



Joel Brown Transcript

RH: All right. This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Joel Brown at his restaurant, the Kosher Cajun, in Metairie, Louisiana. Today is Monday, October 23rd, 2006. I'm 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. Joel, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

JB: Yes.

RH: Let's just begin with where you were born and your early education, both general and Jewish. Talk a little bit also about your family and how they came to New Orleans.

JB: Okay. I'm thirty-nine years old. I was born here in New Orleans. My father moved here in the early '60s from Philadelphia. He went to Drexel University Engineering School, moved here with the Apollo space program, and worked out at Michoud. My mother is from a small town in Mississippi called Hazlehurst, about thirty miles south of Jackson. That's where she grew up. My parents both met through mutual friends and cousins and were married. I have a sister, Miriam, who's four years younger than me. She lives outside of Jackson with her husband, one son, and one on the way. I'm married. My wife Natalie. We've been married for seventeen years. We have three children. Ruth, my oldest, is – Ruth is fifteen. And Sarah is almost eleven. And Rebecca is seven. Just to let you know, I was born here in New Orleans. My education – went to communal Hebrew Day School. Then went to Lakeshore Hebrew Day School when it was on the lakefront, housed in Beth Israel Synagogue. School was doing very well at the time. I think in its heyday had probably K through eight with a hundred and fifty kids plus. That was good for the Jewish day school at the time. I was at the day school at the time when they moved out of the Beth Israel facility to Metairie, which was



being developed, to a piece of land in a building on West Esplanade, past Transcontinental. That's where Lakeshore Hebrew Day School opened and has been around. I graduated from that school. My sister also went to that school. Graduated – pretty nice size, about eight to ten kids out of the eighth grade. After Lakeshore, continuing my Jewish education, I went to Dallas, Texas, to a school called Torah High School of Texas, which was a small boys' yeshiva and very good education there. We were able to dorm there and able to come home for vacation and holidays, but that was continuing my Jewish education in Dallas. After high school, I went to Israel for six months to another yeshiva in Jerusalem called Machon Meir, which is a very Zionist yeshiva; it's called Mercaz HaRav Kook in Jerusalem. After that, coming home, I went to Yeshiva University, which is in New York, did a semester there, and I had, I guess, about two years of college under my belt when I decided to get into the workforce and start Kosher Cajun. But I'll go back and just tell you a little about, I guess, my upbringing. We belonged to the Conservative shul. My parents always kept a kosher home. We grew up going to what was called Conservative Congregation at the time. I think it was on Napoleon and Magazine. My father became very involved in the congregation with a family he had met when he came down here; a family kind of befriended him, and [they] were almost like his parents while he was down here. And grew up going to that shul.

RH: Did you live in that area?

JB: We lived across the river first, and then my parents bought a house on Cleary in Metairie. So, we lived in Metairie and my parents built a house also in Metairie close to the lake, about six blocks from the store. That's where I really grew up in this area in Metairie.

RH: Go back to – I didn't mean to interrupt you – about the Conservative shul.

JB: Sure, the Conservative shul we went to – my father was the president of the shul at the time when they bought their new piece of property where they are now on West



Esplanade, which has been a beautiful facility when it was built, and which houses next to it the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute where the JCC is and the New Orleans Jewish Day School. So, he was instrumental in buying that piece of property with the congregation at the time.

RH: So is that Shir Chadash?

JB: Which is now Shir Chadash. Right. Continued to go to the Conservative shul, and I had my bar mitzvah there, which was very nice. As we were going to the day school our family was becoming a little more religious. There was a group of families that came down called a Kollel, which is a group of families that come. Sometimes, the women teach, or the men teach at the school, and they learn with families also. And sometimes, it starts with the kids. As me and my sister would come home from school with more questions about kosher and keeping Shabbos, our family became a little more religious, and we, I guess, became Orthodox right before I turned thirteen, right around that time, which was a nice step. In my life also, I definitely see – I say thank God for Shabbos. It is a day of rest, and I really need it, and it's great to be with the family. There's nothing else that's done. We know that that day, from Friday night sundown to Saturday night sundown, is Shabbos. I think I learned that from my parents. We do that in our family also. But, as we became religious, my family – I had my Bar Mitzvah there, and as we became Orthodox, me and my father started – there was a shul where they were davening at the day school. That's where a lot of the Rabbis lived, down West Esplanade. As some of the families started becoming religious – we'd walk to shul. It was like three miles from here. So, we kind of made an agreement – let's put something in the middle where some of the families on this end could also. And things started moving closer in, I guess, to this area around Shir Chadash and Gates of Prayer on West Esplanade. We had bought a house and were davening in the house. That's where we were going to shul then. Was called Young Israel of Metairie. My father was very instrumental in that beginning. And I was, too. Growing up and being able to lead



services there and help – because it was a small group, and ten men make a minyan and everyone counted, everyone really counted. But it was nice, and it's been a nice transition becoming Orthodox and taking on some of the different – keeping the Sabbath fully and keeping kosher fully. It's kind of led me into my business also.

RH: Tell me, it's primarily a Reform Jewish community in New Orleans. How did that feel?

JB: I think I learned from my parents. My father was, I think, on the Federation board and different boards and a very big part of the Jewish community. I saw him in many different aspects with Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox people, and being a really good go-between. I think I learned that [from] meeting all the different friends of the family. I had friends that, even going to school, not all the kids were necessarily Orthodox. Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox kids were going to the day school, and those were my friends. We would go to different Bar Mitzvahs of friends at different shuls or temples. When I played basketball at the JCC – I think it's close-knit. New Orleans has always been, I think, a close-knit community with, for the most part, all the different sects and groups getting together. I think I learned that in my business here, having a kosher restaurant. I'm servicing a wide spectrum of customers. Of course, starting with kosher, I would gear to Jewish people who keep kosher for the religiosity part, and then there are many people who come for the ethnic foods. It's a New York deli, so corned beef and pastrami and knishes, things like that. On the other end of the spectrum, I'd say a good portion of our business is the non-Jewish trade. People are coming again also for the good New York deli. Kosher is quality, kosher is clean, and a lot of people are seeing that kosher products are – I think if someone is in the mind to shop at Whole Foods, then they know they're going to get a quality product that they might pay a little more for, but they know exactly what they're getting. I think I've seen that and been able to in my business talk to the whole community and bring everyone together. We do different catering at all the different shuls. The Reform shuls Uptown and all the ones in Metairie.



RH: So, tell me how you decided to go into this business.

JB: Sure. I'd say, I guess, around thirteen or fourteen, growing up in a kosher home, my father loved to cook, and just seeing all the different recipes and different foods that he would make, and he'd love to copy – like, make a kosher jambalaya or a kosher gumbo. He had those things before, but now in a kosher home, strictly kosher, everything had to be correct. Just seeing my parents and living in the house, things that were readily available, and things that were not readily available. I remember many times we could not – and we still can't even today – buy kosher white bread in a grocery store, which seems to be like a staple item, but there's no – there just happens to be in the city no kosher white bread. I remember many times, I think it was in – might have been Mobile – a grocery store called Pantry Pride I remember. Each one of the families would take once a month a ride, in whoever had a station wagon and would literally go and buy a month's worth of bread – if it was hamburger buns or hot dog buns, white bread – to bring back. Everyone would put it in their freezer. I joke – every Jewish home has a chest freezer. Every Jewish home has an extra freezer because people buy in quantity. They're usually always cooking for a lot of people. People don't come in and buy one chicken; they always buy six and put some in the freezer. But I know that's one thing. They would do that. I think there was a group of people, I know my parents were part of it, that would bring in kosher meat from out of town. They get people together who kept kosher and would order – I think I remember a company out of Denver. That's something they wanted to do. Kosher was what they wanted to keep. And whatever it took to – it was definitely more expensive for the product itself and then for shipping. But I saw that, and I saw what my parents were doing, and I guess, as I came back – and always, whenever I would travel – they're always looking at other cities. What did they have new that we don't have? Go to different restaurants – of course, the major cities, New York has tons of kosher restaurants. And Florida, Miami. Philadelphia has some, where my aunt lives. So, I thought, just looking around, “What does New Orleans –? It looks like New Orleans definitely had a void of kosher food.” So that's when a light bulb went off



