



Robert Loewy Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Rabbi Bob Loewy at Gates of Prayer in Metairie, Louisiana. Today is Wednesday, November 29, 2006. I am conducting the interview for the Katrina's Jewish Voices project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Rabbi Loewy, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Rabbi Robert Loewy: I do.

RH: Why don't we begin with where you were born and if you don't mind giving your age and just a little bit about your general and Jewish education.

RL: Sure. I was born in Hempstead, New York, in 1950, which makes me 56 years old. I did my undergraduate degree at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Graduated there in '72. And then went on to the Hebrew Union College where I attended three of the four campuses -- Jerusalem, Los Angeles, and New York, being ordained in 1977. And from there I went to my first pulpit in Houston, Texas, at Congregation Emmanuel, which will play into our further discussions in a few minutes. And then in 1984, came here to Congregation Gates of Prayer, and I've been here ever since.

RH: Can you tell me, what is it like to be Jewish in New Orleans?

RL: You know, New Orleans is a Jewish community, and I describe it that way as opposed to a place where a lot of Jews live. Having come from the Northeast and having familiarity with other large cities where there is a larger Jewish population, those places are areas where there are a lot of Jews who live there, but it's not a Jewish community. New Orleans is a community of, approximately, pre-Katrina, around 10,000 or so. That's always up for debate. But it's a place where we have Jewish institutions and we have



both synagogue- and Federation-linked institutions. And everybody knows everybody else. So, New Orleans is a warm, caring, linked Jewish community. And that will play out, I think, in terms of some of our further discussions as far as how we responded to what occurred.

RH: I've heard people say about Jews in New Orleans, they're so assimilated, and yet, there seems to me to be a paradox of assimilated, but a very strong sense of themselves as Jewish.

RL: Well, New Orleans has always had a strong history of assimilation. But I guess the question is what does that mean? Assimilation in New Orleans meant that people were very much like everyone else who wasn't Jewish, but at the same time, they were always distinctively Jewish. And so New Orleans, for example, is unique as a city in that it's predominantly Reform in terms of the Jews who are here. The three largest congregations are all Reform. The Conservative Movement didn't even get started here until the 1960s, which is much later than other cities. So, while yes, we were very much part and parcel of the general community, and we were assimilated into the general community, we always maintained our distinctiveness, and there were always social bonds, one with the other. I don't know, for example, that our inter-marriage rate is really any higher than any other part of the country. So, while yes, we're assimilated, but I think this community is very proudly Jewish.

RH: Are there any memories that you have that kind of capture either your congregation here at Gates of Prayer or the Jewish community as a whole?

RL: Are you talking about in general?

RH: In general, pre-Katrina.

RL: Oh, that's a hard one. I mean, I think the memory -- when I think of my congregation, I picture us together for the High Holy Days. One of the favorite aspects of



being, and this is perhaps not unique to me but indicative of my rabbinate, is one of the highlights of the year for me is prior to any of our High Holy Days services, I walk around the congregation and just greet people. These are folks who I've come to know and love and care about, particularly the longer I'm here. And so, for me, that's one of my highlights. Just greeting folks. Whether they're Shabbat regulars or the folks I only see on the High Holy Days. I'm just as glad to see either. So that's an important moment for me. And similarly, there's that other moment that comes, ritually, as part of the Yom Kippur evening service. It begins by gathering here in this office with my past presidents, filing out onto the pulpit, and then I immediately go to the Ark and there's the hineni prayer where I ask for forgiveness for any sins that I have committed personally and, in particular, for those sins that I may have committed in my leadership of this Jewish community. So those are very special moments for me.

RH: In New Orleans, is there any type of prejudice, discrimination, against Jews that you've come to see?

RL: While I've heard about it periodically, there are occasional issues of harassment in the workplace. There are occasional problems, particularly for our children when they're in some of the public schools and they have some of these Christian right groups who have their gatherings. I don't think this is any different than most other cities. It's certainly not unique to New Orleans. But in general, I think Jews in New Orleans are very respected. And they're appreciated as part of the community. We are given, for example, when there are inter-faith activities, we're still given that same kind of presence and privilege as if we're all equal. Protestant, Catholic, and Jew. When we know full well that the Jewish population of New Orleans is infinitesimal in comparison to the Catholics and the Protestants.

RH: Let's go ahead and move in to the Katrina story and start, first, with just what -- when did you become aware of Katrina, and also, what type of preparation did you make



for the storm?

RL: Well, keep in mind that Katrina is not the first storm that's ever come this way. So, in my 20-some odd years here in New Orleans, I've evacuated four or five times, inclusive of Ivan the year before Katrina, where we were not here for Rosh Hashanah. So, we take storms seriously. At least our congregation has. And so, we heard about Katrina. We watched her. I believe it was around Thursday, before the storm actually hit, that we started paying attention to her a little more seriously, but even then the predictions were that the storm was going to be heading away from New Orleans. By Friday morning, then it was getting a little dicier. We weren't sure what was going to happen. We actually had a Board retreat planned for Sunday, and someone was going to be flying in from Atlanta to speak to our Board members and develop who we are for the future, so my President was calling me saying, OK, are we going to have this event or aren't we. Should we cancel him or not? I said, well, let's just wait and see what's happening. And, by Friday, we now saw that there was the potential that the storm was coming our way, but still, the prediction was not solid and we've had enough experience here to know that these storms can zig and zag and wobble. But, by Saturday morning, then we knew it was time to get serious. It was at that point that my President and I spoke again. We said, yep, it's time to cancel the speaker, and we caught him at the airport as he was getting on the plane. We have an odd situation in New Orleans in that the three Reform congregations share summer worship. And so August was not our month, so that come Saturday morning, I was able to come here with our educator, our Temple Administrator, and one of our other lay leaders, just to go through the building, get ready for the storm. The most significant -- there's not a lot to do, to be honest. We backed up the computers and made sure we had back-up tapes. And of course, the thing that most people ask about are the Torah scrolls. In reality, we probably could have left the Torah scrolls in the Ark, but we like playing safe. And so we took the Torahs to a high-rise office building where one of our past presidents has an interior office, which is to say it has no windows. We placed them on a table there, covered them in plastic, and felt comfortable



that they would be safe. We went out to our playground area and brought in all of the loose toys and tied down some of those which couldn't be brought in. And other than that, I mean, I lifted up my computer off the ground. We didn't do that universally, but I did. And after that, we kind of waited. Meanwhile, personally I was getting ready for the storm as well.

RH: You had things to do at your home?

RL: Sure. Sure. I think I was -- I think I came here around 11 o'clock in the morning. Earlier in the morning, my wife and I were looking at the forecast. And previously, we drove two cars out of town. And this time we decided, no, we're going to leave some of our cars in town, so we drove both my car and my daughter's old car to a nearby shopping mall and put it in the parking garage on the second floor. Just to be safe. And we gassed up the cars and we got money, began the process of packing, just in case. I was a little more reluctant to leave, waiting to see what the storm was going to do. She and my daughter were anxious to say, come on, let's get out of here so we don't have to hit the traffic too badly. And so, by 7:30 that evening, I had really held them off longer than they wanted. But, by 7:30 that evening, we decided to leave. At first we were going to go to the Jacob's Camp in Utica, Mississippi, but then as I saw the path of the storm, I said, I'm not sure I want to go to Jacob's Camp because that's where the storm was heading. And since we have friends in Houston who are sort of an automatic -- if the storm is coming, we're moving in for a few days. We decided to head to Houston and really made a relatively uneventful trip. The contraflow evacuation lanes, which the state established out of the city, worked effectively. And so, I think we left here around 7:30, and we got to Houston around 3 a.m., which, all things considered, is not too bad a drive.

RH: Yeah. So, then what happens then? You're staying with friends.

