Andy Busch Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: Okay. Do you want me to start over here? This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Rabbi Andrew Busch at Touro Synagogue, 4238 Saint Charles Avenue in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is August 2nd, 2006. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina Jewish Voices Project of the Jewish Women's Archive in the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Rabbi Busch, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Andrew Busch: Yes I do.

RH: Thank you. Let's start with a little bit of background. For the tape, give me your name, where you were born, and, if you don't mind, your age.

AB: Sure, no problem. Andrew Busch. I'm forty years old. I was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

RH: Tell me a little bit about your family and how you came to be here and most importantly when you arrived in New Orleans.

AB: Sure. I grew up in a family that's been in New Jersey ever since it came to the United States. My grandmothers were both born in this country. My grandfathers both came here before they were five. My family was very involved in the Jewish community in New Jersey, which led me to rabbinical school, which led me to living in a number of different places, mostly in Pennsylvania, in my career before I came here. My wife is a Rabbi also, and we came to New Orleans at the end of June 2005 for me to become the rabbi of Touro Synagogue on July 1, 2005. I think the furniture arrived at my house exactly two months before Hurricane Katrina.

RH: OK. What neighborhood did you move to?

AB: We moved to right on the tip of Uptown. One of those neighborhoods that doesn't really have a name that immediately identifies itself. Fontainebleau right off of Carrollton and Claiborne's intersection.

RH: Because that will play in, of course, to your experiences in the storm. Why don't we -- tell me about getting settled here and how you were feeling up to the storm and tell me what your thoughts were when the storm started to come and essentially how you made decisions, you and your wife, about evacuation and such as that.

AB: Sure. This was my third synagogue. I was an assistant rabbi in Pittsburgh. I had a solo pulpit in the very comfortable suburbs of Philadelphia, and then we came here. Settling in here was both harder and easier than the other places we settled. Easier because we came here for the people, and the people have truly been wonderful. When the congregation said they would help welcome us to our house, they got a key from my real estate agent, and we showed up at a house that had a stocked fridge. We were getting there – because of our cat, we didn't want to stay in a hotel anymore on our travels, and we moved into our house without our furniture and the congregation had arranged a bunch of inflatable beds, which we said all we need was some inflatable beds. But they also had a table and a TV in true southern New Orleans hospitality in terms of wanting us to feel welcome. In that first week we were here, as we unpacked, truly, people were physically unpacking us. A doctor of the congregation came and removed a stitch from my youngest son's chin because we couldn't figure out which hospital to go to. The day the furniture was arriving, he said, “I’ll just come to do it,” and that doctor stayed and helped connect my dryer to the exhaust. It truly was what we expected. People were showing up that whole first week; the welcome committee had arranged for people to take our kids who, when we moved here, were – I'm going to get this backward. They are now eleven, nine, and five, so roll back a year younger than

that, depending on their birthday. People were taking our kids to the aquarium, to the streetcars, to different places so that Debbie and I could unpack, deal with the bank, and those kinds of things without having to drag the kids with us. So, that was all very easy. There were some hard pieces in that this can be a hard city to live in even before the storm. Trying to get gas, electric, newspaper delivery, those kinds of things in every other city has been one phone call, and in this city, was a series of phone calls and conversations finding our way around that kind of thing. It was somewhat tricky but we were very much welcomed in. My kids went to Jacobs Camp, the Reform Movement's camp in Utica, Mississippi. My two older ones were there for a month in the summer of 2005. We had been here a week. We took them off to camp. My youngest kid was going to a day program in Old Metairie during that time. We settled in, and my kids came back from camp and began fifth and third grade at Lusher, what was then Lusher Magnet School, before the storm. My youngest started at the JCC. Very different from where they had gone to school. Now in an urban environment, not in a suburban environment, but very diverse, and Lusher was in those seven days all we had expected it to be, actually. It was a wonderful place for our kids. Most of the Jewish kids in this community have been going to private school. There were three other kids from Touro in my daughter's class at Lusher and a number of other families. So, my kids had seven days of school and were not back at Lusher till January.

RH: So, they'd settled in and then –

AB: They'd settled in, right, settled in or begun to settle in, right, moving into new school and whatever. Easiest for my youngest, who was in the pre-K program at the JCC, which I forget whether that had even started yet or whether we had just gone through orientation. I truly don't remember.

RH: So you start to hear about a storm in the Gulf?

AB: Yeah, interesting piece, and someone just said to me it would have been a lot more stunning this year. Because this year 2006 we haven't had anything yet. 2005, Tropical Storm Cindy came through pretty hard. We didn't lose electricity, but it came through pretty hard. Tropical Storm Dennis came through just a few days later. It was our first weekend or our second weekend in town. Because I know I had my first wedding in town scheduled. The wedding was supposed to be at Touro Synagogue and was actually rescheduled to the hotel downtown because people were concerned about the weather. Dennis went through, and nothing happened. But people had called us about evacuating. Someone had made hotel reservations for us. I had been given a heads up and begun to think about what kind of financial documents I need to be taking with me, having just bought and sold a house and a number of matters in terms of that. I had never dealt with anything like this before. We had at least had some heads up that this summer that's been relatively calm now till the beginning of August; I don't think we would have actually in terms of some of the thought process of having thought about when we evacuate. So, on the Friday leading up to Katrina, which would have been August 26th, we were barely paying attention to it. I remember the Friday night services at 6:00 that night. It's not that it was being ignored, but when we went to services that day, we hadn't said, “We're evacuating tomorrow.” I mean, as much as we were aware that there was a storm somewhere out there, it was really in those hours of Friday evening that I think it sort of began to pull up, and I know as we came to Friday night dinner and sat there back at our house we began realizing that we very well may [evacuate]. We had a full house. My parents were in from New Jersey, visiting to see how we were. It was their second visit to New Orleans but their first visit with children living here. The other visit had been for a convention a decade earlier. We had with us a family of four plus a friend of theirs. One [in] that family were moving into Tulane Saturday morning. This was a kid whose bat mitzvah and confirmation I had officiated at in Philadelphia, a family I was very good friends with. In fact, the weekend of the younger daughter's bat mitzvah was the weekend that I announced I was leaving

Philadelphia actually. They were at our house getting ready to move the daughter in the next morning, so we actually had a lot of people in our dining room and a full fridge of food ready to feed these people. I know when my parents went back to the hotel that night, we were saying, “Gee, we might be evacuating,” but we weren't sure exactly. They'd gotten here on Thursday. They were supposed to be here until Monday, actually. Going to bed that night, we began to realize that we were evacuating the next day, but we still weren't sure. We called my parents the next morning before they even got to the house, I think, and said, “Come on over, but we are evacuating by this afternoon.” Actually, arranged a separate babysitter because my parents were supposed to babysit the children so that Debbie could come to Shabbat services that morning because I was going to officiate at my first bar mitzvah in New Orleans of Adam Orlansky. That was going to be my first bar mitzvah here in the community. The tangent of my parents' story is they worked the phones, they had a rental car, and they were supposed to fly out Monday. They managed to get a flight out at 6:00 pm Saturday the 27th out of Gulfport, a place they had never been before, and it took them a dozen hours or whatever to find their way back to New Jersey from that flight. As the storm hit, watching Gulfport, they never would have thought about or cared about in their lives particularly, being a place they had just gone through also.

RH: Suddenly connected to Gulfport.

AB: Suddenly connected in a way that they never would have. I really was an extra piece.

RH: So, I believe you went forward with your bar mitzvah.

AB: We had the bar mitzvah that morning. We purposely didn't say anything about it much. We didn't want to make Adam nervous. I didn't even joke with him that morning [about it]. I think most of the people who were supposed to be at the bar mitzvah were here. Some may not have been, but it was certainly a full house of attendees from

around the area. Where I'm the newcomer, the Orlanskys are very grounded in this region and had a lot of people in – the bar mitzvah went off fine. I have not seen it, but Larry and Naomi Orlansky told me I made some joke about it [the storm] at the beginning of the service, something about, “I think there being some excitement here this morning, and I don't mean the weather,” or something offhanded like that. They said it was not anything that's painful to watch now as I said it, that I didn't go overboard in any way, but we had the service. My wife came to the service, actually, also. She left the moment the service was over to start gathering up. I stayed briefly to meet some people. I was new to the community. Because of the way the three major Reform congregations in this community, Gates of Prayer, Sinai, and Touro, share summer services, I had been here since July 1st, but actually, I had only led services during August. So, [this was an] opportunity to meet people. It was really only, I guess, my fourth or fifth weekend of leading services. [I stayed] to meet people, and I went home right after that. My parents may have been at the house or may have been gone already, trying to find their way to Gulfport in plenty of time. [We] began packing up a house that we still had not fully moved into, emptying the backyard of whatever. I remember I pulled the porch furniture in. We had an extra basketball net that wasn't hooked up yet that I pulled into my house. Took the porch swing down and sort of packed up. [We] had to make sure this other family was packing up as well. As with all the other Tulane freshmen, she'd shown up at her dorm, met her roommate and been told, if she had a way out of town on her own, to leave. So, they left with us.

RH: So they were doing that Saturday morning while you were doing –

AB: While I was doing services, they were moving into Tulane Saturday morning. So, they were packing up, we were packing up, and they helped us pack up some. Once they were back at the house, in terms of just trying to get things off the ground, put a few things upstairs, unplug computers, that kind of thing. It was nice to have some extra hands, actually, in terms of helping us. Parked my car in our backyard, which felt a little

higher than our front yard, though not much. We hit the road at 3:30 on Saturday the 27th.

RH: Tell me what you did bring with you.

AB: What we did bring. Not enough. We brought, thankfully, a briefcase-plus of all our closing papers on the house. We had actually refinanced the house the Thursday before the storm, and there were some loose ends. So, we luckily brought our insurance documents, our financial documents, checks, those kinds of things. Plenty of food, though mostly snacks, as we do when we drive places. You can drive half an hour without any food, but if you're going on a three-hour trip, you can't drive more than ten minutes without eating something. So, our kids needed some foo, and we took four pairs of shorts, four T-shirts, a bathing suit, maybe a pair of sneakers in addition to the sandals we were each wearing, some books and toys for the kids, but nothing other than you would take for a weekend. The cat. And that was it.

RH: So, where did you decide to go?

AB: We went -- we had actually figured this out earlier in the summer in terms of the cat and having thought about hotel rooms and the like and now having this other family with us, we went back to Jacobs Camp in Utica having made a reservation in advance. Called and let them know we were coming and that we were bringing someone else up. What is usually a slightly over three-hour ride took us about six and a half hours, which was fine by me. I had heard the stories of Ivan the year before, and if six hours meant everyone else was getting out of town in addition to me, six hours was fine. We got out half an hour before the highways went to contraflow. That was the other panic. I had picked up one of those contraflow maps at the hardware store and couldn't find it. One of the last things I did before we disconnected our computer was go online, find it somewhere online to make sure that I could get on the highway where I wanted to get on the highway, and make sure I ended up going up 55 and not further out on 10. So, that

all worked, we got out, and the highway was full and moving very slowly but it was moving more or less the whole time.

RH: So, Jacobs Camp is kind of an evacuation area?

AB: Jacobs Camp, when the camp is not in session, is open as an evacuation area. Generally, it's been to the Jewish community. I know come Hurricane Rita, they had a bunch of evacuees there, very few of whom were Jews, but they were open as an evacuation site for Jews in the community. They also had an evacuation contract with an adult mental health facility. I don't know how many people were at the camp, but I would say there were roughly a hundred Jews and a hundred people with this facility their staff and their families were there as well up at Jacobs. We got there when it was dark already and there was a list on the wall. The assistant director was running around. No, he wasn't there yet because the assistant director was Abram Orlansky, who was here at the bar mitzvah and who did not get up to camp until later that day. Actually, until later that night because he stayed for the party. But we got , and they had assigned us two rooms to be able to be in. The people who had made reservations and got there were given the rooms that generally rabbis or supervisors stay in during the summer. People who came in later were given cabins. But we got up there. It wasn't late. It was dark already. I guess we got up there around 9:30 if it took about six hours.

RH: So what's the normal drive there? How long does it take?

AB: Normal drive is a little over three hours. Easy and moving fast. This was pretty heavy traffic the whole way.

RH: Were you guys anxious?

AB: Yeah I'd say a little anxious. Joking mostly. As much as the news pictures we were watching that morning as we loaded up were showing the storm covering the whole Gulf, we weren't – as shown by what we took with us, we thought we were evacuating, so we

didn't have to deal with the risk of maybe having a tree come through our window or being out of power, whatever that meant. We certainly didn't think we were not going back indefinitely. Nervous that it was our first storm but, in general, fairly calm and joking. Feeling bad for people whose cars had broken down on the side of the road.

RH: Which you watched as you passed.