about this might be something to start. I think it was December of 1987. There was the first kosher food show in Miami. I went there for a week. A good friend of mine's parents live there. I went, and I stayed with them. I went to this kosher food show and just started making contacts with different people – Empire, the kosher chicken company, and Best's Kosher Deli out of Chicago. Started making these contacts, putting things together. I think I was nineteen at the time, and some people – I started out of my mother's house is where I started, bringing in small orders. I bought a few chest freezers, and I had a little shelving. She had a little solarium in the back of the house. It was a small group of people who I knew that kept kosher. I just started bringing in a few new products or making it easier for people who might have had to order stuff from out of town. Might have done that for six months – can't remember exactly how long – out of her house. It's even harder to remember people coming over to the house to buy. But I've been in business, it's been twenty years now, and I saw, as each month went by, possibly a retail location was in the near future. A friend of mine owned a building, the one back on North Hullen Street. It's a quadruplex, had four spots, and he had a spot open downstairs. It's not the best street that people would pass by and say, “Oh, there's a ...”. But if I put a sign up, people will search out kosher food. If you keep kosher, you'll go the extra mile; you'll travel across town because you keep kosher and you need that food. So, I still thought it would be – the price was right. He had an opening. I needed a good – and he really helped me along. Really good close friend of mine. I went to the electric company. I paid my deposit to turn the electric on. But I got cold feet, and I shut it off. I waited thirty days until I got enough courage. I just waited a month, and then I said, “Okay, I'm going to start this.” So, I had a small retail location, about nine-hundred square feet. Just groceries. Around that time, I met my wife, Natalie. Her family had gone to the traditional shul, Chevra Tehillim, Uptown. We might have known each other from different Jewish youth events, but never really clicked, let's say. We were introduced by kids that I went to day school with and Natalie went to high school with. So, those were mutual friends of ours because I had gone away to high school. She had



gone to high school here. So, some of my friends had graduated day school and then went on to high school became Natalie's friends, and they introduced us. We were married. We were married for seventeen years. Even as we were dating, she started to help me in the business, taking some of the hours and being here and helping. I still vividly remember I was representing a really great cake company out of New York with gourmet French kosher cakes. Federation had asked me to cater a dessert buffet at one of their annual meetings at the Uptown JCC. This was a pretty big event for me. I thought, and I thought leading up to it, and I proposed to my wife that night at the JCC. It was special. This is a nice event, and I think I can make some money in this, I think I'm ready to get married and start a family. So, that was a special time I always remember. We got engaged there and married about a year later.

RH: So tell me, do your children go to the Torah Academy, or where do they go to school?

JB: I'll tell you, my kids – well, right now – I'll go back. They all started at Gates of Prayer at the nursery school. We live about six blocks from Gates of Prayer. So it was a great location, and we always knew that the day school there, the nursery school, was excellent. Yes, it was a Reform shul, and we're Orthodox, but we didn't think that that would be a problem. We were looking for our kids to be taught the basics of Judaism. Yes, when it came to kosher, we made sure to send kosher snacks. Again, I wanted my kids to interact with Reform kids and Conservative kids and be able to go over to their houses. If it meant having to bring, you know, kosher food for my kids, they could do that. It was very nice. Even the parents would want – what can I do to make your child feel – said you don't need to do any – we didn't want anyone to do anything extra. But it was a nice learning experience for other parents, and the kids got along very well. From Gates of Prayer, I was pretty instrumental in part of the beginning Board of the New Orleans Jewish Day School. My kids have gone there. I'm very supportive also of Torah Academy. That is housed where Lakeshore Day School used to be. It's a very fine



school. We chose for ourselves to send our kids to the New Orleans Jewish Day School. The concept at the beginning was to have Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox kids together with the priority of having an excellent English education and an excellent Judaic education. And that's exactly the way I was brought up with Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox friends and just being a whole part of the community. We were very happy. I was on the board for many years and happy [with] the way things were going. My oldest, Ruth, was in the first graduating class. That was right before Katrina. She got an excellent education, excellent. My second daughter, Sarah, who's four years younger, was in the school also at the time. Right before Katrina, that school year, my oldest, Ruth, had started at McGehee, which is an all-girls' school Uptown. My two younger children were at the New Orleans Jewish Day School. My youngest coming into kindergarten. And unfortunately, the storm hit, and that ended, of course, that year of education in New Orleans. But I can tell you –

RH: Well, I think this might be a good place to talk about the storm. Why don't you tell me when you first realized Katrina was about to happen?

JB: Upon us. Yeah, sure.

RH: Upon us, yes. And how you prepared too because you had to prepare your home and your business.

JB: Sure, absolutely. I can tell you we're always vigilant, of course, in this area, watching for hurricanes, always watching what's brewing in the Gulf. We'd had a little – I think exactly the year before there was another hurricane that was coming, which finally turned at the last minute. But we had never evacuated for a hurricane. Kind of watched and ready to go if we needed to, but I know we stayed for that hurricane. But this one, as we started seeing, was tremendous, as we all know. A hundred miles wide, possibly Category 5. Wherever it came on land, New Orleans was going to be in its path. We keep Shabbos, so we don't watch TV or listen to the radio. So, leading into Shabbos, we



knew that it was brewing on that Friday. Saturday, walking home from shul, we could already see – we saw people boarding up their houses and getting in their cars and going. We knew right when Shabbos ended. We turned on the TV, and we started to see what was upon us. I know evacuations were already going on. We got together, my personal family, talked to my mother, my in-laws, my wife's parents and my wife's sister, and family. We all together decided we're going to definitely evacuate, and where were we going to go. At that point, I think the Governor was saying the arteries going west to Houston were jam-packed, no one else go west, go north, and if you go north, go far enough north because the strength of the storm, once it makes landfall, and they usually die down, this one is going to still be very strong for many days as it goes across land. So, we thought Memphis, Tennessee. That's what clicked in our head. Memphis is a pretty close community to New Orleans. I remember some of the Jewish youth groups were kind of in the same region. We went to different weekends together or they came to New Orleans. Me and my sister both had gone to a Jewish sleep-away camp there. We had friends. And we also, on both of our family sides, had cousins in Memphis. So that's what we – we had decided Saturday night that's what we were going to do. We decided first thing in the morning – of course, we have our business that we needed – and I have a lot of glass, a lot of glass frontage that we needed to board up. I had had boards cut for the first time the year before. So, I was pretty prepared, but it's still a long process of – I was out here with – I hired a gentleman to come, and we boarded up the store, boarded up both front and back entrances, took our computer systems and raised them higher, took some essential papers, locked everything up, and hoped for the best. At the house, we also boarded up. I had some sandbags that I was able to get. I put sandbags at the front and back doors. Both the store and the house. No idea what – maybe this would help. We took basically – packed suitcases for three days, figuring it'll come and pass. So, we started, I guess, out around maybe 11:00 in our car – my wife and three kids and our dog – our pug has been part of the family. We started out. So, we're going to head to Memphis. My sister lives in Jackson, right outside of Jackson. We had the



dog. So, I called her, “Miriam, do me a favor,” as I'm driving, and we're sitting on the Causeway, which usually can take you twenty-five minutes to get across; it literally took us close to three hours to get across the causeway, bumper to bumper traffic, as everyone saw on TV. It was mind-boggling, the traffic getting out. I called my sister, “Miriam, do me a favor. We're going to Memphis. I'm sure we're going to stay in a hotel. Do me a favor. I need to board the dog. Call around. I know it's on a Sunday. Try and find me a place.” So she was working on that as we're driving. A horrible unfortunate situation – our dog had a heart attack in the car from the stress of all the evacuation and the storm coming. Pugs always have a nasal or heavy breathing, and just from getting in the car – he was fine for the first few hours. We were going. We went to a rest stop, got out, had water, plenty of food. He got back in the car. His heart was beating fast. He was around the car, on my wife's lap, in the back – he couldn't get comfortable, and he was panting and panting. I'm just telling Natalie, “Something's wrong. Something's definitely wrong.” It was just most horrible, in front of the kids, in front of us, he went and laid on my wife's lap, and then went down by her feet, and just he threw his head back. She was trying to pet him to calm down. She says, “His heart's still beating,” and then she took her hand off. His heart stopped beating, and it was just we were all crying tremendously.

RH: Oh my god.

