

9/11  
TEN YEARS  
LATER



# A Sanctuary

## The Story of the Wall Street Synagogue and 9/11

BY BLIMIE BASCH

*The Wall Street Synagogue, at 47 Beekman Street in Lower Manhattan, makes an interesting neighbor for the New York City Fire Department's Engine Company 6. On the harrowing day of September 11, 2001, they shared more than just a wall; they shared the painful burden of witnessing death and destruction, but also of bringing help and solace to the many survivors who streamed away from the World Trade Center, just four blocks away. The ornate wooden doors of the Wall Street Synagogue were open to all who sought refuge. It stood as a haven of faith and survival in the shadow of Ground Zero.*



# y at Ground Zero

Rabbi Hager presents a check from the shul's memorial fund to benefit the families of fallen firemen to Captain Roger Sakowich, commanding officer of Engine Company 6. This company which is adjacent to the Wall Street Synagogue (seen behind the fire truck), is only four blocks from the Trade Center and was among the first to respond to the terror attacks. Four of its firefighters died doing rescue work.



## A Haven

September 11th dawned bright and sunny. It was after the morning Shacharis minyan and Rabbi Meyer Hager was outside the shul chatting with a fireman. The Wall Street Synagogue shares a wall with the FDNY's Engine Company 6, and the Rabbi and the firemen have a warm, friendly relationship.

"As I was talking to him, we heard a crash," recalls Rabbi Hager. "To me it seemed like it could have been a truck or a manhole explosion, but the firefighter realized that something really bad had happened. He ran into the firehouse and turned on the radio. He was told to keep all channels open for an urgent

announcement. The [fire] truck was out on a job. It raced back and picked up all the firefighters to take them to [the scene of] what I soon found out was an attack on the World Trade Center.

"Meanwhile, I saw people crowding together on the corner at the intersection of Williams and Beekman Streets, and they were looking up. I looked up too and was shocked to see thick smoke billowing from the top floors [of the Twin Towers]. People were streaming out of the towers and passing the shul as they evacuated. That's when I learned that a plane had crashed into the first tower, and a few minutes later the second tower was hit.

"As survivors staggered by in panic and confusion, many stopped in to use our phones or facilities since cell phones weren't working. Of course we obliged. They lined up to make calls. The air all around became thick with smoke. As the towers fell, debris came raining down. More and more people, Jews and non-Jews, came in to sit down and regain their composure. They were traumatized. Some people took a *siddur* or *Tehillim* [and prayed]. This went on for a couple of hours.

"People encouraged me to leave the shul since I have a heart condition and respiratory problems, and the air was thick with soot and ash. I began to walk toward the Lower East Side, past the Brooklyn Bridge. It was like a different country. The air was clearer. I got to

Mesivta Tiferes Yerushalayim on East Broadway, where I spent a few hours sitting and talking. Then I went back to the shul.

"People were still coming past. By the end of the day, the power went off and the shul went dark. The synagogue was completely covered, both inside and out, in layers of soot, dust and ash that were still coming down from the two downed buildings.

"We had to close the shul until a few days after the attacks since no one was allowed to be in the area. It [became] a sealed-off military zone. National Guardsmen patrolled the area to ensure that no unauthorized persons entered.

"I found out that the firehouse next door lost four of their men that day. They later gave me a certificate for our cooperation and assistance on September 11th. On Thursday [September 13th] Con Edison bought a generator to restart power for the fire station, so I requested permission to share it. On Shabbos morning, we got a *minyan* together and *davened*, not in the main sanctuary itself because it was too dark and dirty, but in the mezzanine, the *ezras nashim*, because some light filtered through there.

"Rabbi Jacob Goldstein, chief Jewish chaplain of the National Guard, was in the area and joined us for *davening*. He convinced National Guardsmen to let people through to *daven* since the area was a staging area for emergency personnel.

"Sunday afternoon, a Con Edison truck came by and connected the shul to the

generator, so we had electricity and lights. We were concerned about a *minyan* for Rosh Hashanah, which was the week following 9/11. Each year we have a *chazzan* from Boro Park, Moshe Kiss, who comes and *davens* for us, but the bridges were closed and the subway wasn't operating down to this area, so he couldn't come. So we had someone from the Lower East Side who *davened Shacharis* and *Mussaf* as well. We had a nice *minyan* for Rosh Hashanah because many Jews came from nearby neighborhoods like Soho and Chelsea, to show solidarity.