RL: We're staying with friends, so that was Sunday. The storm -- you know, we followed the storm. We saw that it did come. But the initial feeling about the storm was that we



had dodged the bullet again. That the storm did veer to the east at the last minute, and while yes, New Orleans was hit hard with winds and rain, the initial information was pretty positive so that on the Monday after the storm hit, you know, if you want to find the Jews of New Orleans when you go to Houston, it's very simple. You go to one of two places. You either go to a place called Kenny and Ziggy's, which is the Jewish deli, or you go to the Galleria Shopping Mall. And so I decided to hold a service in Houston Monday night to give thanks, and to give the community an opportunity to come together. So we went to lunch at Kenny and Ziggy's, and I found a whole bunch of people there and spread the word that way, and then my wife went on to the Galleria and she went -- she found all sorts of people there and spread the word. And so that evening, we had, oh, I would guess anywhere from 80-100 members of the Jewish community at the Chapel of Congregation Emmanuel. In addition to myself having evacuated, our Cantorial soloist evacuated and she and I have been together for 19 years. So we have our song and dance routine down pretty good. And we're able to conduct the service very comfortably, providing everyone an opportunity to not only pray but to share their thoughts, their feelings, and, at that point, the major theme was giving thanks. We were thankful that the storm seemed to have passed, that the damage, hopefully, wasn't going to be as severe as we had anticipated. And thanks for all of the friends and family who had just opened up their homes in the community of Houston, which was very welcoming and accepting of all of us evacuees. So that's how that occurred. And then, of course, probably interesting -- one of the conversations I had that evening was with one of our congregants, Peggy Bloom. Peggy's daughter, Jennifer Polach was scheduled to be married that next weekend. And -- if it wasn't that next weekend then it was the one after that. I forget precisely -- and so, she was saying to me, well, what do you think. Are we going to have a wedding in New Orleans? And she was pushing hard. She wanted the wedding in New Orleans. And at that juncture, I just kind of hedged my bets. I said, well, we're just going to have to see. We'll wait. And of course, by the next morning, the message was clear, the levees had broken, there was massive flooding throughout the



city of New Orleans, Jefferson Parish, which is where we are here, had flooding overflowing from the canals, not the levee break, but from the failure of the waters to be pumped out in a prompt fashion. And so that wedding did take place on the appropriate date. It just took place in Houston, not in New Orleans. Fortunately for her, the groom was from Houston, so we -- they just switched the wedding very quickly.

RH: Did you perform the wedding?

RL: Yeah.

RH: When did you perform it?

RL: On the prescribed date.

RH: On the prescribed date?

RL: Sure. I was still in Houston.

RH: OK.

RL: Actually, at that point, if I remember the timing correctly, I want to say that that was around the 9th of September. When the storm hit and we realized that we were in trouble, this was going to be time for us to figure out what we were going to do with ourselves, we decided to leave our friends -- my wife is from Waco, Texas, which is another three hours from Houston -- and we went to spend time with her family and kind of regroup and think through what our next step would be. Initially, we knew we weren't going to be able to come back for a while. We didn't know the situation in terms of schooling for my youngest daughter. I have, in terms of my younger children, who are not independent adults, I have one who is a, at that point, was a freshman at the University of Texas, and one that was a freshman in high school. The college student we weren't worried about; the high school one we were. Her school clearly was not going to



open up for a while. She attends the Newman School. And so we had to decide what was going to happen with her. Friends of ours had already staked out some apartments in Baton Rouge, and that was our first inclination. We thought we might go to Baton Rouge, which would keep us in close proximity to Metairie, but still in an area that would be good. But then it was -- we decided, first of all, that the schooling situation wasn't going to work out for her. Then we thought maybe Atlanta, because she had some of her friends who were in Atlanta. But again, we decided the housing situation wasn't right. I kind of feel like the three little pigs. You have one that was going to be good but not quite good enough, and the other was -- but finally, we found Houston and that was going to be just right. Now, why was Houston going to be just right? First of all, one of the things that I was busily doing once the storm finally hit was trying to find where my people were. It's a challenge for a Rabbi to be a Rabbi to a congregation whose building was underwater, whose congregants --

RH: Did you know that right away?

RL: Well, we knew that there was water in the area. We didn't know how much water was in the building.

RH: Mm-hmm.

RL: And we knew that our people were scattered all over the globe. But the more I was able to find, I kept finding them in Houston. And so we decided that Houston was the best place for me to be to be able to serve the members of the congregation, and it was also going to be good for our family since we knew Houston. We have friends there. So Houston became where we were going. So we came back from Waco, I think the weekend before that wedding was to take place. I think the wedding took place on a Sunday afternoon. We came back on either a Friday or Saturday, stayed with our friends, and in the meantime, started looking for a place to live for ourselves.



RH: Did you -- who were you on the phone with during this time -- who were you -- you said you were trying to find your congregation.

RL: The way I did that was first of all through my temple administrator, Lewis Geiger, my temple President -- he was based in Lafayette, Louisiana. Second was my synagogue President, Miriam Latter, and she was based in Atlanta. And Tori May, our Cantorial soloist, who was also based in Houston. And so really it wasn't so much the phone. It was more computers.

RH: Really?

RL: God bless computers because, you know, everyone is busy trying to find each other and I started creating an Excel spreadsheet where I could say, OK, here's my congregants and here's where they are and here's their contact information. And that's really part of how we reconstructed our membership was by simply finding them and trying to come up with ways that we could best serve them. And so, working with Jewish Federation as well, and working with the general media, we started holding events so that by -- I'd have to have a calendar in front of me. Maybe the ninth. For some reason the ninth strikes me as if it were a -- it may have been a Friday night. Early on, we held a second service in Houston, and every time I saw someone -- and people -- you know, the word would spread, word of mouth, I would start keeping a list and pass around the list and say, here you are, give us your contact information so we can know where you are. So we held a service there that week. And then the next weekend we went to Baton Rouge.

RH: What was that first service like? It was a Shabbat service?

RL: Well that was actually the second service.

RH: Second service, that's right.



RL: The service was on a Monday. It was a Shabbat service at Congregation -- this was held at Congregation Emmanuel, which, as I mentioned, was the place where I had been an assistant Rabbi in my early Rabbinate, and they opened up their doors to me, provided me with an office, provided an office for Tori as well as my nursery school director, who was another person, Jennifer Peopely was with us. She also wound up evacuating to Houston. What was it like? You know, it was -- my job was to give people a sense of familiarity. And I think that was important, to let people know, to share. We had -- Emmanuel provided dinner that evening, and again we had 60-80 people show up. And some of them were, most of them were my members, but many of them were members of the other people -- the other congregations in the community. Because early on we realized that as Rabbis, and this was a conversation that I had with Rabbi Busch, who is the Rabbi of Touro Synagogue, that each of us had to function, not as the Rabbi of Gates of Prayer, not as the Rabbi of Touro, but as a Rabbi of the Jewish community. We were familiar faces, because not every Rabbi was in Houston, and not every Rabbi was in Baton Rouge, so we were there to serve the Jews of New Orleans. And that's, again, where I mentioned the idea about we're a community. And I could do this probably better than most of the other Rabbis because I've been here so long and people know me. Poor Rabbi Busch, as I'm sure you're aware, became the Rabbi of Touro Synagogue starting, I think, July 1, and you know, had barely had the chance to meet his congregants.

RH: He mentioned that every time he did a service, he asked people to introduce themselves.

RL: Right. But he was wonderful. I have to say, I give my colleague high praise for the way he dealt with the situation and rose to meet an amazing challenge.

RH: Where did you find a place to live?



RL: Some of the folks in Houston were actively helping people to find apartments. And so, again, I was a little more advantaged in that I had friends who could do that. And so, through the temple administrator at -- not temple administrator but program director of Temple Emmanuel, Myra Lipper, she put me in contact with, OK, now I've got to remember her name. Her mother's name is Dee Dee, and she was one of my confirmation students many years earlier. Laura Mayer, who was a realtor. And she helped us find an apartment in a good location. We also enrolled my daughter in the Emery-Weiner High School, which is the community Jewish high school in Houston. How long? Again, every time you went, I mean, here was this day where we went to Emery-Weiner to -- they were going to have an information day, as we were told, for the New Orleans people. We thought we would go. We would hear a little talk and what the process was. Well, eight o'clock in the morning we all gathered in the lobby of the school and it was sort of the homecoming. Everyone got to see their friends. And again, we started to learn who's where. And kids who never in their lives would attend a Jewish day school were all of a sudden attending a Jewish day school. Now that was not unusual for us. My daughter was one of the 12 graduates of the New Orleans Jewish Day School, which had just completed K-8, and she was just starting another school, finally, a non-Jewish school, so lo and behold, there we were in the lobby and the school officials say, OK, come get your kids at 3 o'clock today. What? Surprise. So it was a little bit confusing, but it worked. But it worked.

RH: So she ended up being probably a good resource for the other children who were?

RL: Well, the school -- Emery-Weiner, while it was a Jewish Day School, and she was comfortable with it as were a few others from the day school perspective, it was also a very fine, secular school and kids got comfortable quickly.

RH: So, you talked about needing to be a Rabbi for the entire New Orleans community. And just -- what did you -- that's the first shift in your role that you experienced in how to



be a Rabbi to a scattered congregation.

RL: Right. It's one of many shifts.

RH: Well I was just about to ask what were some of the other shifts?

RL: Well, as you know, first is to find a congregation. Second is how do you serve -- how do you connect with your people when they're not around you. And that's where the Internet and phones -- and anytime I would get a phone number, I would just call. Tell me how you're doing and where are you and how can I be of help. So that one of the other new roles for me, and I know this is not an unusual role for a Rabbi, but this was different, is as a fundraiser. I quickly realized that my people needed help. I knew I needed help. So that I wasn't any different than anyone else.

