

www.thejewishweek.com

Monday, November 12, 2007 / 2 Kislev 5768

- News
- New York
- National
- Washington
- International
- Israel
- Short Takes
- Briefs
- Editorial & Opinion
- The Arts
- Jewish Life
- Food
- Travel
- Calendars
- Classifieds
- Special Sections
- Singles
- Write On For Israel
- Fresh Ink for Teens
- Directories
- Blogs
- NY Resources
select below

[Home](#) > [News](#) > [National](#)

10/25/2007
[Email this Article](#) [Print this Page](#)

Swimming Upstream

[Two years after Katrina, New Orleans Jewry is desperately trying to lure new Jewish blood. Against the odds, there may be reason to hope.](#)



New Orleans in better times: Is the future bright post- Katrina? Getty Images

by Steve Lipman
Staff Writer

New Orleans — It's hurricane season again, but the schedule makers at Congregation Beth Israel aren't thinking about Katrina.

Drew and Reggie are on their minds.

Beth Israel, New Orleans' major Modern Orthodox synagogue, has a new rabbi — Uri Topolosky picked up stakes with his wife and two small children this summer from the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. The congregation needed a date this fall, preferably a Sunday, for an installation ceremony.

Two years after Katrina, New Orleanians don't look skyward when planning events, despite the ever-present fear about the levees that failed in August 2005. They look at the New Orleans Saints' schedule.

No one here would think of holding an event that conflicts with the beloved NFL team whose star players are quarterback Drew Brees and running back Reggie Bush.

So Rabbi Uri, as everyone calls him, will be installed — and a donated Torah scroll will be dedicated — in a ceremony that will start this Sunday at 12:30 p.m. Which allows time to get home to watch the Saints' 3:30 p.m. game on TV.

"We were looking for a rebuilding opportunity, a project," Rabbi Topolosky says. And New Orleans presents the ultimate — some would say impossible — rebuilding project.

In a city struggling to regain its population and its reputation, the ubiquitous loyalty to its

team is another sign that normal life, a slice of “pre-Katrina” life as everyone here dates recent history, has returned to New Orleans, which lost about 40 percent of its former 500,000 residents. The Jewish community, which also lost about 40 percent of its population (damage to the communal infrastructure was estimated at \$20 million), is part of the precarious recovery.

Like New Orleans itself, the Jewish community is attempting to rebuild, balancing smaller numbers — 6,500, down from 10,000 — with heightened commitment. Many leaders of the community left on the eve of Katrina and never came back, but a new generation of leaders is starting to replace them. Yet most members of the community agree that it is too early to forecast what sort of Jewish community will emerge.

The signs of rebirth are evident on synagogue pulpits. In addition to Beth Israel, two other congregations welcomed new members of the clergy in recent months.

The Northshore Jewish Congregation, across Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans proper, hired Rabbi Julie Kozlow, who was ordained by Los Angeles’ Academy for Jewish Religion. And Cantor William Tiep, a recent graduate of Hebrew Union College, joined the Touro Synagogue, a landmark congregation in the city’s Uptown section.

The cantor will be installed tonight.

The decision of two rabbis and a cantor to cast their fates here is “a great sign,” says Joan Berenson, a New Orleans native who has worked on the Jewish federation task force that created an incentive program to attract Jewish residents. “It’s a vote for the future of the community,” says Rabbi Andrew Busch, spiritual leader of the Touro Synagogue. “It’s a vote for the vibrancy of the community.” One native son, however, takes a less sanguine view of his hometown’s future.

Lawyer-author Ben Toledano, who left New Orleans two decades ago and lives in neighboring Mississippi, wrote a critical essay “New Orleans – An Autopsy,” in the September issue of Commentary.

“Reports of the death of New Orleans as a major American city have not been greatly exaggerated,” Toledano wrote, “they have only been greatly delayed. Although the funeral was not conducted until Katrina struck, the death took place several decades ago.”