AB: That we watched happen as we passed them and sometimes got stuck behind them. I know we laughed a fair amount in terms of the governor encouraging us to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the trip well into the night at a time when people should have evacuated already, I would think, but I know not everyone had. Also, if I remember correctly, the governor encouraged families to pray that the storm would hit somewhere else, which even theologically is an interesting question, but certainly, being from another state, it struck me as kind of strange that that was the advice our governmental leader was giving us, regardless of what was felt. But I mean, I don't think we were anxious. We were curious and nervous. The cat was definitely anxious. I know when we first got up to Jacobs Sunday, the weather was beautiful Sunday, and we ran some errands. I got an oil change in the van, not because I thought I was about to do heavy driving but because suddenly I had time to go to Jackson, Mississippi, and get an oil change in the car. I had a day off. An unexpected day off that I didn't have to do errands around the house. My time in New Orleans before the storm, as much as the kids had been taken around and Debbie taken around, I really had been going to work, visiting people in the hospital, trying to get to know people, and working on the house. We moved into an old house that was in decent shape, but you move into an old house, it needs work. So I kept going to Lowe's and Home Depot and home. I had never been to the French Quarter, never even for a meal. I had never been plenty of places. My kids had been in the aquarium, but I had not been to the aquarium. I'd been to the zoo when we were interviewing, but I don't think I – I hadn't been to these places ,and we suddenly had a day off without chores to do. So we did that, we ate lunch, and we sort of

hung out for that day.

RH: You discovered the secret gift of the hurricane.

AB: Right.

RH: As long as nothing happens.

AB: Right, it was very nice that way. As would later happen to us when we evacuated for Hurricane Rita also. So right, it was really very nice.

RH: So when did you realize you were starting to watch the TV, and what started to happen?

AB: Your camp time blurs to begin with, and it was no different in evacuation. The time sort of blurred. But again, we went to sleep Sunday night rather calmly, knowing that it was coming in. I guess I spent Monday night sitting with the assistant – Sunday night rather, pardon me, I spent Sunday night sitting with the assistant director watching cable TV and watching mostly the storm reports in terms of what was happening, but it was just about it coming in. I don't remember exactly when it made landfall, but I know I went to sleep, and Monday through the day, I think we were like most New Orleanians; the news we could get when there was still power was about the storm hitting hard but it sounded okay. If anything, my part of town in terms of where the synagogue was and where my house was sounded what passes for okay in the middle of a storm. And it was not until -- I know people were nervous Monday morning at camp. My cantor, Cantor Seth Warner [and I were] up there, and Cantor Joel Colman from Temple Sinai was up there also, and the three of us led a service for those people who wanted to come to a service. As much as Reform Jewish camp usually has daily services, it doesn't during evacuation, but people asked, and we had that, so people were definitely somewhat nervous and wanted that. It was definitely tension in the air in terms of the size of the storm. But again, I think that tension was about whose house is going to be hit hard, not a whole city. A

realization that some people sitting there and/or their friends were going to have impact on their homes and businesses. But it wasn't – power went out fairly early. I don't remember exactly when during the day. But as the storm started to come up that –

RH: At the camp?

AB: At the camp. Sometime in the afternoon the power went out on Monday. At that point, someone had a small TV that plugs into a car that managed to get bad reception in terms of watching the early reports of both storm surges – and there were a number of people up there at camp with us who were from the North Shore who got hit I think from that storm surge pretty early on – to the levee breaking through the afternoon, really had to – that news came in both on radio and just on the little pieces, the little TV. In terms of watching it, we were all huddled around this TV, different people in different states of things watching it, and the early reports were very sketchy in terms of what was going on. I remember feeling very badly. There was a man there who was a staff member for the adult mental health facility whose house was right in Saint Bernard's, along one of the first reports of something breaking, and he just knew that that was his house. My family had a very weird situation, which none of this meant anything to me. In terms of geography of the city, I knew where Metairie was. I knew where Uptown was, but terms like Ninth Ward, Gentilly, even New Orleans East, or Saint Bernard's really didn't mean a lot to us in terms of where that played on the map yet, which made it difficult. I ran and got a map from the car to try and follow it, but many of the terms that get used aren't terms that you find on a map anyway.

RH: Right. Neighborhood terms.

AB: Neighborhood terms, Lower Ninth Ward is not – now it's on maps, but it's not on your AAA map in terms of finding your way around; it doesn't say it.

RH: So when did you start to realize you weren't going to be able to come back? What did you and your family –? What kind of process did you –?

AB: I think leading into that night, it became pretty clear that things were getting worse. I got probably zero sleep Monday night. We were in two connecting rooms through a bathroom. The cat spent the whole time hiding on top of the closet, with dogs barking from the various people that brought dogs with them. We managed to get our kids to sleep okay. I guess part of our errands, just to play it safe for power outage, we had bought some flashlights that day. I know we had plenty of working flashlights. So, there was enough light, got the kids to sleep, they were a little nervous about it. Debbie slept some, I think, and I had a battery-operated radio that I kept playing with all night, trying to figure out what was going on. Mississippi Public Radio was being amazing actually in terms of – my difficulty was finding a signal. They were, when I found it, broadcasting pretty clearly. I think it was – whenever it was that we woke up, it was pretty clear that we were not going home, and I assume we woke up pretty early. The camp -- we had spent Monday late afternoon when the storm finally came through the camp we had spent that playing Ping-Pong inside watching a couple trees being blown over and not going out during the worst of it. But up there it felt like a very, very heavy thunderstorm, the kind of thing we had experienced before in life. I have no idea what category it was by the time it hit Jackson, but it wasn't – it was scary but not terrifying. We played Ping-Pong and dealt with it. But waking up the next morning, the camp, which had looked very clean the day before, was a mess. Water had gone out overnight related to the electric and some other issues. So, we woke up to no water and to people being in various states of knowing that their houses were underwater or possibly underwater. I guess we didn't know. It was very sketchy in terms of the news one could get that morning. I don't think I looked – I may have looked briefly at a TV that morning, but I had been listening to the radio all night. We had been out of cell phone – any phone contact. Phone lines were now down. I guess we had probably spoken to our parents on Sunday but not on Monday. They knew where we were but we now realized also that the storm had come

up that way. Actually, Cantor Colman has a portable ham radio which he set up to be able to let some people be able to through ham radio people send messages to people. So, Joel connected with someone in Main, I think, who called my parents to let them know we were okay.

RH: My gosh, that's such an interesting, old-fashioned –

AB: It was great – it was old fashioned – we've got all these cell phones. Ham radio works. I learned later the next day from my mother that – or later that day from my mother. My mother got a message but deleted it, thinking it was a salesman trying to sell her something. The phone message came in, it was on the thing, and it sounded like someone trying to sell her something. She never actually got the message, but I was trying to somehow get word out. We knew we were okay. Our families knew we were not in New Orleans anymore. But you could have been the one person in the wrong place when a tree fell in Utica, Mississippi. So, we woke up that morning. It was very clear by that morning that Libby, the kid from Philadelphia, was not going back to Tulane. So, her family started plotting their course of driving back north. We made sure they had some phone numbers to be able to find us at because cell phones were not working at this point. We had figured out that it was not just the bad coverage at camp but that they simply were not working. So, pretty early on – the timing on that day is among the foggiest days in my memory. Pretty early on, we packed up the car, there wasn't much to pack up, unfortunately – packed up the car. We had brought a lot of water, just to have plenty of [drinking] water at camp, and we actually gave a lot of our water to some of the staff from the mental health facility that clearly were not going to be able to leave as quickly. We knew we were driving out and we'd be able to buy water, and they had no water at camp at that moment. They had some stuff in the fridge but not a lot because camp was over, so you clean out for the year. So, we gave them that stuff, and we drove north. It took us some time to get onto the interstate because as we tried to go the main route from camp back to I-55, there was a lot of traffic in the way, and so there I was

again looking at my map that doesn't show Utica, Mississippi in very good detail trying to find our way somehow. I realized I needed to get north of Jackson to come back out, and I managed to weave my way there. We started heading out, having not really eaten breakfast and being rather shell-shocked. Again, Mississippi Public Radio was doing a great job at this point. As we got on the highway, we were able to get them and so listened to the reports with our kids in the car, trying not to concern them, but certainly, my eleven-year-old could understand – she was ten then – could understand what was going on. My then four-year-old was rather clueless, with the middle kid in between. We knew as we left camp, we were heading to my mother-in-law's in central Illinois. Of the options in front of us not knowing what was next, that was where the kids had to be. So, somewhere early on, whenever we finally got cell phone service back, which was not to be able to receive but to be able to call out, was pretty early on. I don't know if we were an hour north of Jackson. No more than that. We called my mother-in-law to say we were coming. We called my parents to tell them where we were headed. I know at that moment, I made only one more phone call, which was to Rabbi [Lawrence] “Jake” Jackofsky, who was at that moment beginning his last year as the regional director of the Reform Movement out of Dallas, who I did not know. I had never met actually, I had spoken in the interviewing process and knew of him. As early as then, I said to Jake, “We are headed towards …”. I told him where we were going. I said, “I'm not sure where we're going after that.” He said you're probably going to Houston but go to Illinois first. Then, it was a bizarre day. Driving north, trying to stop pretty early on to be able to feed the kids and just get a breath and use a bathroom that had water. There's not a lot between Jackson and Memphis in terms of stopping.

RH: Tell me what you're thinking about. What was going on?

AB: Well, I mean, for our case specifically, here I'd taken my – I had chosen to leave a job that was a comfortable job, a very comfortable job, but was not a job that fit my needs, in terms of just a difference of opinion of how the synagogue and the community

should function. We had some very good friends there. After six years, we realized it was not the place that I was going to build my career. They didn't want me to leave. Here I had taken my family from their very comfortable split-level in Wynnewood, Pennsylvania, to the fact that we were now had no idea at that moment if our house was flooded, certainly knew that we weren't going back in the near future, didn't know whether that meant whatever. Knew enough about New Orleans moving here that all the discussion about it being a bowl and if it filled with water, how long would it take for it to empty. I don't think anyone was thinking about mold or anything yet, but this question of sort of how was it – so, it was [inaudible] there. As much as there was some joking, the kids weren't mad at me. I'm married to a rabbi who understands the profession and understands what goes on. We were more just trying to keep the kids happy, trying to follow the news, and frankly concerned about the people I barely knew in terms of what this meant for the staff and the membership of the congregation that I didn't know. I knew a very few number – a very small percentage of them.

RH: Kind of isolation.

AB: It was very weird, and isolation has been –

RH: For you that other people may not have experienced.

AB: I think the crucial unique piece of this in my family's experience over this year has been isolation. People have been wonderful and friendly. We like to say we don't have any friends; it's not because we have any enemies, and it's not because we don't have friendships that are growing, and probably the year of this experience has caused that to accelerate, but at the same time, we didn't know anyone. That has been a difficult thing. In the week and the month or more that immediately followed the storm, there was also a strong point to that. Which is professionally, I cared about all these people but we truly had moved to a city where we didn't know anyone. We didn't have any relatives. So, I cared deeply as a rabbi for the people we were sharing this with, but it's not like my

oldest friend,, my sister or my aunt, were going through this at the same time. So, there was some ability to compartmentalize my professional responsibilities, which are not easy to compartmentalize in the rabbinate, but the lines do exist. The added advantage of coming from – my wife's from central Illinois. I am from New Jersey. We've lived in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia since we've been married. The people who cared about us in the world, very few of them had any other connections to New Orleans. So, in terms of the amount of energy, support, and financial connections, in some cases that we were able to deal with, these were people who were not picking up the phone, calling one best friend from New Orleans and then picking up the phone and calling the next best friend. We were it, and that was actually a tremendous amount of strength. But isolation has been a piece of this because as much as this community has been wonderful –

RH: You don't have the history.

AB: We don't have the history. And everyone's energy from that day forward has been tapped from dealing with the storm. That was a hard piece. I joke about being a carpetbagger in terms of you come in, you don't know anyone, and you're suddenly in a position of leadership. I was not alone. In the fall, I was joking that we should form a club of the head of Newman, the head of Touro Infirmary, and a couple of the administrators at Tulane who had stepped into this community just before the storm into positions of leadership, not just moved here for a job, but stepped into a position of leadership within the community. That was both a burden and a responsibility in terms of making decisions and not only caring about oneself, and yet, knowing primarily my responsibility was also to my kids.

RH: And your family.

AB: We knew the odds were not that I was about to spend a lot of time in Decatur, Illinois, but that's where our kids were going to be safe at the moment. We're friendly with a rabbi in Memphis, which was closer, but what were we going to do there other than

turn around and go somewhere else? Really, first thought was just our kids need to be in a comfortable space in their lives, and that was at either grandparents' house.

RH: You said also you're making me realize that the sense of safety isn't just upon returning; it's a sense of safety after you've lost what you were expecting. That you wanted your family in a safe –

AB: Wanted my family in a safe place. Everyone's aware of it. I will never have known New Orleans before. Other than two trips interviewing, I had never been here. The stories were told and different things. We just had never been here in terms of that. My family's vision of the city is what's come after the storm. There aren't a lot of memories in our heads in terms of what did that intersection look like. Was that a building that got knocked down in the storm? There were a lot of buildings knocked down in the city. Was that a knocked-down building? The closest major intersection to us is a closed-down gas station and a burned-out grocery store. Well, the gas station's been closed for years, and the grocery store has been burned out for a while. Hopefully there will be something new built, but we really had no memory of the landmarks of the people. The Camellia Grill was down the street from us, and just at dinner Friday night, someone said, "Did you guys ever eat there?" and the answer was "No," and now it's closed. Really, no sense of that. No sense of favorite places. So, I've got something professional in front of me. My wife had a part-time – at that moment, a part-time professional obligation, and my kids had no friends. They had seven days of school. Seven days at school is not friends. A couple of the kids they had been at camp with were New Orleanians, but no one they were in school with. We hadn't started religious school yet. So, they hadn't met people her and really, with the life of the summer, we hadn't met so many people in the congregation. We had met a handful of young families and met some of my leadership. On Sunday the 28th, my president was having the whole board and their spouses over to dinner to meet Debbie and me, and that, of course, hadn't happened yet. I had board members of the congregation, very significant members of the congregation in terms of

their involvement, who I had not yet met. So that piece, that the safety was not just is my house okay, but who do I know, how do I get information, all those things were very new to me.

