, three people around a table.

Finally, every Shabbat, we had like 20, 30, 40, 50 people around our table and it became like a happening place. A lot of young people started moving in. A lot of single people started seeing it and recognizing that there's something about this way of life that means something positive. It wasn't just being Jewish because of culture, or because you had to do something. It was a way of life that worked. It has had a history, it had a depth, it had a philosophical system to it. It was a really powerful way. And the language that the Lubavitcher Rebbe had imbued in us was a language that was extremely advanced in terms of the levels of knowledge of the period, because even people who were very scientific and so forth, Jewishness fit into that pattern very well and people who were very modern, Jewishness fit into that pattern very well.

There was no judgment. ... We didn't say I got to dress one way or just another way. We never asked questions where you come from, what's, you know, why don't you dress a different. ... Everything was accepted and if you were Jewish, you had a Jewish soul. You're welcome. Pretty soon, many of these young families — they met each other and they married each other and all these families moved into the community. It was an exponential kind of a growth and pretty soon it required to have other kinds of services. So once we built our school, we had a mikvah, we had children's programs, we had adult programs, we had a preschool and restaurants opened up. We have the finest kosher restaurants in America.

And today, for example, even in the midst of this pandemic and the midst of this horrific calamity that's taken place, we have no room in the shul. We're building a big extension right now, thank God, it has outgrown its facility. There's over 300 kids in our daycare. And that's another very important factor, is people need to grow. They need to learn. They can't remain stagnant. And so when you're constantly having classes like we have, like a fully accredited college, we have like 40 classes a week and we have children's classes, classes for all ages and the classes and all languages. We have our regular schedule. Then we have a Sephardic synagogue under the same roof. And Jewishness has become really, instead of a religion, it's become a way of life.

**WLRN: Jews weren't welcome in Bal Harbor when you first moved there. Can you describe how that's changed?**

RABBI SHOLOM LIPSKAR: It's so incredible how much it's changed. You can't believe, because when we first came here, my son would go down to the water to sit and then he came home one day. He was 8 years old. He says, “Daddy,” he says, “I don't understand.” He says, “The man who's in charge of the waterfront said I can't be here.” I said, “Why?” He says, “Because you're Jewish.” He didn't understand. An 8-year-old kid. ... Or you have eggs thrown at your house. We really felt that we got to make a difference here and it's now totally transformed. You know why? Because like Begin said, you could break my leg, but you can't bend my knee.

**WLRN: Tell us about the aspects of Judaism that mandate helping during hardships and bringing people in when they don't have family.**

RABBI SHOLOM LIPSKAR: Number one, it's just a great community because, you know, when you have a community where most — a lot of the people have come back to their Jewishness — there's a warmth that they want to share it. So they already accustomed themselves to such kindness. And right now, for example, every Sabbath, we used to have a Shabbat in our house every week, now in every single house on Shabbat there are guests, there's no such thing as not having a guest for Shabbat. It's normal. In America. If you want to bring a guest to your house for a dinner, you have to invite them a week in advance or two weeks in advance. Here, you invite them Friday night to come for dinner. And it's not just like a very up neighborhood. It's a very integrated neighborhood and people really feel like a community. ... On Shabbat, our shul’s like that place, everybody comes to shul just to hang out. In fact, they don't leave after that prayer. In our shul, they hang out at two o'clock. You know, you come to school every Shabbat, you'll see 100 carriages and scooters and there's as many women as men in shul, which is really very highly unusual. So it created the community. So in good times that's great. And in challenging times, it's also very helpful to have this kind of integration because the kindness that has extended from the community is the only one thing that has been helpful in this case with all the people that we're dealing with.

<https://www.wlrn.org/news/2021-07-09/pioneer-of-orthodox-jewish-life-in-surfside-shares-how-community-has-evolved-over-the-decades>