“I don’t see a viable community, period,” he tells The Jewish Week, adding that New Orleans Jewry exaggerates both its prospects for the future and its population figures.

Toledano says the size of the Jewish community cited by most local leaders probably includes Jews in neighboring parishes who were not counted in previous population figures.

New Orleans itself, he says, probably has about 3,000 Jews — and some leave each year. “The brightest young people, whether they’re Jews or gentiles, go away to school and don’t come back.

“I can’t think of any good reason why any young Jewish people would go to New Orleans,” he says. “I don’t see what is attractive to Jewish families.”

‘A New Normal’

While the historic French Quarter swings on, luring tourists and showing no signs of Katrina, and while the Ninth Ward still looks like Chernobyl, the Jewish community is “settling into a new normal,” says Deena Gerber, executive director of Jewish Family Service; she is referring to a communal emphasis on the quality, rather than the quantity, of Jewish life.

The new normal means scaled-down activities. Talk of institutions merging and of buildings closing is in the air.

In the institutions and homes of the New Orleans Jewish community you hear mixed messages. You hear about reduced membership rolls in synagogues and other Jewish organizations, but increased attendance at religious services and community events. You hear about the loss of board members and donors, but a Jewish federation fundraising campaign that is nearly at pre-Katrina levels. You hear about lives that apparently have returned to normal. You also hear about divorces and suicides.

“They have plenty of challenges and therefore opportunities ahead of them, but they’re over the hump,” says Howard Feinberg, lead staff member of the United Jewish Communities emergency committee and a frequent visitor to New Orleans. “They have a critical mass of people who have returned.”

Since Katrina, Jewish New Orleans has been sustained by grants, totaling about \$16 million, contributed mostly by the UJC, and administered by the Jewish Federation of



Ads by Google

[Toxic FEMA Trailers](#)

FEMA Trailers making you sick? Contact Our Attorneys for Help www.wrightroy.com

[Satellite Phones Work](#)

When cell and landlines don't work satellite phones keep you connected globafoneiridiumphones.com

[The Tax Relief Directory](#)

Act Hurricane Katrina Relief Tax Smart Money Management Starts Here! TaxRelief.MoneyPowerCe

[Hurricane Katrina Relief](#)

Hurricane Katrina information and pictures. www.HurricaneKatrinaRel

Greater New Orleans. The outside funding runs out at the end of the year.

"We're not going to fall apart," says Allan Bissinger, who became federation president the week after Katrina. He bases his optimism on the results of the federation's 2006-07 fundraising campaign — about \$2.6 million, compared to \$2.8 million in the last pre-Katrina campaign.

Following a yearlong study, the federation last month released a report that targeted the restoration of the Jewish community "to its former size and potentially to 12,000." To foster that growth, the federation is embarking on a five-year, \$30 million fundraising campaign, with substantial contributions anticipated from Jews outside of New Orleans, and it recently established a pilot, one-year Newcomer Incentive Program.

Patterned after the inducements given to new immigrants in Israel, the program offers a basket of financial incentives, including rental grants, moving expenses and a year's free membership in synagogues, the Jewish community center and other Jewish organizations.

The program's goal is 1,000 families in the next five years.

"I don't think the goal is impossible," says Rachelle Stein, who coordinates the program. Of the 200-300 Jewish family units — mostly young singles — who have moved to New Orleans in the last two years, about 90 have come since the federation announced the incentive program three months ago, Stein says.

Jake Schwartz, a Pittsburgh-born attorney who moved to New Orleans in 1989, is one of those who evacuated to escape Katrina and stayed away. He and his family resettled in Atlanta, where his wife has relatives.

Their teenage daughter was happily enrolled in an Atlanta day school, Schwartz says. "It became clear to us that life was going to be easier for us" in Atlanta.

Katrina "exposed" some of the problems that any small Jewish community faced, like the lack of a Jewish high school, but "has created some leadership opportunities for people who [otherwise] may not have gravitated to it," says Schwartz, a former president of the New Orleans JCC.