RH: Isolation, again, is really striking to me.

AB: Yeah. No, I would say on the professional side of things, what has struck me during this past year is how isolating this has been for people, even those who are more networked in the community. I think I often read that through my own sense of isolation. I watch husbands and wives trying to make decisions. Are they rebuilding or not rebuilding? Are they staying? Are they going? If they're rebuilding, what are they doing? As much as they're very much on the page together, often they're very much also each going through their own decisions of why they're here and trying to deal with that. At least I had my family with me. My kids have been wonderful through this. Debbie has been wonderful through this. For all our strengths and weaknesses as parents, we've managed to give our kids a sense of humor. Maybe not a good one, I don't know. So, we were joking about that as we pulled forth and a real awareness – I'd been in the hospital a day or two before the storm ,visiting a member of the congregation. That Friday, I'd been in the hospital visiting a member of the congregation. A real awareness that the five of us were healthy, that our families were healthy, that no one in our family could have possibly not evacuated because they were all out. As our kids both joked but also fought as kids will on a ten, twelve-hour car ride, as our kids fought on [Tuesday] in the car, an awareness that whatever was going on, we both had employable skills. It's not like we had a business next to the Industrial Canal that we had to deal with. We both had employable skills, and our kids were healthy. And for all the things that I sometimes wonder through my head what have I said during sermons in this past year, what's convenient memory and what's memory – we had the conversation that day that we were in the car; we were healthy, we had a working car with an oil change, and a safe place to go.

RH: You assessed what was working.

AB: Yeah, yeah.

RH: You had a gratitude assessment, it sounds like.

AB: Right, it really was. We knew we had a safe place to go and that we could stay as long as we wanted.

RH: So you went up to Decatur.

AB: We went to Decatur, Illinois, which is right in the middle of the state, not really near anything. We got there probably around dinnertime on Tuesday, I guess, because the storm was Monday. So, on Tuesday, we got there around dinnertime. Actually, with the move – we usually spend about a week in Decatur in the summer – our kids had not been there at all. My mother-in-law was not happy [about] why we were there and had spent the day watching the news, but she was happy we were there because we hadn't actually come that summer. My kids are always happy to go to their grandparents' house. So, we were there. I, more or less, hit the landline and the computer right away. One of the other rabbis in town describes it as being in a bunker, those couple of weeks there. I mean, I really sat in front of the computer and on the phone, trying to use email and phone to try to figure out where people were – where was my staff? Where was my leadership? – and to begin thinking about what's going on. Of course, following the news, which was still unfolding at that point. We had been out of news contact for much of the day. As much as we had listened to the radio, there were points where we turned it off and let the kids watch a video in the car because they deserved not to have that all day. The news was somewhat sketchy, but we knew something was big. Actually, one of the few memories from I-55 driving up, starting probably about the same time cell phone service came back in, was the utility trucks driving down from the Midwest. I would not have wanted to have a utility problem in Chicago that week because it was

really somewhat inspiring in terms of both public utility companies and individuals – tree and utility companies streaming down I-55.

RH: Feels like the troops.

AB: It really did. Really did. And watching the news and knowing how slowly the National Guard was in coming.

RH: The utility companies –

AB: But the trucks were coming. I'm not sure how far south they were going. Mississippi needed plenty of work. It really was a very striking memory that day.

RH: So, the first people you call was trying to find your staff?

AB: First people was trying [to find] my staff. Two of whom had been here.

RH: Here in the building?

AB: Sorry, no one had been here. No, but my educator and my cantor. Touro's Director of Education and our Cantor had both been at Jacobs Camp with me. Our educator left before or around when I left. Our cantor actually stayed a little longer than I stayed. Trying to find them. Having really to use email first. I didn't know how to text message. I'm still not prepared for this hurricane season in that I haven't learned how to text message, but my wife has. I need to actually. I'm told it's easy. But sitting there using email, being able to track people down, and slowly – but again, I didn't know that many people. I didn't know email. I guess I had my PalmPilot with me that was still working at that point, but I did not – if I had a list of emails, it was not a good list of emails. Though luckily I was still in transition, and I think I had trouble accessing the webmail system of the synagogue. But I was able to use an AOL account and really spent the next couple of days – very old-fashioned, except that it was email – trying to network with people the

way families used to do with letters – it just took more time lag – and phone eventually. I think it wasn't that night, but by the next morning, I had connected with our temple president, who was in Memphis. Her sister lives in Memphis, so that's where they had evacuated. She was in Memphis with her whole family.

RH: And that was Ruth?

AB: Ruth Kullman. Ruth and Larry had gone up there. I actually wasn't sure they had evacuated. As of when I had last seen Ruth on [Saturday], she had said they had never evacuated and she wasn't evacuating. I think what happened is on Saturday, she convinced Larry to pack the car, and Sunday morning, they evacuated. But the number of people I know had never evacuated before the storm – I didn't know where our Rabbi Emeritus David Goldstein was. I knew he wasn't in the city because he had been in Spain, but I didn't know where he was. He actually had gotten stopped at the airport in Atlanta, not able to fly back. He had never evacuated. My secretary, who had been the secretary of the congregation at that point for twenty-five years – while I didn't know where Chalmette was, I knew she lived in Chalmette. Two of our secretaries –

RH: What was her name?

AB: Sandy Barnett, who had been the secretary of this congregation for twenty-five. I knew that when I had last seen her she hadn't planned on evacuating and had also never evacuated. I had spoken to all these people as I was trying to gauge over the summer when do I evacuate. What's the category level at which one evacuates? A number of people said we're out of here the moment the wind blows, but there were a number of people here who say, “I've never evacuated. I'm not evacuating.” Luckily, in most cases, but not all, they, in the end when they saw the size of the storm and where it was headed, did evacuate.

RH: You're reminding me of something. Did the Touro Synagogue itself have a plan?

AB: No. I mean, I think I can safely say we had no plan. I don't feel personal guilt.

RH: [inaudible] only place.

AB: Exactly. I don't feel personal guilt in that, in that it certainly wasn't my job to have a plan, having just gotten here. In talking to everyone else over the year, discovering that hardly any other institutions had plans, and those institutions that had plans had remarkably poor and incomplete plans. Scott Cowan at Tulane jokes about the plan that had him staying on campus, and he's still left trying to figure out what good it did having him staying on campus. And Les Hirsch, who had started at Touro Infirmary as the CEO, four days, five days before the storm. Whoever imagines you're evacuating the hospital? So when they finally did evacuate, there was no plan to reconnect the senior staff with each other, let alone any other command and control. So, we truly had nothing. Our saving grace was the Reform Movement and the local federations. The Jewish Federation system in terms of how it pulled together. Because my Executive Director had evacuated to Houston, he was already there in a hotel with his dogs, and Mark was able to get the computer systems doing what they needed for Federation. And some things pretty early on whereas –

RH: Mark.

AB: Mark Rubenstein.

RH: Mark Rubenstein. He's the Executive Director for –?

AB: He's the Executive Director for Touro Synagogue. He's a lifelong member of the congregation. Mark and I, the whole experience is – he had the exact opposite experience. His whole life has been in this city. His wife's from out of town, and he went to school out of town, but he's lived his life in the city. His family – Rubenstein Brothers – runs the clothing store downtown on Canal Street. His parents actually had to be evacuated by boat because they did not evacuate. But Mark was there, and pretty early

on, I was able – once I found someone on email, I was then able to call them on my mother-in-law's landline until we figured out the cell phone thing. The amazing sharing that's gone in this community is somewhere in that first week – I don't know where because I wasn't there yet. When Federation when the New Orleans Jewish Federation set itself up in the Houston Federation's office, Mark was able to go and get the computer system going because he's a computer guy.

RH: So, he's responsible for that amazing Federation community that started to find one another very quickly.

AB: He is not solely responsible. He was a piece of the work going to that. He's absolutely not solely responsible, but I know that Federation was very appreciative of his computer talents and the use of bulletin boards and people's finding each other. That started developing pretty early on.

RH: I was in with a Jewish family in Seattle. Even that Monday, people were all emailing through the Federation network.

AB: Our oddity is our name started to show up places. We had good friends. Obviously, our best friends knew where we had moved, but we had old friends and colleagues who had no idea where we were. We had people who it took them two or three weeks to realize that they should have been worried about us as news spread places or people had been in Israel for the summer or whatever kinds of things. As the news spread around and people realized things very early on –the people in Houston got lost in the pile. Some of them got interviewed, and some of them didn't. If you end up in Decatur, Illinois, we got interviewed by the local press, which there is. I think there was one or two other families – not Jewish, but one or two other families that somehow had connections in Decatur. Pretty early on – it must have been Wednesday – Debbie started to figure out if there was a chance she and the kids were going to stay in Decatur and send the kids to school there and started dealing with some of the school board in terms of was

there a school that we would be willing to send our kids to. In the end, it made sense for us to stay together as a family through this whole thing, but there was also, with all due respect to Decatur, no school that made sense for where our kids had been in school for us to be sending our kids to school. But the person that Debbie was dealing with – almost everyone through Katrina had at one point this experience, where Debbie realized that the person from the school board that she was dealing with was the homeless coordinator. The person called back and said, “I'm the homeless coordinator,” and suddenly realize that who – they don't have an evacuation coordinator. It makes sense. But this realization that we were homeless. And I'm not sure when we – somewhere during that week, somewhere Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday, we managed to connect with someone on our street who was still on the street and gave us an update about our house. But I think when we first heard that we were dealing with a homeless coordinator, we realized we didn't know whether we were temporarily homeless, which was the truth, or truly had lost our home.

RH: Had to be an incredible experience to be the person giving services most of the time to suddenly realize that you've been categorized as the homeless.

AB: Right, it was a back and forth, that was a very – and not having both experienced and done plenty of reading and thinking on my own and teaching kids, especially about the homeless and hearing stories of homeless people who had had promising careers and for whatever turn of events and health insurance or whatever it may be had found themselves on the street. An awareness that we had a family network for which that was not truly going to happen.

RH: Intellectually, you had that awareness.

AB: Intellectually, yeah. I think we had a fear that we – in the end, we lost no belongings, but I think we had a fear that we had lost much of our stuff in our house. Emotionally, some fear of that, but truly knowing the way both our families deal with

money and deal with professions and by no means is anyone wealthy – no, I think some of the comfort was knowing that unlike that guy at camp whose house was against the Saint Bernard Parish levee or whatever it is that we knew that we would be okay one way or another. The added piece that added comfort in this is frankly the way Ruth Kullman dealt with all of this as our president. In some ways, while clearly our other lay leaders were stepping up and asking what they could do, Ruth as president – and she had just become president, but she had been an officer for a number of years – Ruth as president really carried a fair amount of this load.

RH: Explain that to me.

AB: In terms of hand-in-hand having to make sure the finances were there, make some decisions, deal with some things, and just reassure us as she was dealing with plenty of her own things and her own family. Ruth is from Oklahoma but she's lived her whole adult life here, and Larry's whole family is here. Their family took a very hard hit; their extended family lost several homes in the storm. But the example is – at least the question I asked you at the beginning – how many days does August have? So whatever day payroll came in on, which would have been the 30th, I guess. So, the next Tuesday, not that I knew – now I bank online. I did not even bank online so it took some phone calls to figure this out, but I was paid twice. I guess Mark told me on the phone. My executive director told me on the phone that the whole staff was actually paid twice on August 30th, that the payroll company made a mistake having nothing to do with the storm, and there had been a double payment. Mark, in his very responsible tone, was immediately trying to figure out how does he take back the salaries because he was concerned about what was our cash flow at this moment and our access to our funds institutionally, and Ruth immediately said, “Leave it.”

RH: That's amazing.

AB: It was an advance. It wasn't a bonus.

RH: I understand.

AB: But it's all going to come to pay at the end. I think everyone's been uncertain. One of the huge differences in this is cash flow, and I got plenty of family members and friends who make a lot more money than we do. Because of having just sold a house and moved and things like Ruth's decision, our cash flow has been pretty good during this year. That has mattered in terms of getting my contractor working, but that has also mattered in terms of saying, “Okay, you know what? We're going to Target tomorrow.” My credit cards weren't maxed out. I'm aware that I have congregants who hit the store with credit cards that were already maxed out. We did that very weird New Orleanian thing, which is by that Wednesday, we were at Target shopping because we didn't have any clothing. The need to purchase some basic things for the kids and whatever, and thankful again that we don't have any serious health issues. We don't have any allergy issues. We don't have anyone who needs specialized shoes or anything. It's all normal stuff, but it was very weird to know you own stuff, to assume it might still be okay. Again, I forget whether it was Wednesday or Thursday that we truly had figured it out that it was okay, or that most of it was okay. The cash flow made a big difference. Again, we weren't rich, and we were not being extravagant. We laugh at some of the purchases we made because there were some things we said, “Well, why did we buy something so cheap?”