JB: I felt for the kids to have to see this in such a close family pet, and you feel helpless – we're in traffic. If your child is sick, you rush to the hospital; if your pet is sick, you rush to an animal hospital. We couldn't do anything. It was horrible. To start off which later on to be this horrible event, this was the beginning. So, I covered our dog Jack with a blanket, and we drove. We were still in traffic. I called my sister – the next call to her was please find me an animal hospital that – and I know there are emergency animal hospitals that would take – that our dog had died. We didn't want to, of course, just put him on the side of the road. We wanted a proper – the next few hours, as we were sitting



inching away in the car, were really just heart-wrenching. We met my sister. She called. She found a place. We met at this place, and the kids – I mean, all of us still crying. We went in. The lady even told – we go into this veterinary hospital, and she says we're like the twelfth person. They had more than twelve dogs that had died from stress, which was amazing. That's what they had been doing all day, unfortunately. Many animals had passed away with all the – they could sense the packing up and in the car. And twelve other – I couldn't. I had to have one of the technicians go out to the car and take the dog out. I wanted the kids to say their final goodbyes, but he said by that time, it shouldn't be their last glimpse of their dog to see the position and situation he was in. So, we said our goodbyes and remembered the good times, but that was the beginning of a long evacuation. We got back on the road. I'll say my mother evacuated and went to Jackson. She was going to stay with my sister and her husband. We continued on to Memphis. Lo and behold, the storm, like they said, went straight up and hit Jackson, too. They were without power for two weeks. So I know my mother and my sister were jockeying around Jackson to different friends. I have cousins there also, whoever had power. They stayed, they were in Jackson, but they also, you know, were moving around. It took a good two, two and a half weeks until they got power back at their house. But we continued on to Memphis. Another close friend who I knew in the hotel business, I had his cell number, I called him, said, "Pace, can you do me a favor? We're coming up to Memphis. Can you find me a hotel room in possibly one of your locations?" So, he called, and he called me back and gave me the number. "They're holding a room for you at this hotel." Told him, "Thank you very much." So, we had a point of where we were going to. We arrived. A six-hour drive from here to Memphis took more than twelve to fifteen hours. We got there in the middle of the night after what we had gone through, and it was just crashing in the hotel. So, Monday morning came, and we were all really glued to the TV. My family was there. My in-laws and my wife's sister and family. They had gone to some cousins that we had there. They were staying there. Monday, we were in Memphis, seeing some friends. They have plenty of kosher food available there.



So, we're able to go to a restaurant there or see friends or go to cousins. But we were, like everyone, glued to the TV. What's going on? Watching what's going on in New Orleans. I was getting calls from a lot of my friends around the country. "Joel, where are you? What are you doing?" I mean, everyone around the country, around the world, was seeing what was going on. It was a good heart feeling that people were concerned. I was glad I was able to tell them that we evacuated and were all together. We're safe. I don't know what's going to be after that, but we're safe right now. So, that was Monday. A lot of the New Orleans people – it just so happened, a lot of from our congregation – I go to Chabad of Metairie, which is – I call Temple Corridor. On West Esplanade, there are three shuls within a mile: a Reform, a Conservative, and an Orthodox. So, again, it's everyone together, everyone gets along, and you get your pick, you get to choose where you'd like to go on a Shabbos or a Yom Tov or holiday. But it seemed like a lot of people from our congregation I guess, just talking, went to Memphis because we saw familiar people up there, and as we were all getting together, we saw a lot of people from our congregation up in Memphis. We got together and were thinking – the kids – we need to start some sort of stabilizing for the kids. So, they've got an unbelievable excellent school called the Margolin Hebrew Academy, which is a K through eight Orthodox Jewish day school. They have a girls' high school and they have a boys' high school. It's an amazing community. I'll tell you plenty about. They opened up their arms, not what can we do, they did it, food, clothing, they banded together and it was like an army of people to help. The community opened up their doors, and I continue today to say it's a good feeling, thank God I'm Jewish; the Jewish friends, and even others as we were in Memphis for many months, just people in general were so generous to us in every way. But the Jewish community in particular. I remember at the JCC, all the organizations there got together and had all the New Orleans people come, and the head of Federation was speaking from the front – "Would everyone fill out a questionnaire? Your name, where are you staying. What do you need? Do you need clothing? Do you need money? Do you need a place to stay? Do you need furniture? Whatever you need,



we're here. We're here.” I mean, it just kept on pouring in. The support and help. I can tell you we got there Monday morning in the wee hours of the night. By that Friday, right before Shabbos, my family, my in-laws, my sister-in-law, and her family – we're a total of eleven people. We were in a house. A couple who had moved from Memphis to Detroit had a house for sale; they took the house off the market and opened it up to us to move in. I just can't even start to – how we could ever repay these people for the kindness that they gave us. Furniture was arriving. They knew wherever people – we were lucky we had a house. Some people, wherever people could stay, were staying, with families, in apartments, wherever. We were maybe one of the first families – in a beautiful area.

The shul, Baron Hirsch Synagogue, I could throw a rock at and hit; it was right behind where we were living, a beautiful Jewish neighborhood. We were so thankful. Furniture was showing up. Brand new beds. People were saying, “Come to my house. I have this. I have that. What do you need?” When Shabbos started, we were in a house fully furnished – eleven people. Everyone had their own bed. No bunk beds. Everyone had a bed. It was a big house, too. You think, “Oh my God, eleven people.” With my in-laws and my sister-in-law – we get along great together. We're a good close family. It was a gigantic house. It was like five thousand square feet, probably a house that I would never be able to afford, but it was beautiful. We were so gracious. As months went on, we did work out an agreement to definitely pay these people some rent, but we were very gracious at the beginning of opening up their house. My family ended up staying. The families ended up staying there for ten months.

RH: Ten months.

JB: We stayed in Memphis.

RH: So tell me, what was that first Sabbath like, the week after? What was going on inside of you that Saturday, Friday night?



JB: At shul many people coming up to me who I might have known over the years, very welcoming – “Glad to have you here. We've always tried to get you to come open a kosher place here in Memphis.” Very premature, very premature, but people were coming over and lending support. That community and that area, the kids – I almost call it like the Jewish ghetto; there's so many Jewish people [who] live in that area. The kids can walk from house to house. So it was very good. The kids had plenty of friends to play with. They were very occupied. School was going well for them. For us, we were trying to take it day by day. Of course, people ask you questions – “What are you going to do?” So many things, a thousand thoughts go through your mind. I asked myself also, “What are we going to do?” All we see is what's on TV. Do I have a house? Do I have a business? Is any of New Orleans or Metairie left? What is there? Until you can see for – you can see on TV, which we saw some pretty horrible sights, what all was going on and then with the levees breaking was even worse. It's like it went from bad to worse. Unfortunately, for people in areas where the levees broke, they were definitely the hardest hit. I'll tell you what happened to us personally. At the store, we got two inches of water; at the house, we had seven inches of water. The house is a one-story house, so seven inches of water – or two inches of water, anything from the floor up is ruined. The floors, the walls, all the furniture, everything. You sit back, and seventeen years of marriage and thirty-nine years of being accumulated of things can be gone in an instant, but those are just things. We definitely thank God that our family was together and alive and well. We know, unfortunately, other people, some people did not have – many people did lose their lives.

RH: When did you first find out about your business and your home?

JB: Think it was the first – of course, as we were watching reports on TV and the main source of information a lot was computer. I'm not computer-literate myself, but we huddled together with other people from New Orleans around computers, and as reports started to come out – Jefferson Parish is opening up on this certain like ten days after the



storm, and you have to have proper ID and you have to have a certificate, we were reading hourly things were being updated on when people could come back and what restrictions were, what things being – nothing available, no water, no electricity, no food, if you're going to come bring everything with you. So, we were watching that. It was four men – four of us decided we were going to come back. We left. We took two cars because we wanted to come back and possibly be able to take items and more cars out. So, four of us drove down. We left in the middle of the night, maybe around midnight, knowing that there was a curfew. We knew from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m., you couldn't get in the city, and Metairie was the only thing that they were opening up first. New Orleans was many months down the road. So, about 4:00 in the morning, we get close, maybe a hundred miles out, and just parking lot – stop. There were cars for miles and miles, and everyone had stopped because way, way far up, they weren't letting people in the city. So, like 4:00, 4:30 in the morning, we got out. We stretched, looked at the stars, and talked to many people out in the pitch black, just waiting for daybreak to come. Six o'clock came, and we're looking – 6:30 comes, and we finally started seeing engines starting up and people starting to slowly creep in. I guess it was about 8:00, 8:30, and the route we had to take was, I think, going through Baton Rouge, taking, I think, Airline Highway from Baton Rouge, this two-lane highway, all the way in. As we were coming in, we see the military and the checkpoints, and it's just a new phenomenon. What's the next thing that we're going to see? It's like we're driving through a war zone after going through and being checked in. Just driving on Airline Highway and just looking left and right and seeing the devastation. Trees, one hundred-foot trees just pulled up out of the ground with their roots and just pulled up out of the ground. Of course, houses with no roofs on them and power lines down all over the place. I'm thinking, "Is this safe even?" They let us back in. As we're driving down, I see power cords. But I guess they went around and checked, but still, I'm sure – how safe is this for us? Also, we brought gas, we brought like fifty gallons of gas. I had my van. I had my Kosher Cajun van. I'll tell you how – because we went out with my wife's van, and I parked – I left two of my cars



