

Yom Kippur 2005
Comfort Suites/Congregation Beth Israel
President's Message—by Jackie Gothard

“With everlasting kindness will I have compassion on thee, said the Lord thy Redeemer. This is the waters of Noah, and I have sworn that the waters of Noah nevermore would flood the Earth. And I swear that I will not be angry with you or rebuke you. The mountains may move and the hills be shaken, but my kindness will never move from you, nor my covenant of peace be shaken. Said the Lord who has compassion on us.”

These words of loyalty from G to us, according to the prophet Isaiah.

How coincidental that we were reminded of the Biblical flood and of this promise from our G in the Haftarah Ki Teizei, read just 2 Shabats after Hurricane Katrina.

There we have it—G promised never again to destroy the whole world by flood—every child in Hebrew School and Day School knows the story. Tell that to Diane and Sidney Cotlar, whose every room in their home was flooded, every floor, wall and closet was tainted with mold. Tell that to Toby and Joel Mandler, where the flood waters rose to the eaves of their roof and stayed there for 2 weeks. Tell that to Aidi and Alan Kansas, and to Judy and Irwin Lachoff, and Lisa and Lee Sands—who lost their homes, their cars, their clothes, their belongings. Tell that to any member of Beth Israel—and you all know by now the depth of the muck and mildew, the extent of the mold and destruction – not 1 prayer book, not 1 talis, not 1 Torah scroll is salvagable. So far, the few items you see here—the velvet covers, the menorahs, the Yads—are our only souvenirs.

Would we dare to say that the flood waters destroyed our whole world? Of course there is heartbreak and sadness and loss of family treasures. But I would guess that Diane and Sidney would say how lucky they are to have Lisa and their precious grandson Stevie safe and near—that is their whole world. And Toby and Joel would say that their grandchildren, including their new baby Malie, have given them the hope and energy to look to the future. (And someday soon, Shari and Guy will have the wedding of their dreams, maybe even in Audubon's TeaRoom!) Aidi and Alan have Ian— safe and healthy and happy—that is their whole world. Lee and Lisa, and Judy and Irwin (with barely 2 months to adjust to newly-wedded life)—they have each other.

Our whole worlds are not our carpets, our furniture, our roofs, our businesses, our cars, our clothes—those are only parts of our whole world. The important components of our world are each other—our loved ones, our friends, our neighbors, our community—and our relationship with our G.

This is a beautiful world which G has given us, but Nature is not static. As Isaiah tells us: “The mountains move, and the hills shake.” And we could add, “The waters rise and the storm rains down.” The ground beneath our feet is not as firm as we might like to believe. There will be other storms, there will be other tsunamis, there will be other earthquakes. But the flip-side—the consolation—we all still have each other.

Our energy, our commitment, our priorities are being challenged. Will we be able and willing to dig deep—to muster the “koyech” to rebuild our homes our lives and our Congregation?

How sad that our shul was so badly damaged by the storms. Like our city and all the other synagogues of New Orleans, our members are scattered far and wide, and so many sadly not even planning to return. Beth Israel’s finances are also dwindling—having just recently spent almost \$175,000 of our savings on the much needed replacement of the AC/Heating systems. And today there is virtually no income—our dues statements went into the mail only shortly before the hurricanes.

Do we see this as the demise of Beth Israel—or do we regroup, make a plan of action and rebuild our synagogue? Do we have the desire to keep our 102 year old congregation alive and well?--- even if a little smaller and cozier?—and this Yom Kippur is such an example. Do we have the commitment to our parents and grandparents who worked so hard to pass on this beautiful legacy of Orthodox Judaism to us and our children?

Perhaps G spared all of us for a reason—to be kinder to each other, to care for those less fortunate than us, to appreciate the real treasures in this world—our families and friends..

Less than 2 weeks after Katrina, Eddie and I traveled from Dallas to Milwaukee—we were the guests of the Union of Orthodox Congregations. There was a 2-day seminar for small Orthodox shuls seeking help in programming, outreach, inner structuring. Everyone there, from the leaders of the OU to the rabbis and lay-leaders of about 17 congregations, some even smaller than Beth Israel, knew of our dilemma. We were welcomed with such warmth. Eddie and I were even asked to speak to the gathering—about the long history of Beth Israel and our uniqueness as a stalwart of traditional Orthodoxy in the Coastal South.