RH: What did you get?

AB: Oh, shirts. We made sure everyone had a few more T-shirts and shorts. Underwear. We bought some books. My mother-in-law made sure that the kids had some toys. Some more toys. Definitely needed that. I bought two pairs of khaki pants and five shirts that, for a few weeks, would be –

RH: Your uniform.

AB: My uniform. And we laugh because we probably, in the grand scheme of things, could have afforded to buy slightly nicer shorts or shirts, but the cash flow was good, and we were being very responsible with it. Within a couple of days, it became clear we were going to Houston, and I realized I needed a suit. That was the one place where we actually looked around and were not buying a cheap suit.

RH: At Target.

AB: At Target. We do laugh because we looked some places that just isn't where I normally shop. The one very nice store in Decatur had a suit that would have cost me way too much, double what I usually pay on a suit, so we didn't do that. In the end, when we took a very bizarre trip down – I guess we left Decatur a week after the storm. We left on Labor Day. All the way down, we took two nights to get down there – on the first day or two – I guess the first day – no, it was the first two days of the trip, we stopped at a number of places to look for a suit for me. We'd drive around a city in Oklahoma and realize there's got to be a mall somewhere and actually got a very nice deal on a nice suit in a Dillard's that was going out of business or something. That we now laugh and call my evacuation suit every week I wear [it]. But just buying the basics. By the time we left Decatur, knowing that we were going to be moving into a borrowed apartment – and pots, pans – my mother-in-law saves most stuff. We, truly feeling homeless, drove in our van, in our Honda Odyssey, from Decatur packed to the gills this time with just things to get us going when we got there.

RH: So we're going to take a short break here and change the tape.

AB: No problem.

[END OF TRACK ONE]

RH: – for Katrina Jewish Voices. Well, you were beginning to speak of – we were talking about seeing the scenes on TV of Katrina and how actually that hit you personally and

about what you thought when you saw the people but also discussions of looting.

AB: It was all very concerning. Look, we moved to a city knowing – we chose to move from suburbs to a city, drawn to a Jewish community that was still interwoven with the urban fabric of this community. It was something we had experienced in Pittsburgh, but in so many cities the Jews have moved to the suburbs or live in the one gentrified part of downtown or whatever it may be, and to truly have – it was actually a draw for us to live in a community that was still so much a part of things. As we thought about where to live in this community, both in terms of convenience but also in terms of how we wanted to raise our kids, consciously chose to live within the city. But to then be hearing – both to be disturbed in terms of the Convention Center and the Superdome and people who had not gotten out and to hearing the discussions very early on about had they been told to go, why hadn't they gone, and to be very aware of – been very clear that you should leave. Other than some of the crazy macho people who weren't going to leave no matter what, much of the people who couldn't leave couldn't leave. Later, I would hear stories as I sat with my congregants to hear about what had happened to people who were at some of the hospitals in terms of evacuation, both as employees and patients. People couldn't necessarily leave if they didn't have transportation or whatever. And to be concerned about very early on the national coverage. To be very aware that while the national coverage was focusing on some of the poverty that tended to be African American, there certainly were poor whites. That the storm clearly by then had hit everyone. The looting was a concern. We were somewhat concerned about this building [the synagogue], though the police officers who part-time worked for us as security were here, were in and out of this building as quickly as they could come by. These were guys who stood their ground, worked through the storm, and are still working. We've honored them as a congregation at our annual meeting for their service and their losses because they both lost their homes. But being very aware of that. Sometime during that week – and I forget whether it was Wednesday or Thursday – managed to connect with the only two neighbors we knew on our street, either side of us. Pretty early on, one of them – I

guess between that and looking on the Google and the other satellite maps, whenever that became possible, we figured out that there had been two feet of water on our street. So, we were thankful that it wasn't the six, ten, twelve feet of water in some other places. But two feet of water. We really had no idea how high our house actually was. We knew it was vaguely around two feet off the ground. It was really this fear, and you could only get so close on those maps to figure it out, even though I had figured out where our house was pretty early on, I think. I forget exactly when I was able to do that. But we were able to, through these neighbors – and again, we hadn't exchanged anything other than cell phones or home phones, but we managed to get the number of someone who was two houses away from us who had not left, who had no radio and no cell phone but actually still had a landline and had stayed on the street. I think two couples had stayed with guns and a canoe and were patrolling the street. We spoke to them, and they told us that they had already gone by our house, but actually, in a later conversation, they very purposely went around as much around our house as they could and let us know that they didn't think the water had gotten into our house, that it looked like we had one window out, and some roof damage, but it looked like we were in pretty good shape. They also told the story of chasing what they called one group of scary people off the street. And later, seeing those people rescued on Carrollton two blocks away by a helicopter. Don't know exactly how to interpret all of that, but certainly a scary thing. One of those images that I can't get out of my mind is that couple chose to leave on the Friday after the storm when a police boat went down our street. They figured if a police boat was going down our street, then there was at least some law and order back in hand in terms of that. But a concern, a concern for again members I don't even know who have a range of businesses in terms of what was going on with this looting and where were their businesses. So concerned not only about their businesses for physical damage from the storm but in terms of whatever the looting may or may not have been.

RH: So, talk about you getting to Houston and how you set – what kind of infrastructure started to be set up to reconstitute your community?

AB: Sure. Some of that happened even before we were all in Houston, helped by the fact that our Executive Director was in Houston. The Reform Jewish Movement from the 30th forward – I guess, maybe from the 29th, but I think we all went to bed not knowing what was going on –really stepped up to the plate. It became clear that the majority, the largest share of the Jewish community in New Orleans, was in Houston already or headed there. That's where the Federation was setting itself up. One of the other Reform Rabbis was in Atlanta, but the other was in Houston. Bob Loewy had once been the Associate Rabbi at one of the congregations in Houston. It was the natural place for him to go. I had never been. I had been at a convention in Houston the year before, but I had never been in Houston either. This is also foreign territory. But again, I had been conversing through the week with Rabbi Jackofsky, the Regional Director, and he was encouraging Houston – there was somewhat of a jovial bidding war between Memphis, where my president was, and Rabbi Micah Greenstein in Temple Israel, trying to get us to choose to come there. I told Micah he just wanted to hang out with my wife who he was friends with in school. It just became clear that I was going to Houston. We were trying to figure out exactly where Debbie, the kids, and maybe I were going. But pretty early on I , I guess we knew I was going to Houston. But we got a call from our old school in Philadelphia asking if our kids wanted to go back. We could have stayed in Decatur, though we had ruled that out. Debbie's brother called from Bethesda, Maryland, saying the house was big enough. We just realized that as few people as we knew, we as a family had to be together for as much of this as possible.

RH: Can you say why?

AB: Yeah, I guess it ties back to the isolation we were talking about earlier because with kids at a different age and/or if we had lived in this community for ten years, maybe it would have felt differently. But with us really having no roots in this community, it all being so new – really more uncertainty than we had ever had in our lives. We've always known there'd be a job, and we've always known there'd be a house, and things were

pretty simple. What has really been – my father expressed it most, but I think for all three of our parents – my father-in-law's no longer living – but for my parents and Debbie's mom, the uncertainty that we've gone through, which is something that for the most part certainly in my side of the family has only [had] uncertainty that my grandparents' generation back would have dealt with. In Debbie's family, it might have been a generation further on in terms of some uncertainty. But we've lived a pretty easy, comfortable life, and [it was] very hard for our parents to watch us having to figure out and make these decisions and then be – I comfortably call ourselves refugees. One of the guys in Houston that was helping us figure out where to go down there very much corrected me and said I was an evacuee, not a refugee. I didn't see the pejorative inherent in refugee, but I understood what he was saying in terms of that. It just felt like we should be there together.

RH: You had one another.

AB: We had one another. We have what I think is a relatively strong and healthy marriage with its flaws as they are. We both understand the work each other [does] and just realize that the kids needed us there, and we needed to be there. I don't think we thought about this in the first place, but when I look at some of the people, I think it was actually easier to end up in a place like Baton Rouge or Houston where there were a lot of evacuees than the people who ended up in – our director of education went to Park City, Utah because her brother was there. She had just been out there for a bar mitzvah the week or two before. She had just been out there for a nephew or niece's bar or bat Mitzvah. She ended up there. I talked to members of the congregation who ended up in Maine or Washington. I think, in some ways, it was easier to be in a place where there were lots of people. Neither could you escape it, but on the other hand, there were people around who understood. There was a way to do work together. When I talked to people in the congregation who professionally were with their colleagues from work or were doing it all virtual, I think it was much easier to be able to have lunch together, be

able to experience that together. Certainly, the communities that took us in, like Houston, had a greater understanding of what we were going through in terms of that. We just thought it would be better in the short run and the long run for us to be together as a family.

RH: So, let's talk about Touro and talk about what you did to reconstitute –

AB: Sure. Very early on, a piece of it was trying to figure out where was my staff going. What was going on? With some phone calls with the help of specifically Congregation Beth Israel in Houston, but the Houston Jewish community as a whole, we managed to find some housing. Again, a concern that this not break the bank personally. I know very early on again a concern was just fiscally how do I come out on the other side in terms of this. Some very generous people arranged not a big apartment, but an okay apartment for us. One of the great lines within all of this actually was those members of the congregation who arranged the apartment arranged only – they apologized and called, said we can only arrange a two-bedroom. I said two-bedroom. It's first time since I was born that I've lived in new construction. My parents built my childhood house. They said, “We're sorry, it's only a two-bedroom. I said. “Fine. I need five beds and a bridge table.” They said, “No, no. You're going to be here for a few months.” These people owned a furniture store. They said, “There's no rental furniture left in Houston. We're pulling floor models for you to be able to [inaudible].” I said, “No please.” They said, “No, no, if you're going to live there as a rabbi, your family needs to be comfortable.” The great line was the wife said to me, “And do you like colonial or contemporary?” I said, “You got to be kidding.” And she then said, “No, no, no, no, serious.” I, of course, was left alone to make this decision, and I said, “I guess I like colonial. Or classical, I guess she was asking. “Classical or contemporary.” “Classical.” And then she asked what our favorite color was. I said, “You got to be crazy.” She said, “If we're going to take care of you, we're going to take care of you.” So, the concern at that moment was arranging housing for my staff. My cantor was able to arrange his own. My executive director was assisted

in linking up with someone actually whose wedding he just went to a couple of months ago. He needed someone who could take his giant dogs. It made the most sense for my education director to be in [Utah] with her family because that would be what was best for her kids because her husband, at that point, had to be in Baton Rouge for his job. And there was nowhere – if you hadn't found a place to live in Baton Rouge by a day or two after the storm, you weren't finding a place in Baton Rouge. So she was there and we assured her that was fine. And we started finding people. The first phone call I got from a colleague came Wednesday, two days after the storm. I was at my mother-in-law's. I guess he found me via – I don't know how he found me, frankly, because we didn't email first; it was a flat-out call. It was someone that I was friendly with in school but not someone I had ever even shared a meal with. It was not my closest friend, but someone – we had a lot of mutual friends – who called me and said that he had a member with a five-thousand-dollar check in front of him; what did Touro need? I said we needed four laptop computers because I needed my educator, who was going to be in Houston, to have one. I said I needed – my executive director was going to have to run the synagogue off this for who knows how long. With a little back and forth and a little extra money, by the next week, when I got to Houston, we had four laptop computers – in terms of being able not to have to borrow space on someone else's computer. Some of my staff had personal computers. I didn't want their spouses to have to depend – to have not access to the personal computers, which were their personal computers if they were traveling or working all day on it. So, that all worked out, and that was really the first piece in terms of that. Mark Rubenstein was not able to fully update our website because of the way – I don't understand this stuff at all. But in terms of how it had been built without being inside the building at that point, he couldn't truly edit the website. What he did manage to do was hack into one part of the website, the only thing he could hack into, and lay out our phone numbers there. I guess by sometime later in that week, I had dumped my New Orleans cell phone and had picked up a Houston cell phone number. I had only changed my cell phone from Philadelphia on August 15th or so, so

no one really knew it. We dumped it, and we put a line up that had all our cell phones there. And the phones which had been ringing at my mother-in-law's all along started ringing on the cell phone. We really were just trying to find members. The first piece of reconstituting the congregation was [to] find members, see how we can help them, [and] make sure they realize that the Jewish communities, wherever they were, were willing to help them. For that first month, it was a new professional experience because I was never on hold. I'd call and say, “Can I speak to Rabbi X?” and I was there. It was magic. We were all joking about it. But truly cases of – on the Thursday after the storm, I went through my head – who did I know was sick? And called a rabbi in Memphis and actually got a different doctor to someone's bedside related to that, had someone – got a rabbi to visit someone who was in a hospice north of Dallas who had been medevacked off the top of Touro Infirmary. I had visited someone the Friday [August 26] before services and actually truly did not know who they were. It was a name that meant nothing. I went in and visited them, had a very nice visit with them, and it took me a few days to figure out who they were. Their daughter-in-law got in touch with me. It turned out that they had – instead of taking evacuation from Touro Infirmary, the husband had driven the wife, who had just had very serious surgery a day or two before – four days before the storm – drove her to Birmingham, Alabama, and I made sure that the rabbi in that community knew that they were there. So, we were trying to do those kinds of things, trying to make people realize that in addition to the general resources that this country as a whole – and certainly its not-for-profit centers – were throwing at evacuees, that the Jewish community was really ready to help, that the day schools and the synagogues were there. So we spent a lot of that week driving down, spent that time talking to family, being interviewed by newspapers, including Israeli newspaper in Hebrew – get a few smiles out of this – and trying to reach members of the congregation. I know one of those first nights, somewhere, Thursday, through one of my mother-in-law's friends in Decatur, Illinois – this woman was from Houston – discovered that a friend of hers had a number of New Orleanians over at the house, including among a couple of the people

that we actually knew. So I called that house where there was a party of – not a party, a gathering dinner for a number of people from New Orleans, many of them Touro members, and the phone was sort of passed around. I spoke to a couple of people whose names I only know and who are the chairs of our welcoming committee to town who were now there and, by that point, who we knew had lived in Lakewood South and whose house was underwater. We worked towards putting those people together. So that by the time I arrived in Houston on Wednesday, ten days after the storm, we had already borrowed office space at Beth Israel for my executive director, my cantor, me, and our one secretary in Houston, who was in Houston. They sort of gave us – it was a big enough physical plant; they gave us carte blanche. Many of the kids from the New Orleans synagogues were in their day school. My wife taught in their day school during the fall for the kids from New Orleans who were from supplementary Hebrew schools who suddenly found themselves in day school and were not in the right place Hebrew-wise. So, my wife stepped in. That school took in forty kids from New Orleans – forty-one, I think.