here, my car and my store car. My father-in-law's car was parked here, also at the store. I'll just go back a little bit. My Rabbi, Rabbi Nemes, stayed through the storm. He's the Chabad Rabbi, Chabad of Metairie. He's got a family, I think of eight. He had a bunch of people at his house. I think it was a convention going on, and said, "Everyone evacuate," and the airports started to close. Jewish people – gosh, the Superdome or the Convention Center, where do we –? You pick up the phone, and you call the Chabad Rabbi, his door's always open. He had, I think, there were like fifteen people at his house. He lives on Lake Villa, right a block from Lake Pontchartrain on one side. He's got the Seventh – a canal right behind him and a canal on West Esplanade. He stayed. He took the Torahs from the shul to his house as the water started to rise. He put them on the second floor. Then he put them up in the attic. I mean, I've talked to him many times, but still, just imagine riding out the storm, and just the water rising, and not knowing what is around you. When will the waters go? We're running out of food, water. A friend of mine, Sam, who had helped me start business with my building, stayed too with two of his boys, his older boys. He told the Rabbi, Rabbi, "If you're staying, I'm staying. I want to try and be able to be here and help you if you need," which I think was tremendously courageous – not sure how smart, but a tremendously courageous thing. Somehow, we were able to be in contact, even though people's cell phones were so erratic – working, not working. Periodically, be able to get in touch with Sam. He's about half a mile from the store in this area. We live in the same area. "Sam, how are you doing? What's going on?" He'd give us live updates. "The water's rising. It's not in my house yet. I've got sandbags around. I've got each boy at each door. We're going to keep the water out." But it kept on rising and couldn't stop it. Us in Metairie, thank Mr. Broussard for, right or wrong, evacuating the pump operators. Unfortunately, no one had the insight to push the button to turn them back on. So most, a lot of us, we feel in Metairie that we flooded because the pumps weren't turned on, not because of the storm with the rising water. The pumps were working. We feel that the water could have been pumped out. But talking to Sam and being very worried, of course, not being able to talk



to him. His wife and some of his younger kids were able to fly out to go to Miami, where her family lives. So I talked to Susan, “Susan, have you heard from Sam? We're trying to update what's going on. We're safe and we're worried about friends that we know that stayed. Worried about the Rabbi.” The storm had passed, got a little more information from Sam. Kind of joked – I talked to him, says, “The water's going down, but I'm not going out yet.” Because, of course, with all the debris from the roofs and nails, didn't want to – you drive in your car, flat tires. And you want to be able to see what – if there's water in the street, you might still be able to drive in it, but you don't know what power lines are there. So, he waited. And he waited another day. And I joked. I said, “Sam, are you waiting for the dove to bring you an olive branch to tell you–?” He said, “Yes, the dove has come – the olive branch. I'm ready to go out.” This might have been Tuesday. If it came across Monday. Or it might have been Wednesday. Truthfully, I think Wednesday, Wednesday at some point. He was able to first go over to the Rabbi's house, check on them, and thank God, they were okay – getting very harrowing with that many people in the house, and the water rose I think on the first floor and they moved up to the second floor. Thank God he had a two-story house. The water subsided. They had one car. Plus, the Rabbi had a big van. Couldn't get the van started. Tried and tried and tried – couldn't get it. Sam said, “Come over.” I left him with the keys to my cars and the key to the store. “Come, I know where there's kosher food.” So, he brought everyone, packed up – they knew that was the time they got to – now's the time to get out. They rode through the storm; thank God they're both all alive and safe; it's time to leave. They came here to the store. So, I'm talking to Sam, it's like, “There's no water in here, Joel.” It's like, “Oh my God.” I was elated. I was like, “Are you serious? Are you sure? Are you just telling me that?” He said, “I'm telling you, I'm standing in the store; there's no water in here.” So, I was kind of happy at the time. I said, “Are the windows broken?” “No, some boards have fallen off, but it's okay.” Of course, they were able to get whatever food they wanted, whatever refrigerated stuff was still available that wasn't – take whatever dry goods. So, they took stuff in the van, and they were able to get my



van started. [inaudible] I'm glad the rabbi was able to drive out using my second car. We all waited. We knew they were driving and coming up to Memphis. He was going to come up to Memphis and then eventually try and go from Memphis to New York, where he and his wife's family live. His congregation was waiting, waiting, waiting for him to arrive because [we're] very close to him, our spiritual leader. He even had some instances I think on the way. Of course, it was very hard to get gas. On the way up, pulled into a gas station, had all these people, and there were lines. Fights started breaking out – "I need gas, I need gas." I think the police came and shut down the gas station. I think they had run out of gas. They were waiting for a tanker to come. A lady comes up to the Rabbi, a non-Jewish lady. "Rabbi, I see you and your family. Leave your cars here in line. Come to my house. You shouldn't be ...". She sees the situation going on. "You shouldn't be out here. Please come. I have beds, food." "Well, I keep kosher." "Don't worry about it. Whatever you need. We'll go to Wal-Mart – twenty-four hours. We'll go get you food." It's another great, compassionate story that this lady helped them. Then, they were back in line the next morning. They got their gas. Just a gracious heart, an innocent bystander, wanting to help these people. But we were all waiting. We went to the Chabad Rabbi's house in Memphis, and we knew Rabbi Nemes was on his way. They pulled up. I saw my white refrigerated van. It was a good sight to see, and his whole family got out. We cried. We were just all joyfully crying that they got out safe and the congregation was back together in some sort. A lot of the families were together. We sat around talking for hours, hours and hours, just talking amongst ourselves – "How are you doing? How are you doing? What are you planning?" We were all just trying to lean on each other at the time. I remember that.

RH: We're going to wrap up this tape and move on to the next tape. [RECORDING PAUSED] This is tape two with Joel Brown. This is for Katrina's Jewish Voices. So, Joel, you were talking about being with your community, regathered, reformed in Memphis, and what did you do there together?



JB: It was good to see familiar faces, to see people – of course on TV – where are people? Where are people? And cell phones were not available. So, it was a joyous like seeing a family member, a brother or sister who lives out of town, when you saw a familiar – not just a regular hello, a hug and a kiss, “Good to see you.” Just really the week or the two – first few weeks in a grocery store or in the shopping center – oh my goodness – you see a familiar face from New Orleans. You let your mind a little more at ease. This person's okay Then you start to think, “What about another person?” But we continued to get together and stay in touch with each other. We all had agreed definitely at the beginning to put the kids in the Jewish day school there, which was amazing. Again, to thank the Memphis community. They took in over thirty kids. Jewish education is not cheap. They took these kids in, our kids. No tuition. Provided us with books, supplies, the kosher meal program. It was just whatever was needed was given to us.

RH: How did your community – did you create a little Chabad community within the Memphis community because there were a number of you there?

JB: Not really. A lot of us lived close – in Baron Hirsch Synagogue, which is a large Orthodox synagogue in Memphis. I'd probably say most of us – the Chabad rabbi, Rabbi Klein, lives further away, and Sabbath-observant people who don't drive, you need to live close or stay close to shul if you're going to walk to shul. It's like how it is here. The nucleus is the shul, and people buy their houses around the shul. But in that area, I think Rabbi Nemes might have stayed with Rabbi Klein for the first Shabbos, but I think most of the rest of our congregation stayed around the Baron Hirsch Synagogue area. I think, over the many months, that's where a lot of families became very comfortable as their new congregation for the time being.

RH: How did you stay in touch with friends and such as that?



JB: As we'd meet, we started a call list. Everyone passed around a pad of paper – write your name, write your number, where you're staying – so we can all be in touch.

Everyone was passing out email addresses so everyone could be in touch. If there was an email that everyone could get, everyone could be up to date. Wouldn't lose sight of – no one would fall through the cracks. We wanted to make sure that we stuck together and wherever people were in certain circumstances, if we could help each other, and just to see if we knew anything new in New Orleans, what was going on. Were people making the drive down there? Did you want a ride? Could I go with you? Could you help me do this? So, we definitely wanted to stay in touch with each other to help each other. As much as we were close here in New Orleans, we wanted to stay close in Memphis. As the weeks went on, a good amount of people stayed but some other people went further where they had family. Some people went up to New York, some people – wherever other family was. If they weren't necessarily in a permanent place in Memphis they might have moved on because we still could not make any definitive future plans. I don't think anyone could. So many things were –

RH: So what was that like, trying to live in such an uncertain space?

JB: It was very tough. Not knowing, again, do I have a house, do I have a business, how will I support my family, where do you begin when you have – and we're talking material.

