



# Bluma Rivkin Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: OK. This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Bluma Rivkin at her home at 919 Broadway in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is Thursday, October 12, 2006. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina Jewish Voices Project of the Jewish Women's Archive in the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Bluma, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Bluma Rivkin: Yes.

RH: OK.

BR: OK.

RH: Now, I turn it over to you.

BR: It's Rosalind, right?

RH: Rosalind.

BR: Today is the sixth day of Sukkos, of the holiday of Sukkot. And I'm really very thankful that we have the opportunity to do this interview, especially on this day, because a year ago is when we returned for this holiday, and that's a lot of what I'm going to be talking about when we speak today. And this is the Lulav, the Etrog, the Hadassim, and the Aravot. The date palm. The myrtle. The willows. And the citron. Representing all different kinds of Jewish people. With Torah learning, people who emphasize good deeds, people who have no good deeds, people who have everything. But you can't just take four Etrogim, or four Lulavim, or four Hadassim, or four Aravot. You've got to have the four different kinds in order to make the blessing. And that symbolizes unity between people. And that, to me, is very symbolic about the way I realized the hard way the way



the rebuilding of New Orleans was going to be. When my husband talked to me about coming back and I'm like, I'll come back when it's all fixed up. And my friends said to me, it is you. It is not going to happen unless each and every one of us comes back and does our part. Like, one friend said I'm not coming back until there is a Rabbi back here. And I just began to realize that it's just like the four kinds. We have to have them all together in order to be able to do a mitzvah. We have to have everybody doing their little piece of the puzzle in order to rebuild the community. So I had to come back before it was done because I was it. And that's each and every one of us. So you take this in your right hand and you make the blessing. Barukh --

RH: Barukh --

BR: -- atah --

RH: -- atah --

BR: -- Adonai --

RH: -- Adonai --

BR: -- Elohaynu --

RH: -- Elohaynu --

BR: -- melekh --

RH: -- melekh --

BR: -- ha-olam --

RH: -- ha-olem --

BR: -- asher --



RH: -- asher --

BR: -- keedishanu --

RH: -- keedishanu --

BR: -- b'meetzvotav --

RH: -- b'meetzvotav --

BR: -- v'tzeevanu --

RH: -- v'tzeevanu --

BR: -- al --

RH: -- al --

BR: -- n'tilat --

RH: -- n'tilat --

BR: -- lulav.

RH: -- lulav.

BR: OK. And then you take the Etrog and you hold it together and you just concentrate on the idea of the four kinds and everybody in unity. You give it a little shake and -- OK. So --

RH: Now we'll sit down and --

BR: I just thought I'd refer to some -- oh, I forgot that I'm leashed. OK. Shall we sit now?



RH: So, we'll give him a second to --

BR: That's good.

RH: OK. So, Bluma. We'll now begin with the interview. And if you could just tell me where you were born and how you came -- your own education, and how you came to be in New Orleans.

BR: OK. I was born in Newark, New Jersey. My parents are also from a Chabad Hassidic family. And the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Schneerson that was a great Rabbi in Judaism -- he sent my parents to New Jersey to see what they could do to help out Jewish education in New Jersey over 60 years ago. And I grew up the daughter of a Rabbi. And I grew up in New Jersey with a wonderful Jewish community. And then eventually I went away to New York and studied there for high school. And I did -- I decided to become a teacher. I loved teaching. So I went to a teacher's college, a Jewish teacher's college, and graduated from Beth Rivkah Teacher Seminary. And then I started teaching, and I've taught all different grades. I like elementary school. So I've taught from kindergarten all the way through eighth grade, and that's where I've stopped. I don't feel that I can teach high school effectively. And then I married my husband. And we wanted very much to go and work --

RH: Say your husband's name.

BR: OK. My husband, Zelik Rivkin, Rabbi Zelik Rivkin -- and, at that point, when we got married in 1972, the Rebbe had started this whole movement where he was sending out young couples to college campuses all over the country because there was a tremendous growing rate of assimilation and, you know, on the college campus. And he felt that he wanted to set up a Chabad House on as many college campuses as possible. That it should be like a home away from home for Jewish students. So we started out in San Diego, California. We were there for two years. And then someone



from the New Orleans community asked if we could come here to the Tulane campus. Not we. Asked the Rebbe if he would send a couple here. And when my husband was in a private audience with the Rebbe, the Rebbe suggested New Orleans for us. And my husband came and checked out New Orleans and he thought it was a very good place that he thought we could be effective and do meaningful things here with the students. And so we came here with two young children and found a very warm, welcoming community. Now I must say, before we came here, when my husband said New Orleans, I'm like, New Orleans -- all I knew about New Orleans was hurricanes, Mardi Gras, swamps. I didn't even know there were Jews here. Like many other people before Katrina or even after Katrina. They were like, "Jews in New Orleans?" And of course CNN didn't do anything to help that image that there are actually Jews in New Orleans. And my husband assured me that when he had researched it, according to the Federation, there were 12,000 Jews here, and there would certainly be a lot of people to study with and help in every way possible. So we came and we started out near Beth Israel, in the Lakeview area, which is why it hit me very hard when that area was destroyed. And then shortly afterwards we purchased the house of Freret Street. Chabad House. 7037 South Freret Street. And that became Chabad House on the campus for the students. And right from the beginning we would have like about 40 students on Friday night for Shabbos dinners. And we'd have like 80 people at the Seder. And it was just -- you know, it was something that snowballs because students love kind of a home away from home. We had young children. Our family became their family. And then over time, some of those students actually married and settled in this area until it grew into -- this little area here grew into not only for the students but also there were families here who wanted the Chabad House to be here for them also. Which is why now, if you go by Chabad House, you'll see there is a second building going up. It's going to be just for students, because it has grown to the point where it's almost squishy when there are students and families at the same time. And the students have their needs and the families have their needs. So, actually, next door to Chabad House,



the Roar Student Center, the Chabad House Student Center, is going up. The building next door became available. And that was supposed to be demolished, for building, on the day the hurricane actually hit. We all hoped it got demolished by the hurricane, but of course, that building did not get demolished. Only all the other people's houses. And we're -- what else would you like me to tell you about that?

RH: Well --

BR: What did I find? I found a very friendly community. We lived in San Diego for two years. That was a very nice community, but the friendliness here, the hospitality, the warmth, the continuity with the families -- you know, people staying generations -- you know, the love of the women for preparing food for their families, which I didn't find in other cities. Because you know, at that time, the feminist movement was very strong and there was a big feeling of "Oh, cooking. Anybody can do that." But here I came and I found that many of the women really loved preparing Shabbos foods and holiday foods. I actually learned to make Challah here in New Orleans. Before that, I always bought it ready, but here, at that point, there was no bakery under Rabbinical supervision that I could get Challah from. You know, the Shabbos bread. And I found it to be a very warm, welcoming community. And since I was only about 22, the students were pretty much my age, so I was very close friends with a lot of them and they were with me as we raised our children. And some of them are still here raising their own -- some of them have grandchildren. The students that I met then, now are living in the neighborhood with grandchildren. So --

RH: So, you were centered here in developing this community here, but were you also teaching?

BR: OK. So, we came -- we started out with the Chabad House, the Jewish Student Center, and the primary responsibility in the early years was with the students. I actually did teach at Beth Israel Sunday School almost right from the beginning when I came.



And that's in Lakeview. You know. And I just loved teaching children. And at that point there was a Day School -- Lake Shore Hebrew Day School -- but they didn't need teachers. And I was pretty busy during the week with Chabad House, but on Sundays I taught at Beth Israel Sunday School. So I feel really connected to that congregation. And then of course, you know, the ongoing interaction with adults -- I got involved with the mikvah at Beth Israel. The mikvah that's needed for the Jewish marriage discipline. And right from the beginning, I just got involved. Our job here was to try to help out in whatever we can in helping the Jewish community in whatever way possible. My husband and I would speak for different groups. My husband taught a lot of classes at Chabad House. He had a table on campus. And a center point of our interaction with the students was Shabbat. You know, eventually -- at that point what we'd do is we'd move into Chabad House every Shabbos with our children and just kind of, you know, hang out together with the students Friday night, Shabbos lunch and services. And you know, then it grew.

RH: So, why don't we talk a little bit now about Katrina and about your experiences.

BR: Well, how about if I tell you my hurricane experiences for the last 29 years, which were very positive.

RH: Oh, OK. Let's talk about that.

BR: My hurricane experiences for the last 29 years before Katrina were always amazing in the sense that at the last -- we knew when we came here, we heard about Betsy and Camille. But that was history and we couldn't imagine what they went through but we heard about it. But after that, every hurricane warning just came and went, thank God, and at the last minute, every hurricane either turned away or went down to a lower category and I have to tell you that I didn't really take it very -- personally, I didn't take it very seriously because every time, thank God -- you know, we had times when the power went out. We had -- once, we had a hurricane during Sukkot and we didn't know --



should we take down the Sukkah or should we not? And then it went down to a very mild little tropical storm. And then I think it was around 1991 maybe -- we had the Hurricane Andrew thing -- where we were told that we should maybe evacuate. And at that time we called up our Rabbi -- the Lubavitcher Rebbe -- and we said, what should we do? Should we evacuate? They've recommended evacuation but we don't feel -- what should we do? And the Rebbe told us then not to evacuate at that time. And Hurricane Andrew turned and went in a completely different direction, actually to where a lot of people evacuated. And then, the year before Katrina, we had the warning of Ivan, when really a lot of people evacuated and it seemed like really, we should evacuate. In fact, Ivan was supposed to be coming up the mouth of the Mississippi, which, now I understand, is right down Broadway. And they were showing 25-foot storm surge and blah, blah, blah. But somehow, all this time, my husband never felt that we should evacuate. He always -- watching the storm track and so on -- he just felt that we should wait, wait, wait and then it would turn. And with Ivan we had a real dilemma because Rosh Hashanah was coming, and there would come a point where we would no longer be able to leave. We couldn't just get on the road and end up somewhere without a synagogue, with a Shofar, and more important, we didn't want to abandon -- we knew that many people would not leave here no matter what. They couldn't leave. So we didn't want to abandon the people, especially older people, and leave them for Rosh Hashanah. And what should we do? It was a very hard thing. And thank God, again, after many, many people evacuated, and I'm happy that they did, at the last minute Ivan turned away completely so that not one drop of rain, not one drop of rain, fell on New Orleans. This was exactly a year before Katrina. So, for 29 years, this was our hurricane experience. The biggest inconvenience was with Tropical Storm Cindy when the freezer went out for three days. You know, and that's why I actually had a battery-operated radio in the house by Katrina. But actually, we were not supposed to be in the cone when Katrina was hitting. That Friday, when I left school, Katrina was not coming this way. And then Shabbos started, and we do not turn on the radio during that whole time, but that Shabbos, in Chabad