RH: So, financial help?

RL: Yeah. Yeah. We needed to learn a whole -- how do you play this game? This was a whole new game. So, the -- one of the things that I was able to do, since I didn't have access to my Rabbi's Discretionary Fund here from New Orleans, was I established a checking account in Houston, a Rabbi's Discretionary Fund, and early on, through, again, the Internet, I sent out sort of a SOS through a Rabbinic listserv, explaining the situation and saying, if people want to help, feel free to send it to me in care of the Rabbi's Discretionary Fund of Congregation Gates of Prayer. And so I quickly accumulated a lot of money and quickly started dispensing a lot of money.

RH: So can you tell me about how much money you kind of collected there, and how you made decisions about how you gave it out?

RL: Well, the collection -- I probably, in a very short time, within a month and a half, had close to \$50,000. And in terms of dispersing it, first I thought, gee, I have to come up with some fancy system. And then I realized, un-uh. If someone says to me -- if



someone says to me they need something for something, I'm going to write them a check. If they don't say anything to me, I will ask them what they need. One of the key messages as a Rabbi was to teach people about tzedakah. Now, we know about tzedakah in terms of giving. We don't know as much about tzedakah in terms of receiving. But in Jewish tradition, and this is something I wound up repeating over and over and over again, so that individuals didn't feel as though, well, there are others who need it more. They need it. You know, you're out of your home. Your income is perhaps being cut off. You've got to pay for things. Yes, you're getting money from FEMA, and that was also part of what I was doing, communicating. Early on I started writing e-mails to as many people as I had a list for. AOL, in fact, got angry with me. They cut off my service because I sent out so many e-mails at one time. I had to get in touch with them to say, no, this is not junk mail. I'm communicating with lots of people. And so, you know, I, early on, started teaching them a: They need to be receiving and applying for FEMA grants. Everyone should do it. B: as time went on, there's nothing wrong with getting food stamps in this situation, and I got -- and in each of these, I made it clear that not only should they be doing, but that I was doing it. I felt that A: I wanted it, because our resources were being questioned. Not questioned. They were somewhat compromised. But secondly, I'm a role model. I know that as a Rabbi I'm supposed to be a role model, and I needed to be a role model for this as well. So those were the kinds of things that we were doing. Something very different.

RH: Can you remember any particular stories of someone that you talked through this to really urge them to please go ahead --

RL: Well, I had that conversation over and over again with lots of people, to let them know that it was OK to do it. I just, the other day, a woman said to me -- her husband felt as though they weren't going to do it because it was for those who really needed it and they weren't really all that affected. Their house was OK. All right, so they had to live out of state for six months, which is what they did. And then their daughter, who I had



worked with and who accepted a check from me, said, look, Rabbi Loewy gave me a check and he's getting food stamps, he's getting FEMA, he's getting Red Cross. No reason for you not to get it. And that convinced them to do it. And that convinced them to do it. Same thing later on when the Jewish community here in New Orleans got up and running and there were funds through the Jewish Family Service, where every member of the Jewish community who was entitled -- everyone who was Jewish in this community was entitled to \$700 per person, if they had been adversely affected. Well who wasn't adversely affected? But again, I had to convince people that yes, you were adversely affected. You know, people are very proud and they feel as though they should be able to do things on their own. But this is unprecedented. This was unprecedented.

RH: How would you engage the larger Jewish community? Through the Federation? What was your interaction with other --

RL: Well that was usually -- at least in Houston, there were a number of community events that were either hosted by individual congregations, Congregation Beth Israel as well as Emmanuel were particularly active. And so there would be gatherings there. And it was just important for me to show my face. I would also go over to the Federation headquarters in Houston where the New Orleans group was meeting, just to periodically let them know I was there and give them a vote of confidence to let them know I appreciated all that they were doing.

RH: Did you find things that they were doing particularly helpful?

RL: Well, the most important thing they were doing was finding people. And they were trying to, you know, ascertain what the status of the community was, and how we could rebuild things in the community. I'm a past President of the New Orleans Jewish Day School, so that was another area of my concern, and sadly, we never did get the school up and running in that first year. I think that hurt the school badly, but the building was



not ready until March. So we couldn't bring the kids back until the Fall. But so that was an area that we at least tried to -- I kept in dialogue with Rabbi Pine who became the defacto head of the school. She had just come in as the Jewish Judaica director. Rabbi Pine, as you're probably aware, is married to Rabbi Busch. And all of those jokes about pine and bush? Forget it. They've heard them all. And in any event, Rabbi Pine really very nicely stepped up and even though she had only had about a week-and-a-half with the kids, took on the role of cheerleader for the school, and then ultimately became the interim head of school until later on in the spring.

RH: I assume there were fundraising efforts going on around that also?

RL: Well, it was really not so much fundraising efforts. I think there was a nationwide fundraising effort through UJC, though the school and UJC and the JFS were not doing individual fundraising. You know, I was doing fundraising and then later on we were saying people could either go to the URJ, the Reform Movement, which was in contact with us from the very -- even before this storm hit and continues to be very supportive. But I was simply help -- letting people say, if you want to give to the URJ and they're helping us, they'll be helping us, that's fine. Or if you want to give it to us directly, because a lot of places don't want to give to the general institution, they want to give to a specific institution. And my goal was simply for them to be giving. Another concern, as we got closer, was High Holidays. And on this we weren't sure what was going to happen. We didn't know when people were going to be allowed back into New Orleans. But it looked like we weren't going to be here for the holidays. At least initially, the early reports coming out of New Orleans and greater New Orleans was that it just wasn't going to happen. And so early on, Rabbi Busch and I, who were in Houston, got on a conference call with Rabbi Cohn of Temple Sinai to try to figure out how can we, in different locations, serve the Reform Jewish community at least. And so we first thought we would offer a service in Houston, a service in Baton Rouge, and then perhaps in Atlanta, which is where Rabbi Cohn was, because those were three major communities



where our people had evacuated. However, there were some problems at Congregation B'nai Israel in Baton Rouge where, so that a Rabbi was needed, and Rabbi Cohn decided to fill that void, to serve both that congregation and whoever else could fit into B'nai Israel. We still felt as though we needed to have a New Orleans evacuee community service, and so Rabbi Busch and I coordinated so that we created a service, first to be held at Rice University on Rosh Hashanah evening, and on Rosh Hashanah evening in Baton Rouge at the Unitarian Church. Our thinking -- initially my thought -- actually, my first thought was I needed to find a job for the High Holidays because my people were all over the place. But then quickly I realized, no, that wasn't the case. I needed to be where they were, and we thought, maybe, they would just go to all of the different Houston congregations, and one of our members, Sheri Tarr, said to me, Rabbi, you can't do that. We need to do everything we can to keep the New Orleans people together. Otherwise, we're going to lose them. And she was right. And made sense. And so, Rabbi Busch and I decided, OK, who wants Houston and who wants Baton Rouge. And so we decided that I would do the Houston service for Rosh Hashanah evening; he would do Baton Rouge. I would do Baton Rouge for Yom Kippur evening, and he would do Houston. And so we kind of just flip-flopped. That was -- that was a decision we made, oh, I really don't remember all of the timing of it, was probably mid- -- probably the first or second week of September. That Shabbat, and I want to say the date was around the 16th, was my second trip back to New Orleans. I had had an earlier trip where I went with my nephew and two of his friends and a big old truck to come to my house to collect as much stuff as I could to bring back to Houston so that we could live for a few months.

RH: Were you flooded?

RL: Was I flooded? Yeah. My house had a foot-and-a-half of water in it. The downstairs of my house had a foot-and-a-half of water. But, we could still salvage a lot and we brought all sorts of things to Houston that we probably never needed, but we



brought them anyway because who knew how long we were going to be there.

RH: Did you lose some things that were very important?