Thank God we had our family. But where do you begin when you have nothing? Should I go look for a job? Do I start something, and we're going back in a month? What do we do? We were in limbo. We were really in limbo. I don't take too many vacations. This was definitely no vacation. But looking back on it, gosh, I had two or three months of no work. It wasn't a vacation, but I could have almost used it. But we were really in limbo.

Thank God we got the kids on track. They were taken care of, and their lives were back on track, and it was an amazing year for them. What they learned and the friends that they made will go on with them for their whole lifetime. Even now, we're over a year past, and we've made – even with the family moving back, and I'll tell you about that, but



moving back to New Orleans, we've gone many times – just today, I just got back from Memphis. We went up for a wedding. We've gone up for kids' bat mitzvahs.

RH: So these are new friends, really.

JB: New friends that will be lifelong friends. Some of my kids' friends have come down to New Orleans to stay for a few days and visit. They've had really, really great times together. They stay in touch, talk on the phone, on the computer, and they make plans [for] the next time. Not “See you next year or whenever.” I see them even making sure my kids stay in touch with these other kids. It's every few months. Maybe they'll miss a day of school, and we'll go up for a Shabbos. That's our little vacation; we go somewhere and drive up before Shabbos, be there over Shabbos, over a Sunday, and be back for school on Monday. But I really think it's very important, and the kids have had a great experience in their school year in Memphis.

RH: So, when did you find out that you had water damage?

JB: So, that first time when we came back, we pulled up in the back parking lot, and I saw my signs were smashed all over, pieces there, pieces gone. There was tremendous debris all over the parking lot. I walked up to the door, and just so many things were going through my mind – “Please, what am I going to see? What am I going to see?” I opened up the door and, of course, the most horrendous smell. Being in the food business and having a fully stocked store and no power for a minimum of ten days, things were – it was overpowering, the smell, rancid meat, chicken, and fish. It was the store – when I came in, there was no water in there. I almost could not tell that there had been water. Because there weren't lines on the wall like some other people had seen, lines on their walls from water. I have a two- or three-inch rubber molding that goes around, and I'm thinking that the water might have just gotten a few inches, got up to the molding, and the water went out when things did start pumping out. I walked in – I could tell some things had fallen over, some displays that if water got under it, they fell over –



gefilte fish. I had smelly, broken jars of gefilte fish all over the floor. We had masks on. We all got shots before we left Memphis for whatever disease might be picked up. We did that. But I thought, “Okay, I see this on the floor.” If I can clean this up, the smell will be better. I had big plans when I came. I'm talking to my father-in-law because we stuck together, like, “Okay, we'll be here for two days. We'll go in the store. I'll go door by door with the garbage can rolling. I'll put stuff in and bring it out to the dumpster. One door at a time, and we'll get the stuff out.” I started on the gefilte fish on the floor. After scooping up and sweeping, and no water to clean with, I got all that out. The smell, of course, was still there. I ventured over to the freezers, which were just – the doors were ready to bust open. I could see the packages of food just had expanded and were ready to pop. I think I opened the door a crack, I shut it fast, and I got sick. Had to run outside and get fresh air. I turned to my father-in-law. I said, “This is it. Let me look around the – let me get some essentials.” Thank God the store was in pretty good shape. It was standing. I had a business that was standing. The main thing was all the spoiled food. I guess I could see what maybe – the first to let me know that I had water – I did see some mold growing up one of the walls. But it wasn't devastating. It was, yeah, definitely devastating to see, but you know what? You say two inches up. What's two inches? Of course, it's still probably calculating overall about \$300,000 worth of damage is what we estimate everything. Thank God I had good people who taught me some good business sense. I had insurance, thank God, both flood insurance and commercial insurance, some business interruption insurance. Thank God today I can say my store is back, built up. We still have some things to talk over with the insurance company. We're not done, but I'm, thank God, very satisfied. I know it's very, very rough dealing with the insurance companies. It's a hard process. But we saw what was here. I took some memorabilia that I had here. We're thinking what's going to be if we would possibly be looted later on. We didn't know what would be. There are no police out, and what would be, but tried to take some important papers with me and just locked the doors up and went on to our houses. That was next. I went with my father-in-law first to his house about two miles



away, back towards New Orleans but in Metairie. We drove down his street and, again, looking left to right, just devastation all the way through. He goes to his front door, puts in the key, the key turns and unlocks, but the door won't push open. We're pushing and pushing, the both of us. Won't budge. Goes around to a side door, fumbling – “Do I have the key? I never use this door. Do I have the key to this door?” Finally finds the key. We're able to go in through the garage. The stench had already – they had a little less than two feet of water in their house. They have a one-story house, too. So, the smell of the wet carpet, the dampness, the mold, the food spoilage also. It was just – we come around to the front, it's like, why won't the door open? The hardwood floor had just buckled up and made a brick; you couldn't open that door. All the hardwood floor had just buckled all up. There was nothing. We were crunching as we walked. Said, “Okay, Norman let's see what we can do. We got to get this wet carpet.” Thinking what can we do to start the cleanup. Said let's start one room. We started moving furniture. We're sweating and huffing. We had some cold water, but we definitely didn't bring enough, we soon found out. That was gone very early. After we finished moving furniture out of one room, had our knives, and started cutting the first bit of carpet, we go, “This is too much. We can't do this the two of us. At some point, we need professionals. Norman, I'm here; let's go through the house room by room, gather essentials, pictures on the wall, memory's sake, old pictures of good times, and pictures of the family. Let's get that.” We did that, probably spent an hour, and again, we just went back out the door and locked it up. Next stop was my house. Drove. I remember driving down West Esplanade towards my house. It was a bright sunny beautiful day, but quiet, not a sound. There were no birds, just like time had stopped. You'd see one car. It might have been a holiday, maybe Christmas Day, and no one around. Drove down my street, maneuvering around. Pulled up at the house. I probably said, “Please God” a hundred times. I put the key in the door – “Please God.” Maybe I'd be spared. Open the door. Of course, the devastation that I saw – I could see my hardwood floor also had buckled, mold growing up the walls. We had no power. Some power had come back to Jefferson Parish. My



neighbor's tree fell across my power line. So, some people's power had come back on, but mine had not. So I opened up the door, and my worst fears and nightmares came true. I had never been through a hurricane or a flood. It was a new horrible experience. My life, my married life, memories just rushing through my head like the house we lived in and our kids grew up in. It's material thing, but of course, I broke down crying. I called my wife and was able to get through, and we just cried both on the phone. I told her what I saw. I told her about the store. My father-in-law – we had decided, both of us – he had gotten his essentials. I said, “We cannot physically do – I'm going to go also room to room.” Each of my kids made a list and gave me – “Daddy, could you please –? Could you get me this out of my room? Could you get me this out of my room? Could you get me this book, this toy, these shoes I left behind?” So, I went room to room, also taking family portrait pictures off the walls. I went to each of the kids' rooms, starting with their list, trying to fill them as much as I could with things that were not ruined. I told my kids when I got back, whoever had a clean room with nothing on the floor did well. Whoever had a messy room – will teach you to clean, put things in their place. One of my daughters – of course, shoes can be on the floor in the closet. One of my daughters was lucky; she had her shoes on a hanging rack. A lot of their things. I was able to take a lot of clothes. Of course, if there were two racks, the bottom rack, all the clothes were moldy, smelly, wet. The carpet, of course, walked through the house, sloshing in wet carpet. There was no water in the house. The water had gone out. No standing water. I filled their list as much as I could. Even some things I thought – I had plenty of garbage bags. That was the suitcase of choice: garbage bags, heavy-duty garbage bags. I'd find something – “This Gameboy can possibly be saved, or this – let's see.” You just got to wipe it off. Of course, being waterlogged – what you can't see. But I do remember getting back, driving back to Memphis, and walking in. It was like it was Hanukkah time, it really was, or a birthday; the kids were elated with each of their garbage bags filled with dolls, teddy bears, and a lot of their clothing. They've had nice but borrowed, possibly new clothes, some used, they had some of their own. They were very happy. They're



happy with those things. I was just thinking of all the things that they lost. They didn't say, "Well, you didn't bring me this, you didn't bring me that." They were elated with what they did get. They fared very well through this, I do have to say. They fared very well.

But my father-in-law and I decided we were going to stay for two days. When that 6:00 p.m. curfew first day comes, we're getting out. We just got the essentials that we were able to get and knew that's all we could do now. We'll have to regroup and make another plan. The many, many, many trips back and forth – I think I could drive the four hundred miles in my sleep – went back so many times. But it was hard that first time getting back to Memphis and talking to my wife.