House, a lot of the Tulane -- it was freshman orientation, I believe, that weekend. And a lot of the Tulane parents came in all alarmed that they were telling all of the students to evacuate. And I have to tell you, my reaction at that point was, here we go again. This happens every year. We had George. We had Andrew. We had Ivan. And you know obviously if they tell you to evacuate, that's what you should do. But it was just like, oh, here we go again. But then Saturday night, it was clear that this was not the same kind of storm. And for the first time, in all of the years, my husband started saying, well, maybe we should evacuate. It looks like -- you know, but he thought we could wait until Sunday morning to decide. And there was so much going on in our house. We had so many people staying. We have a lot of guests that come, tourists, for conventions, for this, for that, and all of their planes were cancelled. So we spent the whole night trying to help people make arrangements. There were no rental cars available. The planes were cancelled. That was the biggest craziness that -- you're hosting people and they have no way to get out. And you can't -- you know what I'm saying? So that took a lot of time. And then we were actually, after all of our out-of-town guests left, we still were 13 people staying in the house. And the Nemeses also had 13 people, which was interesting that we ended up with that same number. And at one point, I'm not saying this has any religious significance, but at one point I thought to myself, there is the concept in Kabbalah about the 13 attributes of God's mercy and I'm like, this is the time when we really need the 13 heavenly attributes of mercy. Thirteen people here; thirteen people there. You know? Anyway -- and so we were just -- we were just being snowballed by the -- everything was just growing. People calling. What should we do? We don't have a way to get out. Where should we stay? And in the past, with Ivan, a lot of people came and stayed in our house because it's very high and people felt it would be pretty sturdy. And it had lasted 100 years and it could probably last through a storm. But Sunday morning, when my husband listened to the news, unfortunately, instead of getting better, it had gotten worse. And at that point, he started telling people that we were evacuating. So as people called that whole morning, many, many people who had



never evacuated before -- when they heard that he was evacuating, they evacuated. And all day he kept saying, we're evacuating, we're evacuating. And we tried. We did laundry and we cooked food and then people called and said they were stranded in hotels and didn't have Kosher food. So my son took the food and brought it down. And then we had to start cooking again. It was a very crazy situation for people who were stranded. There was a tourist that called up -- he couldn't get any Kosher food. Everybody had closed down. All of the restaurants. Everybody had evacuated all of the Kosher restaurants. The grocery stores were cleaned out of food. All he could get was one bag of potato chips and a bottle of water and it was sold to him for \$40. And could we help him with food. So my son Mendel and Malkie, who were living then in our house with the five children -- why were they there? Because they had just moved out of their apartment. They had put all of their stuff in storage. And they were in the process of finishing up this house down on Broadway. So it was just going to be painted and then they were going to move in. So they were for like a few weeks. That's why they happened to be with us and that's why their stuff was in storage. So they started, you know, trying to help all of these people who were stranded and some of the older people, and the day just went and went and went and it started to become a dilemma. Is it even safe to evacuate, because as it got later and later, then you come into the idea of are you going to end up with flood -- getting stuck in a flash flood or something. Because other times, the storm turns, either east or west, right, unexpectedly, and you could end up right in the path. So, what we have been told over the years, is to discuss such things -- I'm getting bugs in my hair, sorry -- you know, with a Rabbinical advisor. So I called up a Rabbi that we ask for guidance in California, and we discussed the whole thing with him in great length, and he discussed it with some other Rabbis, because it was a complex question, what to do at this point. Was it more risky for us to stay here, and I described the house to him, or was it risky for us to get on the road -- we had very small cars, the little Camrys, and end up in floods. And it was like, really, I have to tell you that I was very reluctant to leave because I just knew that many people were not leaving and it



seemed mentally sane to leave, but to abandon our community didn't seem right either. Now, of course, nobody knew what the future was going to bring. We were unable to see how difficult and dangerous it would be. We thought it would just be a bad storm and then we would be able to help in any way possible. And then our son and daughter-in-law assured us that they were not leaving. There were too many people that they were hauling and trying to help and so on, with their children, anyway, the time just went on and then finally, time just went on and finally the Rabbi encouraged us to fortify the house as best as we could. We had a lot of food, a lot of water, and he said that at this point, it seems more dangerous to get out on the road. Because it was so late already. It was about five or six o'clock Sunday. And so we did that. And once we kind of made that decision, we made very good -- we were at peace with that decision. We had tons of food. We had freezers full of food, which of course later on, that was our undoing. We didn't know what was going to happen or we would have taken it with us. And lots and lots of water and tons of cases of tuna and crackers. And, I mean, we happen to usually have a lot of food. And I was very well stocked. And then he said to just, after you fortify the house and do everything possible, just pray. Pray a lot. So that's what we did. And the storm was like nothing I'd ever experienced. I had always sat on the porch and watched the storm. It was like a very strong storm. It was unbelievable. And then at 11 o'clock at night, we saw on the computer that, thank God, it had turned and it was not going to hit New Orleans directly. It turned to the east 30 miles. It had gone down to a Category 4. And it was like, thank God. New Orleans has avoided a direct hit. And I actually went to sleep feeling peaceful. My family, a lot of them were sitting up, reciting psalms, and just talking to each other, and then at five o'clock in the morning I heard the big crack, the power went out, because we had air conditioning all night because that was really a pleasure. And then I looked out the window and I saw the most awesome thing I've ever seen in my life. I mean, the real -- and this was not a Category Five and this was not a direct hit and yet this was really awesome. I mean, trees were snapping everywhere. It was unbelievable. Very, very strong wind and rain, as you've seen



everywhere. And that went on for a couple of hours. We lit candles. You know, like those deep Yartzeit candles. In Jewish homes, you have a lot of them, usually, so -- I had some of those seven-day candles that I lit the year my father passed away. We kept that lit for a year, so those last for like a week. So I had a few of those available. And you know, we kind of huddled together and said a lot of prayers. The chimney -- a big piece of the chimney fell down and broke the window on my son's car and that created a problem later with the evacuation. And then it was a couple of hours that were quite awesome until about eight or maybe -- I guess 11 o'clock is when I remember it being over. I don't know what everybody says on the news, but that's what I remember.

RH: Is that Monday morning?

BR: Yeah.

RH: OK.

BR: And basically I was -- our landline was working the whole time, and our cell phone was working the whole time, and I did not feel disconnected. People from all over the world kept calling -- our sisters and brothers from all over -- and cousins and aunts and uncles and friends and everybody kept calling, and everybody was praying, and everybody was praying for New Orleans and I -- it just did not feel like -- I'm not trying to minimize it, but you know, it reminded me a little bit of being in labor, when they tell you, you know, like I kept calling my sister and I'd say, we don't have power anymore. What do they say on the computer? And she'd say, it's almost over. It's almost over. You know what I'm saying?

RH: Right.

BR: It reminded me of when the nurses tell you, OK, this is transition and soon the baby's going to be born and then it's going to be over. And then it was over. And then we looked outside -- and in our yard, a lot of the trees were down. And obviously, what's



left has grown back, but there were a lot more trees. And we saw roofs down and we saw destruction, but the storm was over. And I think around 1 o'clock or maybe 2 o'clock, we actually started taking walks outside to see what was going on. And our family, different members of our family, walked to each of the houses of the people that we knew around here and thank God it looked like everybody's houses that we knew seemed to be OK. I didn't see any roofs off or anything. I mean, later on we all found that we all had wind and roof damage. But at that point, of the particular people that we knew, we didn't see any major damage. Now, walking down Broadway, there were some houses where the roof had torn off completely. There were a lot of broken windows. We personally, in our home, had no broken windows at that time and the only thing we had was we had some leaks during the hurricane that we actually, by being home, were able to prevent the damage from going further. We took away everything the water was pouring in on and put out -- we put out pans to catch the water and that was it. And then we took walks and we saw what was going on and it seemed like there would be some fixing up to do. There would be some -- you know, there were homes that had damage. A lot of trees down. But, you know, we said, thank God. We came back into the house. We got ready to eat, like in the olden days, where you'd eat before dark, and then we'd try to wash the dishes and clean up before dark, and then we talked about how to plan to manage for a few days without power. And it was still fairly cool, so we were able to sleep without power. The next morning, my husband and I had a little meeting on the porch, everybody was still sleeping, and we talked about the idea that we have to figure out how we were going to manage for a few days now without power. Get everybody used to not -- to only using one towel and putting it down. We didn't have the laundry. With 13 people in the house, you can go through all that stuff very fast, and how we were going to figure out how the food -- how to use the food properly, you know, with the refrigeration. And, the strange thing was I had the radio on and all night long I kept hearing people screaming for help on the radio and saying, my house did not have water after the storm and now I have eight feet of water, nine feet of water, and I didn't have a



clue what was going on. And I listened to the radio all night. And yet obviously I slept a lot but every time I woke up, I had the radio, I turned it back on, I heard these strange things. People saying, "There is water in my house. I have eight feet of water. Help. I'm on my roof." You know. What happened was people were calling with cell phones to the radio. I'm sure you heard about this. I'm sure you heard about this on the news.

Basically, after the levees broke that night, I didn't hear any announcements about the levees breaking. For some reason, it was not announced on the radio, that I can tell, did anybody ever tell you that? That they didn't announce that the levees broke that night?

RH: There's a lot of confusion about that.

BR: Well, I can tell you that I turned WWL on and off all night. I heard people crying for help. I heard people saying, "I'm at 7907 Nelson. I've never flooded. And now I've got nine feet of water. I didn't have any water after the hurricane." Or, "I had two feet of water after the hurricane and now I'm at 9 feet of water." It was very, very strange. You know. But we lucked out. Our street was bone dry. Bone dry. And so we started getting everybody ready for breakfast and giving everybody little speeches about how we have to keep the house clean and, you know, the next couple of things. And then I turned the radio on again and I heard this panicking, screaming voice on the radio: "The levees have breached. We've been trying all night to fix them. We can't. The city is filling up with water. Get out now. If you can get out, get out now." There is one way out, the West Bank Expressway. And it was like the most crazy moment and at that point my husband said, "We are leaving in 15 minutes. Everybody pack whatever you can. We are leaving in 15 minutes." Now, we had been in talk with the Nemeses to see how they were doing. And although we had no water in our house, they told us, well you probably heard this from him -- they had about two feet of water. And they had to go upstairs.

RH: Well, now, that's the Rabbi at the Chabad House.

BR: In Metairie.



RH: In Metairie.

BR: In Metairie.

RH: OK.

BR: And they also had 13 people sheltering in their house and they had to go to the second floor, but around two o'clock Monday, we were no longer able to be in touch with them. Their cell phones and their landlines stopped working. So I was very worried about the situation over there when I heard all of these weird things on the radio, that people were getting so much water. And then, I forgot to tell you -- six o'clock, Tuesday morning, I got a call from England. Rabbi Nemeses had his niece from England staying there and her mother was on the phone all panicking because she hears that people are dying and drowning and I'm like, oh, that's not here. That's in Mississippi. You know, we avoided a direct hit. The hurricane did not come here. And Mississippi is very close. So in England, you're probably hearing. She said, "No, I heard Metairie." And I said, "You don't mean Metairie. You probably mean Meridian or something." And she said, "No no. I'm really worried." And I said, "Well I have no way to contact the Nemeses." And she said, "I'm going to contact the Red Cross and see if there is anything they can do." Anyway, at that point, I really did not even want to leave and kind of abandon the Nemeses and we didn't know what to do because we had made out with them that as soon as they can get out, they should come to our house with their 13 people and stay with us. Not knowing what was really going on in the street. You see how ignorant we all were. In the end, we left a car for them and a key. And we wrote like a whole message in Hebrew that we were leaving food for them and a car and a key and a key to the house so that if they ever came here, they'd be able to use the house. And the last phone call was to our Rabbi, actually, to just consult with him once more. I said, "My husband said we're leaving in 15 minutes. The levees have broken. I don't want to abandon the Nemeses. What should we do?" He said, "Right now, you have to save your lives. You