RL: Fortunately, not really. We lost furniture. We lost flooring. We lost walls. But really -- we really didn't lose anything special. We didn't lose heirlooms or art or family pictures. Those actually, on the day prior to -- on the day of evacuation, my next door neighbor came over and said that they had rented a storage bin in one of these secure buildings and they had room and would we like to put some of our things there. And that was where all of our pictures were taken. So, on that first trip, which was early September was the first time we were allowed back into New Orleans, we went in and collected things including those two cars that I told you about earlier. And while my nephew and his two friends were doing some work with the house, I came here to see what it was like. And I had already gotten reports that there was three-and-a-half feet of water in the sanctuary because our sanctuary dips down. And so all of the water gathered in what we have always, facetiously, referred to as the well, but there was water in the well. We became the shul with the pool, the mikvah in the middle -- pick your humor. But, knowing the High Holidays were coming, and I had this truck, I thought, why don't I bring the cart of High Holiday books, because we would need them. And so I -- they were all nicely packed on this cart and I rolled them out, and when I brought them outside to the truck, my nephew said, uh uh, you can't do that because they'll fly all over the place in the truck. So, instead, I put them -- I emptied what I had in one of the cars, the older of the cars, packed all the prayer books in that car and we left here in caravan with -- I was driving my car. My nephew was driving this old car. And his friends were driving the truck. On the way out of town, as we were crossing the Bonnet Carré Spillway, which is this 12-mile stretch over lake and swamp, my cell phone rings and it's my nephew who is behind me to say that the car is breaking down. Oh boy. So, we wind up -- he and his friends have to get back to Waco, Texas. So, the broken-down car with all of the prayer cars loaded in it sits on the Bonnet Carré Spillway. I, then, say, OK. You



go ahead. I'll stay with the car and get it towed someplace. I drive to the Laplace, Louisiana, which is the end of the Bonnet Carré Spillway because you can't just turn around in the middle of this thing. A state trooper -- I get stopped by a state trooper as I'm trying to turn around to get back to the car. He won't let me go. I explain the situation. He says, fine, then a minute later he flags me down and says, stop. And right behind me is a tow truck. Just happened to be there. I'm a Rabbi. Those things are supposed to happen. So, the tow truck -- I tell him where the car is. I said, just follow me. And so I drove back to Kenner, turned around in Kenner, because you have to do that to get back to the car, and I drive a little bit ahead of the tow truck and I pull up behind my little broken down car, and I watched the tow truck drive right by me. Just missed me completely. And I'm going, no. This isn't happening. I just started to laugh, you know, because I figure crying's not going to help. So I laugh for a few minutes and got on my cell phone, called AAA. Couldn't get through to anything. So I figured I would just wait until the next state trooper or somebody pulled up. And I sat and I sat and then a few minutes later -- I guess it was about 30 minutes later -- I see the tow truck again coming from the other side. He's waving to me. And he was a decent guy. Good to his word. And came and wound up towing that car to Luling, Texas, or Butique, which is about 20 miles away, and they fixed the car. So that then on -- a week or so or 10 days later, when I drove to Baton Rouge, but first to New Orleans with our soloist, I picked up the car and then we went on to Baton Rouge where we conducted services in Baton Rouge for the New Orleans Jewish community. And now at least I had some fun so we had an early service and I rented out a place for dinner, it was Ralph and Kakoos. And we had Shabbos dinner as a community. And food becomes very important.

RH: This was for Yom Kippur?

RL: No, this was still -- this was the middle of September.

RH: Oh.



RL: This was the middle of September.

RH: So tell me -- I didn't mean to interrupt --

RL: But the reason I was sharing that -- it was already, by the middle of September, people were telling me, we're going back to New Orleans. We're going to be back in our homes early. So that the plan for High Holidays, of being other places other than New Orleans became somewhat problematic in that there was going to be people in New Orleans who needed services too. Which is how it evolved that on Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Busch did services in Baton Rouge in the evening, but he went to his congregation, to Touro Synagogue, and conducted services in the morning for whatever Jews were there. And similarly, for Yom Kippur, by then we had pumped out the water out of our building and we were ready to receive people by -- thank God the holidays were late that year. It was like already the 10th or 11th of October for Yom Kippur, and I was already back. But we'll talk more about that, I imagine, in a minute.

RH: So tell me a little bit -- you were about to say, you did the Shabbat dinner --

RL: Oh.

RH: -- at Ralph and Kakoos. And dinners, meals, being important --

RL: Well, first of all, meals became important because people didn't necessarily have places that had kitchens. Some were still in hotels. Similarly, it's a time for people to break bread. Food is important. And eating together and being able to talk with one another over a meal is very important. One family in particular was there that evening, it was the bar mitzvah boy who was scheduled to have had his bar mitzvah that night, Jordan Lieberman. The bar mitzvah was postponed, but that evening, he still helped lead the service the same way as he would have done had it been the evening of his bar mitzvah. And that was special for all of us -- first of all, he's a great kid, but there he stands in his polo shirt and jeans because he didn't have his bar mitzvah suit with him,



and that was kind of fun. He enjoyed that part of it. But we had dinner together and we were family together and it was just good to be a community.

RH: And how many people were there that night? Do you recall?

RL: That service, I want to say, again, 60-100 people came for the service. Not all of them stayed for dinner. Probably, again, 40, 50 people came for dinner.

RH: Was it primarily your congregation?

RL: Mostly, but some from others. Some from others. You know, all were welcome. I wasn't dividing it that way.

RH: Did you attempt to reach out to --

RL: Yeah. A lot of people know each other. New Orleans, as I said earlier, is a community and people know one another.

RH: So, did you hold your Rosh Hashanah services in Houston?

RL: I held, right. The evening service, I held it in Houston at Rice University and in the interim, Hurricane Rita had hit. And now that didn't affect New Orleans, but it did affect Beaumont, Texas, and the Beaumont congregation was shut down for Rosh Hashanah. So, Rabbi Barbara Metzinger, who just happens to be a close friend of mine and a close friend of Rabbi Busch's, co-officiated with me for the shared evacuee service, so we had people from Beaumont as well as from New Orleans who came to this service at Rice University. And again, it was the URJ which underwrote the service. Both services in Baton Rouge and the Houston service.

RH: What were you thinking in preparation? What did you think you needed to do to convey? Or bring out in the service?



RL: Well, there were a number of themes that I felt needed to come out, both in that service and in subsequent services, really, over the next few months. One is a message of hope, that we, as Jews, are a people of hope, and we can't allow ourselves to sink to depression and despair. Second is the message that God is with us. That God is a part of that hope process. Third, was the idea that we need to build upon this experience, use it for our own strength, and then, again, some of those same themes I mentioned earlier, tzedakah, be willing to receive, but also to say that being exiled is not unique to the Jews of New Orleans, that we have a history of having been exiled from our homes and returned to our homes. In particular, later on when I spoke in Baton Rouge, I was strongly stressing that idea, that, you know, OK, we can return home. You don't have to leave. Because I was concerned then, as I continue to be, that the Jewish community of New Orleans would be dispersed and not returned. I think, fortunately, we're much better off than those early fears would have led to.

RH: So, were there any questions that people were coming up to you and asking about -- and I guess I mean --

RL: Theological and where's God and all that kind of thing?

RH: Where's God or, like I had a conversation with God and I'm really angry.

RL: You know, I would love to say that we had lots of those conversations. People were much more focused on the practical. You know, they weren't busy blaming God. You know, occasionally, why me. Everyone gives a why me. But, since everyone's in the same boat, you can't say why me. And so there really were -- although I preach that message periodically, that was always in there just in case you had the question, here's my answer. But really people were not so much theologically stressed as they were stressed in terms of what's it going to be like. Where is it going to be. Where's is it going to work. And so that was the message that I kept preaching, and again, making funds available as much as we could. We started getting gift cards as a form of assistance,



and people seemed to be a little more receptive to taking a gift card. A gift card, you know, to a supermarket, to the grocery, to the drugstore, to Target, to WalMart -- they'd be more willing to take those gift cards. And that became an opportunity for me to say, OK, well, if you're going to take the gift card, can I give you something else as well? I also saw my check writing, because I had no idea what kind of demand I would have, in fact, I was just looking at that early checkbook the other day, and where as initially, maybe, I would be writing a check for \$250 to help people out, then I would go up to \$500 -- I tend to be writing more checks now for \$1,000 at a shot. Because, a) I have the resources, and b) those are the kinds of needs that are out there, where people need assistance for a variety of purposes.

RH: So, are you saying that now this is happening?

RL: Oh it continues.

RH: It continues?

RL: Yeah, I'm continuing to be able to assist people. And folks are still rebuilding. We're sitting here, this is November of 2006 that we're speaking and the storm, of course, is over a year gone by, but we still have people who are living in trailers. We still have people who don't have the same income they had prior to the storm. They're rebuilding their homes. They're rebuilding their businesses. They're rebuilding their lives. Now, many of the people who I am assisting at this kind of level now are people who may have been in trouble before the storm. Who may have -- but now they're even more so.

RH: A little deeper in the hole?

RL: Deeper in debt, right.

RH: We're going to take our break.



RL: OK.

[END OF TRACK ONE]

RH: This is with Rabbi Loewy. And I guess what I'm interested in knowing now is when you came back from New Orleans -- you came back after a month --

RL: Right.

RH: And I believe I recall Miriam Latter telling me that she was like, we want you back.