"On fasts like Tzom Gedaliah we usually have a large turnout for *davening* since those who normally have a *minyan* in their offices need to hear the Torah reading. Usually, we would have the times announced on our phone recording, but the phones weren't working, so we had to handwrite the signs and hang them up along the streets. One of the people who saw all this happening, Abe Brown, a manager at J&R Music World, commented to me that even those signs were [soon] covered in soot and ash.

"One incredible incident took place on the morning of September 11th. Two of our *mispallemim*, Mr. Michael Kaplan and Mr. Uri Ocean, participated in a *shiur* before *davening*. They had an argument on a *gemara* and continued their discussion after *davening*. Normally, Mr. Ocean would leave the Wall Street Synagogue at eight a.m. and walk over the Trade Center's footbridge to his job at the World Financial Center. By the time they resolved their Torah argument and he left to go to work, he saw people jumping from the towers and debris falling."

## Losses at the Synagogue

Though Rabbi Hager was fortunate to see miracles, he also suffered the loss of six of his congregants. One of these was Herman Sandler, z"l, owner of Sandler O'Neil and a philanthropist who supported many worthy causes, including the Wall Street Synagogue.

"Mr. Sandler once told a friend of mine that he had no reason to work," says

Fireman Bill Rodríguez of Engine Company 6 on Beekman Street, who was among the first responders at the World Trade Center, at the Wall Street Synagogue with Rabbi Hager.





Rabbi Hager. "He had more than enough money. The only reason he made the ascent to the 104th floor of Tower 2 was to donate money and carry on philanthropy.

"Eileen Greenstein, a"n, would come to the synagogue for *Yizkor*, *yahrtzeits* and holidays. After September 11th, I got a letter from her mother in Florida informing us that her daughter had died at work in the Trade Center and requesting that we perpetuate her memory on the *yahrtzeit* of 9/11.

"In the days following the attacks, many rescue personnel came to *daven* at the shul. A group of doctors and rescuers from Washington *davened* there on Yom Kippur. Before the congregation began *Kol Nidrei*, someone turned on the air conditioner. It blew in ashes from the outside, and the acrid smell of it filled the shul. The *chazzan*, Mr. Kiss, remarked that these ashes must be the remains of the unknown who perished and who wanted to be in a shul on this holiest of days."

The Wall Street Synagogue was greatly affected in more ways than one. As time went by, things returned more or less to a new degree of "normal," but the shul suffered a setback both financially and in terms of *misppallelim*. Many offices were closed for weeks or months after the attacks, and some never reopened, so the size of the *minyanim* dwindled.

### Reflecting and Rebuilding

A decade after the attacks, Rabbi Hager reflects, "We're still here. We survived, *baruch Hashem*, and were able to accommodate the survivors. It meant a great deal to them [that we were here] even though they all felt a great loss. Many lost their *parnassah*. We are able to be here and serve this community as one of the only places in the area where one can feel spirituality. Nearly every other shul and *minyan* closed down for weeks and even months, yet we remained. I was breathing ashes, but we never left."

When asked how the memorials and rebuilding at Ground Zero will affect the shul, Rabbi Hager says, "It could be helpful. I'm sure the more they build, the better it will be for the shul.

"We are planning to have a memorial gathering here in the shul on September 8 this year to say some *tefillas*, *Kel Malei Rachamim*, *Tehillim*, and memorialize individually those we knew. We have a special relationship with the firemen next door. Whenever we do something in memory of 9/11, we invite them to join us. Since it's Elul now, we will also blow the *shofar* at the moment the tragedy occurred to awaken people more."

Just as Rabbi Hager and the Wall Street Synagogue stood fast in the shadow of Ground Zero, maintaining a spiritual refuge and providing comfort during a time of death and destruction, we hope they will stand proud witnesses to days of joy and celebration and will merit to see the ultimate redemption. ■



(L-R) Former Fire Commissioner Thomas Vanessen, fireman Ralph Burton, and Rabbi Hager at a ceremony held in the Wall Street Synagogue honoring Burton's many years of service to the synagogue.