RH: What did you talk about in the car on the way back to Memphis, you and your father-in-law? Do you remember?

JB: There were many times of silence, just wondering in our heads. There were times of agreeing with – "Did you see that? Can you believe that tree that we saw? Can you just believe that?" We were just reminiscing the day that we had. But for the most part a pretty quiet drive. Drove a little extra fast. I wanted to get back. I just wanted – no tickets, but I got back quickly. It was again the middle of the night, probably got in midnight, 1:00, probably was up, just all of us. The kids were sleeping, but the adults were up, and we were talking [about] what we saw. It was a very sad, sad night.

Beginning of many, many sad, sad days and just – because that was the beginning of seeing firsthand for myself what had happened and then the process of what will the future be. That was very hard for me. I have had this business for 20 years; I've worked in this business, I haven't done really anything else, and I'm thinking, "What am I going to do? How am I going to support my family? Am I marketable?" We always think – on a day-to-day basis, in good times, you think, "What will the future be?" and so on, but this was – I've lost – I've got everything invested in my business. This is my business. Me and my wife have, over twenty years – thank God, we went from nine hundred square feet to eighteen hundred square feet, to taking some space upstairs. Our next major



expansion was buying this piece of land, adding on, building a brand-new building, three-thousand square feet – connecting. This was something – we did it piece by piece, the two of us. We did it with money we had. If I had money, I bought another freezer, and I just did with what I had. When I had more money, I bought another freezer. That I think is a part of our success. I didn't go to business school. I asked a lot of questions. Had a lot of good advice from friends and family. I think some people who might invest a lot of money upfront and don't see a return right away, many businesses fail. Thank God I could always, I guess, go to sleep. I own every piece of – I own it. I don't owe any money. Yes, when I did my major expansion – that's my second marriage to the bank. But we were really in a, thank God, a good position. Business was going well. Also, I was thinking back. We had done this expansion probably six or seven years ago; things were going well. I had just six months earlier refinanced my loan. Things were going good – great. A better interest rate for shorter years and things were – and then everything just – it's like time stopped. When people in Memphis or friends [say], “What are you going to do,” the questions – I wasn't rude, but – “Please stop asking me. I don't know what I'm going to do.” In my position, I had a building that was standing –the structure was standing. Yes, I had some damage, but around me, there's no people. I had a unique situation. Some people – their house is blown away. You know what to do next; either you rebuild, or you move on. I had a building that was standing. I had a mortgage on the building. How am I going to pay that note with no income? So, that was going through my mind for the next beginning month, two months. Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot were all right after Katrina in September and October. So, it was hard to – as many trips going back and forth and back and forth, it was hard to get started on the rebuild. I think when my mother came back her first time, she was leaving out also – we can't do anymore. It just happened to be – someone across the street said, “What are you all doing?” We're trying to pull the carpet out. “My son and daughter-in-law live right here, I came over to help them. I'm in the flooring business and carpet business. We're getting started into work. Here's my key. Go right ahead.” She



called me. I got on the phone. So, thank God we – to minimize the damage – within, I'd have to say, two weeks or less, we had our houses gutted, all the flooring out, four-foot sheetrock cut. The things that we couldn't do were done. I asked this gentleman on the phone – “I've got a business a few blocks away, can you –?” I said, “The main thing is the smelly food.” He says, “That’s not my ...”. But he goes, “Wait, there's a company ...”. A truck drove by with a phone number that he gave me. People were already here. Two and three days after the storm, there were companies from around the country who the mold remediation business or contractors or these people, I guess they – Florida keeps them very busy. I was able to get in contact with a company, and the work had begun. We were very lucky to get contractors to start and to minimize the damage. Two of my main employees – I had ten employees. We exchanged phone numbers, and we wanted to stay in touch. For a period, we did, and then as phone contact started not being available and some of my employees had moved from city to city, we lost track. I think I can say now everyone, thank God, is alive; most of them are in other cities. But some were totally devastated. Everything they owned if they lived in New Orleans. Some of the lower-hit areas were really devastated. But my manager Mary and my head cook Janice – Mary had come up to Memphis. I think she has some family or her husband has family, and they were up there. Her husband was one of the people who drove down with us the first time so he could go see their house. Thank God their house was okay. But he was able to take one of my cars also and drive out. Mary and Janice again also made trips back and forth; I'd say they were the thrust that really kicked me in the butt and said, come on, two months, we're ready to get back to work, we're ready. “Come on, Joel.” I'd been back and forth. But they had come back, and they were in here themselves overseeing some of the cleanup – cleaning themselves. The freezers, where a lot of our main – the company came in, they did it. My employees did it again with bleach and cleaning. Every remedy you could think they tried and they cleaned, and they were working. With the holidays and Yom Tov and Shabbos, it was hard for me to be here until the holidays were over. But one of my last trips coming back and forth, I



remember – I do wholesale business, and I sell to some grocery stores. I'd come back and went to Dorignac's, which is one of my main accounts. I went there, the store was open, I went to their manager and said, "I'm back. I'm standing. My business is not open, but would you like to be restocked?" A definitive yes, right away. So, my business in my head started to roll again. I'm a salesman, and I started to sell. I wrote an order for them. I called another few people, a few people. So, if anyone in Memphis wanted anything that I could bring back. So what I did was – of course, I had no refrigeration here. From the orders I got, I was able to place orders from my suppliers in New York. They would have a truck come down and not meet me here but meet me at the grocery store. Most of the stuff's going there, so that's the place to unload rather than coming here because I had no – and Mary met me and Janice and Janice's daughter and Mary's husband. 6:00 a.m. in the morning, waiting for that truck to show up. It was a long, it was a good long day. It was on a Thursday. We worked from morning until evening stocking.

RH: Was it October? November?

JB: Think towards the end of October, towards the end of October. I was kind of feeling a little better. Let's see. I started to look around and see. Restaurants were doing very well. Places to eat, people needed food. So many places were devastated. Of course, help was hard to – essentials, we all know. My stuff mostly came in from out of town. So, suppliers locally weren't – I was able to bring in my product from out of town. The ball started rolling just a little – we worked that day and some of Friday, and then I knew I was driving back. Thanked them. They're so loyal, such good, good, great employees. No one could ever ask for anyone as loyal. The business is like it's theirs. They care. When they go home, they care what goes on in the middle of the night or if that door is ready to open the next morning. Thank God I was able to continue to pay them through that time and knew they definitely deserved it, and hopefully, in some way, insurance would kick in, and so on. But on that ride back – I remember that Friday – drove back to



Memphis, got there right before Shabbos, and I was exhausted, absolutely exhausted from the excitement when I left Memphis to getting back to New Orleans to doing, and then getting back. Went to shul, we ate, went to sleep. 2:30 in the morning on Shabbos, I wake my wife up and say, “Natalie, I don't feel good.” Pains in my chest, my left arm was numb. Something I had never – I've heard, is this a heart attack or stroke? Just let me get up and just walk around. After ten, fifteen minutes, taking aspirin, Tylenol she says, “We're going to the hospital.” She woke her sister up and told her that we're leaving. She rushed me to the hospital and checked into the emergency room – Baptist Hospital in Memphis. They took some tests, and things didn't look – something was puzzling to the doctors, they wanted to do – can't remember the name of the surgery, but they did a surgery where they –

RH: Angioplasty?