RH: Might be time to say your wife's name.

AB: Did I not say my wife's name? Now, I'm in trouble. You got to edit this backwards. My wife is Rabbi Debbie Pine, P-I-N-E. As we came down here, she was actually a congregational Rabbi before I was. And Debbie, as we came down here, was the part-time Judaic studies coordinator of the New Orleans Jewish Day School and third grade part-time teacher. As of two days after the storm, she found herself as the de facto head of school and, for most of the year, was involved in making the decisions of whether the school was going to reopen in the second semester or not, trying to reach out to the families of those students in that school and dealing with donations from national organizations to the school. In the early spring, she decided that she would switch. Really, her part-time options disappeared with the storm. We moved to town with a number of part-time options for Debbie. They all disappeared in the storm and she was

really faced with a decision of what full-time job she wanted. As of July 1st, she's now the Director of the New Orleans Hillel, serving primarily Tulane. Full-time for the first time since our nine-year-old was two, pardon me, seven years. But [she] has been a trooper through all of this and has been working within that. But she spent the year, much of the year, as the de facto head of school. I guess by sometime in December or January, she was actually appointed interim head of school.

RH: Is that right?

AB: Though she never actually was in charge of the school when the school was open but she was dealing with the incredible lay leaders of that school trying to help make decisions and figure things out. Again, when you talk about isolation, one of the nice things – we didn't know anyone in Houston either. One couple that we knew. We got our kids to the school, and they said, “Oh it's okay, there's lots of New Orleans kids here,” and my kids looked at me because they didn't know any of the New Orleans – didn't matter. So, the nice thing is, again, the five of us were in the same building for September, October, and most of November, which was helpful.

RH: So, as a spiritual leader of a congregation, what kind of responsibilities were you feeling?

AB: The responsibilities were huge. But my approach to the rabbinate to begin with is one of partnership, and they weren't mine alone. Our director of education was sitting in Park City, Utah, calling religious school families. My cantor was working the phone nonstop, knowing these families better than I did. In terms of reaching out, helping people, listening to them emotionally – the day I got to Houston on Wednesday, I took my family to the apartment, and I went straight to Congregation Beth Israel, where there was a communal meeting and went up to the head of Federation, quickly got a handle on what the agenda was, and said, “You know what? One of the rabbis of this community has to be part of standing up there and saying what's going on.” I got up and said a few

very brief words, among which was, “I'm sure if you belong to Touro Synagogue, please introduce yourself because I don't know you,” which was the case. There were people in the room. I talked [about] a number of different things. I think spiritually, one of my messages right then was, “We're used to giving help, and we need to take help. If you're offered psychological services, take them. This is not just about finances, and it's not just about theology, if you will. It's about family and life and community and holding together.” Very clearly from day one as well, various religious leaders, especially within the Jewish community, in the short term, were all working together. The rabbis were in communication one with another. It was not a question of who belongs to which congregation. It was very much if someone comes in front of us, we're dealing with them; we're helping them. There was no proprietary information in terms of sharing of addresses and contacts and information between synagogues and Federation, between synagogues and synagogues. Rabbi Cohn was in Atlanta, but Rabbi Loewy and I were both in Houston. For the six weeks after the storm, there was not a day that went by that we did not talk or meet. In terms of all of us trying to let people know what was going on. The Conservative rabbi in town was newer than me actually and ended up in New Jersey for most of the evacuation, and we tried reaching out to him and the Orthodox community. There was a real effort just to make sure, once you get into October, and people are back in and out of town, as funerals – whenever the first funerals started up, people were covering for each other in terms of those kinds of things, making sure that the spiritual needs of our congregation were pretty clear. We were blessed that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were coming late. I guess it was still the first of Tishrei, but they were coming late in the regular calendar year into October, which means we didn't need to have an immediate response, but we were able to begin planning where were our members going to be, what did we need to do for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and reaching out. It happened even on the way to Houston. It wasn't just the phone. I was passing through Dallas for just one day. I stayed overnight in Dallas at someone's house as we moved to Houston. One of my vice presidents, Walter Levy, who was in

Dallas, because his wife was from Dallas, and the Houston Jewish professionals pulled together as many New Orleans Jews as they could at Temple Emanu-El in Dallas on the Tuesday after Labor Day, so that I'd be able to meet with them. I didn't know most of them, but they would be able to – very clearly, the message we were sending was we're all one community, whatever we can do. A range of people – and I had met them briefly over the summer, but Henry and Eva Galler were there. We later had a memorial service for Eva back here afterward, and I remember very much speaking to them as Holocaust survivors within the community. What they said to me that day is feeling that, in some way, they were going through it all over again. And trying to reach out. As much as I was the new Rabbi at Touro Synagogue and again used my line that if you're from Touro, please introduce [yourself], and again was making it very clear, as I know my colleagues were doing, that we as rabbis, cantors, staff of the congregations were serving the whole community, that this was not about boundaries and our synagogue or another synagogue.

RH: Did you have services in Houston?

AB: Trying to think. The first day I arrived at – I mean, the Houston Jewish community as other communities did, but especially in Houston, really caught us. We had an experiment of doing some Shabbat services at some point during the weeks there, but really, by the end of September, people were coming back, and that piece wasn't working. What we did do was we did a Sukkot gathering. The Houston Jewish Federation had a couple of picnics and barbecues that people were able to gather at. The reason I needed a suit when I was evacuating and driving down from evacuation is I knew the Friday I got to Houston I was going to be delivering a sermon on the bimah of Congregation Beth Israel, and Cantor Warner actually served as the cantor that evening. Their cantor was out of town. So, we sort of melded it, and again that evening, there were members of the congregation – someone just came up to me a week or two ago telling me that he hadn't really – he had been out of town most of the year, but he had

met me that night, that Friday night when I gave a sermon there at Beth Israel. So, we had services of that kind. What we did have was for the High Holidays, we got together and said, “Okay, how do we serve our members during the High Holidays?” We realized that the majority of our members were in Houston or Baton Rouge. As much as we had other people elsewhere, they'd be taken care of elsewhere. We were dealing with people, letting them know that any synagogue would take them in for the High Holidays. Touro Synagogue doesn't have High Holiday tickets as many congregations in the country do. So, while I was aware of this, I was new to that fact and was new to the experience. There were conversations with our members who truly had no idea what a High Holiday ticket was. And in most congregations, it didn't matter. They were being told to just show up and tell us you're from New Orleans, but truly, it was foreign to them. We realized that we needed to serve Houston and Baton Rouge. So, through a turn of events, Rabbi Cohn from Temple Sinai ended up leading services at B'nai Israel in Baton Rouge as their fill-in rabbi because their rabbi was on leave, but in advance of that, we had really made plans that those people who were in our large population centers needed attention as such. So, Rabbi Loewy and I split Baton Rouge, Houston, and, in the end, New Orleans. I went to Baton Rouge with Cantor Warner, and we flew in our accompanist, Terry Maddox,, who lives in Mobile [Alabama] and drives in here every week to begin with. That was [the case] pre-storm. We flew Terry in, and Rabbi Loewy and Tory May, his soloist, led services in Houston. We were given for the evenings – at just the cost of staffing – the music hall, the beautiful new music hall at Rice University [which] made itself accessible to us, far bigger than we needed, but it was beautiful for when we used it for the two erev services. I did Erev Rosh Hashanah services at the Unitarian church in Baton Rouge together with Cantor Warner. The humor there was Beth Shalom Congregation in Baton Rouge had its ceiling collapse during Hurricane Rita, and they ended up having to have their services at the Baptist church. Because they had sent us to the Unitarian church, which now wasn't available, because we were there. So, it was truly – we had a range of members of the congregation again. People coming

together, trying to see each other, some of whom had seen each other a lot in Baton Rouge, but some of whom were not right in Baton Rouge and had driven in for the night to be at services. We put together a very full service but very quiet – stripped down. It was actually the first time I had seen Naomi, Larry and Adam Orlansky since the bar mitzvah. We had spoken on the phone. So, that piece was very interesting. The service was very moving. The people were happy to host us.

RH: What did you want to tell people? [inaudible]

AB: I think my sermons got a little more coherent.

RH: What did they want to hear?

AB: What did they want to –? I think what they wanted to hear and what I wanted to tell them were very similar, which is we're not alone, we're not the first Jews to deal with this, the specifics, yes, but displacement, no. That we're together as a community, that there was a lot of uncertainty but that Judaism understands uncertainty. I think, look, one of the messages in this to our very comfortable American lives is there's uncertainty in the world, and we're crazy if we don't think there is. It's just sheltered from us often. So, I think probably three out of four of my sermons were just that. Different takes on it, different comforting words. Erev Yom Kippur, I spoke about racism in New Orleans and was very straight up in terms of the fact that I probably would have lived here for quite a while before I started tackling those kinds of issues on a High Holiday in terms of learning the community. Not in any way that the Jewish community was racist but in terms of what was it going to take to rebuild our city and that the racial issues are interwoven with all the other issues, not alone but interwoven, and that we as a community needed to be part of something that was put together in a positive sense of it.

RH: So you moved to an urban setting, you moved to the south from the north. You must have expected to be engaged in some kind of racial justice at some point. It was

certainly unmasked rather brutally.

AB: Unmasked rather brutally and again both the learning curve but also the comfort level – you move to a community you're not – as the leader, it takes a while to learn the people and learn the community in terms of not being cautious but of being comfortable that you can say the things the right way and not be some northerner coming in dealing with it. So, it came out of discussion. Again, nothing I said, I think, shocked people, and I think it was coming out of conversations I was having in terms of grappling with how the city back together and what were the flaws of the city. They have nothing to do with the levee walls that came down in terms of the racial piece of it but how politics, geography, [and] economics related in the city. I think they're in every other city. As we dealt with family members, there may be certain extremes or certain realities in the city, but there is poverty and racial issues woven within America as a whole. If we don't get a handle on it, it's an issue, and it is part of what drew us here and part of what caused us to send our kids to Lusher, which was a magnet, is now a charter school that's as diverse a school as you get in the country in terms of who's there.

RH: So, in one way, you were realizing what you came to Louisiana to do. You wanted a synagogue that interfaced with the city more than a suburban synagogue.

AB: Yes. And my last congregation very much wanted to interface with the city but was out in the suburbs, which here, our fate is intertwined. This congregation has a history of being involved. They started an interaction with a mosque that was supposed to be every January. We skipped January 2006, but we're on schedule for 2007 for a meeting. The African American who is the head of that mosque, Imam Rafeeq Nu'Man, has since I've been here been to services three times, for the day and Friday where we sort of re-blessed our community – the Friday in January, pardon me – the Friday in January where we re-blessed our community and brought everyone together, not reconsecrating the building because the building was not out of consecration but sort of a welcome back

service as by January we had a lot of people. Rafeeq was also here on the week that I was installed finally as rabbi of the congregation.

RH: When was that?

AB: I was scheduled for December. It happened in March I think, which was fine. So, the congregation had that history but we really – what could we do all the more? As a congregation, much of this waited until we were back and really didn't start materializing until November, December. This congregation very much tried to engage in the community around us as we always have, but here's our opening to do it all the more. In the late fall and early winter, when there were very few large public buildings open, we were offering our sanctuary left and right to community and neighborhood groups, candidate forums – whatever it may be – because we had the space to offer. In most cases, not our members. We have right now – the young artists all summer long have had a day camp set up that we're just renting space at cost to young artists that realized that the New Orleans Recreation Department was going to be challenged this year in terms of providing summer activities. So, we've provided our space. I don't think any of our kids from our congregation are in this program. It was a free summer camp and happy to share that. I've got a meeting next week with Habitat for Humanity and the Catholic Church. In terms of what can we do as a community to be not only taking care of our own but very clearly, as I sat with my staff and my lay leadership, we realized that our process of healing and rebuilding and securing our future was both about taking care of our own members and taking care of the larger community around us. Our burden is different in each case, but the two work together in terms of what was going to bring us back to life and maintain our lives.

