



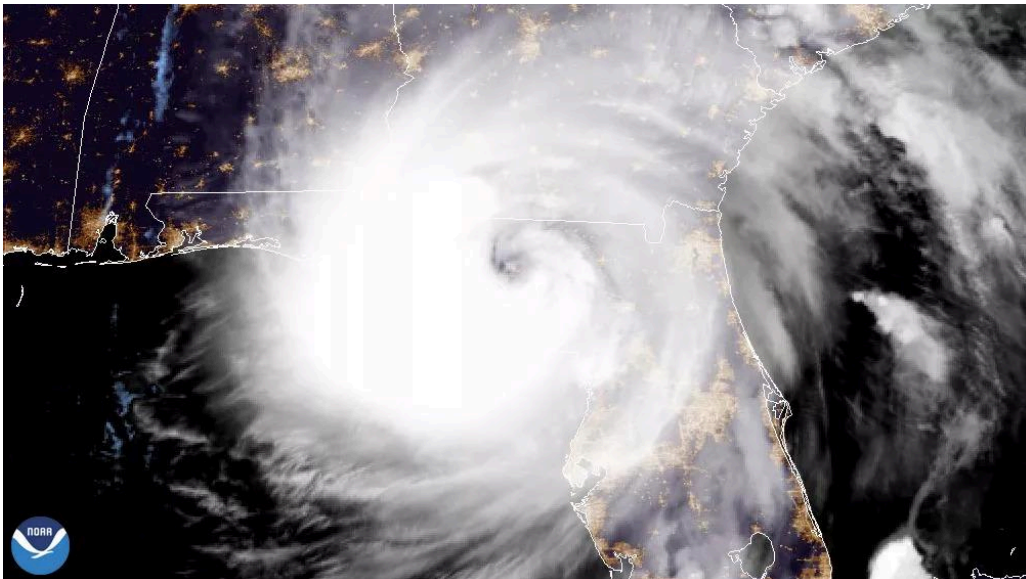
NECHAMA
JEWISH RESPONSE
TO DISASTER

One Year Later: Reflecting on Our Hurricane Helene Response

Approximately one year ago, Hurricane Helene formed in the Gulf of Mexico. While its landfall in Florida was significant, the storm's path turned inland, causing unexpected and severe damage far from the coast. **Twelve months later, we at NECHAMA – Jewish Response to Disaster offer these reflections to this ferocious storm that impacted communities in a way few could have predicted.**

Helene's Arrival

On September 26, 2024, Hurricane Helene made landfall in Florida's Big Bend region as a Category 4 storm. With sustained winds of 140 miles per hour, it caused extensive damage to homes and created dangerous storm surges along the coast. National attention and initial relief efforts were concentrated on the immediate impact area in Florida. As the storm moved inland and its winds weakened, many assumed the greatest danger had passed, especially for communities located far from the ocean.



Satellite imagery of Hurricane Helene as it made landfall.



NECHAMA
JEWISH RESPONSE
TO DISASTER

However, the storm system carried a significant amount of tropical moisture as it moved north. When this moisture reached the Blue Ridge Mountains of Western North Carolina (WNC), the effect was severe and unique – the high valley region had never previously experienced catastrophic hurricane damage. The region's terrain contributed to record-setting flash floods. Small creeks and rivers swelled rapidly, with water levels in some areas rising over 20 feet in a few hours.

The flooding devastated entire neighborhoods, washing homes from their foundations and destroying local businesses. **With at least 230 deaths across six states, the storm is the second deadliest hurricane to impact the mainland U.S. in the last 50 years, after Hurricane Katrina, and at more than \$78 billion in property damage across the Southeast, it is the country's sixth most expensive storm ever.** In North Carolina alone, Helene caused an estimated \$60 billion in damages and at least 113 deaths. For these tight-knit communities, the scale of the loss was immense, and the path to recovery looked uncertain.



Helene's destruction on one of our client's properties.

Even before the storm made landfall, NECHAMA had begun preparing our response. However, the situation on the ground presented significant challenges. Widespread damage to infrastructure, including collapsed bridges and close to 1,000 impassable roads, made travel into the disaster zone nearly impossible. Local authorities had restricted access to prioritize active search and rescue operations. You may remember our [first update](#) from the region, featuring our Director of Operations, Max Manasevit.



NECHAMA
JEWISH RESPONSE
TO DISASTER

Following our protocols, we waited for official clearance, ensuring that our arrival would support, not hinder, the critical work of first responders.