have to get out. And so with very heavy hearts -- it was the craziest feeling, the packing -- and it was extremely -- as I'm sure everybody has told you, you don't know what to take when you have 15 minutes and our biggest problem was we had very little space. We had one car that was filled with broken glass from when the chimney had fallen on the car window. And we had so many people to take -- one car had a broken trunk. So we had one usable trunk. Thirteen people. And our son and daughter-in-law were visiting as newlyweds. So they had a lot of luggage, and they needed to bring their luggage. Our son was going away back to school; he had his luggage. So in the end, we told everybody else, they could take one little -- 26-inch, whatever it is -- that one little roll-away that you take as a carry-on, and then my daughter-in-law filled up three bags with food -- peanut butter, tuna, that kind of thing -- for three different cars. And it looked like we were going to be separated. And she had to break up her children between the cars because there wasn't enough room in one car because of the broken glass. That was a very harrowing moment. I was like frozen. I didn't know what to take. And of course you have all of the photo albums and -- it was impossible. We were choosing life because it was either people in the car or possessions. And obviously we had to choose the people. So, I just took my marriage ketubah, because you're supposed to always know where that is and I took certain prayer books and, you know, some basic clothing and a little bit of the jewelry. And I told my daughter to take the wedding albums of all the married children and just put them up on the third floor. I figured, if the water came in, it probably wouldn't get up the third floor but we couldn't take it in the car. And then I saw my husband took some very special letters that we had received from the Lubavitcher Rebbe guiding us over the years and he put that in his little thing. And I saw that he had his head on straight. And a few study books. And then we were in the car and we were very fortunate to be able to get out. And I heard later that some guy came with a bobcat and cleaned the streets, so I think he was doing that so that emergency vehicles could come in, but it actually allowed -- that's my take on it. I heard that somebody from the Green Parrot Nursery came out with his bobcat and started clearing the trees. Because





my impression was that it was worse the day before when we took a walk. When we actually tried to get out, it seemed to be more clear. And we were just able to get out, and we started driving to the West Bank Expressway. Some policemen and firemen that we met on the way walking told us which way would be the shortest way to go. And it was very easy to go. We thought we were going to be stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic. We thought we were going to be stuck in public shelters. But the Way was empty. Because, I guess, we left so quickly. And the way they were talking on the radio, I didn't think we were ever going to come home. It sounded like the whole city was going to be flooded, but then I thought, 15 feet of water and everything will be OK. But then, when we got to Lafayette where we had a friend, and they turned on CNN and we saw all of the looting that was going on and it didn't seem like there was going to be a city to come back to. And I remember feeling as we were driving that we were just being scattered like dandelions. And I had to just focus myself. Our basic belief in Judaism is that every single thing happens by divine providence. The sun is on you. You look uncomfortable. Are you OK?

RH: I'm OK.

BR: OK. All right. And I have to remember that every single thing, where we are being put and where we are going, doesn't feel loving but it is being done lovingly by God by divine providence. There is a master plan, here. There is a master of the universe. I remember just thinking these thoughts as we were driving out. I remember when 9/11 happened -- when the planes flew into the Twin Towers -- Rabbi Nemes came into the school and into the lunch room and he said to the children, "Although it feels like the world has just gone crazy, and it seems like everything is just happening wildly and randomly like it's a jungle, there is a Master of the Universe." And the core base of Jewish belief is that every single thing happens by divine providence, so we took out our psalms and we said psalms together in school. And we prayed. And at that point they talked about their being 25-50,000 people in the Twin Towers. I don't know if you



remember that.

RH: Right.

BR: I'm not saying that 25,000 people -- that 2,500 people that died isn't terrible -- it is terrible -- but it's about one-tenth of what was originally thought to be. Do you remember that?

RH: Mm-hmm. Right. Right.

BR: Anyway -- we got to Lafayette and in Lafayette we stayed in the home for a few hours with this wonderful Jewish family that always came to us for Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur because they were looking to be in a traditional service and they would come to New Orleans for the high holidays and sometimes they would come for Sukkot. They came a lot of times for Sukkot. And we came to their house and it was very nice to be there. They had already taken in a lot of New Orleans people into their home. And from there we just drove toward Houston --

RH: Was there a reason you decided to go to Houston?

BR: Because -- my sister actually lives in Birmingham. We wanted to go to Birmingham. But the twin spans, the bridge to the east, had broken. Otherwise, I would have gone to Birmingham. Now, of course, I know that God guided us to Houston, I feel, because when we got to Houston, about a day or two later, we found out that there were thousands of New Orleans Jews there, and it was a huge place where people ended up that we were able to do something about. But our natural instinct would have been to go to Birmingham. My sister begged us to begin with to go there to evacuate. But the road to the east was closed, so we could only go to the west. And at that point, our cell phones were not working, but we got a text message from the Chabad Rabbi in Houston that we have food and lodging for you. Please come. We're all set up. We know you have 13 people with you. We've researched everything and please -- we're all set for



you. By the time we were able to use the phones, my brother-in-law had called and arranged a hotel room in Houston. He arranged three hotel rooms for my husband and me and our children; for our newlywed daughter and son-in-law; and for our son Mendel and Malkie and their five children. He said, "Before you go to anybody, just go to a hotel for a night. Catch your breath. Refresh yourself. And then you'll see what to do next. Because," he said, "this is not a one-day thing. I've been watching the news. This is going to be eight, nine months if not forever. And you need a day to catch your breath." So we came to the hotel and we had bags and bags of food. Whoever travels without food? We thought we were going to be stuck in public shelters. So what we did was we actually left a lot of our food in Lafayette where they can't get Kosher food, so we had brought roast beef and hamburgers and chicken -- we left that all there. And we just -- and they were so thrilled because then they had some food to eat because they had all of these New Orleans families that kept Kosher and that had come to stay with them. And everybody thought who had evacuated beforehand that they were leaving for two or three days. We knew we were leaving for longer, but we had no space to take any more. That was the irony of it. We knew we were leaving for who knows how long, but we had no space. They thought they were leaving earlier and most of them didn't even take something to wear for Shabbat. Most people leaving on a Sunday took a couple pairs of casual things. They thought they'd be back Tuesday or Wednesday. We each actually took at least one thing for Shabbat, you know. And when we got to Houston, the Chabad Rabbi and his wife, Rabbi and Mrs. Lazarov, after we stayed in the hotel, we stayed there overnight, and I remember watching CNN just for four hours straight and that was just -- I didn't watch CNN again the rest of this whole experience because I -- we don't have a television in our house. We specifically don't want to have a television. We have a VCR. We have a DVD player. But we don't want a TV. We just don't like the uncontrollable content of the programming and the advertisements and the commercials and, you know, whatever -- cable -- and so on. And I found that CNN -- it was true, the news was really bad -- but they distort -- when I'm saying CNN, I mean all of the media.



They showed the same exact image four times in the same picture. I looked very carefully. It was the exact same looter. They made four times in the same exact thing. In one picture. So it looked like there were four looters. I'm not saying there weren't thousands of looters, but they created this horrible, negative feeling. And I'm not saying it wasn't negative. It was terrible. But, at the same time, there were unbelievable miracles and kindness going on here. Anyway, you know --

RH: So you were not too pleased with how they were portraying the city?

BR: I felt that they were focusing on the most negative, hopeless -- and there was a lot of terrible stuff going on. But they only showed the evil, the negativity, the destruction -- which of course is what sells news -- but at the same time, I heard later stories from people, I met people, who did such incredible things, and I feel like the media shapes -- does not take its responsibility seriously enough in the power that it has to actually shape people's decisions. You know what I'm saying? I know that there may have been people who -- later on for example, like in December. After we were back here. It was non-stop, non-stop negative about the levees and the levees and the levees and the levees and I actually became physically ill from how negative it was. And all of my friends were saying, we're moving. You should move. And one day, I just opened up one of the books of different letters that the Lubavitcher Rebbe wrote to people over the years on particular subjects. And this particular letter happened to be to somebody in Israel after his community had suffered a terrorist attack, and he wrote to the Rabbi about wanting to move away. Not a terrorist attack. It was at that time, was it called terrorists in the 1950s? I don't know what they were called in the 1950s. Whatever it was when the Arabs would come in and --

RH: The guerilla --

BR: The guerilla attacks. I don't know if it was called terrorism in those days. And they wanted to move, and the Rabbi writes back to them, all this talk about moving that



nobody knows where they are watched more closely and where they are more safe. The Guardian of Israel does not sleep or slumber and God can watch you wherever you are. And what you should do is stop all of this talk about moving. Get busy in your community by being a candle that lights the way. And dispels darkness from your surroundings. And just get busy, you know, with your observance and your holidays and your teaching and your friendship and your extending love to others. And to me, that was somewhat of a turning point. I made up my mind at that point -- I had to stop reading over and over all of these articles. I had to just read enough to be able to effect what I could effect, but I had to spend more time -- I remember, that day, I called up my brother and --

RH: And when -- this was in December?

BR: This was in December. December 10.

RH: OK.

BR: I remember it very clearly. It was December 10. And I remember I called up my brother around then and I told him -- my brother in California was very, very helpful to me. And I said to him, I told him some of the things that were going on here. We couldn't get any plumbers. I couldn't get any -- you know, all of the things that people were going through, and he said, Bluma, everyday make yourself two lists. Write all of the things that you can do -- that you can't do anything about. All of the problems that I can't do anything about. The levees. The contractors. The plumbers. Call that God's list. Make another list of all of the things you can do something about. Call that Bluma's list. Everyday, do a few things on Bluma's list. That was a tremendous tool that he gave me for my mental health. And wherever I've gone to share our story, people have told me that this was what they've been able to take immediately into their life tomorrow. The idea of Bluma's list and God's list and do a few things on God's list everyday. I mean, a woman told me she had cancer and when she heard this, she felt that she was going to adopt this into her daily life, this idea. And so getting back to how I felt then about the



media -- you know, I realize that we'll never get to Sukkot, so I don't know if you want me to do this or not.

RH: Oh, we're doing great. Keep going.

BR: So that's how I felt. That's Mendel. So that's how I felt about the media. I was physically sick and I know the news was bad, but I think the repetition has a tremendous negative effect on people. I also think that visual is very, very strong. Visual for good and visual for bad. It's one thing to hear something on the news, and it's another thing to actually see it. So I think they have to be responsible and balanced. You know, like I have a deal now. Whenever somebody comes and says something horrible to me, I say, now you have to tell me one good piece of news. For everything horrible you tell me, I need to hear one good thing. And I'm not trying to be Pollyannaish here, but I think we have to be more mentally balanced. It's not going to help anybody if we all fall apart.

RH: So, how did you make decisions of what to do in Houston?

BR: OK. So this is what it was. We were swept by the conditions, by the circumstances. What happened was, after we left the hotel, we went to the Lazarov's house -- Rabbi and Mrs. Lazarov -- the head *schluchim*, the people that the Rabbi sent to Texas over 30 years ago. They were very welcoming and here we were, 13 people walking into their house. They prepared five bedrooms. They had had a lot of little children who are now all grown up. They treated us royally. And the phones did not stop ringing. We all had cell phones that we got working. You know, we put in our new phone numbers. We went in and put in New York exchanges because the 504s were not working. And the phones were all ringing non-stop and basically we were just swept by the conditions. They knew more about what was going on at that point than we did when we first came. They had already started a rescue effort. I mean, not a rescue to come in here and rescue, but to try to help New Orleanians as they were coming. They had been flooded with volunteer offers. They had been flooded with people ready to come with



clothing, with housing, with money. Chabad of Texas was already flooded with all of that, as were so many other organizations. So when we came to them they were like, we're ready to help in any way possible. What can we do to help? I mean, immediately, my husband and Mendel went down to the Astrodome to see, as people were coming into Houston, and Rabbi Lazarov said, "Let's start getting apartments ready, because pretty soon, people are not going to be able to stay indefinitely with their friends, their cousins, their hotels, their motels -- let's start finding some apartments for people because," he said, "the prices here are going to skyrocket when" he said, "I've heard 25,000 New Orleanians have come here." And we heard that 2,500 Jewish New Orleanians had come to Texas. And let's try to get just a few apartments. Let's start with the people that you know that are going to contact you. In other words, it's the idea that you just do one family at a time, one smile at a time. So what happened was, our son Yochanan and his wife, they, because the Tulane students had evacuated, they had no doubt that they should evacuate. They were also in a very small low house which unfortunately did flood. And they left early. They left Sunday. So they actually had working phones and everything else and they got the rescue effort going, working with the New York Chabad office, to actually get a team to come in here and start getting people out. And at that point, they talked to my husband -- at that point, the phones were working as we were driving, and what happened was there were professional rescue people -- whatever you call them. I've forgot what they're called -- you know, people who literally go to disasters and Chabad Headquarters in New York together with the --

RH: Is it the ZAKA?