We were treated with unbelievable empathy and offers of help—from money to prayer books, to Torah scrolls and even sanctuary pews. Mostly what we heard was “Tell us what we can do to help!” In fact, it is due to the generosity of the OU that we have Rabbi Robert Shur and Menachem Butler and Elyassaf here to help us have our own Beth Israel Yom Kippur Services.

It was only after spending that day and a half with the OU folks, that I felt inspired to rebuild our shul. We are not alone in this effort! If so many people care so sincerely about our future, do we have a choice? Do we dare take the easy way out—collect the insurance, watch our synagogue go down to rubble and then disperse, never to pray together again as Congregation Beth Israel?

The flood waters will dry up—the mold will be killed off—sheet rock and roofs will be replaced-- the piles of debris in front of our homes will someday all be gone. But the TV images, especially the human suffering, the memories of these eventful natural catastrophes, will be with us for the rest of our lives. As human nature will have it—we will blame our civic leaders, we will criticize our lack of emergency preparedness, we will second-guess the corps of engineers, some of us sadly may even blame G—but feeling sorry for ourselves will not solve anything.

As a Jewish nation we have overcome even more devastating events than Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Beth Israel isn't the first synagogue in history to be lost to flood or fire or , worst of all, to anti-semitism. In our history, the 2 great Temples in Jerusalem were destroyed and desecrated, but we came back and rebuilt. We were dispersed from our homeland—we migrated world-wide-- and it was not always pleasant. As a nation, as a people , as a religion—we were designated for annihilation during the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition and the Holocaust. But we always rose from the ashes. We have returned to our Homeland, rebuilt ourselves as a nation of G, a nation of Israel. If all that can be done on the worldwide scale, then certainly those of us here can rebuild our little congregation in this small corner of the world.

I have the blood of 5 generations of Beth Israel running through my veins, as do many of you. Those of you who are newer to our Congregation have generations of Jewish blood in your veins also, and you infuse us with new life and energy.

In short time, very important decisions will need to be made—how to handle the state of our building.....perhaps a new and smaller shul, even a new location.....do we have the committment of 10 men to regroup our daily minyan, of which we were so proud..... should we rebuild the mikveh? But Folks—for any of this to happen, it needs to be more than just Eddie and Jacob and Jackie!

IT NEEDS TO BE ALL OF US! And that is even more important now since we will surely be fewer in number. Beth Israel will be revived if we all care enough to do our share to help. None of us can be indifferent. Let no one say what a good job the other one is doing. This challenge needs to be shared by us all.

Eddie told you at Kol Nidre how coincidental it was that the retirement home in Monsey, N.Y.—returned the Mahzorim to us, dedicated to the memory of their Gabbi and our beloved Meyer Lachoff.. There is another story I think you might enjoy. When our

group of past-presidents and exec-committee had a conference call just 1 week ago today, we came up with the idea of somehow gathering our clan and having our own Yom Kippur observance. There was the problem of finding a location. Sol and I know Ken Patel, and his close friend and associate, Kenny Patel. They are from India and are Hindus. They built this Comfort Suites maybe 4 years ago. As soon as we told them our situation, they welcomed us with open arms, helped us set up the “ Little Shul,” and offered everything we needed. But the end of the story is that they did not own the land originally—they purchased it from 2 local men who had invested in it over 30 years ago. Those men were Sol Gothard and Ralph Pressner.

Do you think my Dad is smiling down on us as we observe Yom Kippur as a Beth Israel Congregation on land he once owned? The way he loved his shul—I certainly think so!

My heartfelt thanks and appreciation to all of you for making today possible--Eddie and Blayne, Jacob and Lee, Irwin, our OU emissaries, Ken and Kenny Patel, and my husband and best friend, Sol.

My Family and I wish all of you and your loved ones a healthy year—one of peace in Israel and compassion for our fellow man. May we have the energy to be better people. May we have the clarity to appreciate G’s blessings.

May we all be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life.