

# After flood of antisemitism post-Hurricane Helene, relief group Nechama adds program to combat disaster-related Jew hatred

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## SHELTER FROM THE STORM

'Nechama might be, for their entire life, the only Jewish organization they ever interact with. It's a very unique opportunity we have when we show up on site'



Courtesy/Nechama

Nechama volunteers in Western North Carolina after Hurricane Helene.

By

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Last September, as relief organizations mobilized to provide aid in western North Carolina following the devastation left in the wake of Hurricane Helene — the deadliest tropical cyclone to hit U.S. mainland since Katrina in 2005 — they found themselves facing another storm: a wave of antisemitic conspiracy theories blaming Jews for the crisis.

In an incident described by *The New York Times* a few weeks later, 33 posts peddling antisemitic tropes garnered over 150 million views within days. The posts, which targeted Jewish public officials — specifically then-Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas and Jaclyn Rothenberg, then the director of public affairs at the Federal Emergency Management Agency — included tropes of Jewish dual loyalty and insinuated that Jews were capable of controlling the weather.

The disinformation had a marked impact on relief efforts, affecting people's willingness to rely on FEMA assistance and leading to FEMA releasing a public statement and creating a page to combat the disinformation, Shlomo Rozenek, director of finance and administration at the disaster relief nonprofit Nechama, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*.

In response to the resurgence of the Jewish weather-control myth, Nechama — the only national Jewish disaster relief organization — is creating a program to stem the tide of weather-related antisemitism.

Though still in the process of implementation, Nechama has hired a staff member — Tzlil McDonald — focused specifically on the initiative, is currently forming an advisory board committee, bringing together experts with interest in the subject matter and is engaging in conversations with community leaders and leadership of other disaster relief organizations that are passionate about combating antisemitism. They also plan to create programming that brings members of communities impacted by disasters to volunteer alongside their staff onsite and learn about Nechama and the Jewish community.

“We’re not always going to talk about antisemitism. We’re going to talk about why we are there, the values that we hold that are universal,” Stephan Kline, Nechama’s CEO, told eJP.

According to Rozenek, having responded to disasters in 35 different states over 30 years, Nechama’s team often interacts with people who have never met a Jewish person. As antisemitism spikes across the country, this provides a unique opportunity to break through preconceived notions people might have.

“Nechama might be, for their entire life, the only Jewish organization they ever interact with. It’s a very unique opportunity we have when we show up on site,” Rozenek told eJP.

While the initiative was ideated in the wake of Hurricane Helene, given similar tropes shared widely online in response to the wildfires in Los Angeles this month, this particular form of antisemitism is a storm that has yet to pass, according to Tzlil McDonald, the organization's recently hired project director for combating antisemitism.

"It's going to be a component of any large-scale disaster moving forward. It's not just this one snapshot in history," McDonald told eJP.

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