JB: Where they cut my thigh, they sent a tube up to my heart to see if there was any blockage. At that time, if there was, they could do angioplasty, I think. Thank God there was no blockage. But this came – the tests came back with some irregularities, and I was in the hospital for probably three days, four days, and not a definitive determination, but definitely a stress-related, mild possible – I don't want to call it a heart attack, but the doctor told me, “You need a ...”. And this was – I was ready to – I had a date. I was only going to be in Memphis another few days. We had decided I was going to move back to New Orleans, and the holidays were over, and the next thirty days would be devoted to every single day getting the store back open. [He] says, “You need to find a cardiologist and take the stress out or slow down.” It's like, “Sure.” I heard what he said, but of course, the situation – of course, I've got to watch my health. I probably didn't slow down, but thank God I haven't – no reoccurrences, but that was a very scary, scary time. I did come back right at the end of October, and for the next thirty days, from morning to evening, I was here with Janice and Mary, and we pushed the contractors, and we pushed the workers every day. “Why did only two guys show up? Where are the ten



guys that were supposed to be?” Up to the point when I did have to back up because I thought I might cause myself – because I was getting so worked up. But I was still very lucky to be able to open the week before Thanksgiving. Thank God business at the beginning was tremendous. We were three out of ten people doing the work of fifteen people because we were one of the few restaurants that were open, and we were mobbed. We thought, “Is it Passover?” Because Passover time is just wall-to-wall people. It was a good, good feeling. I missed my family tremendously. That was the hardest thing – leaving. I told my wife and kids, “Of course, I’ll see you, but I don’t know when I’m going to see you.” Because I’m open six days, the seventh day is Shabbos – I don’t travel. So, it was really hard. I spoke to them every day, each of the kids before they went to sleep. Probably spent, looking back, more time, precious time with my kids on the phone than I might have on any given regular [day]. I come home late from work. They’re doing their homework. “Hello, hello, go to sleep.” But I made a point – they made a point – before they went to sleep, we spoke. That was a good connection. I missed them tremendously. Being very lonely. Trying, of course, different times whenever I could steal a day to possibly – literally, for a birthday, drive up for six hours, stay for a one-hour birthday, and drive six hours back. But I’d do it again. So worth it. I was able to do that. We definitely take for granted, that’s for sure, what we have until we don’t have it if it’s family close to you or material things that you have and then you don’t. In the long run, the store, the house – I try and put a positive spin on after. Thank God the store is built back, business is pretty close back to what it was. In a different sense, we know we’ve lost a good thirty-five percent of the Jewish community. Those people, of course, will buy certain things that other people might not. We shifted gears. I might have a different mix of what I had I sold, but we’ve been very busy, and I’ve definitely seen a growth. I’m very satisfied that we’re back to where we were and moving forward. So many new people found us right after the storm and continue to come, and new people. We’ve had so many groups that have come down to clean and to help. Many many Jewish groups, groups of twenty, thirty, fifty. They keep kosher. They need kosher



food. We're the place they call. Those were also people that we couldn't thank enough for what they were doing, taking their vacation time, their own resources, bringing gifts, Hanukkah time there was a group, think the Ramaz High School group, that came with thirty to forty kids and some advisors, they brought – the headmaster wanted to ask, “How old are your kids?” Brought presents for my kids. I think it was – might have been Sunday night, the first night of Hanukkah. To be here in the store, sixty to seventy people all lighting a big menorah, singing, and it was a great, great feeling. A great time to be able to – one, the family came down; they took the train down. That was something they – of course, my wife didn't want to drive. That's a tough ride for a lady and safety. They like the train, and they use that many times going up and back. So, they got to come down on the train a few times, which was very nice. Whenever my wife could get away for a few days, [she] would come down, and it was great, it was really great spending time. But the house, thank God – I said, “Natalie, take it as an opportunity. We got a brand-new house.” The brick was fine. Got new floors, all new furniture. The kids got to – it was fun – pick out your furniture, pick the colors of the walls. One picked pink, one got yellow, and one picked blue. If that's the colors you want. “Natalie, you got a brand-new house. You can pick whatever you want.” Up to a certain number that the insurance will pay, but we did okay, thank God, and we're happy. Family moved back when school ended – that was our plan – in June. The kids went. Again, programs that places around the country were helping kids go to camp, Jewish camps. My oldest daughter went out West to Achva West, which is part of the Young Israel movement; a bus tour for two months around the West, which was another amazing trip that she'll never forget with the friends she met. My second daughter stayed in Memphis and went to Camp Darom, which is a camp that I went to growing up, which was really nice. She'll make the same great friends that I did, that I, in times of need, was able to call on in Memphis. When school ended and waited another week or two until camp started for my second daughter, it was great. The moving van showed up at the house in Memphis. They packed up three families. My wife had bought the furniture up in Memphis. They



loaded it, and came down, went from house to house. “Here's yours” – my mother-in-law and father-in-law, my sister-in-law, and to our house and started the beginning of the family together rebuilding together.

RH: You've been through quite an amazing year, and I'm thinking I want to know what your thoughts are at the end of this on the other side of just this portion of it, your understanding of home. What does home mean to you?

JB: I think growing up, knowing the Jewish home is the basis, the home is the base of what we live around. Keeping a kosher home, eating together, celebrating the Sabbath every week, being able to bless my kids every Friday night, singing Sabbath songs, the blessing to your wife. I remember nice times at my parents' house having guests over, and I, too – I might work late and not get to eat with the family during the week sometimes, but every Friday night in our home, we're all there – and every holiday. That is definitely our basis. I've told people about it, and we have people come over. They say, “I need to try that.” It looks good. It's a joyous time, and they see – I tell them, “I'm telling you, thank God for Shabbos, or I'd be working on that day too.” God definitely put it there for a reason: to rest, regroup, be with your family, and through the whole ordeal, definitely learn how special it is to have close family, friends, and people you can count on and will never ever take for granted what you have today because we saw in an instant you can lose it all.

RH: Do you have for yourself any priorities that are different now?

JB: Definitely not missing – trying to be at as many functions with the kids, if it has to be school. Sometimes, I might be late showing up to a birthday party but making it a priority to – family is definitely first. The business is what supplies income to sustain the family, but definitely being closer together. I've definitely learned about helping people, other people, that a sense that we got so much help – people say, “Oh, I know if we were in the same situation, you would do for us.” I want to be able to give back and help. And I've



tried. I think, over the past year, as things got better for me, I've tried to give more charity to people less fortunate, helping either through Federation or through people personally, helping people along. One thing I'll tell you that I'm very proud of – something I started with Rabbi Nemes and another lady at our shul – when I came back late October, I was here by myself. Again, we talked about Shabbos. I'm not going to cook for myself on Shabbos. It was nice. I was staying with my brother-in-law. My father-in-law was also there. The three men came back. But we weren't going to – Shabbos meal. The shul was very important to me. I'm the Gabbai at Chabad of Metairie. I said, “Rabbi Nemes, we need ten men to make a minyan.” We put together a kiddush fund, and we put together – I called around to get people. “Would you like to come to shul? We're going to have Friday night dinner and Saturday lunch. Davening starts – prayers start at this time, and an hour later we have a full meal.” Since the end of October until present, we haven't missed a week. We have fed thousands of meals. Every Friday night, we probably average sixty to seventy people – new people, any congregation, come to – again, it's the family, it's the shul pre-Katrina with some different people, but it's building the family back, and it's religious, not religious, come back next week or not. People know. People know in the city Chabad of Metairie, every Friday night – full dinner, not just chicken and potatoes but matzo ball soup every Friday night, salad – I'll give you part of the menu – gefilte fish, and a main course, chicken or meat, turkey, vegetable, starch, and great desserts. This Kiddush fund sustained itself. People donate to it. Something that I've given is I'm heading this Kiddush Fund. I use my resources that I have here. Able to buy the essentials wholesale, and my staff cooks part of the menu every week. I make a menu with another person I'm working with. She takes some of the stuff. I take some of the stuff. She does some of the shopping. I do some of the shopping. That's something that I'm very proud that I've been able to give back to our community.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

RH: This is tape three with Joel Brown for Katrina's Jewish Voices.



JB: I was telling you about the Kiddush Fund that we had set up and just the joy in seeing people every week, people who were lonely, by themselves, who might not have a place to – they might not go to shul, but they come to shul, they have a place to eat, a meal, friends to be with, people to be with, just making new friends – it's like building the congregation. Rabbi Nemes and his wife came here years ago devoted in their work to building a community in Metairie. I think they've taught a lot of us, some of the congregants, and have really – like they used to do – the Rabbi would open his house up. He'd have probably fifteen, twenty people to dinner on a regular Friday night. Services were over. “Do you have a place to go? Come over.” But now the shul, the beautiful Gerson Katz Chabad Center, where we daven, which got hit by the storm also, which, thank God, is totally rebuilt. We just had a rededication about a month ago – a joyous time. It's really good that the shul is rebuilding and meeting new people all the time. We got a nice Israeli contingency that has come to New Orleans, and I've personally become friends with some of the young gentlemen. Some of the boys came from California in the mold remediation business. They came, and that's their work, and they started working, and of course, at the time when there was nothing around, searching for a place for Shabbos. Whether they were religious or not, they might drive there or not, but looking for a place, looking for other Jewish people, looking for kosher food. The connection started, and these boys started and I think business was good for them, and some more friends have come, and some of their girlfriends have come to meet them, and there's almost like a small – there's a small group, and I'd say we do – every Friday night, we look around, there's a new Israeli. A new Israeli has come. I just remember we just finished the holiday of Sukkot and Simchat Torah, which is a joyous time of the festival of eating outside. We had a sukkah, which was donated by someone, a gigantic sukkah at the shul. We probably seated sixty people inside. Tight, but we fit them in. And there were tables inside if there wasn't room. But to have everyone there singing songs in the sukkah. In the last days, Simchat Torah, when we finished reading the Five Books of Moses, and we danced – remember Saturday night, Simchat Torah,



dancing with the Torahs for hours and hours inside. Then we went outside in the parking lot and just thanked God for giving us the Torah and being part of living a Jewish life.