BR: Oh, ZAKA is a different thing. ZAKA, they come and help when there is a disaster. I'm saying that there are actually professional people who are trained, with all of the equipment and everything, and Chabad in New York, together with our son Yochanan, and being in consultation with my husband on the phone put together an actual rescue team. They stationed themselves in Baton Rouge. This happened like very, very



quickly, because what happened was, we started getting phone calls from people. My son, my uncle, my brother, my grandmother, my great-grandfather, that are still here. And Malki, my daughter-in-law, she had been in touch with a lot of the older people that hadn't left. And we knew addresses. And don't ask me how she had the presence of mind, but she actually took her entire mailing list and everything with her. I don't know how she did it with five little children, but she just thought the work was going to continue. She thought we'd be away a couple of days and -- I don't know. So that helped us have actual -- we knew that Mrs. So-and-so was in this house and Mr. So-and-so -- and people started e-mailing and calling to say I know this one and I know that one. Can you go and get them? So they actually got a professional rescue team. And then some of the rabbinical students that are young and strong came and -- drove down or flew down, I guess -- to Baton Rouge and they went in, with the rescue teams, and they one-by-one -- and a lot of people were doing this. They got out about 50 people all together over those few days. Now, some of the people they were actually able to get out because it was a rabbinical student. Like, one older man refused to leave. But when he saw a rabbinical student with the rescue team, he was like, "a rabbi came to save me? OK. I'll go." It's like they didn't want to trust the National Guard or the Red Cross. And you know obviously, this is a drop in the bucket compared to what the Coast Guard did and all of the other rescues and everything, but every person that is saved is a complete world. So this particular rescue team did save about 50 people. A lot of older people who, like -- it was the craziest story. One guy, they promised him we're going to have a private jet for you to take you -- because you know, they just had to get him out. He had some illness. And he -- you know. Anyway, there are different stories. I know this sweet older man here, Mr. Scher, he has a very devoted son and his son would have never left without him, but his son had gone that weekend to take his daughter away to college. And there were many people who got left for that reason. So he was with another Israeli man named Mr. Akron, and they told us the story and I thought it was an exaggeration, but I actually met their rescuer so it's really true. They told this story





that they were -- it was Thursday already and they were getting desperate. Broadway by where they were was filled with water. Our street, the water pretty much stopped at our corner. I mean, there was a little bit of water in the street but nothing -- even our basement didn't get wet. We were very fortunate. But further down, like where Marlene lives, and they had like five feet of water over there. Now, they were on the third floor, but this was a man who was probably 90 already and they didn't know what they were going to do. So this Mr. Akron said to this Mr. Scher, let's put on tefillin and pray to God to help us. This is the story they told me. So they put on tefillin, the phylacteries they put on, and they were praying to God to send them help. This is what they said and the rescuer confirmed that it was true. Like a boat kind of came into the yard like in the mud. It was pushed in the mud, this boat. Now, they were too frail to do anything about the boat. But then they see this guy walking down Broadway with a rope named Juan Parke. Have you heard of Juan Parke? Juan Parke saved a lot of people. So Juan Parke was walking down Broadway with this rope and they're like, what are you walking in that dirt for? And he's like, I'm trying to save people. And they said, if you want to save people, there is a boat in the yard. And then Juan Parke picked up the story here and told me. And he actually went into the yard and there was this boat all stuck in the mud. He took it and he attached a rope and then he helped these people, you know, with the boat. And he said, for example, Mr. Scher was a Holocaust survivor and he said to him, you take your time. And I said to him, how do you get a man who is almost 90 to pack in 10 minutes. I know how -- he said, I didn't care if he packed in 30 minutes. I told him you take your time. I'm not rushing you. And he said to him, after you went through the Holocaust, I'm not leaving you behind. We're either both going to be dead or we're both going to get out of this alive. You know. And just that kind of kindness. I think there should be a daily feature on the news telling these stories.

RH: Mm-hmm.



BR: You know what I'm saying? I think this could be the most tremendous, inspiring experience if the good that was done would also be publicized. You know what I'm saying?

RH: Right.

BR: There's a big emphasis on the bad things that were done. And I'm not minimizing the bad that was done. And to me the bad that was done brings out, you know, you asked me how it influenced me. As an educator now, and as a teacher, I think very carefully that what we have to do is make sure we're raising children who will be self-motivated to do what's morally right, even when the police are not able to function as police. And even when the principal is not around or when their parents are not around. You've got to have something inside you that tells you what's right. And that was the whole failure here. That once the alarms didn't work and the police didn't work, there was obviously a tremendous moral failure, what people chose to do. Right?

RH: Right.

BR: And the only way that can be fixed to me is starting with proper education. Because every person has to be educated in a way that they will choose to do the right thing because it's right, not because a policeman is going to shoot you if you don't. Anyway --

RH: You're in Houston.

BR: So we're in Houston. I'm totally confused. So as I was telling you, the Lazarov's invited us in. I remember the moment and I was friends with her. I didn't want to step into her house. I didn't want to step into her house. I didn't want to have to be a guest. I didn't want to have to be a forced guest. I just wanted to go back to my own house. And I host a lot of people. Our home is a home that a lot of people come and stay for different -- either for conventions and they want a place where they can do Shabbat near a Shul. Or we have an Israeli couple that's coming next week because she's having some kind of



surgery and they need a place to be. For different people over the years I thought I was a nice hostess. But I never realized how difficult it is to be in a situation where you have to be a guest, not where you're choosing. It's not like when you go to your friend for dinner. But where you don't have a choice. Either because life has put you in a situation where this is where you need to be or because you have an illness or something and this is where you need to be. Whatever it is -- I hope that I will remember that feeling and I hope that I'll be more really sensitive and accommodating to my guests. That I'll always think about -- as people did things for us, I said to them, I hope that God will bless you, that you should always be able to give and never have to receive. Because that feeling of having to receive --

RH: So tell me what it was like to receive. After you've been in such a position, brought down here to serve a community.

BR: Exactly. Exactly.

RH: I mean, your whole life is --

BR: It was torture.

RH: It was torture.

BR: It was torture and I just kept saying, everything is from God and there was a story that really got me through this. My father had told us this story when we were growing up that there was a certain, a very wealthy Hassid who suddenly lost everything and he went to his Rebbe for guidance. And usually the Rebbe would guide him. Start this business. Do this. Do that. And he said to him, I have to tell you that what has happened here spiritually. In other words, we believe that a Rebbe, a very great spiritual leader, can sometimes see things that we cannot see. Right? Spiritually. On a spiritual plane. He said to him, everybody has a pipeline between God and them. Sometimes that pipe bursts temporarily and your stuff is everywhere. You've got to go get it. But it's still your



stuff. So, as you have to go and ask from house to house for help, if they say no, don't take it personally because it's not yours. And if they say yes, then it was yours. So I remember getting -- a group of 30 women in Houston asked me to speak. It was on Shabbat afternoon, the first Shabbos that we were there. And I told them this story and I said, obviously, for some reason, New Orleans, for some reason the New Orleans pipeline seems to have burst temporarily and our stuff is everywhere. And thank you for giving us our stuff. Which I know -- it's kind of like a lot of nerve to say that, right, because really, it seems like it's their stuff. But what kept me going to a certain degree is that I believe that everything comes from God. For some reason, right now, it had to go through them. But it's still ours from God. Now, that may be, in some people's minds, just an escape. To me it's a, you know. Now, what did help me is that I personally needed very little. What we were able to do very, very quickly was become a clearinghouse to help many, many other people. In other words, people started showering us with gift certificates to give out to food stores and to Wal Mart and to K Mart and to Target and to -- and we just were giving them out very, very quickly to everybody that we came in contact with that we could vouch for, that we could -- you know what I'm saying? Rabbi Lazarov helped us find a bunch of apartments around the Chabad House there. So as people from our community started realizing that they better get settled somewhere and put the children into schools right at the beginning of school -- it was the first week of school -- so they couldn't stay in Lafayette, let's say, where there was no Jewish school for their children. So they needed to gravitate to a larger community. So we -- as soon as we heard from them, we're like, look, we have apartments for you. There is a school here that is ready to take in your children for free. Come. Get the children settled here and let's get some kind of normalcy going. And I really feel like basically -- again, this was organized. It was like a national effort that was done for us. There was this fund created that we were able to work with for a while until, you know, the huge UJC fund developed and all of that. But temporarily there was this fund called the Chabad Hurricane Relief Fund. That many people connected with Chabad all over



the country started sending in money and we were just quickly giving out that money as they needed it. To help people put down deposits for apartments, for -- just to buy something to wear for Shabbos. All they had left was three pairs of shorts and two T shirts and you know -- also, people just needed to have a little bit to work with. I mean, a lot of these people are hardworking. They're going to look for another job in Houston. We thought we're going to stay now forever, right. So they're going to have to find another job, but they can't do it in a day. And some people, they didn't leave with enough cash. There was actually a story there -- this is a story that I didn't see it happen but my friend told it to me that it happened to her. That her -- she went with her friend, a very rich lady who came to Houston, and she had like a former maid who lived in Houston. And her former maid came to visit her in the hotel. And she's like, oh, your husband was always so good to me. And when I retired from working for you as the maid, he gave me \$5,000 to buy a little house. And then he gave me another \$5,000 to put into a bank account. This was a very rich family in New Orleans. So she said, "Did you put that into the bank account?" And she said, "Yep, I've put that into a bank account and I saved money over the years and I have, you know, quite a bit of money saved up." And she said, "Could I borrow \$10,000 from that money because I have no cash right now and I have no way to access anything in New Orleans?" Whatever it was she had in New Orleans was inaccessible at the moment. So the former maid went with this very rich woman to the bank and lent her a few thousand dollars to tide her over for those few days. And those kinds of stories were happening constantly. And it was a very powerful lesson that all of these things are very transient. Possessions are transient. Today, I have. Tomorrow, you have. We hope that everybody should have. It shouldn't have to be that only I can have or only you can have. We should all be able to have. But we don't know what the future brings and we shouldn't make ourselves feel whatever we are based on our possessions because they're not permanent. And this was a good -- I'm sure a lot of people told you this that you've spoken to. That a lot of people felt that way. Now, the very first night we got to Houston, they made a prayer service in the Chabad



House. And they asked my husband to speak and he spoke and he thanked the Houston community. And of course, at that point, many people that we knew were still missing. So it was a prayer that people should be safe. And we already heard that there was so much death here. And a very interesting thing happened that night.

## **END OF PART ONE**

RH: OK. This is Rosalind Hinton with Bluma Rivkin and this is tape two for Katrina's Jewish Voices.

BR: So, should I start again about the prayer service or just continue and --

RH: You can talk on the prayer service if you like and discuss Houston a little more.

BR: So basically -- there was a prayer service that night in Houston and a couple of things hit me very strongly. I saw people for the first time since I had come from New Orleans and I'm sure everybody has told you this but I just greeted people as if they were like the most dearest, long-lost relatives. There was this unbelievable feeling that I just never even knew that I had to every single person from New Orleans. It was unbelievable. It didn't matter if we were friends before. If we weren't friends. If I just knew them from New Orleans, everybody just kissed and hugged, wherever it was appropriate, you know. And that was extremely intense. And just realizing this tremendous love that I have for my community. And one particular woman I met, I was sure that the minute she had the opportunity, she'd move, because she always complained a lot about things here. And she said to me, I want to be back in Chabad House sitting next to the people that I know. And I said, but don't you want to move to be near your mother? And she's like, no. I want to be back in New Orleans in Chabad House. And it just brought out things like that. And it really surprised me. You know? Like one woman said, I want to be back in Chabad House complaining about that hole in



the floor that I always complained about. The piece of the carpet that I trip on. Do you know what I'm saying?

