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People making their way down Canal Street in New Orleans, during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. (AP)

Last update - 16:30 28/10/2007

## New Orleans sees resurgence of Jewish life in Hurricane Katrina aftermath

By Anshel Pfeffer, Haaretz Correspondent

tags: New Orleans, Jews >>

Michael Weil, executive director of the Jewish Federation of New Orleans estimates that over the last two years since Katrina, at least 400 Jews have moved to the city to take part in its rebuilding, in a resurgence of Jewish life in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

About 30 percent of newcomers to New Orleans are Jewish. "We made a survey and we found out that these newcomers can be categorized in two profiles. There are the opportunists, carpetbaggers, lawyers, engineers, damage-assessors who realize this is the time to make money here. But there are also many idealists, people who believe in Tikkun Olam and see this as their chance to make a change. Most of them are young people in their twenties and thirties, singles and couples, very few with children."

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About 9500 Jews lived in New Orleans before Katrina, and their numbers were dwindling. A third of them left the city after the storm and now the Jewish population stands at 6700, including the newcomers. The rebuilding efforts have also lead to a newfound enthusiasm for Jewish community life and about 70 percent of Jews in New Orleans are currently affiliated in some way with Jewish organizations, a very high number relative

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### Rosner's Domain

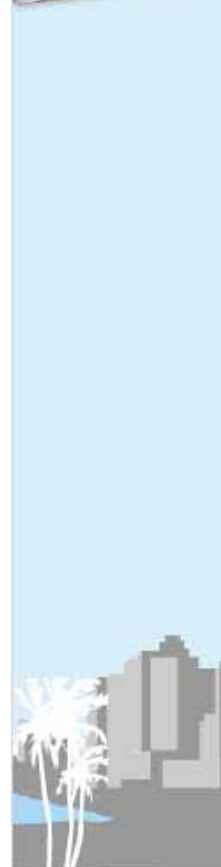
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to most cities in the United States.

To attract more Jews to the area, the federation has put together a package of incentives, modeled in part on the sal klita (absorption benefits) given to Olim in Israel. It includes 3000 dollars in moving grants, 2500 in rental assistance and an interest-free loan of 15 thousand for those purchasing or renovating a home or starting a business.

Newcomers are also given free membership to all Jewish organizations and synagogues during their first year.

"We are also getting funding now so we can offer newcomers with children a free Jewish education at our day school here" says Weil.

Since the program began in August, there have already been 170 enquiries.

Weil, a former research fellow and policy planner at the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute in Jerusalem, has been on the job for a year and was in Israel last week leading a UJC mission from New Orleans. He wants other communities around the world, struck by disaster to be able to learn from New Orleans experience and there have already been talks with Kiryat Shmona municipality.

"Our policy has been not to hang around waiting for someone else to help us out, and not to wait for billions of federal money to come in but to change the rules of the ballgame. We made the switch from a declining community and became an emerging one."

Sarina Pollack, a lawyer from Chicago, is an example of the new kind of New Orleans Jew. She arrived with a UJC group to give assistance after the storm and ten months ago came to live. "I was offered a job here at a law firm dealing with damage and property cases" she says, "and jumped at the opportunity. I think a lot of people like me are interested in coming here. We've led easy lives and the most we could have done is give money donations, this is a real opportunity to give something with our own sweat and do the kind of Tikkun Olam we only learned about before."

New Orleans is predominantly a Reform community with 4 temples. The city also has a Conservative synagogue and two Orthodox ones which will probably unite in the future and two Chabad centers.

As part of the apparent Jewish renaissance in the city, a new Orthodox Rabbi will be appointed at the Beit Yisrael Synagogue on Sunday.

For many outsiders, New Orleans has the image of a hedonistic, licentious Mardi Gras city, hardly the place for observant Jews, but Rabbi Uri Topolosky, who arrived from Riverdale three months ago is certain that he can attract young Orthodox families to his new community.

Beit Yisrael was established 104 years ago but in recent decades it was a declining congregation with less than a hundred members and only about 25 arriving on any particular Shabbat. The synagogue was flooded during Hurricane Katrina, submerged under ten feet of water and its Torah scrolls and holy books were destroyed. Half its members left the city following the storm.

"We are now rebuilding the community" Topolosky said, "and we already have ten new members. I believe Orthodox Jews will come here because this is the kind of place where you have a real opportunity make a change and be a part of defining the community. In a big community, things are set out and defined for you. This is a special place for Jews, even the fact that we are now using a room lent to us in the Reform temple which is a very rare thing for an Orthodox community, while we look for a new place to rebuild our synagogue shows how special Jewish life is here."

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- 10:21** IDF strikes northern Gaza Strip, killing 4 Palestinians
- 10:49** Livni, Rice meet in Jerusalem in bid to overcome impasse in peace talks
- 09:42** Newly deployed PA police force leaves Nablus to IDF at night
- 08:38** High Court challenges criteria for Palestinian student entry
- 02:43** Turkey seeks right to build monument in J'lem's Old City
- 11:01** Olmert: Israeli must unite around memory of Rabin's assassination
- 09:40** Olmert's comments to ethics panel shed light on probes against him
- 05:36** Histadrut to decide on labor dispute in support of teachers
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|--|------------------------------|----------|
| 1. <b>Jews in exile</b>  | 16:38   Choni Davidowitz     | 28/10/07 |
| 2. <b>Orthodox Services in a Reform Temple</b>                             | 17:09   Johnny Weintraub     | 28/10/07 |
| 3. <b>I am a Jewish Swimming Teacher with a strong belief in NO future</b> | 17:35   Myron                | 28/10/07 |
| 4. <b>May we preserve that authentically New Orleans Catholic flavor</b>   | 18:40   New Orleans Guy      | 28/10/07 |
| 5. <b>Choni Davidowitz . Pie in the sky</b>                                | 19:30   Ky                   | 28/10/07 |
| 6. <b>Pie in the Sky???</b>  | 20:14   Hadar                | 28/10/07 |
| 7. <b>Choni Davidovitz</b>   | 20:54   Shmuel               | 28/10/07 |
| 8. <b>#23 Tosefta, inaccurate information</b>                              | 21:05   Jasmine Murphy       | 28/10/07 |
| 9. <b>Not in exile</b>   | 22:28   James                | 28/10/07 |
| 10. <b>New Orleans</b>   | 22:53   Scott G              | 28/10/07 |
| 11. <b>No neighbors in NO?</b>   | 23:34   Miriam               | 28/10/07 |
| 12. <b>Reply to Post No. 6</b>   | 00:41   Johnny Weintraub     | 29/10/07 |
| 13. <b># 1 Choni Davidowitz</b>  | 01:42   Joseph E .           | 29/10/07 |
| 14. <b># 5 Ky</b>  | 02:00   Joseph E .           | 29/10/07 |
| 15. <b>Jewish renaissance in New Orleans</b>                               | 02:03   David James Vickery  | 29/10/07 |
| 16. <b>Yes Choni, of course.....</b>                                       | 02:09   David James Vickery  | 29/10/07 |
| 17. <b>TWO CHABAD CENTERS!! BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY!!! MAZALTOV!</b>      | 03:32   VOICE of MOSHIACH))) | 29/10/07 |
| 18. <b>Here is a suprise</b>   | 16:31   USA                  | 29/10/07 |
| 19. <b>All displaced Jews should be packed and shipped to Israel</b>       | 00:11   Israel is home       | 01/11/07 |
| 20. <b>Jews are NOT Displaced</b>  | 10:57   Shmuel               | 04/11/07 |

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