RH: Tell me about when you decided to come back. Obviously, you came back first, and then your wife came, so you ultimately split a little bit of your time.

AB: In the end, but it wasn't in the immediate aftermath either that we decided to – I probably should have come back a couple of weeks before I did even but it was sort of concerns of family and taking my time. The last piece of the High Holidays was one of our past presidents, Lou Good said to us as we were planning Baton Rouge and Houston – and Lou was in Baton Rouge. He said, “We have to have services at Touro for the High Holidays.” On Rosh Hashanah morning, we had services. We're sitting in the chapel right now, which at a good day holds 150. We had 248 people at those services, 198 in this room and the rest out in the hallway. We had National Guard and a number of people, and while it was led by Cantor Warner and me, and it was Touro's way of doing a service, it was a community service that we held here. It was the first Jewish service in New Orleans Parish after the storm. Rabbi Loewy would take care of Yom Kippur in Jefferson Parish the next week, and actually, I think Temple Sinai had a Kol Nidre service as a piece of what they did, but it was really a moving day. It made us realize that if we had 250 people in this room, most of whom were locals, it was time to get going from there. Cantor Warner came back and led a Sukkot service here while I led Sukkot in Houston. We took it from there in terms of moving forward, in terms of moving forward with services. We had regular Shabbat services from Sukkot forward every week. Cantor Warner and I alternated weeks with that. He actually carried a slightly heavier load than I did. After Thanksgiving, I moved back. It was just clear that we had enough members back here, that my family was settled enough in Houston. Probably would have moved back a week or two earlier if it had not been for Thanksgiving and the fact that the Reform Movement's Biennial was in Houston a week before Thanksgiving so we stayed there in terms of that. It was a weird experience because that was about talking to a lot of people, educating, and frankly, doing fundraising. I felt like my Israeli colleagues who come to these conferences primarily to be at conferences and learn and share with everyone else and who, in some ways, are always fundraising no matter what they do. As much as Touro's always been able to take care of itself, there was a huge fundraising piece of having conversations and then trying to line up some gifts and some

donations for both the institution and the members of the institutions on two tracks and we've raised monies on both those tracks. So, really, I moved back right after Thanksgiving. The Touro Synagogue physical plant had been fairly lucky. The building was not – very little hurricane damage. Some flashing here, a cosmetic stained-glass window in the front was hurt, but the work this congregation had done in the last two years to seal the windows, tuckpoint the bricks, and take care of the roof meant we suffered very little damage except that our basements flooded, which caused in the end about $150,000 worth of damage, HVAC flooding, and there was an oil spill in the basement. So, it was not until the end of December that we were fully able to be back in the majority of the building. The chapel part of the building was built as a separate building. It has its own HVAC system, and we ran wires, and our two secretaries who were back in New Orleans, both of whom lived in Chalmette, both of whom lost their houses in this – Sandy Barnett, who I mentioned earlier who was my secretary who just retired at the end of June, and Donna as well who lost her house in Chalmette and is now my secretary actually. Both of them were here and ready to work living with family in the New Orleans area. We ran wires to their desks. Mark Rubenstein was back, Cantor Warner was back, and I was back. We were less in the building, and more around trying to visit our members, trying to help out, trying to go to meetings, and again Shabbat services started at Sukkot. From the week we started Shabbat services really through now, there has not been a week where attendance has not been solid and large. For those first months, not a week where someone wouldn't walk in the door having just come back that day.

RH: Tell me about your congregation now. It's got to be – I know it's smaller. But also, you've got to be dealing with some other issues. Is there anger?

AB: Priorities have shifted. Look, we've gone through different stages. We've reached the point now where the adrenalin has worn off, and people are tired. People who are not back in their houses are tired even if they've settled up with the insurance company

or if they haven't. Contractors are slow. Business is slow. It has been demoralizing on members of the congregation to watch other members, old friends, [and] community leaders, leave, move to other cities for economic opportunities or just because they don't want to be here, not because they don't love the community but because it just doesn't make sense in their lives at this point. The congregation was over six hundred families when the storm hit. We will be over five hundred families still when it all settles out, but we've lost right now between ten and fifteen percent of our membership, and it will probably creep higher than that. We finally have a sense of our numbers, but it will be another year, I think until we really have a sense of our numbers. We've had some new members, a sprinkling, either some people who hadn't belonged anywhere and felt this was a trigger that they wanted to belong now somewhere or some people who just wandered to town before the storm. I don't know if there's anger. There's anger directed at certain places politically or whatever it may be. I think it's more uncertainty [and] fear. People have been very responsive to the congregation and any efforts we've done, in terms of just looking out and hoping for support, strength, community, [and] financial resources where possible.

RH: You mentioned funerals, and I know overall that there's been more of those in the city because of the storm. Has that hit Touro?

AB: We have not had an inordinate number of funerals, actually. In fact, I think a couple of other congregations may have had more. Now, we have had funerals of members of the congregation [where] the funerals ended up happening elsewhere because they had relocated. There's been some burials that have happened here when funerals have happened elsewhere, or places where we've done memorial services here even though the death happened elsewhere, and the memorial services followed. There's been a fair amount of illness. There has been some tragedy in terms of some of the funerals, affected by some of the stress of the storm. But we actually have not had an uptick in funerals. The first funeral from Touro was in November. Everyone was very thankful to

see that the Hebrew Rest Cemeteries, owned jointly by Touro and Sinai, were very lucky in the storm in terms of what could have been. They're right there on Gentilly on the ridge, and a little ways either way would have been a lot worse. So, no, we've not had an uptick in funerals. Definitely, people are back and exhausted, I think is the ongoing thing. There may have been a window in the winter and spring where there was a certain sense of near-term optimism that things were heading in the right direction. I would say right now, in terms of how slow things have taken, in terms of a new storm season, in terms of seeing people who left after the school year, and even though some came back from elsewhere after the evacuation, understanding that this is going to be a long process and that it's been hard on people.

RH: What are your concerns for the Jewish community at large? It's interesting because you've really got a little more perspective, perhaps, than some other rabbis. I don't know if you have any thoughts that are different.

AB: In many ways, we've been very much on the same page. The sense of working together, the sense that without a doubt, this Jewish community is going to look different five years from now than it did five years ago. That's true to some extent anyway, but things change slowly, and this was a dramatic change. Numbers are going to change. The Federation tells us there were roughly 9,500 Jews in New Orleans before the storm. We're going to get back just two-thirds to eighty percent of that number. Unclear in terms of that. Unclear in terms of exactly what percentage. Will every institution survive? But it's too early to know. All the national experts dealing with trauma and tragedy and things that have happened in communities, nothing like this, but Hurricane Andrew and some other areas, have encouraged all the leaders to make no decisions quickly. So, right now, everyone's moving along. It's just hard to believe that with a smaller number of people in the community the institutions are going to survive exactly the same way. We right now for a while have a cushion of donated cash. The Union for Reform Judaism and its members and congregations have been amazing, the United Jewish Communities

have been amazing, and just individuals have been amazing. We have a fair amount of donated cash that's going to help us budget-wise for a while. On the other hand, very much this community and very much Touro Synagogue don't want to be takers. Part of this is figuring out who we are and putting ourselves back on a solid financial grounding in terms of what it means to run our own synagogue. If we're somewhat smaller and therefore we either come up with a different way to raise money or we have to adjust to that within our program and staffing. And luckily, again, we've not had to make any decisions quickly, so hopefully, things sort out moving forward.

RH: In the larger Jewish community, are more Jews in need than used to be?

AB: Yes. It may cut both ways. Of the people who didn't come back, a lot of elderly didn't come back, and some of the ones that were – so, they're now being cared for in other Jewish communities. Some of the elderly who didn't come back didn't need the help, but some did. I think there are definitely some people in crisis. Some of it is short-term and moving forward already as people got cash flow going. Some of it is mid-term as people figure out things and deal with losses. Some of it may be long-term. What may be difficult is some of those long-term people may not be staying in this community because they may be able to put themselves financially better together somewhere else. At the same time, this community's doing everything it can to help people and to help understand the impact of this and whether you lost your home or whether you were just – took fifty to a hundred thousand dollars' worth of damage or whether you just lost a shingle, everyone in this community is affected by this. Universally, among the rabbis and also when we speak to the agencies in this community, the Jews in this community have found it very difficult to accept tzedakah. They have found it very easy over the years to give tzedakah. We all have the same stories and we all have dozens of them. I stand there with members of the congregation – I call them and say, "I know you just took a tremendous loss. We have been given money that we can't use to pay the electric bill of the synagogue that has been given to us specifically to help members in need. Can I

give you a check?" I was visiting someone who doesn't even have washer-dryer hookups in the apartment they're forced to live in right now even though they have a washer and dryer and no real income at this moment, and when I said, "Can I help you?" they looked at me and said, "I'm sure someone else could use the help more." Now, I simply handed them the check. Actually, I just got a very nice note from them. But people have found it very hard to accept help, which is part of why we've been trying to get them doing things also. I think they will find it – those people who have been involved in helping others have, I think, simultaneously found it easier to accept help where they need it because they were not just on the receiving end.

RH: So are you finding more people more engaged?

AB: I've got nothing to compare it to. I'm finding the community very engaged, very engaged, and I have nothing to compare it to. This was a very involved and engaged community, to begin with – this synagogue. It's what drew me there. Our lay leadership has been incredibly engaged. Of our executive committee, after Memorial Day weekend, every single one of them is back in town and here. Some of our board members have moved on. I know that some other institutions in town had some trouble filling open board positions. We had no trouble. We may have found it easier this year to fill some open board positions. That people were honored to serve and were happy to look beyond their own lives and their own houses and be able to say, "What do we do to help? What can we do to serve at this moment?"

RH: You've been in other communities. You've never had a community, I assume, have a crisis quite like this.

AB: Nothing like this.

RH: But even now, do you see anything distinctive about this Jewish community that's different than other communities? And also things that are just very similar?

AB: I think distinctive is a good word in that many of the things that mark this community could be found in some other Jewish communities, but the mix of things, in terms of the long roots that some of the members of this community have – for better and for worse, New Orleans has not been a place that's been drawing lots of new people in over the last quarter century and that's got its upside and its downside in terms of what it's meant financially for the city as a whole. But that said, you've got a lot of people who have been here for a long time, and yet what's interesting and part of what drew me here is in many places that have a lot of people who've been there for a long time, there becomes a certain closed nature of let's do it exactly how we've done it and certainly in terms of public policy that may have been true in this city as a whole. But in terms of what I found within this synagogue, it's been quite the opposite; people are very confident in terms of what Touro Synagogue is and understand that part of what it is is being open to evolution and experimentation in terms of what our worship may look like. Staffing over the years has changed, and they've dealt with that. In terms of how and when we've used the building, people have been open to the fact that this synagogue is part of the community, both Jewishly and generally, and is open to that. I think that's very true. While my northern friends and relatives wouldn't like to hear it, in terms of the hospitality down here and how we have been welcomed to town, it's been wonderful. I think any of the other communities I served would have done well in the crisis. How this community has done well, how it's dealt with each other, how the congregational leadership has trusted the staff, and how the staff has trusted the leadership has truly been wonderful and allowed us to streamline decisions. We've had – as you would in any year even with a crisis – plenty of flubs, plenty of ideas that we floated that didn't go anywhere, plenty of moments where we should have moved faster on something, and probably a few moments where we moved too fast and should have waited and thought a little more before we did something.

RH: Want to give an example of a mistake on film for posterity?

AB: On film? No, no mistakes that are mentionable on film. No, there are probably moments. I think we, as a congregation, did everything we could to reach out to as many of our congregation as we could. We probably were too slow in rolling out real efforts on follow-up [and] on making sure that every single member had heard from us. We used email, web – without a doubt, anyone who was looking for us could have found us. We reached out to lots of people. But we were probably slow in terms of making sure that every single member had heard from us. I can imagine other communities where the fallout of that would have been very angry [for] the people who were not found. We discovered people who were in Houston who didn't realize we were there even though we had a pretty public presence and did a lot to reach out. But again, the experience I've had in this community is that people who we didn't manage to catch up with until sometime into 2006, they understood. They appreciated that we were trying. They either knew we were here, they didn't want to be found, or whatever, but those kinds of things could have been quicker in terms of that.

RH: Tell me about you. You didn't sign up for this. You're staying so far.