RH: Was there something you missed in particular that was just -- when you thought about coming back --

BR: Well, in the beginning, I didn't think about coming back. In the beginning, I didn't think about that at all. I just kept thinking about everybody's safety. The first two weeks or so we were just consumed with finding out about everybody's safety. It didn't even seem like there was a thought about coming back. It just seemed like how do we make sure that everybody is OK. Let's check out Alan. Like Alan. The first we had heard about Alan [Krilov?] was that he had left a message on somebody's cell phone that there was 12 feet of water coming into his house and he can't swim. And that was the last thing. And somebody said he read his will to the Rabbi on the phone, gave it to one of the Rabbis or something. There was like terrible things floating around. And we were just praying non-stop for people like that. Making a lot of phone calls to try to find out where they were. And people were calling about this one or that one. It wasn't until five days later that we heard that Alan was safe and alive. So I didn't think at all about coming back in the beginning. All we focused on those first -- probably over a week -- was just who was safe. Where are they? What can we do for them? There was no talk about coming back. New Orleans was sinking more by the second at that point. Right? From what we heard, things were just getting worse and worse. There was no electricity. There was no power. The place was full of looters. The hospitals had to be evacuated. It was getting -- the news got worse and worse and worse and worse, right? By the following Saturday, Sunday, Monday, it was just worse and worse. At that point, they worked those weeks in evacuating the city. They were forcing people to evacuate. Even people who didn't want to leave were being forced to evacuate. So I didn't even think about coming back. I just kept thinking, what's our next step. And I just knew that our next step was to put one foot in front of the other and see -- my husband said as we



were leaving, as we were driving toward Lafayette -- I said to him, what now. And he said, well, the Rabbi sent us to Louisiana. If New Orleans does not come back, we will go to Baton Rouge or Lafayette or wherever. Our responsibility is to the Jews of Louisiana. When we got to Houston, we found out that the Jews of Louisiana were in a huge amount in Houston. So then he just transferred his responsibility within -- you know, carefully working with Rabbi Lazarov and the other people in Texas, not to be stepping on anyone's toes or anything, but first and foremost he felt his responsibility that the Rebbe gave him is for people's safety, mental health, physical health. Do everything he can to help those people. That is, you know -- when you have that track, that kind of single-mindedness, it gives you something to do. And for us, of course, it was a blessing because we were so busy doing that we couldn't take time and we didn't take time to reflect on what might be going on here. We were very fortunate that we didn't come back to a lot of destruction. But Mendel and Malki, for example, later on found out, as a young couple with five small children, that they had lost everything. But they were busy every second, with phones coming out of all ears and making lists of who is where and who is alive and who needs help and who needs apartments and who needs food and who needs gift cards and who needs schools. And, you know --

RH: So, how long were you in Houston?

BR: OK. So I -- my husband and I were in Houston, I would say, for about the first week-and-a-half, and then one of our students from Tulane was getting married. So we had had this wedding planned in New York, so we went in for that wedding. And my husband had a lot of meetings in New York about trying to organize this national relief organization, you know, the Chabad Hurricane Relief Fund. And, you know, what to do with it and how to help people. And then we came back to Houston again. And before we left, with Rabbi Lazarov's help, we had found a bunch of apartments and the community there, Chabad and the other Jewish groups, furnished the apartments, Koshered the apartments, brought in some basic food staples, brand new beds and I'm





like, why are you giving brand new beds, and they said, because people, even if they ever do go back, their stuff is all ruined. And it was so beautiful that many of these people did bring back that furniture. We personally didn't need to. We donated everything -- I mean, it was theirs, but we have it back, everything, because they had these apartments that they used for people seeking medical help. And Chabad there has apartments near the medical center. Let's say you're coming and you need to have an operation in Houston and you live in South America, so they have these apartments set up where you can stay there for free, so we just gave the beds to be used in those apartments. But many other people brought the beds back and they have them in their homes here now because their stuff was ruined. Beds and couches -- and it was just an unbelievable effort. The whole entire Houston community, from the Mayor on down, was just unbelievably really hospitable and a beautiful example for America. A beautiful -- really, an inspiration. But we were there a very short time because we kept flying back and forth, my husband and I. Now, Mendel and Malki stayed there until November. They actually settled in a house that became the center of Chabad of Louisiana, that became like our center, and that house had a big garage. And into that garage came trailer trucks full of things that Jewish organizations were sending. And I'm sure they sent it to many organizations, but this particular -- a lot of people just know Chabad as a name that it's going to get right away to wherever it is and there's like -- there's not too many people on the payroll. You know what I'm saying? What I'm saying is that there are no secretaries and administrators. It's just going to go straight from here to the people. And I'm not saying that everyone else doesn't do a great job, too. I'm just saying how it worked. And they sent -- that's my youngest daughter and my two grandchildren -- they sent trailer trucks full of clothing, diapers, Judaica, prayer books, and Malkie's garage -- that became her work all day. Besides taking care of her five little children, all day she was cataloguing and having -- giving out to people as much as possible. And some of the other women came and helped her, from New Orleans, you know.



RH: So, tell me though about you and when you and your husband -- because you came back to New Orleans fairly early.

BR: Right. So, what happened was basically we realized we are the only ones of all of the Chabad couples that don't have young children. And therefore, we do not have to be in a place where there's a school for young children. Our 14-year-old who was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, she refused to stay in Houston. She insisted on just picking herself up, moving herself into New York into her aunt's house, and she started going to school there with her cousins. She wanted to get away. She said, I don't want to hear another word about Katrina because our lives were intensely 24/6 -- I'm not going to say 7 because of Shabbos, but -- non-stop and she was just sick of it. And in about a week or so -- so we respected her feeling about that. We flew her to New York. She settled into her aunt's house. She went to school there. And she stayed there until December 25 or whatever, when they came here. And all of the other people had young children, so we were the only Chabad family that could come back here, that didn't have small children, that didn't need a school, and my husband said, we need to get back here as soon as possible. I'm like, ooh. I don't like dirt. I don't like smelly things. I don't like bugs. I don't like mud. I don't like -- I'm not the pioneer. I said, I'm not a pioneer. Anyway, so basically, at that point, New Orleans, we were not even allowed back here yet. And then, or as soon as this area was open, Yochanan went back, our son Yochanan, and he saw horrible destruction in his house. When he walked into his house, his bookcases, because they were made out of not, you know, like that kind of wood that --

RH: Presswood.

BR: Presswood. And all of his books that he and his wife had saved up for all of the years, which was their main thing that they owned, had all collapsed and everything was just laying there. Frogs were jumping around. And it was all these Holy Jewish books that had to be buried in a special way. So he filled pails and pails full of stuff and



eventually, in December, he organized a very big burial for the whole city for whoever had Jewish books that had to be buried. But getting back to that -- so, at that point, somebody had come up with the idea that there should be a place where New Orleanians could pray together for Rosh Hashanah. And I'm not going to go into the details of that because you said you were going to talk to someone who actually attended there, but New Orleans unites for Rosh Hashanah in Monroe was one of the most meaningful experiences of my life.

RH: So tell me why it was meaningful to you. Talk a little bit about it.

BR: Because – alright, no problem. First of all, I realize now how amazing it was to once again be able to plan something for my community. That was -- that's just in retrospect. That's not what I thought at the time. The thought -- I just thought, I don't want to be a guest in somebody else's Shul. I don't want to be a guest in somebody else's community. And it was such an amazing thing that we were going to get to go somewhere, be together with people who are scattered all over, talk to our heart's content about all of the things we had been through with Katrina, and pray together for a new year. And Yochanan knew a Tulane student whose father lived in Monroe, Louisiana and had a hotel. This was before Rita. And he said, I have many, many empty rooms. I will give you an amazing rate. Very, very cheap. And there was some sponsor in New York that sponsored rooms for everybody for three nights, because it's a holiday and we can't drive or anything like that. And they sent up a huge truck full of food for three days. That was like eight or 10 meals. I mean, food like for a king. Challah and fish and chicken and soup and kugels and fruits and vegetables. It was unbelievable. And two young Rabbinical students drove down this massive truck. They stopped in Mississippi and brought some people in the communities their Challah and other food for the holiday. Then they stopped in Baton Rouge because Chabad had set up an apartment in Baton Rouge that they were using for whatever relief workers they met, rescue workers that they met, that needed a place to be. Not that needed a place to stay



in the apartment, but let's say they needed a place to hear the Shofar for Rosh Hashanah. So they were just kind of acting like a supply depot for that. And they were also -- that was the place where the Rabbinical students had stayed that were helping the rescue workers. So it was kind of -- they stopped in Baton Rouge and brought them food. And then they drove up to Monroe, Louisiana. Well, in the interim, Rita came. Hurricane Rita. And that hotel became flooded with refugees from Hurricane Rita, which the Red Cross was paying for to stay there. And just a few days before Rosh Hashanah, we were told this whole thing might fall apart. I remember how devastating it was, but thank God, at the last minute, somehow, enough of the evacuees from Hurricane Rita left the hotel, and about 120 or so people came from all over, from Houston, from Memphis, from New York -- and some people from little cities around Louisiana where they had evacuated -- Alexandria, Baton Rouge, Hammond, Monroe -- and they converged there. That's where we met Lynn [Shaveberg?] again. That's where -- I think Alan [Krilov?] was there. And we just -- it was the most unbelievable feeling to be able to pray together, under those conditions, where all status was stripped away. Money meant nothing anymore, because who had access to their money. Whatever you knew -- whatever -- it didn't matter. First of all, the way people embraced each other as a community. People that had decided to move away were just sobbing because they were seeing people that they probably would not see again. Most people didn't know if they should move back. There was a lot of confusion about whether or not to move back. At every meal, there was a different theme that was discussed. At one meal, people just had the chance to get up and speak -- what I miss about New Orleans. At another meal, it's like, you know, why I do or don't want to move back. Whatever. Different things were discussed at different meals. And I remember at one meal, this Adam Strauss got up, and he said he and his wife were back. You know, he's got a shotgun and a generator. And I'm telling you, it's not as bad as you think. Everybody's got to come back and do their part. It was just like different -- and some other people got up and said, that's for you. You have no children. I'm not bringing my children to a place where there is toxic whatever it is, and



I'm not laughing about it because, you know, there probably was toxic whatever. And it was just a very wonderful opportunity to be in this beautifully, strictly Kosher, catered, highly spiritual and yet very physical, with people who all are sharing the same experience and we can talk about it and nobody is sick and tired of hearing about it because they don't -- you know what I mean?

RH: It's a way to process it.

BR: Right.

RH: And really deal with it.