The Israeli boys just added such a great aspect. They're dancing and teaching new songs. Some of the boys have – with our Kiddush Fund, a few times the boys have cooked. We're going to do the – we'll supply the supplies, and they'll make an Israeli menu. That's another thing; people are getting involved. Like, Thursday night there are four or five, six ladies, some men at the shul helping, cutting up vegetables, whatever. A lot of people are pitching in. If it can't be financially, it's time. It's special.

RH: So, in some ways, what are some things that might be better now since the storm? Not that you want to have had it happen this way, but what do you like about the community now, the Jewish community?

JB: I'm not sure if I would use "better." Things are different. We've lost a lot of good friends who have moved to other cities, and still, I'll have people come in to say goodbye, that they're leaving a year plus after. People stuck it out as long as they could and moved on. That's the sad part. But I also see new people moving in. Sort of a business sense – I see when I read the paper. It's the building of a new city. There's tremendous economic possibilities. You can almost possibly mold it the way you'd like it to be, possibly. In the bigger picture, people can build certain buildings or not build certain buildings or build certain sections back. I'm seeing as people have left, there are jobs that are available that people are moving in and filling. I see Jewish entrepreneurs that might be buying property and rebuilding. It's an opportunity. The New Orleans Jewish community might have been at a stagnant point. It's definitely taken many steps backward with all the people we've lost. Maybe we can even get closer [and] work closer together, using the resources that are available to the congregations and the schools. New possibilities have opened up, and hopefully, for the better. It's still going to take, I know, a long time to rebuild, to replace all the people that have left, but I personally, and I think people, feel a sense [that] we can really do something. When you're a pioneer at



the beginning stages, your efforts are really leaps and bounds what might on any given day be a small thing. When you're a pioneer, you're really taking big steps, and I think a lot of people – some people see that and hopefully more will. I'm not sure better, but hopefully someday – some people say it'll never be the same, but we can hope for better.

RH: You going in any new directions now? Either with business or –?

JB: Well, new direction – my children are in a new school. It was a tough decision on where to send the kids. They've always had a Jewish education. That is very important to us, me and my wife. Unfortunately, the school situation in New Orleans was also hit with Katrina. There are some schools open. Some with only a few grades. Some of the kids are not of age because the schools start or stop at a certain age. My oldest daughter had started McGehee. She was happy there. So, we looked into – and that's where we did decide [to] put all three girls. They're at McGehee, which is an all-girls' school in Uptown. So, we now take the trek uptown twice a day. When people would say, "Oh my goodness, I have to come out to Metairie to your store," I said, "It's not that far." And we go the opposite way, bringing the kids up there. They're doing very well. We definitely see a void. They were having Hebrew subjects every day in Jewish day school. We've gotten a tutor, or to have some extra classes for my oldest daughter, [who] is learning with Rabbi Nemes, her and her cousin, who were both in school in Memphis together. And the younger kids we're still working on, but we definitely want to get them some extra Jewish education. We try and do at home, what we can teach them, but that's something that I would really like to be a part of, helping rebuild the Jewish community schools. There are two schools. The city's too small. There's some different ideas, but I think I've learned to bridge the gap in my life and being part of this community. I've had some talks with people, and there's the possibility of possibly getting the schools together.



RH: Do you have a sense of what it might take to get those schools together, besides people like you who really do –? Very few bridge both worlds so completely like you.

JB: People have certain lines drawn, barriers, things, religiosity that they can't and won't and understandably can't cross over. But there is also the fine line – not sure if the word negotiation is the right word, but they can get, I think, the Boards of both. I think with more talking and more discussion they can get together and make one stronger school servicing all the Jewish kids of the community. A great English education that I think everyone would agree on. The Judaic part is where there might be – some kids would like a certain track the parents would like. Some kids would like a different track.

They've talked about, I think, the possibility of electives. “Okay, it's time for the Judaic portion of the day.” If you'd like to go into Door A, that's your curriculum. If you'd like to go into Door B, that's your curriculum.” As long as they meet the school standards and state standards, I think it could work. I think there was discussion at the beginning of the year, but it was shelved. I think as this school year is underway and there may be twenty kids in each school, it's a tremendous financial – and there has been help, but it's not going to be forever – tremendous strain on just running the school. You still have to do everything, but you only have twenty kids. We need to regroup, put our resources together, and rather than two floundering, one strong, hopefully. Hopefully, for that possibility.

RH: What are some of your frustrations in the recovery, either Jewish or just in general?

JB: Well, I guess in the business sense, it's very hard to get help. Help is definitely a very hard thing to do. The pay scale has gone up tremendously. I'm willing to pay, of course, for a good worker. But when you sell a turkey sandwich for \$4.95, it's hard to pay someone ten dollars an hour. So, there are some frustrations on trying to get good help.

I'd say our customer service base around the city it's not there anymore. People are so in need of everything. Of course building supplies, and you'll call for a service, and sure,



someone will call you back in thirty days. It's like thirty days. I need to get my car fixed.

Sure, you have an appointment in two weeks. But I can't drive my car. We used to be able to bring your – “Sure, bring your car in today. I'll see what I can do.” Sometimes, it's taking twice or three times as long to get somewhere because of traffic. Longer lines in the retail business because there are less employees to wait on people. Time, which is so precious that we've learned from the storm, is being wasted waiting in line as the days go by. That's frustrating. Choices. You don't have ten choices on flavors of ice cream or flooring. “This is what's available. Do you want it or not? Quickly, got to go to the next person.” So, missing that. Missing the Southern hospitality, which is still there in certain – but it's tough. In the retail business that I'm in, and I see around town, giving services to the customer is – until we get many more people back into the workforce, which means building a lot more housing far quicker than we've seen, it's going to be – it's going to stay – it's slow, very slow, very slow.

RH: What has being Jewish meant to you during this experience? Has anything changed in –?

JB: I'd say at the beginning, I started questioning God. “I thought you promised the Jewish people you wouldn't bring another flood?” That's what the story of Noah and the Ark and the rainbow was. That was a flood that destroyed the world. But in a smaller sense to us personally this was a flood that devastated our lives. So, you question God, and we're reminded that God gives us many tests and more tests, and each time we overcome the next test, we're stronger. It's life, a give and take, give and take test. But after the questioning, you come to the point of thankfulness. Thank God every day for what we do have and for the graciousness of people to help. They say helping a single person is like saving the world. So, many people have done that ten times over, a hundred times over. I've just seen the groups that have come down to get dirty, gut houses, come down, and bring financial aid, or they come down – “What can we do? Whatever it is. What can we do?” Groups and groups. That's a good feeling being



Jewish.

RH: There any Jewish observances that are more meaningful to you now than prior to Katrina?

JB: Holidays and Shabbos, when we're together as a family, from the ten months that I missed out being with the family. Togetherness. Each of the holidays are more precious. A few months ago, I think we were – it was either the end of August or first week in September; we were still, of course, having the Friday night meals, but we had a family Bar Mitzvah to go to at Shir Chadash. So, we didn't go Friday night to Chabad; we went to services, and then we ate at home. Before we started, I looked at the date [and] said, "It's one year to the week that we sat together as a family having Shabbos together in our house," and that was just an amazing thing. That weekend happened to be – out of every single week that we go, we were home that weekend, the five of us just looking around the table, sitting at our table, missing the dog when things would fall on the floor. That was special.

RH: Do you remember what your children said about that?

JB: They were just really happy. It's good to have a home-cooked meal or Mommy-made matzo ball soup. We've been eating meals at the shul. Natalie, of course, has been helping [with] cooking here, but we have certain set menus that we have every Friday night. We like to take the challah and wrap it in tin foil, have it in the oven, and then when I make the blessing, we have hot challah. That's something – there were special things that we all started feeling a little normalcy, bringing back good memories.

RH: When you bless your kids, what goes through your mind? What blessings do you most want to impart upon them for the future?

JB: To be safe, [in] good health, true to their faith and their tradition, always treat their fellow friend/fellow person like they would like to be treated and remember the kindness



that was done for you that you can do that kindness back and be able to, to someone else, for someone.

RH: Is there anything else you'd like to add to this interview at this point?

JB: I thank you for having the opportunity. Thank God I am here to have this opportunity to be able to tell my story.

RH: Well, I thank God I'm here too to be on the other side and hear the story. Thank you very much, Joel.

JB: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]