RL: Right. Right. What occurred was I had both a family situation and a congregation situation. The family situation was that my wife and daughter were going to be situated in Houston for the -- at least for a semester. My wife, in the process, lost her job as a teacher, but she was not going to leave my daughter in a situation that was not appropriate. And it became clear that more and more of our people were coming back to New Orleans, and what I was going to have to do was come back, which I didn't object to. It was just a matter of trying to figure out when the right time was. And so, after Rosh Hashanah in Houston, as the Jefferson Parish schools here began to re-open, I figured, OK, I'm going to move back to the upstairs of my house. I was getting it gutted. Downstairs. And I established a place for myself so that when I came between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, that was when I moved back to New Orleans, back to Metairie. And I kind of set myself up upstairs. My upstairs was fine. I could watch TV. It took me a while to get my computers up and running, but I put a little kitchen up there and my office became my dining room as well, and so I began to work out of this building and meet the needs of the community from this end. As well as from wherever they were.

RH: So what was it like for you and your family, you being in New Orleans and to be separated from your family in Houston?



RL: Well, it wasn't fun, needless to say. Well, I'll tell you. My wife's parents are Holocaust survivors. And so that helped, you know, it just put things in perspective. You know, what was so terrible? OK. We had water in our house. We had repairs. We had the wherewithal to make the repairs and so we would move ahead. We kind of had a division of labor that occurred. Two divisions of labor, really. The first in terms of the synagogue life, I had an early conversation with our temple administrator, Lewis Geiger, to say, OK, your job is to get this building physically back in shape, and my job is to get the congregation programmatically and spiritually back in shape. And similarly, in terms of home, we divided it in such a way that my job was to get the house physically back in shape, which is to say get walls and flooring and the basics and she would spend her time in Houston shopping, which was tough for her. It's tough shopping. But she would get all of the cabinetry and the appliances and the furniture and all of the things that we would need once I took care of the basic outline. So it was a division of labor. Plus, while it was difficult, I did a lot of commuting. I commuted, first of all, because they were in Houston. But, by coincidence, we had a number of personnel or professional events that were either going to have me in Houston or have us together. We had parents' weekend at the University of Texas towards the end of October. And it was right -- I guess it was during Sukkot, so that I came back to Houston and held a Sukkot event for my Gates of Prayer family members, for the Gates of Prayer congregants -- we had a Sukkot dinner out in the Suktah at Congregation Emmanuel, so I saw my family then. As well as a Sukkot early event here at the synagogue. That was one of our first events we held and we figured we'd have dinner. We'd get chicken -- we'd get fried chicken. What little we knew. Where are you going to find fried chicken now? Popeye's isn't open.

RH: What did you do?

RL: Well, Tori and I did find, at that point, there was a Save-a-Center open, and a WalMart that was open, and we kind of went from store to store to store collecting as much fried chicken as we could, as well as we got Domino's Pizza and we had dinner.



And people enjoyed it and appreciated it. That was for Sukkot at the beginning. But later on, during Sukkot, I did a dinner in Houston where some of our members helped organize that. But then I went on the next weekend to the University of Texas for a parent's weekend, so our family was together for that. Then two weeks later we had to be in Chicago for a family bar mitzvah, then three weeks later I had to be back in Houston for the national convention of the URJ, the biennial convention. So it wasn't so terrible. We saw one another. They came here for Yom Kippur. They came here for Thanksgiving. So we saw one another. We managed. It wasn't horrible.

RH: Are any of those events, like Parent's Day at UT, did they feel a little surreal to you?

RL: Oh yeah. Well, anytime I would leave New Orleans, and I think all of us who were living through it looked forward to getting away because, certainly in the beginning, all you would see here was dust, debris, destruction. And that's hard to see. Even in areas that weren't badly afflicted, you would see all the debris sitting out on the curb waiting for the trucks to come and pick it up and the cars would be covered with dust and you had to adjust to dealing with a life here. So, when I would leave town, it was sort of like, wait, they didn't have a hurricane here. So indeed, it was surreal. But reality would quickly come back to you because as soon as someone found you were from New Orleans they would go, aw, tell us about what's going on. And of course you would tell them.

RH: What was your first service like here, back here, at Gates of Prayer?

RL: Well, they had had one or two services without me, but the first service that I believe I did was Yom Kippur Yom Kippur morning. And that was -- will always remain in my memory as a highlight of being a Rabbi here. The building, physically, we had stripped the building. It had been gutted. Carpet was pulled out. The pews were pulled out. The social hall was filled with tables and on the tables was everything that was salvageable from the rest of the building. So it sort of looked like a tremendous garage sale. And so there I was, with the doors of our sanctuary open into the social hall, which is what we



normally do for High Holy Days. We squeezed every chair imaginable into every nook and cranny and we had 500 people here Yom Kippur morning.

RH: Did that surprise you?

RL: Well, it didn't shock me because I knew that for Rosh Hashanah morning he had between two and three hundred people. And this was already 10 days later. More people were back in the community. But it was exciting. And we didn't do Kol Nidre here. As it turned out, we didn't -- initially, we didn't think there would be Kol Nidre in the community, in the Reform community at least, and as it turned out at the last minute, there was a Kol Nidre service held at Temple Sinai, but a lot of people didn't know about that, so one of the advantages, I guess, of being Reform is sometimes you can be, shall we say, flexible with the liturgy. And so we decided to do Kol Nidre in the morning as well. And our minhag, our custom for the past presidents of the congregation to hold the Torah scrolls during Kol Nidre. But this was not a Gates of Prayer service, this was a community service, and so we called forward the past presidents of any congregation who were present, and there were some from Touro and some from Sinai, as well as Gates of Prayer. And that was just a very special moment. To be able to have these members of the Jewish community and for us all to worship together as one. And that was the first service where -- I kept wanting to get back to normalcy. I kept wanting to say, OK, we had Katrina. Let's get on with it, in terms of my preaching. But, every time I would write a sermon that was kind of a general sermon, not a specific Katrina sermon, anyone who I would have read it ahead of time, because I wasn't trusting it just to myself said, you can't do that. You have to be more direct. And so Yom Kippur morning I spoke on healing, which is what I was actually planning to speak on Yom Kippur anyway, but, of course, shifted the examples to everything to be Katrina-related. And for that matter, even a year later for the High Holy Days, I was hoping to just do one Katrina sermon and the rest back to normal, and still, even a year later, I felt as though I couldn't do that. People were not ready for that. They needed to hear their Rabbi and their congregation



and their tradition speak to their reality.

RH: So, talk to me a little about that reality for your congregation? How many are back?

RL: Now? I estimate that close to 80 percent or more are back in the community. Fifteen months later, I would say the majority of that 80 percent are now situated in permanent homes. Now, I say it that way because in some cases that means they're back in the home they were in previously, whether or not that home is still completely fixed is another story. Some of them are in new homes. They're no longer going to go back to the homes that they were in. And probably, of that 80 percent, 20 percent are not back in a permanent resident yet. They're living in rental property. They're living with family, with friends, in FEMA trailers, so they're not back yet.

RH: How many of your congregation was on the other side of the breach? Over in Lakeview and Lakewood.

RL: Gates of Prayer, as you're aware of, is predominantly a Jefferson Parish congregation. Having said that, I don't have a specific figure, but I would say 30, as much as 30 percent of our membership lived in Lakeview, lived in Lakewood North and South, which was devastated, as well as in some of the uptown areas that were flooded. And of course their flood waters remained over a period of time where as the flood waters here in Jefferson receded after a few days. So we had a lot of people who were directly affected in full-blown flooding and their homes destroyed.

RH: And also, you mentioned before, the economy is not exactly back to where it was.

RL: Right.

RH: So you have probably -- you have people who are in your congregation who, they're back in their homes but their businesses?



RL: You know I don't -- unfortunately, that's an area where I don't have as good a handle on as I wish I did. But indeed I know that -- I have some of our lawyers -- people don't think of doctors and lawyers hurting, but I -- we have members who are doctors and lawyers who have lost their clients and lost their patients and you just don't rebuild a client or patient base overnight. I have other members who are in retail or particularly some who have stores in the French Quarter. You know, the economy is down. The tourists are not here. So those people are hurting. Our -- you met with Miriam Latter, our synagogue President, her husband has one of the -- their family owns one of the oldest restaurants in the French Quarter. And we have other members who are in the tourism business, either through stores in the Quarter or restaurants in the Quarter, all of whom are hurting. So, I don't know to what extent, and I have one congregant who tends to struggle anyway, but he had a small business and that small business -- he still doesn't know what he's going to do, whether he'll rebuild it or not. Another is hopeful to rebuild his business, but still it's not back yet. And even if it does come back, he wants to build it in an area that's been totally flooded. And people have said to him, you're crazy. Why -- you're not going to have any clients. You're not going to have any customers. So we have a lot of people who are very much affected.