AB: I'm here now. What's been amazing – I've never been complimented more in my work. I keep saying I may be just not smart enough to try anything else. You accept a position of leadership and service not knowing what's going to come. Now, this is obviously way outside the ballpark; it's not just I have colleagues who accepted jobs, and the job has then experienced, I don't know, a major scandal or a fire in the building. That's obviously different because this is the whole city. The staff and the lay leadership, especially of this community, have been appreciative. Every day when I'd get people on the phone back in September and October that I'd never met or I had barely met and who I knew – I was looking at the address and knew – that their house must have taken serious water, the very first thing out of their mouth – and it wasn't just being polite – was concern of how could I have moved into the middle of this, what did this mean, how apologetic they were for their city as if they had done it in some way. None of

us know what the future hold, and there have been frustrating days here, obviously, but I felt appreciated. I felt understood. Ruth Kullman and my other lay leaders, but especially Ruth, have continually said that this is not a sprint and it doesn't all have to happen in a day and this is about securing the synagogue for the long term and this is about reminding a synagogue and nurturing a synagogue that is not all about Katrina. New Orleans in the future cannot all be about the response to Katrina. The Jewish community in the city cannot be all about how do we respond to Katrina. The secretary who just retired, Sandy Barnett, I wrote about her when she retired that she, while obviously, the biggest event in her life during her last year in New Orleans after twenty-six years of living here was Katrina, Sandy did not allow that event to shape her year, shown actually by – she had one of the best lines of the year, which is when I finally found her on the phone two or three days after the storm – we kept missing each other, and she told me later she saw my cell phone number come up but she couldn't get me. The very first thing she said to me after hello was, “Rabbi, this never happened with the old rabbi.” She wanted to blame the whole storm on me. That sense of humor, that willingness to work – this community's been wonderful. Someone foolish, thankfully I don't remember who it was, back in November when they heard me say how wonderful the community has been said to me, so if you had known this was going to happen, you're saying you would have come anyway. And without a doubt, I would have come here if someone had told me what was about to happen. Obviously understood that hurricanes could happen, but this wasn't solely about hurricanes in terms of how this happened. This is a community that is proud of itself, that's nurturing of its staff and its members, and there's meaningful work to do here and , and at this moment, my kids' school is secure, they're being taken care of, and plan for the future. I'm nervous like everyone else as we sit here on August 2nd at the beginning of the height of the storm season and wonder what will be.

RH: Are you like so many people on the fence and evaluating every day whether you stay or you go?

AB: Look, what I've said my whole life is, I just muddle through every day regardless.

RH: There are decisions. What would be a tipping point?

AB: I think there are very few people in this city – I was just talking with someone who's been here their whole professional career and who's retired about this exact issue. I think there are very few people – there are some, but there are very few people in this city who are so wed here that they've said there's nothing that could drive me out of here. Clearly, another storm of the magnitude of disaster – and it's about the disaster, not just the magnitude of Katrina, where the city evacuates for a month again – clearly, that's going to have a negative impact on people's decisions whether to stay or not. I don't think I'm any different. Concerns about crime at this moment [and] development of the city, I think, are long term concerns. Moving into an urban area meant I knew it was coming with a lot of crime, and I think a lot of people who lived here said, “Okay, there's crime. But it means you're living in New Orleans as a whole, so it's part of the whole package, good or bad.” The pros and cons lay out differently in this city right now in terms of what that means and what that means. Now, if the question is – I think largely it's the kind of issue there's not much we can do about it. But when we can do something about it, we do. I'm going to a meeting Thursday night of Common Good, which is a post-storm organization of not-for-profits, religious institutions, and even some neighborhood groups trying to deal with the city as a whole that Touro's a founding member of. [The] Thursday night meeting is meeting with some justice people within the community to talk about what's going on here, what can we do, because that's an issue in terms of quality of life in terms of what's going on.

RH: Okay. We'll take another short break.

AB: That's fine.

[END OF TRACK 2]

RH: Rosalind Hinton is interviewing Rabbi Andy Busch, and this is tape three, and this is for Katrina's Jewish Voices. You were in the city a little bit, and we're talking about race issues from the last tape and city issues. Safety is obviously a major concern. You are a person who's walked into – what do you think about the racial politics of this city? Is it shocking?

AB: Well, look, I lived in Philadelphia. There were polarized racial politics there as well. But it played out a little differently and it may be at the moment that the city had more economically going on. As pies get smaller, struggles get different. I'm obviously in the South, not the North, and he legacy of this country plays out a little differently down here.

RH: Can you articulate how and your impression from being here?

AB: Well, I am one who believes intergroup relations, specifically Black and white, play out as the largest American issues of this century. Now, as we're dealing with, I guess, security issues and terrorism, there's an added mix in there. But in terms of what's the nature of the community that we hope to build and where is it that Jewish values and America as a whole have fit so nicely together, because they're not always perfectly in tune with each other. How you deal with past injustices? How you deal with current injustices? How you deal with a society – my children and someday my grandchildren, God willing, are growing up and sharing a society that anyone else's kids are sharing with in this country. And how we care – medical care, education, economic opportunities, housing – housing's the biggest issue in this community right now. But again it's one of those issues we were just sheltered. We're crazy to think that housing wasn't already an issue in this community in terms of access to reasonable housing that was going to enhance economic opportunities, health care, and education is an issue in this city. Now, in that way, I think it's an issue in many cities. The less money you have, the more likely you are to live in substandard housing and all that comes with that. So, my kids have good health care, thank God. We're living in a city right now in the midst of a healthcare

crisis. Those are all Jewish social justice values in terms of what that is. So, how those racial politics issues play out, yeah, they're an issue here. They're an issue here. On that level, I'm still just learning in terms of trying to find my way through. I think so much of that is developed on the basis of relationships over time, and I haven't been here for that, so I've sat in meetings and worked side by side with some people, but it's over time that that happens.

RH: Talking with Flo Schornstein, she said she'd done a study in the '70s, and there were thirteen thousand Jewish –

AB: Yeah, this was a shrinking Jewish community.

RH: So, is this a challenge that your congregation is thinking about?

AB: Yeah.

RH: How does that interface with the larger city? Certainly, it has to have a city, an environment where young people want to come and not leave.

AB: Has to have an environment. Over time, just the reality of where American Jews tend to find their employment and the kinds of things that go on here between the medical institutions and the universities – those are the main two things that have been bringing Jews to this community and holding them here. Despite the fact that, thankfully, there's some money flowing into this community, the question will – and the Jewish community may even be back already in town at a higher percentage than the general community. Moving forward as New Orleans revives itself, the question will be how large that Jewish community will be and what critical mass will be there in terms of its impact on the community and its ability to draw other people in as a center of gravity – of other Jews in. I think it's too early to know. It's too early to know where that is. If our institutions or enough of them survive and the kind of situation they are in, then a Jewish doctor thinking about moving to town could look around and say, “Look, there are

wonderful synagogues here, there's a JCC. The ADL's here. This is a community that isn't just some small-town community in the middle of nowhere." Obviously, the smaller you are, the less likely it is. The Jewish community over the last fifty, years, probably intensified in the last twenty-five, has centered itself in very – in some large metropolises around this country. You look at the research, and Jews today are more centralized in certain places than they've ever been in their history. Just sort of what has happened from a whole range of different processes. It's probably hit the South even harder than it's hit other places. So, all those small towns aren't there anymore and it's how do you maintain yourself large enough to draw people in and have them realize that there's a very live Jewish community here?

RH: If you had to pick one or two issues for the Jewish community and then for the city that you'd like to concentrate on, and not to say that you will, because you don't make the decisions yourself, but that are particular to you, what would those be for Touro, for the larger Jewish community, and then for the city?

AB: I think for Touro, it's the shared aspect of caring within our community and, therefore, being an active presence in the larger community. When I say caring for our community, it's about creating as many opportunities as possible for our members to come together and reinforce community. These goals were my same goals as I came here; they've just probably changed in nature and venue. Probably, in some ways, would be my same goal anywhere: to create as many possibilities so that our people come together and study here, pray here, so that networks are strengthened and recreated, that people are not just members of this congregation but feel touched and part of this congregation, especially in a community where some people have lost their best friends or their brothers or their sisters. How are we part of rebuilding that social network? For some people, all their friends are here, but for most people, it's a little different. How do we reach out to our members of our congregation who are dealing with health issues, aging issues, or loneliness issues and make sure that we as a congregation, not just the

clergy and staff, but we as a congregation are encouraging ourselves to take care of ourselves in that way. Not trying to do social work, not doing the work that Jewish Family Service does, but really on a very communal value basis, how do we do that? In terms of the larger community that New Orleans needs to work on and that I would like to see Touro work on, it's somewhat of the same, but we obviously play a smaller role in terms of it, though I think together with organizations, a pivotal role, and I think a piece of that is we need to be creating hands-on opportunities for our members to be out there volunteering. Probably what makes the most wisdom as a minority group and as an organization caught up in trying to do a number of other goals, where possible, to be piggybacking with other organizations. Much of the cleanup we volunteered with this year has not necessarily been Touro going out and doing it by itself but has been Touro getting involved in Katrina Krewe or a number of other organizations of trying to gather some volunteers on a day and say, “Let’s go be part of something bigger.” We feel part of something bigger as we do it. The impact of whatever we've done is bigger. We, at that moment, have then represented the Jewish community to the larger community so they realize we're part of it. So, I think it's those hands-on pieces, and then it's also as every other hardworking congregation, Jewish or non-Jewish, in this community is doing is being part of the dialog, is being part of sitting together and talking with other leaders of a range of things. My role here as someone who's new especially is establishing those relationships. Thanks to the work of my predecessor David Goldstein and the members of the congregation, I've been able to draw on relationships that were preexisting that I obviously have to build my own piece of, but that are – it's not that I'm starting from scratch in terms of being all alone here, founding something new. I've got a heritage that goes back to 1828 in terms of the role this congregation has played in the community. I think, in both cases, it's both doing, and there's a public piece. We tend to denigrate spin in this age as everything is PR [public relations], but Jewish values talk to us about the importance of presentation and perception being important, not just action. Action's more important, but if we want to build a better community in the city and if I want to build a

congregation that's all the stronger than it's ever been, even if it's smaller, that's about perception of reaching out to people and people's contributions of time and energy being recognized.

RH: Are there any issues that you could see Touro trying to take a leadership role in, like health care, since health care is –?

AB: I think to be involved in a concern with health care, to be involved in terms of the housing needs, I think again –

RH: Safety [inaudible].

AB: Safety. Leadership in a shared sense. I'm not the mayor. We've got a member of the congregation who's on city council, just elected, but the congregation is not city council. I don't think it's a question of any one religious – and we're a religious minority in this city. We're not the Catholic Church in this city. But that said, we are part and parcel of the city. We've got a voice to be heard and together with others and that's why I think often the work of synagogues even in communities – I served in Philadelphia, which had 250,000 Jews. Our best work as a Jewish community in that city of trying to impact the city was done when it was done in cooperation with other religious bodies or other not-for-profits. So, very much, I see us being part of those kinds of explorations and those kinds of efforts to try to make sure the city moves forward in a way that really takes care of the whole city. That's what that Yom Kippur sermon was about. At a moment when some people were foolish enough to think – in discussion – I actually don't think in any real action, but in discussion, was there a danger that this city was going to be built back in some white middle-class way only or the claims that it would be built back like a Disney New Orleans. The fact is the city was going to fill back up, and people were going to build it however they were going to build it. But that the city, as any city in America, just can't accept the status quo. It has to work in terms of taking care of the city as a whole. For those of us who may have more, and not all our members have more – we have

some poor members of the congregation. But the Jewish community, in general, is in a better economic situation, certainly pre-storm, but probably post-storm, and what do we do to make sure that the community, the society we're living in, is one that reflects our values in a healthy way?

RH: Do you have any special services planned for the date of Katrina?

AB: Cantor Warner's singing, and we're participating in the service being held at the Cathedral in the French Quarter as part of an interfaith effort. I'm really one who believes that the work within synagogue life is done day to day, and the life is in the details and the interactions and not in the big events. If I have a failing, it's probably I'm not so good at those. I come out okay in those big events. It's not my interest. We have decided that, actually, what we're going to do is the Friday following whatever that is, the first Friday in September, three or four days later, is that we are going to have a service, more or less our normal service, but one that's particularly going to speak to the fact that it's the first one coming after Katrina. It's the Shabbat services in September we weren't able to have last year, and really allow people some time to reflect and be together that service. We're not having a speaker. Actually, the next week Councilman Arnie Fielkow, our member, is speaking at our Shabbat service the next week to talk about what's going on in New Orleans now and moving forward. But we really chose to take that first service and sort of draw people together on Shabbat to think about it. No need to compete with the larger stuff going on in the city, but also the question of how do we take this overwhelming event that we were all part of that is still ongoing and put it in the right place in our lives in terms of that.

RH: I'm always very curious about how faith comes to action, and I'm wondering about the different frameworks that are coming up that are particularly Jewish that are important – theologically, spiritually.