BR: It was unbelievably healing and one of the moments that I remember is for example, we have two Chabad Houses. We have Chabad Center and Chabad Uptown. We are never praying together in the same place because we don't drive on the Sabbath and holidays. The spiritual power of being everybody together, all of the Rabbis and all of the Rabbis' wives, and all of the Rabbis' families -- people commented on that over and over. They had never had that shared unbelievable energy, spirituality. This one knows how to tell stories. And this one can give inspiring sermons. And this one prays from the heart. There was no hired cantor. The cantorial beauty was the broken hearts of the people leading the prayers. You know what I'm saying? The tears scoured the vessel so to speak. And I remember, then my son Mendel got up before the blowing of the Shofar and he was carrying a book. And he said, when I was a young boy over the years I received, when I was studying in New York, because we sent him away at a very young age to study in a Jewish school in New York because there was no Jewish high school here. Over the years, the Rebbe, who means a lot to us, gave personal gifts of books on different occasions. And he said, he had a whole case of those gifts from the Rebbe that meant so much to him. Now, when he put his stuff in storage, he never dreamed that that would be in danger. He thought it was going to be on a truck. And now he doesn't have any of those books, which were given to him, from the Rebbe's hand, to him as a



personal gift. And when he got to Houston, he happened to be talking about that. And he said, and one of the other young families here, Eli [Lou?], walked out to his car. When he had evacuated, he has taken his whole box that he had received over the years as a gift from the Rebbe, and he took one of those books, the Tanya, which is like the basic book of Chabad Hassidim, and he gave it to Mendel and he said, I have two of these. Here's one. This book that he had gotten personally as a gift. And Mendel brought that book up before the blowing of the Shofar and he just -- it was like, this book -- he told the story and he said the tremendous love that he felt at that moment, it was just a wonderful, spiritual preparation for the blowing of the Shofar. I don't know if you can understand what I'm talking about. It was like -- there was such a giving. If I have -- if I have one piece of bread, I'm going to cut it in half and give you half. And this year, as we were getting ready for Rosh Hashanah, everybody said one thing -- how can we recapture the spirit of Monroe. And I don't know if you ever can because you'd have to go through another hurricane and we don't want to go through another hurricane. But what was it? It was the friendship. The caring. The neighborliness. The time where everything was taken care of and we could just talk and communicate. The women got together right before Rosh Hashanah was over. The men got together in one room. The women got together in another room. And we just sort of talked together and made a bunch of resolutions of what we were going to do to stay connected. And we actually kept a lot of those resolutions for a long time, until everybody got settled, whether back here or different places. I'll tell you what some of them were. We were going to complete the entire book of Psalms as a group every Shabbos. In other words, each person would do one chapter, but as a group, we will complete the entire book. We were going to set up a group called NOLA Jews at Yahoo.com, which has turned into a phenomenal list, which a book could be written from all of the e-mails that have been shared. And many of us have said at that point that what we know about each other through this e-mail list, or through this e-mail group, whatever it's called, is more than we knew when we lived in the same city. Because there are things you write at 12 o'clock at night to each other, about



how you're feeling, about your fears and worries or your joys, that you don't necessarily say to somebody when you meet them and you're all dressed up and, you know, whatever. You know what I'm saying?

RH: Yeah.

BR: We made up that the children that were torn away from Torah Academy would come back for the graduation. And even though they weren't legally allowed to graduate here anymore, but that they would be honored at the graduation as -- they would be included in the eighth grade graduation, which they were. We made up that every month, on Rosh Chodesh, which is the first day of the Jewish month, have you heard about this Rosh Chodesh group? That we would get together by phone and we used to have a monthly Rosh Chodesh gathering here. We've had it for maybe 20 years. That we would get together by phone from wherever we were all over the country. We would start with a prayer. We would sing. And we would have a Torah talk. And we would just talk about where we are and so on. And we did that from October all the way until about May. And then in May, we started going back to our meetings here, and we said, you know, the people here need a life. We can't do this by phone anymore. The people here are demanding a program. They want to go back to the program. They're like, we're back. We want normal. But for many, many months, we did it by phone. And I don't know. I don't remember what else. I don't know if there was anything else. But it was just a very unbelievable strong connection. And then they made Havdalah, which is the closing ceremony. And then they danced and danced. It was something that -- I mean, you know what, you can live a lifetime and not have moments like that. It was just extremely special. Now, people have told me, in other cities, that they think New Orleans has a special character, I mean, within our community, because they don't know if they would as intensely miss our community as we do. But I don't know. I don't know if that's really true. And what I tell people, wherever I go to speak is, don't wait for a hurricane to tell your children's teachers how much you appreciate them, to tell your Rabbis how much



you appreciate them, to tell your neighbors how much you appreciate them. Because, imagine if suddenly, tomorrow, that was all torn away from you. You wouldn't have the same neighbors anymore. You wouldn't have the same Rabbi. You wouldn't have the same teacher. You wouldn't have the same cleaners. You wouldn't have the same plumber. You wouldn't have the same pediatrician. You wouldn't have the same dentist. That's -- it's like a tapestry. And it's like -- anyway. So in Monroe, right after Rosh Hashanah, Malka Lew got a phone call from son, Perry Lew, who is an EMT guy in New Orleans. He's like, I just drove down Broadway and the lights are on in the Rivkin house. What does that mean? That the lights were on from before the hurricane? And you know they -- when the power went out, we didn't go around shutting down switches. So we knew at that point that our power was back. So my husband said, we're driving back tomorrow to check out the situation and let's try to be home for Yom Kippur. And everybody said, don't go. It's toxic. It's dangerous. Please. We love you. Please don't go. Anyway, we made out to go. And I'm not going to go -- I'm sure you've heard it 100 times how horrible it was when you come back and what you see, the devastation -- and we had a wonderful cleaning lady who, thank God, we were able to -- she's more than a cleaning lady. She's like a housekeeper who comes a few times a week and has just been really part of the Chabad family in the sense that every bar mitzvah, every bris, every baby naming, every wedding, she's always there helping with the cooking and just knows how to work it all. And as my memory is fading, hers is not. And she still remembers exactly where and how everything is. And where is the silver spoon that you have to walk over when you walk into the room. You know, all of the different customs, she knows so beautifully. Her name is Damaris. And thank God we were able to locate her. And she actually came to Monroe. She was brought up to Monroe and of course, paid very generously --

RH: Is she Jewish?





BR: She's not Jewish. That's what's so fantastic about her. She can work on the holidays and so on.

RH: OK.

BR: But she's an extremely religious God-fearing kind moral person. And she's known our family for about 20 years. And when people saw Damaris in Monroe they were like, just watching Damaris chopping the vegetables. And she knew we had to line the tables, because we couldn't work on the non-Kosher stuff over there. They said, it was just so normal to see Damaris in Monroe chopping the vegetables as if they were back in Chabad House preparing the salad. Anyway -- so she came here, with her husband, and tried to help us make some semblance. And our big problem was we had had the freezers full of food. And we didn't realize what was going to happen here. And I don't want to go into the gory details, but it was a disgusting, horrible experience. We had hired some people to carry some freezers out. And obviously, this was meant to be our suffering. One of the freezers opened. And this most horrendous, like, 100 people having diarrhea on the spot, seriously -- I don't want to be on film saying that, poured out into our floor vent. Went into the entire air conditioning system.

RH: Yikes.

BR: The stench was like 1,000 stink bombs went off. I ran out. We all ran out, choking, gagging, and I didn't see how we could come back. Anyway -- we had to be out of here by 6 o'clock. There was a curfew. And at 6 o'clock, the National Guard came out and you got out. Unless you were in your house. Like Adam, who was in his house with a shotgun and a generator and he stayed home. We had no way to stay here and we certainly couldn't stay here with the stench. It was unbelievable. So we went to sleep in somebody's house in Metairie. Rabbi Nemes had an administrator who was not Jewish and her house, miraculously, was the only one on the block that did not flood. She had a place for people to sleep. We slept there that night. And I remember leaving her a note



that -- your house was such a haven for us after this horrible experience, that I hope when we finally get back home, we'll dedicate our house to being a haven for people as they come back to check their property. Because that's what was so badly needed. I remember, we just took a shower. Our clothing stank. And it was just a horrible experience. So my husband realized that there was no way we could get back for Yom Kippur because the smell was so horrible that even our housekeeper said she couldn't even go near the house. So we had to open up the windows and try to get some of that smell out and as it came close to the holiday of Sukkot, my husband said, we have to go back for Sukkot. We must have a Sukkah here. And I said, there's not even going to be a Minyan. There's not even going to be 10 people to pray with. What do you have to be here for? And he said, the Rabbi didn't send us here to have a Minyan. The Rabbi didn't send us here to have 10 people to pray with. The Rabbi sent us, so that if there is one Jew who needs a Sukkah or a lulav and Etrog we have to be here. We don't have small children. And we're the only ones who can go back. And that's when I had this whole thing of, I don't feel like I can go until it's all cleaned up. And that's when I came to -- you know, actually, it wasn't even my own realization. I have a friend, Evelyn [Rhodus?], you know Evelyn. She brought this huge bottle of Gray Goose vodka, or whatever it's called. I don't know what it is. Some kind of -- and she said, this is for your Sukkah in New Orleans. It is not to be used in Houston. And I said, I can't go back. It smells. It's horrible. You know me, I'm so sensitive to smell. I can't stand bad smell. And she said, look, it's like pieces of the puzzle. I can't go back until the Rabbi goes back. You can't go back -- everybody needs everybody. If we're all going to wait, they'll never -- the place will never come back. Anyway, my husband just was single-minded. It was the first time in our marriage that I did not want to go where he wanted to go. The first time ever. I always agreed to go wherever he wanted to go. I couldn't stand it. We had no refrigerator. We had no freezer. He said, don't worry. We're only going to have two or three people. You'll feed them out of an ice chest like Adam and Michelle do. We'll bring some cold cuts from Houston. And I said, I cannot come back here without food to feed



people. If I'm going to be here, and there is going to be somebody who needs food, then I have to be able to feed them. And I wasn't able to get any store that would deliver a refrigerator or a freezer in less than a few weeks. Lowe's would let somebody pick it up on the spot, but they never answered their phone. And it was just like a vicious thing. It went on for a whole week, that I couldn't get anything arranged. There were 50 bags of garbage in front of my house. The house stank. The Chabad House had no power. The Mikvah, which is a cornerstone of family life, we didn't know if it was functioning or not because there was no power. And it hadn't had any power in six weeks so I assumed it would look -- the pool was like a cesspool. It was black with about six feet of black stuff. Not six feet. Six inches. And I assumed that that's what the Mikvah was going to look like. And I just couldn't see how we were going to go back. And my husband said, we're going to go back. We've got to go back. So finally, after Yom Kippur, I called up -- I don't know if you've ever heard of this concept that you, like, ask a Tzadik, a holy person to pray on your behalf. And so we believe that the soul of Hassidic lives on forever, even if his body is no longer here. So there is a gravesite for the Lubavitcher Rebbe, he physically passed away in 1994, that thousands of people go to pray at his gravesite. It's called the Ohel. And also, you can call in like letters and e-mails. So I called up. There's a -- 24 hours a day, somebody is manning the phone. And I said, look. This is my situation. I have no refrigerator. No freezer. There's a horrible stench. The garbage hasn't been picked up in front of my house since the hurricane. The place is lined with refrigerators and freezers outside. The stench is so horrible my housekeeper said she wouldn't sleep there if I paid her. And my husband insists that we're going home for Sukkot. What -- please. Do something. And I have to tell you what happened the next morning. This was Thursday night. Yom Kippur was Thursday. Thursday -- Friday morning, again, I started doing everything that I was trying to do all week long, except this time, Lowe's answered the phone. I immediately gave them a model number of a refrigerator and a freezer that I had written down the last time I was in New Orleans and I said somebody is coming in a half hour to pick it up, which is not true. I had nobody



coming to pick it up. So they took my credit card. They sold it to me. They did me the favor of selling me a refrigerator and a freezer. And then I started calling people who could pick it up for me. I finally found a man who was willing to rent a trailer for \$150 -- which is like insane, right -- and go and pick it up and deliver it to my house. And then, after it was delivered, my housekeeper called me and she said, you're not going to believe this. They just picked up all of the garbage. So I started to feel like something had turned spiritually here. So I said, go to Chabad House and see what's going on over there. She went to Chabad House and she said, the power just went on. This all happened Friday. And then I said, go into the Mikvah and see what's going on. She went into the Mikvah and she said, the water is crystal clear. I just felt that we were being given signs that we should try to come back and we were going to be given help and my husband said, don't worry. There will be just one or two people. Don't prepare a lot of food. So we went to the store in Houston and we bought up a lot of cold cuts and things like that. Took it in ice chests. And our kitchen smelled horrible. I walked into the house and I felt like I did when I was pregnant, when I used to be like very nauseous. I felt like I was just gagging. I said, I don't know how I'm going to sleep here. This was after she had poured bleach and cleaned the whole house for over a week already. This was 15 days after Rosh Hashanah is when Sukkot comes. [Some relatives stop by.] Go away. You don't want to hear about Katrina. You don't want to hear another word about Katrina. Anyway. Go away. Go away, children. Good. I hope you feel better. Those two are my grandchildren and that is my daughter. Watch it, the baby is going into the street.