Our Response

On October 4, 2024 we were officially given clearance to begin the first phase of recovery: [mucking and gutting](#) homes. As Western North Carolina is not a typical hotbed for flood damage, many homes have basements, and many were now filled with several feet of mud and silt.



Dedicated volunteers clearing mud out of a basement.

NECHAMA quickly assembled a full team, bringing on two additional team leads. We also began collaborating extensively with the North Carolina Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) to organize volunteers essential for the dirty work we had to do – debris and brush removal, cleaning up mud and silt, applying mold mitigation, and often gutting homes – tearing out water-soaked plaster, carpets, possessions, and more down to the studs. **Our initial work was supported by major grants from the Mandel Foundation of Cleveland, The Leon Levine Foundation, and The Jewish Federations of North America, as well as many other grants from foundations, federations and individuals across the country.**



NECHAMA
JEWISH RESPONSE
TO DISASTER

By the end of the year, NECHAMA had completed over 2,200 hours of volunteer labor and 445 volunteer shifts. This was made possible due to our partnerships with organizations such as SEWA International, OU Relief Missions, Moishe House, JDC Entwine, Temple Israel Charlotte and more. We would like to also thank Repair The World's *Jewish Service Alliance* for being an important point of connection between NECHAMA and many other Jewish organizations.



JDC Entwine volunteers on-site in Western North Carolina.

One client, Kathy R., described NECHAMA's presence as a "profound blessing" and said that she has a deep respect and admiration for the Jewish people and the kindness of NECHAMA volunteers. Kathy said that NECHAMA,

"brought in teams that worked so hard... It was mind boggling to me. I could not have made it through that time without them. Each time they came to my house, they blessed me so much and worked so tirelessly."

As the holiday season ended and many Americans forgot about the devastation in WNC, NECHAMA received an extraordinarily generous grant of \$300,000 from the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina, which supported our presence for many more months in the region, particularly as we turned to rebuilding homes. We also supplemented our professional team by launching a new Hurricane Helene Fellowship



NECHAMA
JEWISH RESPONSE
TO DISASTER

program, ultimately bringing in four talented team members from Americorps' National Civilian Community Corps and FEMA Corps, whose programs were terminated this past spring due to federal budget cuts.

Under the guidance of our expert staff, NECHAMA began installing flooring, drywall, insulation, and painting homes, among other tangible improvements. But perhaps the most important element of our rebuilding process was [mending the broken pieces](#) of the lives shattered by Helene. By improving the condition of people's homes, we showed them that the road to recovery was real and that they could resume their lives.

Our volunteers expressed how important it was to make a difference for those suffering:

"As an interfaith Jew, I was so grateful for the opportunity to participate in this experience with NECHAMA. It was emotional for me to see how many people cared enough to take days out of their workweek to volunteer and make a difference in the lives of others in need. It had me thinking deeply about what it means to live a life led by Tikkun Olam. Truly a remarkable program, and one that I think more people should experience."

Our Impact

As of the end of September, NECHAMA has completed the following:

- **12,804 hours volunteered, valued at \$448,140**
- **900+ unique volunteers**
- **2,320 volunteer shifts**
- **Provided substantial assistance on 60+ projects, including fully completing 40+ projects**

We've also taken on an expanded communal role in North Carolina, partnering with the North Carolina Council of Churches for a Yom Hashoah memorial event, sponsoring an LGBTQ+ Pride initiative of the Asheville Jewish Community Center, and leading a Good Deed's Day at Agudath Israel of Hendersonville. The cities of Hendersonville and Asheville both passed proclamations appreciating both our direct service as well as our efforts to help combat antisemitism in the region.



NECHAMA
JEWISH RESPONSE
TO DISASTER



Pictured: Tzvil McDonald, NECHAMA Project Director: Combating Antisemitism (second from left), Aaron Bloom, NECHAMA Board member Aaron Bloom (center), Hendersonville, NC Mayor Barbara Volk (second from right) at our Good Deed's Day event.

The NECHAMA team will remain in WNC through the end of November, while we stay vigilant during the current Atlantic hurricane season.

Fall 2024 will forever be memorialized as a drastic season for the residents of Western North Carolina. However, in those moments of darkness there are always opportunities for light and hope. At NECHAMA (the Hebrew word for comfort) we are so grateful for our supporters and volunteers who make that hope possible.

The comforting hand you offered will always be remembered by those affected by Hurricane Helene.