In New Orleans, "the mood ... is mixed," says Ruth Pearlstein, program director of the Jewish Women's Archive, which is conducting a Katrina's Jewish Voices oral history project. "There is definitely energy and determination ... However, those feelings are mixed with weariness, discouragement and some trepidation about the future."

The federation titled its 2006-07 annual report "A Community Rediscovered, A City Revitalized." Executive Director Michael Weil, who left a plum position with an Israeli think tank to take part in the revitalization, keeps on his desk a bowl full of blue-and-white buttons he hands to visitors. The buttons state: "RE-NEW ORLEANS/We're Coming Back!!!/THANK YOU."

Turning Outward

For the first year after "The Storm," members of the community say, New Orleans' Jewish residents, like other citizens, concentrated on personal affairs: getting their homes restored, arranging for insurance coverage, replacing lost records. Now they are finding time to turn outward, to the wider community.

Some signs of confidence in New Orleans' Jewish future are the recent announcement of a new Shabbat-observant Boy Scout troop and a \$6 million capital campaign for the construction of a new Hillel center at Tulane University. In addition to the federation recruitment program, Beth Israel is developing its own program to attract young, Modern Orthodox families. The synagogue effort is running a series of ads in Jewish newspapers, including a recent one in The Jewish Week that asked "Do you have a pioneering spirit?"

Both programs emphasize the city's extant Jewish institutions (including nine synagogues, two kosher restaurants, two Jewish day schools and two Jewish Mardi Gras marching groups) as well as intangibles (an 80 percent Jewish affiliation rate and a closer spirit of interfaith cooperation). Since Katrina, a growing number of programs are jointly sponsored across denominational boundaries; Gates of Prayer, where Beth Israel meets, is a Reform congregation.

Jewish residents of the city point with optimism to the few hundred Jewish families, mostly young, idealistic, single Jews who have already moved here in the last year to serve as teachers or workers in social service agencies.

Two institutions with Jewish connections — Touro Infirmary, named for 19th-century philanthropist Judah Touro, and Tulane University, led by Jewish President Scott Cowen — have played prominent roles in the city's first steps back to viability. And Councilmember-at-large Arnie Fielkow, a former Saints executive who has strong ties with the Jewish community, is seen as a possible mayoral candidate because of his leadership role in the last two years.

The Jewish newcomers represent a disproportionate share of the thousands of Americans who have come to rebuild New Orleans.

"What turns young Jews on?" the federation's Weil asks rhetorically. "Tikkun olam," he answers, using the Hebrew expression for repairing the world.

They come despite the heat that turns New Orleans into a sauna half the year, despite a cost of living that has risen dramatically since Katrina, despite a spate of largely black-on-black violence, despite images of a city as a modern-day Atlantis.

"You come here and you don't see just destruction," says Dahlia Topolosky, Rabbi Topolosky's wife. Possessing a doctorate in psychology, she is a partner in the rabbi's outreach and the singer on a new children's CD called "Kol Nearim."

The New Aliyah?

Serena Pollack, an attorney from Chicago who came here last year to volunteer then came back a few months later to stay, says her service stint "transformed me."

Pollack took a large pay cut to work in a New Orleans law firm. "People thought I was nuts," she says. "Do I regret it? No. It's been the best year of my life." On a warm Saturday night, she and two fellow newcomers, Lauren Goldman and Amy Berins Shapiro, sit at an outside coffeehouse, discussing their new lives.

Actively engaged with the Jewish community, all say they are happy they made the move. They sound like people who have moved, for altruistic reasons, to Israel.

"We're the norm," Pollack says. "Ninety-five percent of the people who have moved here have jobs and have adapted to New Orleans," says Goldman, a Louisiana native who came here from North Carolina. "There are two places in the world where I feel at home. One is Israel. The other is New Orleans. I tell every person I meet, 'Come. Visit. Forget about a visit to Europe. This is better.'"