RH: So, 15 days.

BR: So then my daughter was coming from New York and I called up a company and I said, in case my house smells too bad to cook, could you vacuum pack a bunch of cooked chicken and meatloaf and hamburgers, from this Kosher store. So he vacuum-packed it, in case there would be a problem with the power. And he vacuum packed a



bunch of food. And my husband said, you're crazy. Why are you spending so much on food. I'm telling you. I shouldn't really say this on this thing. We'll have to delete this part. We're only going to have one or two people. Anyway -- and then my mother-in-law gave me a wonderful idea. She said, go to the store and buy cinnamon sticks. And start simmering cinnamon sticks. And this was a lifesaver. We simmered it for about a week and it slowly replaced the smell. Now, there are still in spots of my house the bad smell because we still have not settled with the insurance. So, what we've done so far is lived here for almost a year, so that has replaced a lot of smell. We've replaced the floor. And we've bleached it countless times. But we still need to do a lot more. Anyway, nobody notices it because there is so much smell of Challah baking and kugels and rugelach and all kinds of wonderful things. And just living. But every so often I get a whiff. And we came home and everything was extremely simple. Damaris and her husband had put up our Sukkah. And I must tell you -- this is what I want to describe to you. The Sukkah, the yard was now beautifully manicured, just like it is now. The Sukkah was up. Now, it wasn't like that during the storm. She had picked up -- they had spent a week cleaning off the trees and all of the damage and everything. Stuff had flown off the roof. They had put all that in a neat pile so the roofer could -- and as I sat here and looked, the Hillel House, for example, right across the street, was completely covered by a massive tree. You couldn't even get up the steps or anything. It looked like there was never going to be anybody ever there. And that's why I'm so happy when I look now and I see a Sukkah there and people are coming and going and they're getting ready for their dinner or whatever they're doing. And they couldn't even cut it. They had some volunteers who wanted to cut it, but it was intertwined with wires. Electrical wires. All around, there were trees that had fallen. There were refrigerators and freezers. The stench in the city was unbelievable, from all of the refrigerators and freezers. Plus, people said it was the smell of death. I don't know what death smells like. Dead bodies. Supposedly by then, six weeks later, you would have thought the dead bodies were out. But I don't know if that's the smell of the spoiled meat that smells like dead bodies. I don't know. But the stench



was unbelievable. And every so often, when the wind blew, that stench was unbelievable. There were loads of flies from all the stuff in the freezers. Like, you would come by and there would be a freezer surrounded by like 1 million flies. There was very interesting graffiti over all of the appliances. I don't know if you heard about that. Very interesting -- you know. And basically, I don't know if -- I don't think there was another person living anywhere on this block. It was a very strange feeling. Like I was afraid to stay home alone. If my husband went somewhere, I wanted to go with him. Now that week, it didn't matter, because our children had come home. Our 19-year-old daughter, our 15-year-old son, and, our at that time, 13-year-old daughter had all come for the holiday. And I thought they would have a horrible time, but they loved it. And then it came the first night of Sukkot. We put out the table. And, you know, 10 chairs. And coming from the synagogue from around the corner were streams of people. And one by one, people from all over, FEMA workers, doctors, mold remediation people, people from New Orleans that didn't have their houses, didn't have their Sukkot, had to be here for some reason -- people from different places. And into our Sukkot in the end came 36 people.

RH: Wow.

BR: Two-times Chai in -- you know, Chai is 18, which means life. Two times life. I was so moved by that symbolism, by the symbolic concept, that -- anyway -- we took all of the food that we prepared for the holiday and served it that night. And then we were able to cook because it's the holiday you can cook again. So we had some things that we could cook. And actually, a few families were staying with us in the house. The Sabbath observant families, they were living in Metairie and were staying here with us. Those women, with every little thing that was in the pantry, they started making all of these creative things. They made cookies without eggs. They made different things during the holiday. And every day, the food was just so incredible. And I just remember the singing -- I mean, we'll never have it -- I don't know if we'll ever have it again. I mean, this Sukkot



was very lovely, but it wasn't like the feeling of that first night, when we were just overflowing with appreciation for being alive, for being here, for being able to be home, and sadness for what was going on. I mean, it literally felt, and my son-in-law kept saying, you've got to videotape the outside, and we didn't. But we say here -- there was this unbelievable oasis. This Happy Sukkot sign. And all around was just a war zone. You know, a war zone. Roofs and trees and destruction and horrible smells and debris and you know. Anyway. So then the rest of Sukkot was like that. A lot of people came. The joy in the services was unbelievable. When my husband got up, the first day of Sukkot, there's a certain -- I don't know if you know about the idea of the priestly blessing. So he's from the family of Kohanim, from the priestly blessing. So part of -- before you say the priestly blessing you say -- to bless -- God who has commanded us to bless our people with love. His voice, he's not an emotional person. He's not -- his voice just cracked. Just, I know how he was feeling at that moment. To be back with his congregation, with his community, and to be able to bless them with love. So he and his sons and his grandson -- actually, there were no grandsons, no children were there at that point, no sons were there. I'm sorry. This one son. The married sons were not here with the children. And then they called us up after the first days and they're like, how is it? Is it OK? Can you breathe? And we were like -- my daughter said, it was the best Sukkot of her life. And I was very surprised because she didn't want to hear about Katrina. She didn't want to know about it. They ran up and down the steps bringing more and more food. They ran up and down baking through the whole meal -- baking more cakes, cooking more things, because on holidays, you can cook and bake. Not on Shabbos, but on the holidays. And they were just overflowing with joy that they were back in their community and in such an abundant way being able to celebrate together. But then -- then it was still a very happy part coming. Our son Mendel came with three older children to celebrate the second part of the holiday. So at that point, there were six children in Chabad House. Normally there're like 50. And everybody carried those children around. When you dance with the Torahs, it's as if each one of them were like a



little Torah. The love -- there were not a lot of people in Chabad House, but whoever was there was just so joyous to be there. And there were, especially, a couple of young, energetic, Israelis who had come in to work on mold remediation and repair. Their energy and their enthusiasm was tremendous. Now they were not observant back in Israel. But because they know Hebrew, it was easy for them to -- "Oh, so this is what we say? Sure. No problem." So, one of the girls, one of the guys, his girlfriend said, they don't have this in Israel do they? She had to come to New Orleans to see a Jewish celebration because she was raised on a very non-religious Kibbutz. She had never seen a Simchat Torah in Israel. In Israel, she had never seen Simchat Torah, dancing with the Torahs. She had to come to New Orleans to our moldy, destroyed, stinking city, to see a Simchat Torah celebration. And she's like, this is so wonderful, this is so beautiful. And I'm saying, this is your heritage. You just don't know it.

RH: That's interesting.

BR: It was. Very ironic.

RH: Right.

BR: But anyway, after Sukkot, and the kids went back, then there was a tremendous amount of loneliness that set in. And the cell phone did not work most of the time. We still did not have a landline. And so because the phone didn't work, so the computer, with the Internet, didn't work. So there was a lot of loneliness for me.

RH: So tell me -- tell me about that. How did you get through those -- because you --

BR: I used to count the seconds until the cell phone would start working again. And when I would actually get the cell phone working, I would quickly try to speak to some of my children, or my mother, or my mother-in-law. I would usually be able to speak to one or two people and then have to say, well you call everybody else because my signal is dying. And it got me down. I ate. I gained 20 pounds. Just like everybody else. The





Katrina 20.

RH: That's been common.

BR: And --

RH: Tell me. Now if we reflect back on what you created here, I wonder if you could tell me your idea of home and what is home after you've been through this entire year and after you recreated home on Sukkot for so many people.

BR: OK. What is home? Well, like the old cliché -- home is where the heart is. Like, I just wrote to a friend in an e-mail and she said she just got a house in Austin. And I wrote back to her and I said, I'm so happy you got a house to put your home into. Because you have -- your home is where your heart is, so your home is where you are with people. If you're fortunate to have a family. And then you have to have a house to put it into. And it happens to be that it does work better when you have a house to put it into. Whether that house is an apartment or whatever. But actually, you need a kind of physical place to put the home into. It's true that home is where the heart is, but it kind of needs a house to put it into. So what is home? Home to me should be a place that is warm and welcoming, preferably blessed with family. And if you don't have family, then good friends that share a similar value system of -- in terms of morals and appreciation of life and it should have enough of a semblance of order that it should be a healthy, safe place where people can find their stuff. I think -- I'm striving very much -- and it's been a little hard now with everybody else here -- to minimize our possessions more and really try to -- you know, what happened was, during those weekend when we were not home, and a lot of people say this, how little we could manage with, and I want to try to get rid of stuff that really, we don't need. Have less stuff to take care of, but at the same time, treasure the stuff that we do have in a way of serving whatever value system and whatever we want to accomplish. If it doesn't serve us in the way that we need to accomplish it, and if it doesn't have a great sentimental value, then we should get rid of it.



RH: Interesting.

BR: I haven't had the time to do that too much because what happened was, right after that, a lot of people started coming back to check their property, so a lot of people would stay over. You know, like from Monday to Friday, somebody would stay and they would work on their house. And then somebody else would come. And it was just a stream of people just coming and going. And you know, I was very happy when they came. And I wasn't sure what was going to be here. And I had no idea what was going to be the future here. And I just kept saying -- everything is -- you know, God has a plan. We'll have to see as it unfolds. But in the meantime, every day, we have to, just one person at a time, one smile at a time, make the day better for as many people as we can. Bring as much holiness and kindness and goodness -- and I felt that the community and the city needed a lot of that to balance some of the unholiness that had been revealed so much on television, you know, about what was going on in New Orleans. And obviously it was always here. We just didn't see it openly. And you know, if somebody had been cruel, we needed to be doubly kind. If someone had been immoral, we needed to be doubly moral. You know what I'm saying?

RH: Right. To kind of balance it out.

BR: To balance it out. And --

RH: Right now, how do you feel the role for the Chabad Community in the greater New Orleans community in the --

BR: I'll tell you what I really saw.

RH: How do you envision --

BR: One of the things, during the hurricane, when my husband opened up the Rebbe's Book of Letters to look for guidance during that difficult time, there was a letter that spoke



about the idea of -- in Yiddish we call it, "*Tracht Gut - Vet Zein Gut*" -- "Thing Good and it will be Good." And the Rebbe writes there to this woman about a medical problem. This is not just about being positive. This literally can affect the outcome of the situation. And so much of medical science has shown that medically, people who laugh and who are positive can actually affect their outcome. Well, my husband made that his motto. And the kids were always amazed. He was pretty much a person who used to see the cup half-empty. It was just his nature, but he totally transformed himself into a much more positive person and he came in with a positive approach with a very optimistic approach. And he said literally, we can effect the future and the outcome by having this optimistic, positive approach. And I feel like that is a lot of the role, that we have to be optimistic and positive and upbeat, and at the same time, so what if there are 6,000 Jews here now and before there were 12,000 Jews? So 6,000 Jews is plenty of people for us to -- do you know what I'm saying? And for the general community, so what if there are -- somebody just wrote me an e-mail: "I heard there's only 160,000 New Orleanians." Does that -- why do the numbers matter so much? It matters for the city planners who are going to make what the footprint of the city should be. But how much does it matter for me specifically? Now, it matters for me specifically about my Entergy bill. And there are a lot of things that we're facing now that I just keep telling myself -- I have a high Entergy bill and my friend's daughter just buried her nine-month-old baby from leukemia. There are problems and there are problems. You know, there's the lump in the throat, the lump in the oatmeal, and the lump in the breast. In other words, there are times when you have a little lump in your oatmeal and you're all hysterical. Then there is a lump in your throat because somebody insulted you. And then there's when you find a lump. In other words, you have to have the problems in perspective.