RH: So another reason why you still have to address Katrina 15 months later is that people still seem to be living with a lot of uncertainty.

RL: Absolutely. People are living with uncertainty. They're living with fear. Keep in mind, Rosh Hashanah this year was earlier; Yom Kippur was earlier, and we were in the heart of hurricane season. And every one of us was anxious about what happens if another one comes. And my guess is we will always be anxious about if another one comes. Hopefully, each passing year will dull us in terms of the anxiety level but not the preparation level.



RH: So, in this kind of a state, what is the role of the Rabbi and of the synagogue and congregants?

RL: Well, the role of the Rabbi is multiple roles as is always the case in the role of the Rabbi. I think first is to be as sensitive to our members and their needs as possible. That included, for example, last spring we held not one but four different support groups for different aged members and different status kinds of members with therapists and with a business counselor to say, we care about you in that way, and if you need a place to kind of just unload, we need that. Second, we need to make every one of our programs and activities available to our members as much as possible. So what I mean by that is, normally, you'd have a congregational dinner, and you would charge an amount equivalent to what the dinner costs, but people don't have those kinds of funds so that where as last year, when we had the Hanukah dinner, it was free, year before that, you know, there was a hefty charge for the dinner. This year, there is a suggested donation amount. So I'm kind of weaning them back to where they need to be because, ultimately, we're not going to have the funds to do that. But as long as I have those donated funds to help people, I'm going to help them in whatever ways I can. Try to do as many programs and things to help them do things normally. I have -- customarily we take a trip, a confirmation class trip, to New York. It normally costs \$900. This year it's going to cost \$500. If they can afford it. And if they can't, there's money for it. And what's leftover, the rest will be underwritten. So that's an important dollar issue. Secondly, or thirdly, wherever we are, I just need to be available to let people vent, to talk, to counsel, and to discuss whatever their situations are. The goal of the synagogue, though, is to help people return to normal. To feel a sense of calm. To be a respite from the hectic nature around -- to create a sense of community so that they know they're not alone. And we're doing that with our elders group, we're doing that with the young couples group, we're doing that with a brotherhood and sisterhood -- whatever we can to help people feel a sense of community.



RH: Do you feel they're, in some ways -- are people availing themselves more than in the past at services or --

RL: Some. Some. You know, one of my fears was that we lost our Shabbat morning regulars, and when there is not a bar and bat mitzvah in this particular congregation, as is typical with many Reform congregations, the Shabbat morning group was usually small to begin with. But I'm pleased to see that some people have kind of recognized that there's a need for themselves and for the congregation, that we should have that, and people have stepped up. I think attendance is back to normal in terms of Shabbat evenings and mornings, and that's even -- when I say back to normal, back to what it was pre-Katrina, in spite of the fact that we've lost 20 percent of our membership. So that that means more people who hadn't been coming previously are coming now. So yes, there are those who want to be here, and I think they appreciated the role of the synagogue throughout all this, that we've done everything we could to be a help to them.

RH: How do you care for yourself?

RL: Well, that's an important question. At times, one of the things I do is get away, and I think that's an important thing for me to be able to do, to just not be dealing with all of this. Second, once our JCC opened up, I got back to working out because you need to do that physically. I'm also -- we started an interfaith-clergy counseling group, where I'm part of five or six other clergy, non-Jewish, where we just kind of sit together once every two weeks and we have a therapist as our facilitator to talk about anything that we want to talk about. And that's been kind of positive.

RH: Can you tell me in general some of the things, the type of topics that you --

RL: Well, we talk about everything from, OK, how do you deal with that pain-in-the-neck congregant, or the counseling situation as well as how are you feeling when those good people aren't there anymore or dealing with the finances of the situation. So we'll talk



about just about everything and that's very worthwhile. As well as, I guess one of the other things that I've done, and again, it was sort of more fortuitous, that before the storm, I had a project to work on outside of the community. I happened to be the -- I was the Vice-Chair of the last convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and now I'm the Chairman of the convention in Atlanta in March, and that put me in contact with my committee and my colleagues to be working on something that had nothing to do with Katrina. And literally, sometimes, I'd be on a conference call while I was driving from Houston to Baton Rouge and it was nice to be able to be on the conference call, talking about convention planning, not disaster response.

RH: Right.

RL: So that also helped keep my sanity.

RH: Your work has changed a little, also, because you were teaching --

RL: Right.

RH: -- and you've been doing that for a long time at Loyola University.

RL: Right.

RH: So, how does that feel not to --

RL: Well, initially I was bothered by the fact that I wasn't going to be able to continue teaching at Loyola last year or this year. There's a possibility that next year I'll be back teaching again. I wasn't happy about it. I wasn't happy about the loss of income that went with it, but, to some extent, God provides all sorts of blessings. It was nice not having that time constraint. I've appreciated being able to sit here and do this at two o'clock in the afternoon, where otherwise I might have been teaching.

RH: Right. Preparing.



RL: So it gave me a little freedom -- because, not only was I dealing with the synagogue but I also had to get my house back together and wait for the plumber and wait for the electrician and those kinds of things, which would have been problematic. So, while I'm not happy that I wasn't teaching, I understand it. They don't have enough students. They don't have enough income to afford the faculty. They cut -- it wasn't personal. They cut all of the part-time faculty.

RH: Right. And what about your wife. Is she back to work or --

RL: Well, her situation was one where she had been teaching in a private school here in New Orleans for 10 years. Was an award winning, both statewide and national, teacher in her field of journalism, high school journalism, yearbooks and newspapers. And her headmaster made a decision that when she couldn't come back right away, that he would hire someone in her place and not even temporarily but for the whole year, that she could come back after a year. Well, we were not really happy about that decision. We felt that was a very cruel, disloyal kind of a decision on his part, so she decided that she would not go back and in lieu of that, she's sort of creating her own business right now, of being -- using her skills as a writer and as a journalist to help edit -- she's now the editor of the Jewish Family Service Newsletter, and she's doing some individual tutoring of high school students for college applications and their college essays and other kinds of college writing, pre-college writing. And we'll see if that works. In the meantime, she's finishing getting our own house ready, helping with our daughter, getting her settled in. It is a process. And in addition to that, she's taking on some other projects for the community. She's helping one of the charter schools, using her computer skills, to collect books for that library at Singleton Elementary, Singleton Charter School, working with an Upper Ninth Ward -- the Upper Ninth Women's Shelter, which is a project we're taking on as a congregation shortly.

RH: Oh, really? That's -- well, we'll get into some questions about that.



RL: Yeah. I think that's one -- one of my messages at the High Holidays this year was, OK, stop focusing upon yourself and start thinking about others.

RH: OK. So what is the relationship, and how do you feel that the congregation should be involved in the general recovery of the larger community?

RL: Well, it's hard to be involved in the general recovery when so many are still involved themselves. But, my encouragement is that we have to be at the vanguard of it. We are in a privileged position, most of us, while yes, we may have lost homes, we may have had damage to our homes, most of us had insurance, and while, in hindsight, it was not fun to go through that experience, most of us have our homes back in good shape and we have an obligation. Jews have always had an obligation to be part of the community. The Talmud teaches you that you cannot separate yourself from the community. And so whatever we can do, whether it be something significant or insignificant, every act is significant.

RH: So, as a congregation, you're taking on this Upper Ninth Ward women's shelter. Why did you make that decision?

RL: Well, you know, we were looking for a project. And one of our congregants was really just sort of doing it on her own anyway. And so it sort of fell into our lap, that this would be something -- she couldn't do it by herself, and it's something, hopefully, that we'll move forward on. We're just now starting it. Would that we have started other projects earlier, but we weren't ready yet. And so be it. And other individuals -- you know, one of the things that I did at High Holidays was not only did I preach, but I put out a list that day of a whole bunch of different projects that people could take on for themselves. That even if we didn't do it as a congregation, they could make donations, they could go and volunteer, and I believe some, the power of preaching is not as great as a Rabbi would like it to be --



RH: Overrated.

RL: -- I'm realistic enough to know that if I get a few people who are inspired by what I presented to them, then I've accomplished something. And some did just that.

RH: And can you share what was on the list a little bit?

RL: Well, we had everything from tutoring children to working with Common Ground, which is an organization based in the Upper and Lower Ninth Wards, with another group that's based in the Lakeview area, going to try to assess what's happening. As well as -- I encouraged, at that point, I think I had about three or four levels. I had both levels of work here in New Orleans. I also had support for Darfur, in terms of a global issue. Support for Israel. Those kinds -- I had three or four different levels of activities suggested.

RH: So, it seems like you've -- you're seeing it as a point, perhaps, even of spirituality, where it's now time to kind of --

RL: Oh absolutely. Absolutely. I think --

RH: -- Katrina.

