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# Ma'ayanot Yeshiva High School Continues to Serve Those Struck by Natural Disasters

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## Ma'ayanot Students Travel to New Orleans on a Chessed Mission



For the third time in as many years, Ma'ayanot, in conjunction with NJ NCSY, sent a group of students to participate in a humanitarian mission in a community devastated by natural disasters. Three years ago students participated in a mission to help victims of the Red River floods in Minnesota, and in each of the last two year students participated in missions to New Orleans to provide assistance to communities still recovering, seven years after the fact, from Hurricane Katrina.

For this year's mission, which took place in mid-February, Ma'ayanot's largest contingent ever, 21 sophomores and juniors, traveled to New Orleans with students from other area high schools, including West Orange High School, James Caldwell High School, Fair Lawn High School, Paramus High School, Hightstown High School, and Toms River North High School. The students were accompanied by Associate Regional Director of NJ NCSY, Rabbi Ethan Katz, and NJ NCSY advisors Gavi Lankin and Anne Guetta, as well as by Rabbi Zev Prince, Talmud teacher and Director of Religious Programming at Ma'ayanot and Jenny Lebowitz (a Ma'ayanot alumna).

Ma'ayanot sophomore Naima Hirsch noted that "the trip was extremely meaningful and inspiring" because it afforded participants a well-rounded experience that included opportunities to perform chessed, to tour, and to experience a bit of New Orleans culture. Ma'ayanot sophomore Davida Goldstein added that traveling with students from different schools and different backgrounds enhanced the trip as "it was interesting to see how the students from different schools reacted; traveling together allowed for interesting discussions with more opinions."

When asked why NCSY and Ma'ayanot would take students on a trip so far away when there is still so much work that needs to be done closer to home in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, Rabbi Prince replied, "We know that our students can achieve anything we put before them, but sometimes we have to bring them a thousand miles away outside of their comfort zones so that they can discover their strengths as well."

Chessed opportunities included working with Habitat for Humanity to rebuild homes for those still misplaced since Hurricane Katrina, and volunteering for Green Light New Orleans, an organization that places volunteers in homes throughout city to install energy-efficient lightbulbs, toward the goals of promoting energy conservation and helping lower energy bills for low-income homeowners.

Also meaningful were chessed opportunities that allowed trip participants to interact with local residents, both by running Purim and other programming for students in the local Jewish Community Day School, and by visiting a local nursing home where the group socialized and sang songs with the elderly residents. Hirsch noted that performing chessed for both the Jewish community and the community at large allowed the students "to learn about responsibility, leadership, and dedication from the people they met and from the stories they heard."

The devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina felt all the more real to the students as they toured the levees and the still devastated neighborhood of the Lower Ninth Ward (the worst-hit area in New Orleans). Especially poignant were visits to an old shul that was flooded in the Hurricane, followed by a stop at the local Jewish cemetery to see where the shul's damaged sifrei Torah and siddurim were buried.

Not all of the touring revolved around the Hurricane. The group also toured the French Quarter, where they visited Cafe Du Monde to sample New Orleans' only kosher beignets, and they stopped at

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Preservation Hall to take in a quintessentially New Orleans jazz show. Finally, the group toured a plantation in Baton Rouge, which was followed by a meaningful lecture, given by NCSY advisor Gavi Lankin, on the Torah's perspective on slavery.

For many of the participants a highlight of the trip was spending Shabbat with local congregants from Congregation Beth Israel. The theme of Shabbat, "Jews Around the World," manifested in the food served and in study sessions, which were led Rabbi Uri Topolosky, Rabbi of Beth Israel, Rabbi Prince and Rabbi Katz, and students as well. "It's not hard for a teenager in Teaneck to forget that there is a world out there aside from her own, especially for one who has never experienced a vibrant Jewish community outside of New York," said Prince.

In summing up her experience, Goldstein commented, "I feel really good about the trip because I was helping not only the Jewish community but the greater community as well, and that is what a Jew should do."

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