RH: Right.

BR: And we in America are used to being very, very comfortable. And expecting to be comfortable.



RH: How do you relate, even before Katrina and then now after Katrina, to the larger Jewish community?

BR: I think there's no doubt about it that there's an unbelievable closeness that we all feel to each other which I hope we will never lose. I feel like there was, and I hope and pray that we will hold on to it. I feel like when we met each other, everybody was just so thrilled to see each other before we came back, when we came back, and I think, for example, our turnout the other night. We actually sat down and made a list. We counted over 200 names of people that had come. I think, before Katrina, we had maybe 100-150. The community has gone down but we have many more people. Why? Because people want to be together. People want to celebrate together. People want to show appreciation for each other's events and just want to celebrate as a community. That is a precious commodity that you can live in a community with 2 million Jews and not necessarily have it. You know what I'm saying? So, I do feel, and now, again, I don't want to be Pollyannaish. As time passes, chances are we're going to become -- my daughter-in-law said a very powerful thing in Monroe. I think I mentioned this to you. My daughter-in-law Sarah. We were all talking about what we miss about New Orleans and what we wish we had. And she said, you know, usually, when you have something, you don't appreciate it. When you lose it, it's too late. We had something. We lost it. But we're going to get it back. Let's make sure that we were able to hold on to that appreciation. I think that's our task now. Without becoming compulsive about Katrina, I think we have to make sure that we can hold on to this special feeling where we -- everything is just so sharp. We appreciate things so much more. When somebody walks in with their baby and I'm like, can you believe we're in New Orleans and Talora's baby is here and a year ago her wedding was postponed -- not postponed. Her wedding was changed -- every little thing has like, oh, this is so wonderful. This is -- it's like somebody who went through cancer or something. And you know, they're alive and afterwards they appreciate things differently. I hope that we can hold on to that appreciation. We lost something for a while. We have a chance to get it back even better than before. We



have a chance to work better as a community. We have a chance to work more cooperatively. We have a chance to be more appreciative of each other. When I hear that somebody has a problem, let me think immediately, what can I do to help them as opposed to, that's some other organization's problem. That's not my department. Everything should be everybody's department when it comes to doing kindness for each other and helping out. If we can hold on to that feeling, we'll be a very rich community, no matter what the dollars are in the bank. Now, we're kind of in a state of unreality right now because of the tremendous amount of assistance that we've gotten. You know, we've all experienced this unbelievable national hug. We've all experienced this tremendous influx of funding that has just been unbelievable and it's given us the chance to do such wonderful things for people. And I hope and pray that when that is finished, that we will have a way to continue keeping up the increased and improved programming that we're doing now because of -- you know what I'm saying? Like, let's say for example, the graduation. The children were so creative at their 8th grade graduation because it was after Katrina. I hope this year's graduation will be just as creative. I hope they're not going to lose that. But it is kind of hard to always keep it so sharp and go on with normal life.

RH: Are you concerned about the Torah Academy and I know there's a Jewish Day School and their numbers are way down.

BR: Right.

RH: And just that --

BR: I know we've tried to do everything possible to work out some kind of a merger that can work with everybody's, you know, standards and so on. It seemed at the moment that there wasn't a desire to do that so for this year we went on, and thank God things are very nice. And we'll see what happens in the future. You know, I hope that we'll all be able to work together in an effective way. It should be good for everybody all around.



I think we will be able to.

RH: Do you have a sense of what that might mean? What are some of the obstacles to working together in an effective way that you see?

BR: I'm not so clear about that because I'm not that involved in that. My husband would know a lot more about that.

RH: OK.

BR: I kind of departmentalized myself. Compartmentalized myself. I decided to focus on a few areas that I felt that I could be effective.

RH: And tell me about those.

BR: Well, first of all, in my classroom, I have, you know, a combined class. It's a very big challenge. I'm teaching a third-fourth-fifth grade combination. And I feel like I have the challenge of making sure that every child gets an individualized education plan, that they're operating in getting the best education they can, even though we're combined. And I'm doing a lot of research in trying to find out how that can be better educationally. Like, I'm going to school -- I'm finding out from schools --

[break in audio]

RH: Let me turn this back on.

BR: Right.

RH: OK. You were telling me --

BR: So that I feel is my responsibility.

RH: The --



BR: A particular area of my responsibility is the Mikvah.

RH: Tell me about that.

BR: Well, the Mikvah, I mean, first of all, how to make sure that there was -- that it was operating again. I mean, once the power went on, make sure it was operating and in optimum condition and no matter how few or many women are using it, that every woman has a wonderful experience. And there's actually a beautiful new Mikvah being planned, and that was started before Katrina. Of course, everything has doubled. Any construction project today is twice the price that it was, you know, beforehand. But, I hope it will still -- and my husband is working with the lovely couple that is working on making that happen. And, you know, meeting with brides and getting them gift packets and having it be a beautiful experience for them when they go. Champagne and flowers. And making it a very nice, special experience, and maybe something you can't do when you're in a big community. There are a lot of personal things that we can do here because we're working in a small volume so to speak. Same thing with my teaching. I can do things that if I was teaching 25 kids I can't do. You know, I can buy each and every one of them certain things. I can take them out for lunch like I did today, you know, to the Kosher Cajun. We ate in the Sukkah there. Maybe if I taught 25 children, I couldn't do that. So there are things that you can do that make the --

RH: That's an interesting point.

BR: -- that turn the lemon into lemonade.

RH: Because there are a lot of people who have been in this small Orthodox community and through the exodus ended up in really large communities that they kind of really enjoyed for a while of just being mirrored, I think.

BR: Sure.



RH: In a way that you're not mirrored here. And so now you're kind of discussing some of the things that --

BR: Right.

RH: -- this community might have to offer that a large one might not.

BR: Oh yeah. I mean I -- I know for example that one of my friends, her child ended up in a very big school. She was not doing well academically. And then she went back into this very individualized program, you know, she started doing well academically again. A lot of children --

[break in audio]

BR: -- away at school now. She's away in ninth grade. There's no Jewish High School, here. So we sent her -- she went away to study this year. We had a whole get together about finding the silver linings, even in a hurricane cloud, and for us, one of the silver linings was I didn't see how Mushka was going to go away this year for 9th grade. But because of Katrina, she went away in 8th grade, for half a year, until she came back here. She made lots of friends. She got to know the community. And now when she went back for ninth grade, with no choice so to speak, she had a very good adjustment.

RH: Oh, that's wonderful.

BR: And she found out that she liked living in a dorm better than with a family so she's living in a dorm. A very small dorm. It's only 15 girls. It's like a family but it's a dorm. There is very tight supervision. For our family, that was the silver lining. For the Kauffman family, their daughter found her intended one in Houston. That was their silver lining. For the Strauss family, Adam has a business that, right now, is probably making four times more than it made before the hurricane because he has a roofing business. You know what I'm saying? So different people have different silver linings. I'm not





minimizing the tragedies that people went through. One Shabbos -- the date of the hurricane in Hebrew came out on a Shabbos. And on Shabbos, you're not allowed to mourn. So we got together as women and said, we're just going to find the silver lining in the hurricane cloud. We're not minimizing the losses and the sadness and the death and the tragedy, but today we're going to focus on the silver lining. And we were about 20 women sitting together and each woman said one thing that was the silver lining in her life. Malka Lou said how she just loved living in the same little apartment complex with her grandchildren in Houston. At 6 o'clock in the morning, they would knock on the door and go "Bubbie, I want breakfast." And I said, for example, my little granddaughter, who is now 18-months-old, I never knew my infant granddaughters who even live in New Orleans because their mothers are my daughters-in-law and I don't come visit them. They come visit. They're welcome. But I don't go knock on their door, you know, the mother-in-law is here. So I don't really know the infants. I know the older ones. But this little infant was in my house. And now she says, "Good morning, Bubbie." And I said, "Hi, precious." And she goes, "Hi, precious." You know, those kinds of moments. I'm happy they should find their own house. They'll be happy. But during this time, it's brought a certain closeness with these children that I would never have any other way.

RH: Have there been any rituals, private rituals, even, or prayers that have been particularly meaningful to you over the course of the year?

BR: Well, I'll tell you what has been very moving is both years on Rosh Hashanah, I don't know if you're familiar, but there's a prayer called "*Unesanneh Tokef*" where it talks about -- and this year it will be decided who will live, who will die. And I never paid much attention to what else it says, but it also says, who will have peace of mind and who will be tormented. Who will wander and who will be at rest. And you know, who by fire and who by water, and you know, that prayer, in both years, I looked at very, very strongly. Not in a way of like fearfully but just, you know, there's a lot to think about. And I also believe very strongly what it teaches us in the Torah. That even when things are decreed



to be a certain way, that with acts of kindness and goodness the decree can be changed. And it can be lightened. It can be softened. And a father wants to see his children getting along, so our Heavenly Father wants to see us getting along. And that what creates a vessel for blessing. Part of -- this is another part of the prayer that strikes me very strongly. It says in our daily Amidah: "*Bless Us Our Father As One.*" That God blesses us when we are united. And that's very normal. As a parent of nine children, I hate when there are squabbles. I have no patience for their fighting. When we are united and act lovingly to each other, then our Heavenly Father is more inclined to do what we want than when we're fighting. It's just a normal, natural parent feeling. So, it's just -- there's an expression in the Talmud that says: The vessel that holds blessing best is peace. Peace is the best vessel for holding blessing. So to try to overlook --

RH: So in the midst of chaos you found peace?

BR: -- and --

RH: Or you make peace?

BR: I'll tell you what I found. In the midst of chaos -- we talked about this in Houston. A bunch of women got together and we talked about the idea that Katrina could take away our possessions. Katrina could take away our money. Katrina could take away our wedding gifts, our dishes, our furniture, our clothing. But, what's in our hands is that we should not let it destroy our families. There's an expression: "*Everything is in the hands of God except how we react to things, so to speak.*" And we resolved, then, to help each other strengthen the harmony in our homes between our husbands and us. And with our children, with our mothers-in-law, with our daughters-in-law. That we should take charge, so to speak, of the harmony in the home. Wherever we were, wherever that home was. That home could be in somebody else's apartment in Houston. But how we interact with each other, that Katrina cannot take away. And I started to tell you about the prayer service that night. So somebody came over to me and said, you don't know me, but 35



years ago, you and your husband fed me a dinner in New York when I had just come off the plane as a student coming to study in school. I had no idea who she was. And someone else came over and said, you don't know me, but your daughter in California was a tremendous help to my daughter. She was an 11th grade teacher and my daughter was going through a difficult time. And your daughter helped her and straightened her out. And then somebody else came over to me and said, you don't know me, but your son, when he was in Yeshiva, our son was about 15 and he was having a terrible identity problem or whatever. And your son, as an older 18-year-old boy, helped him straighten out. And at that moment, I said, I remember, in Song of Songs, there is a very famous verse: *Mighty waters cannot extinguish the love. And rivers cannot wash it away.* And I just felt that that has to be my motto that's going to keep me going. Mighty waters cannot extinguish the love, and rivers cannot wash it away. So these things that these people had told me that we had done or that my children had done, nothing can wash that away. Tzedakah that you've given, money that you've given away to charity can never be lost in a storm. It was already given. And the love in a community cannot be washed away. And I started sharing this wherever I went, wherever I went to speak. And in the end, the 8th grade here adopted it as their motto for their graduation. On their yearbook cover, they have this motto: mighty waters cannot wash away the love. And you know if we can hold on to some of those feelings than we -- I can't say it's worth it that anybody should go through any suffering, but at least we should have come out with something from it.

RH: OK. We're going to stop this tape for a minute.

BR: OK.

[END OF INTERVIEW]