RL: -- the more we do for others, the better we feel ourselves. And I think that's always been the case. That's not a Katrina reality, that's a normal reality. People, if they're involved in religious action, social action, they derive a great deal of spiritual value from that. I mean, that's really -- Habitat for Humanity, for example, comes in. I mean, that's a faith-based organization, and I'm in favor of faith-based organizations. I'm just not in favor of the government getting involved with them. But that's a whole other issue that we don't want to talk about.



RH: OK. Well, let's get into a little bit about the government. How do you feel the response was for Katrina on a local, state, federal level?

RL: I think the initial response to Katrina was horrible. I mean, other than getting us out of town, and when I say us, those of us that have cars, the response was horrible. The city of New Orleans was just overwhelmed. And understandably so. This was not something that a normal, municipal government was equipped to handle. It needed to come from federal, and probably not even the state. It needed to come from the federal government, which has massive resources for transportation, for building, for rescue, and that didn't happen as quickly as it needed to happen. So that's the first level. There -- I have frustration with the Corps of Engineers, and the sloppy job they clearly did with the levee system. While I understand the decision that was made here in Jefferson Parish, where the pumping station workers were evacuated, it was poor judgment to evacuate them as far as away as they were evacuated, so that those pumps were left unmanned after the storm for a much longer time than was absolutely necessary. Had those pumpers been back in action, then some of the flooding, probably not all of the flooding, but some of the flooding that affected Jefferson Parish, inclusive of this building, inclusive of my home, might not have happened. It might not have happened. I'm not quite as down on the Parish President as others are who want to string him up forever. I think he followed the plan that was set -- that was given to him. I think he made a decision that, from a Jewish perspective, would be called pikuach nefesh, the preservation of life, and that does take precedence over property. It would have been nice had the workers been a little closer so they could have gotten back earlier. And in terms of the rebuilding effort, it's slow. It's very, very slow. And bureaucratically so. Is it understandable? To some extent, I would say yes. The extent of damage is unprecedented, and I don't think people realize that. This wasn't just a storm that cut a swatch of ground across the state of Florida for example. This was a storm that the effect of which, inclusive of the flooding, that devastated a major American city. Not just a section of a major American city. And so the level of response, while now probably is appropriate, it's still going very, very



slowly. You know, the pettiness that occurred early on between the Governor and the Mayor and the President was just despicable. I mean, it should not have happened. Party affiliation should be meaningless. But that wasn't the case. Past history should have been meaningless. But that was not the case. And so, there is much we can look back on and hang our heads low. But, I think the rebuild program is getting better. It would be nice to see a real, concrete plan for the city of New Orleans. It's still not -- there's still no blueprint yet established, and there is still so much politics involved in that. It's disgusting. But, on the other hand, when the "non-partisan" people get involved, then we do look at solutions that are going to impact people and that's why the politics get involved.

RH: So how do you think about race and Katrina? Do you believe part of the response and even the recovery has anything to do with race?

RL: I know within the African American community, the answer is always to this, yes. That it's all about race. And generally, in the white community, the answer is no. And I think my answer is probably a little bit of each. I think that it's really more an issue of economics than race. And the reality of New Orleans is that those on the lower end of the economic level of New Orleans are the African Americans, is the African American population. And so while it's not as much race, it's more economics, in that you had a population that part of which was low income and needing, and not able to really come back. They don't have the means. They didn't have the cars to get out, and they don't have the way to come back because they have no place to come back. I don't think New Orleans wants to be a white city again. I don't think that's a goal. It's certainly not my goal. I think New Orleans needs that African American population desperately. I think that's part of what makes New Orleans the city that it is, has been the mixture of black and white and the cultural influences of both communities. And --

RH: Have the delays kind of create a de facto white community?



RL: It has. I mean, the delays certainly have kept the lower income people in Houston and other parts of the country not coming back. And some of them are looking and realizing that New Orleans wasn't so good to begin with. And the grass really is greener in other cities. That, perhaps, isn't as terrible as it could be. I mean, if we come back a smaller city but better able to meet the needs of all of the people, we'll be a better-off city, education being a particular area of concern.

RH: Do you like the general direction that education is taking?

RL: Well I think it's -- certainly, having the charter schools with the personal responsibility is a better direction than the old school board system. I think the jury's still out. There's just so much -- while yes, I mentioned Singleton Charter School before. You know, here's a school that has great intentions, but they still don't have textbooks. You know, you can't learn if you don't have the books.

RH: Right. What do you think the Jewish community as a whole's part in the recovery should be? Do you see a particular influence?

RL: I think the Jews, again, going back to socio-economics, we, in general are middle- and upper-middle class. And I think we as a Jewish community have a responsibility to be supportive of the total rebuilding of this city. And that means supporting those schools. It means supporting the rebuilding efforts. To find creative ways to help the population move forward.

RH: Do you have any ideas on that yourself?

RL: Well, I think each of us has to kind of find our own little niche. You know, that's why I'm glad, for example, that we're going to be working with this women's shelter. You know, it's one niche. I mean, these are women -- some of them are battered, some of them are simply homeless. They are working. They're working women. But when you're working minimum wage, the main thing -- it's hard to put a roof over your heads,



especially with the prices of apartments and houses and rentals today. I mean, they're exorbitant. I mean, they're much larger, much higher than they were pre-Katrina. And so, if we can help that group have a safe place, and have those children have a safe place, then we've contributed one brick to the rebuilding of the city.

RH: Where do you feel like the Jewish community is right now as far as the recovery?

RL: You know, I think, again, we're back about 80 percent, and I think -- I know figures -- others have said 65. I think it's higher than that. I think it's certainly, based on my count here at Gates of Prayer, and my knowledge of other synagogues, I think we're at least 80 percent. Which is positive. But I think, post-Katrina, all of us have to look and see, how are we operating, and how can we operate most efficiently and most cooperatively. I think you're aware that right now, something quite miraculous is happening in this building, and that is, while we're meeting in our sanctuary, we have a multi-purpose room where the Orthodox Congregation, Beth Israel, which was destroyed in the Lakeview area, they're meeting in our building on a weekly basis. We're in discussions with them about a possible long-term relationship. I mean, who would have thought that a Reform Congregation and an Orthodox Congregation could have that kind of a connection. But there is, at least, that discussion. If nothing else, in the short-term, we're glad to have them in the building. We're happy to keep a mainstream Orthodox presence in New Orleans going in a viable way. And we're supportive of that for them.

RH: So what are some of the kind of surprises that are coming out of this relationship with the Orthodox community?

RL: Well, I think the first thing we saw was sort of at the High Holidays. Because, as I mentioned earlier, New Orleans is a community, and everyone is related to everyone else. And probably a significant percentage of my members at one time were members at Beth Israel. And so, I saw people walking across the back of the sanctuary come Yom Kippur, this year I'm talking about -- not '05 -- as they were going to the Beth Israel



service. My members were going there and vice versa. And some of their members, I can think of one family member, one congregant who is an active member of Beth Israel, but his wife grew up Reform. And now she had an opportunity. He can daven away in the Beth Israel sanctuary, and she was in our sanctuary. And she was happy to do that. I think that was positive. We're doing something in the spring, which I think is quite unique. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, very well known Rabbi who speaks all over the country but who also has a rather hefty honorarium is going to be coming to town. And I was able to arrange it that the four congregations meeting along this West Esplanade corridor would cooperate so that on Friday evening, he's going to speak here. Saturday morning, he's going to speak at Shir Hadash, the Conservative Congregation, because that's when they get their biggest number. Saturday afternoon, he's going to go -- or evening -- he's going to go to Chabad of Metairie. And Sunday morning, he'll be back here in this building, but sponsored by Beth Israel. I mean, that's a nice way of acting like a community. And where is he going to stay? Beth Israel recently bought a house in walking distance of all four institutions, and he'll stay at their house. So that's, I think, a creative way of dealing with the reality.

RH: So is this something that would have never happened before the storm?

RL: Probably not. Probably not. I think there is a greater openness to trying to work with one another. Now, I think over time, the natural course of institutions will be that we'll all go back to our parochialism to some extent. I think that's only normal.

RH: You had mentioned that the parochialism, getting through that, getting over that, past that somewhat, has been one of the benefits.

RL: Right. I think it has. But I think over time, each institution is going to want to preserve its own little areas. But hopefully we'll be at least a little more open to cooperation.



RH: It seems like there might be a need for a vision of New Orleans and the Jewish community that's not looking back at what it was, but at what it's going to be. Do you have a sense of how to lead that and guide that?