The newcomers, old-timers say, are Katrina's silver lining. The Jewish community and the larger community are attracting a caliber of people who may have never considered New Orleans under ordinary circumstances.

Rick Weil, a sociologist at Louisiana State University, last year conducted a survey for the federation that found that most of the city's current residents are likely to stay.

Today's New Orleanians, in other words, are New Orleanians by choice.

"My friends and family are here. My patients are here," says Dr. Michael Wasserman, federation president, a pediatrician who evacuated after Katrina but returned to his hometown.

Besides the Jews who have recently settled here, an estimated 3,000 Jewish volunteers, the newly dubbed "voluntourists," have spent time in New Orleans since Katrina, planting trees and building houses. Last week a group came from the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation of Evanston, Ill., near Chicago, and over five days they sorted food supplies and gutted an empty house.

In this majority African-American, largely Catholic city, the 250-year-old Jewish community, which constitutes less than 1 percent of the population, has played an increasingly public role during the last two years.

In the weeks after Katrina, the Uptown building of the JCC served as a FEMA headquarters, a landing base for rescue helicopters and a National Guard barracks.

Several national Jewish organizations, spearheaded by Nechama: Jewish Response to Disaster, took part in the cleanup activities on an ecumenical basis, and New Orleans' Chabad rabbis took a leading role in rescue and counseling efforts. Local volunteers, including students from the Tulane University Hillel, recently helped build a playground and a women's shelter.

A Community Without Labels

The city's Jewish institutions, their leaders say, are more prepared for the next deluge, with more emergency contact procedures and updated data storage systems in place.

Beth Israel, whose building in the Lakeview section was flooded by 10 feet of water and is now on the market to be sold, suffered more damage than any Jewish building in the area. Its seven Torah scrolls and 3,000 holy texts were ruined, buried in a Jewish cemetery.

The congregation, now holding religious services in less-damaged Temple Gates of

Prayer in suburban Metairie, subsequently received Torah scrolls donated from supporters in Philadelphia, Anaheim, Calif., and Somerville, N.J. Two more are to arrive later this year, in time for Simchat Torah 2008. "This year we danced with three" scrolls, Rabbi Topolosky says. "Next year we're going to dance with five."

Traditionally old-school leaders of Jewish organizations have made a conscious decision to consider new ways of doing business, in order to attract new, younger members.

It's a sign that the community is looking ahead, not back. "This is a community," Rabbi Busch says, "that doesn't want to be defined by the storm."

Take the hiring of the two new rabbis. Rabbi Kozlow is the first female rabbi at a congregation in greater New Orleans. Working at a Reform synagogue, she comes from the nondenominational Academy for Jewish Religion, bringing a creative and spiritual touch. Rabbi Topolosky is a high-energy presence, prone to shouting "incredible!" when excited, a marked change from the staid scholars who usually occupy Orthodox pulpits in the South. He comes from Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Manhattan rabbinical school founded by Rabbi Avi Weiss as an alternative to Yeshiva University.

Rabbi Weiss will be the main speaker at Rabbi Topolosky's installation on Sunday. In the past, New Orleans Jews agree, both synagogues would probably have turned to mainstream rabbinical seminaries.

This weekend, New Orleans Jewry gets to worship with its new clergy, and celebrate at two separate installations.

Today, denominational labels seem less important. This year, the hurricanes have bypassed New Orleans. Next month, the 2007 hurricane season is over.

At High Holy Days time last month, the students at the New Orleans Day School were asked what they were thankful for this year. Most students gave expected, personal answers — health, family, friends, etc. One second-grader spoke for his classmates. He answered, "No hurricanes this year."

Steve Lipan can be reached at steve@jewishweek.org

[Back to top](#)

[Site Map](#) • [Terms of Use](#) • [Last Week's Issue](#) • [Jewish Week Wireless](#)

© 2000 - 2007 The Jewish Week, Inc. All rights reserved. Please refer to the [legal notice](#) for other important information.