RL: That kind of thing is actually kind of happening in a structured way through our Jewish Federation, where leaders of every facet of the community have been sitting down and sort of looking to the future, both in terms of the various organizations -- where are we going to need to slim down and where are we going to need to cooperate. I think one part of the vision is that we're going to continue to have separate synagogues. There's no reason that everybody has to get together. My hope is to see us cooperate in a variety of areas, just so that there is a greater sense of community. My wife is, for example, happens to be our youth group advisor. And one of our teenagers came back from a NFTY national camp and said, you know, we should do a community-wide youth program. And she was able to pull the other advisors of the different kinds of youth groups together and say, you know, we're fewer in number now as it is. Why don't we have a community-wide event? And that was unprecedented, but it happened a few -- back in October -- where the teenagers from the three Reform Congregations, from the Conservative Congregation, from BBYO, from Young Judaea all got together and they had an evening -- they had both an evening social kind of event and then a daytime social action kind of event where they went to the Jewish Old Age Home, and they brought together about 75, 80 kids in the evening, and about 20 or so in the daytime. That's very positive. And that's the kind of thing we need to be looking at. And similarly to the education program I just described, perhaps we'll do more joint continuing education since our -- the numbers of our potential students have decreased. So those are the kinds of things that are going to happen.

RH: Is there any kind of a difference in the theological mission of the three Reform communities?



RL: Well, I think historically, in terms of the spectrum of Reform Judaism, Gates of Prayer is viewed as the more traditional of the three, which is to say more Hebrew, and more oriented toward the Halachah. Sinai is, historically, the more classical Reform Congregation, with Touro falling somewhere in the middle. But I describe that as historical because I'm not sure that we're all that different now. For example, when I go to Touro synagogue, their service is really not very different from our service. I think it's more of a perception. Sinai still -- they're still much more into the classical mode. Rabbi Cohn loves the music of the big pipe organ and his members, at least some of them, like that. And I think their congregation is probably demographically an older congregation coming from that genre of Reform Judaism.

RH: Is there any difference in approach to the city? Approach to activism? Mitzvot?

RL: I think the -- not so much in terms of mitzvot, because I think we're all sort of based in the same approach. Temple Sinai has historically been very active in inter-faith relations. And Rabbi Cohn in particular is very well known in the inter-faith community. He also has been very involved in the Human Relations Committee of the city of New Orleans. Whereas Rabbi Busch hasn't had the chance to build those connections, but he's starting to do that. And because of the geography, my activity has been more in Jefferson Parish as opposed to the city of New Orleans, although in inter-faith areas, we overlap. So some of that is ongoing. But I'm more involved in Jefferson Parish than the city of New Orleans.

RH: Is there anything that you'd like to see more of in the Jewish community?

RL: Yeah. More Jews. I want to see more Jews moving back to New Orleans. I want to see an influx of young adults. I think that was an area that we lost a number of people. We were having a problem with that pre-Katrina, although I had been detecting at least in terms of my own membership an increase in some of the young people who had started to come back to New Orleans and then the storm hit and they left, which is very sad.



And now they're in Atlanta and Houston and Birmingham and New York and all sorts of other places.

RH: Do you have a plan for trying to bring them back? Or do you --

RL: Well, I know the community, through the Federation, there is an attempt to try to come up with a very specific plan to go out and find jobs that they could have and that they could come back to. As well as doing some publicity to that effect. And I think there may even be some advertising that will go out in Jewish media, talking about New Orleans as a good community to raise your children as Jews.

RH: How do you feel about the Jewish Day School, because it's gone down?

RL: I'm obviously sad to see it gone down. The school was having problems pre-Katrina. There was discussion then whether or not we should continue with the middle school, the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. So, the numbers were a challenge even then. I was sad that we weren't able to get up and running, because I think we lost a number of students who otherwise might have come back and stayed in the school, but you can't undo what's been done. So, I'm pleased with the leadership now, that they've come up -- or we've come up with, since I'm still on the Board -- with a plan of K, 1, 2, 3 combination classes so we're up to, I think, 20-some odd students in K, 1, 2, 3. We don't know what next year's recruitment will be, whereby I happen to have attended the first open house and there was a goodly number of children there and families. And so that was a positive indicator of the future. I think the school is going to struggle for a while. I think one of the challenges that the school never really anticipated facing, while we always understood that our competition was the big private schools, Neumann and Country Day, what's happened in both Orleans and Jefferson Parishes is that the public schools have actually gotten better, and that's more of alternative than they had been previously. You know, that's good news, in some ways, but it's not necessarily good news for the Day School. And my hope is to see children go to the Day School K-5 and



then they'd continue in either public or private education after that. Is it going to happen? Maybe. Tune in next year and the year after that and the year after that to see what's really happening.

RH: For you personally, are there any observances that have become more meaningful. I mean, even personal ritual. Personal prayer?

RL: Well, we have a custom in our Friday evening service that I started pre-Katrina. When you get to the hoda'ah prayer, the prayer of giving thanks, where we pause and I invite members of the congregation to share what they're thankful for. And so, I've seen the progression. When I was back in October and November of last year, you gave thanks that your house got gutted. By November, December, I've got sheetrock. And then you could hear about, oh, I've got cabinets, and I've got countertops and my family's come back and so that's something I sort of look forward to. To hear the progress. And more and more we're not hearing the Katrina-related thank yous, which is good. That means we're moving on. So that's something that I personally appreciate. Other than that, I don't know that I have anything in particular that I can respond to that question.

RH: Is there any concepts or frameworks that have been personally valuable to you in the past 15 months?

RL: Well, I think first of all, I cherish some of the relationships that have been created. The relationships with my inter-faith clergy group. I would say my relationship, in particular, with our new Reform colleague in town. And, you know, normally, there's a level of friendly competition, shall we say, between or among the congregations, and I just don't feel that. Right now, we're all in the same boat, and I'm rooting for him to do well and his congregation to do well as well as my own. I don't see it as a competitive issue. And I've appreciated, you know, working with him closely, as well as with Rabbi Cohn, although he and I have known each other. It's not a new relationship. We've known each other for years.



RH: It occurs to me that people who have lived like the people in the Jewish community in New Orleans, and in general also, that they've lived with a lot of uncertainty and that kind of throws you into living in the moment a little bit more. And living in the moment is kind of a prayer in itself.

RL: Well, I guess I see myself here for the longer -- in the longer-term. Particularly now that I'm sitting now in my office, which has been totally rebuilt since Katrina. The books that you are viewing behind me, fortunately, did not get wet, but the bookshelves were ripped out. The books -- when I describe that scene in the social hall, a number of the tables had all of my books just piled up randomly. It wasn't fun putting them back in order. That was a challenge. So that I see, you know, the Jewish people are a people who -- we're here for the long haul. And so I'm not so focused for the moment. I'm focused for dealing with the challenges of the moment, but my thought process is -- where are we going to be next year, the year after that, the year after that as well.

RH: Do you think that the people who have lived so intensely have something to teach the world? America?

RL: Well, I think all of us have a story to tell. Lehavdil, but to some extent, I would liken this to Elie Wiesel's message of the Holocaust survivor whose responsibility is to bear witness. And I think that our people have the responsibility to bear witness, to share the story -- and I'm not trying to equate it with the Holocaust, but it was a trauma -- and there is a lot of good that came out of it. The blessings that have been bestowed upon us have been bountiful. The kindnesses that have been bestowed upon us have been magnificent. The functioning of the Jewish community is really a success story. The Reform movement in particular stepped forward very quickly to say, how can we help, and continues to say, we're here for you and we'll help you. They're not going to sustain us for years and years and years, but they'll be there to help us for the short haul. We've got to ultimately be responsible. Similarly, the Federation community, I think, has been



very positive. The words that are spoken, klal Yisrael re'evim zeh l'zeh, that all of the Jewish people are dependent upon one another, never became so clear to us as they did during this whole experience. So I think that those are a positive message to share with others.

RH: Is there anything that you'd like to close with?

RL: I think I gave it to you already. No, I'm just appreciative. You know, I recognize -- we're sitting here because what occurred to the New Orleans Jewish community is a historical moment. And that's one of the shocking aspects of living through it. I think that all of us realize that we're not just watching history, we're living history. I'm looking forward to looking back upon this whole experience 10, 15 years from now to see how we did and how it all turned out. Unfortunately, with the reality of the weather, my comment would be it's to be continued.

RH: Is there anything that would push you to move to another congregation?

RL: It would have to be a very heavy push. It would have to be a major destruction of this community, at this point, I would guess. I mean, I can imagine having to move, because others have had to do that, but it would have to be a major destruction. If I don't have a congregation, then that might be a problem. The funny thing, Rabbis like to eat like everybody else.

RH: Right. Thank you.

RL: My pleasure. And thank you for recording this history.

[END OF INTERVIEW]