AB: Well it's a whole question –

RH: Even that you hear others in the community speaking –

AB: Right, no, I think we're talking about – and how we make decisions moving forward for our institutions that are based on Jewish values, that aren't just based on how much money we have, how many people in front of us, but what makes up a Jewish community and what does our engagement need to be with the outside. So, I think that's very true. Sadly, one of the very healthy things that's happened for this community over the summer is our concern for Israel and the situation going on right there. July 2006 has been a very intense time in Israel. It's the first time sitting in services have said, "You know what? We'd rather our tragedy was the worst one at this moment. Let's help give some money for something else. Let's talk about something else." Not that people only want to talk about Katrina because quite the opposite; there are people who were sick of talking about it and just won't talk about it. But the question of how we approach the High Holidays, how do we approach those kinds of things. Without a doubt, it will show up in our worship. Without a doubt, the High Holidays – as I said, this Jewish community, this synagogue, can't be about Katrina. So, many of those same things about repentance and about the environment and health care are probably the same things I would have said, probably with Katrina becoming more of a vehicle to the – and again, it raises the stakes. If we're going to talk about education and housing and health care in a city, those are issues we would have visited anyway. They obviously have a different immediacy for us at the moment. We had a discussion with Eileen Hamilton, our Director of Education, and our religious school committee discussing the opening of religious school in September. Very interesting. When we came back, we restarted religious school on January 8th. We'd called every family, we all came back in, and our first day, we had a guest musician, and we had the teachers deal quietly with Katrina, realizing that there was a whole range of experiences, but that they were probably dealing with it elsewhere, [and] we wanted to get them going. We visited again as a religious school committee, trying to think about what was there. Very clearly, Eileen and the committee – these kids are back to learn. They're back to learn Hebrew, they're back to learn

Jewish values, they're back to learn those kinds of things, and that's the frame that it's about. You can't escape Katrina. [inaudible] people talk about its aftermath; it's the reality of the city right now. Sadly, the crisis that it's caused [is] one that Jewish knowledge and discussion and values speak to already.

RH: What is your vision of the future? Do you have one?

AB: Here at Touro, in New Orleans?

RH: Yes.

AB: Oh, my wife taught me that our theology, to begin with, doesn't have to be consistent from day to day. Ask me about God on any given day, and I may give you a different answer. I think part of the exhaustion of this year for people in New Orleans, and I've been back in and out starting a month after the storm. I've been back since early enough that I've seen lots of other people come back. The exhaustion is not only from dealing with the contractors and the insurance companies and watching people leave; I think the exhaustion is our emotional ups and downs that have been far more intense than most mentally healthy people would normally have and the moments where we're optimistic that things are going to turn around, that this city's going to be a city of substantial size with some economics that cause it to maybe have a healthier reality than it did even – that this congregation will thrive within that with some new people coming in. It's the optimistic days. There are the nervous days where you wonder how long is it going to take for the city to pull itself together. Is the Jewish community potentially a little less patient than some other parts of the community in terms of just the opportunities in front of us? I think Touro Synagogue will continue to thrive within that, but we'll be different. We operate most of our days on the positive side of things. We've gotten resignations over the summer, and one of the things I reminded my staff and leadership about was that we get resignations every summer. You send out new membership bills, and you get resignations. We've gotten far more resignations this year than we ever

would and have obviously had very few new members. But the starting point isn't zero. The status quo in the city can't be an assumption that everything was great beforehand, and now let's move forward. There may be some things like the education system that may be better.

RH: How do you deal with some anger within – I know you've got some – your Cantor's leaving and different – are people angry, or do they feel abandoned?

AB: I think everyone who leaves – A, I don't think anyone who's leaving is leaving easily. A couple people first out the door, but for the most part, the people who chose to stay away or who came back and chose to leave or Cantor Warner, whose discussions were going on a full year ago in terms of thinking of leaving is the reality. Most people understand. Look, our cantors have – he's been here longer than just about any cantor we've ever had, and a great opportunity's fallen at his feet. Some of the people who've left have left because of that already. There is certainly a feeling of abandonment for most people when they hear anyone is leaving – their best friend, their doctor. There are members of the congregation facing very serious health situations whose doctor who nursed them through it every step of the way now lives somewhere else. While there are some quality doctors back in town, that's a very different relationship that gets developed. I think overall, and maybe just going to the good-natured part of this community in terms of what I've experienced is that feeling of abandonment and that anger every moment is tempered by wishing the other person well, sadly understanding why someone's moving on to a new opportunity even if they've made a different decision in terms of that. It goes hand in hand with – I suffered moderate damage to my home. Some of my neighbors suffered more serious damage, and if I lived a quarter of a mile in any of three directions, the damage gets catastrophic. There are very few people I know who suffered catastrophic damage to their homes who would wish it upon anyone else. And as much as there's probably moments of jealousy and moments of sick of hearing someone whine just because their doctor left town when someone else lost everything, I think those

moments are all tempered by what's going on that day and how you deal with the opportunities. I think people ideally wish everyone else well. There's obviously a personal and communal stake in having as many people stay as possible, but a sad awareness of why some people have chosen to go.

RH: Well, you mentioned jokingly one of the biggest changes since the hurricane is that you may have reevaluated your position on gun control, in terms of your neighborhood and liking to have someone there protect it. Have there been other changes for you or if, or if you feel like you could speak for your wife, your family, your marriage since the hurricane? Where you've reprioritized things?

AB: Well, I would actually say, and it came pretty quickly, though it is part of what drew me down here; my family is a high priority. Part of what caused me to leave my last job was I found myself out every night of the week and not for the right things. Let me teach another class [and] I'll go out another night of the week, but that's not what had me out. This is a community that, even in the midst of crisis, has managed to trust each other process-wise that I haven't been out every night of the week at meetings. People were too busy and exhausted, but it's also the nature of this community in terms of that. So, I think the family has taken even a higher priority. That said, it's a year where I was here for two months, and my family wasn't, and that was probably the toughest time of the year, which really for me reinforced that we made the right decision to be together most of that time. Frankly, I think that's a piece. I laugh about it, but I will tell you that cell phone use might have begun to change for me anyway, but I went from someone who before I moved here, my wife and my secretary had my cell phone number to a few days after the storm, my cell phone number was up on the homepage of the synagogue website. All sorts of people, from a sweet little lady in Florida wanting to make a donation to a newspaper reporter to members of the congregation to other rabbis, were calling me. My use of time, when I answer that phone, and where I make phone calls has changed. My wife was talking to the guidance counselor in the school in Houston where my kids

went about a program they had run for the New Orleans kids, and the guidance counselor said to my wife – we later figured out purposely – “The kids are saying their parents are just on the phone all the time nonstop. How do we tell the parents about this?” And Debbie said, “Well, just tell the parents.” And over dinner that night was talking to our kids, and my nine-year-old – then eight-year-old – said, “That was me. I said you were on the phone too much.” So, the question of when we use phone and being aware of that. Priorities. I think even a larger priority about meeting my neighbors. I think even a larger priority on some of those things that really mattered about reaching out to people around in the congregation. I don't think it's caused much of a political change of things. I have tended to be fairly liberal, to begin with. I don't think most of those have changed. Over the past several years, I've preached a number of sermons, especially on the High Holidays, about the environment and global warming, and a whole range of things are clearly part of the puzzle down here. I think that's a piece of it that's all the more clear in terms of that. I've joked a lot over the year about my position on gun control. It hasn't changed, which is that certain people maybe should be allowed to have guns; it's just a question of how easy it is to get it. I have a feeling that this neighbor would have qualified under most rules to have most guns, but a question again of the crime front of the number of guns that are floating around this country. It's crazy. I don't know how you put the genie back in the bottle, but in terms of what that means. I think this has not changed the priorities of our marriage, our political views, or our childrearing. It has just intensified the things that we've held clear within that.

RH: Are there any things you've learned about yourself that you're embarrassed about or even also pleased about?

AB: The pleased is – I truly was raised to wake up every day and do the best job I could, and as much as I may find myself and have chosen to be in roles that involve some aspect of being visionary, I don't have any visions or any delusions of them. I guess, on some level, I am pleased to discover that I, along with the other people serving this

congregation, have been able to draw comfort to the community. The surprise is, I keep recently getting people back and telling me they heard someone else talking about how much they appreciated how optimistic I've been, which means I guess, I know how to somehow honestly say the right things at the right time because as I said there are moments where I'm pessimistic, and there are moments where I'm optimistic. But for the most part, I understand that the role I'm in is not to be Little Mary Sunshine and faking the optimism but giving hope to a community. Again, I think my downfalls are very – are just all the more clear for me. I find myself overwhelmed. The fact that I can be shy to be a career defect.

RH: Especially if you're a big fundraiser.

AB: A big fundraiser but the same level – other people have reminded me that it's their job to raise some of that money, and I think there are many people who find themselves in leadership positions, who when you sit and talk with them, have a certain amount of shyness about them and just step into the role, and I can play my role. Put me in some party, and it's a whole different thing. I understand the role and the skills I have to do that. There are moments where that may have hurt along the way. But again, I've been very touched and truly do not think it's gone to my head but touched with the response of this community that felt like I've had something meaningful to offer through this process.

RH: Is there anything that you took for granted before? You've mentioned this in some ways. One thing's just that you're always going to have a home. Is there anything else that you've –?

AB: I think a lot of this is about – look, some of it is the jokes and the sad irony and reality of living in this city right now, especially during the summer as some of us travel out more and coming back. I used to take it for granted that my garbage would be collected. You don't take that for granted at this moment in this city. I've generally lived in neighborhoods where I've taken for granted that my neighbors would take care of their

houses and their lawns and thankfully for the most part overwhelmingly and especially the houses right next to me people are taking care of those things. But I drive through the city and know the frustration of members of the congregation who assume the people living next to them would not be like them but would be enough like them that they'd care about what their house looked like a year out even with all the difficulties in front of them. For the most part, no, I think to For the most part, no; I think, to some honesty, I'm probably taking for granted the things I already take for granted, like my parents, and I probably could be more polite to them in the midst of this crazy – and be more communicative at least in this crazy process. Our siblings have been amazing. My brother was all set to fly down here before Rita, but it ended up not being Rita. He came in the first weekend Debbie and the kids came back for a weekend with me in November and spent the whole time cleaning out my shed because everything in the shed was destroyed. Nothing meaningful, but we had to clean it out. I was running around working for the most part, and he came in and did what he had to do.

RH: When you went back into your house, were there things you went, “Oh, why didn't I take that?”

AB: Yeah, well I went back in the house with a three-page list from my wife of things I was supposed to bring out. The first time I was back in the house was the day before Rosh Hashanah. Erev Rosh Hashanah, that morning, I drove in to see what was going on. My contractor had been in my house already. In fact, the adjuster had already been even, I think, by that point. So, my window was boarded up. My roof was tarped. The electricity was not on the first day I went in. When I went back the next day, it was back on. What I discovered actually one of those two days is – two days before Rosh Hashanah, three days, the electric to my street had been turned back on, and a house about five houses away across the street blew up and burned to the ground. It's one of the two houses on my street where someone's living in a trailer right now. The fire happened one of those days, and I saw actually in the Times-Picayune that day a New

York City Fire Department truck putting out the fire on the street. You talk about taking things for granted during that time – usually, if your house burns down and even if your neighbors don't know you, they say, “Oh yeah, he works at Touro Synagogue. He's somewhere,” and the police could figure out where to call and find you to tell you your house burned down. These people – who knows where they were when their house burned down? And certainly, there were no neighbors on the block when it happened. The biggest disappointment in terms of what I did in my house – that my wife has forgiven me for – but we had that houseful of guests for Shabbat dinner and for the weekend, and we still haven't figured out where everything in the house goes. My wife's very musical, and I guess two of the guitars were in the dining room high and dry. To make room in the dining room, I placed both those guitars in the den. The den is an old sleeper porch; it goes a little lower than the rest of the house. It is the one room in the house that took any water, and the amount of water it took was less than an inch, and the water didn't stay there, and we had no mold, but the guitars were both –

RH: Ruined?

AB: Not ruined. Damaged thankfully. We took it actually to a member of the congregation; Jimmy Glickman runs the music store on Magazine for repairs, and Jimmy said, “Oh, it's Katrina scars, leave it, you can, it doesn't affect the mood.” But the question of these guitars had been moved right there – and it's actually been this challenge as we prepare for this year. We have no room or significant closet in our house that doesn't have a window just because of the nature of how our house is constructed. That's not so uncommon, but in our last house, we had one bathroom without a window. The question of where we put stuff in our house. We've moved the photographs further up. The guitars are downstairs but, but when we evacuate they'll be going upstairs and trying to figure out where things go.

RH: Do you have a plan for evacuation?

AB: Yeah, I think like many people, it's not a hundred percent full-fold. We would go back to camp again. It was a safe place for our kids. It was a pleasant place to be. We were able to help some other people while we were there, though. It was mostly about us being there. As a whole, the synagogue has a very clear plan at this moment. It's not in my pocket – it's in my PalmPilot – but we have a laminated card with all our significant phone numbers, the phone numbers of the other Jewish professionals in the community. We have an agreement with Beth Israel Congregation in Houston that if [it is] not a simple evacuation but truly a catastrophe again, their staff is ready to answer our calls. Our website is now such that our Executive Director can go in from the outside off those laptops that we now have that we'll all evacuate with. He's able to go in and change the website from the outside so that very quickly it would say, "Call Beth Israel." Our staff would get involved pretty quickly, but we need not as we're trying to feed our family dinner be answering every phone call when we've got fellow staff that's ready to help step in. We've actually said to Beth Israel that if they need help – if they have to evacuate from Houston in the face of catastrophe, we'd be happy to share the same with them. I'm not holding my breath on that one. Somehow, I think San Antonio, Dallas, or Austin would carry that weight. But we've offered that. In terms of financial plans of where things are going, we have not done a survey of every member of the congregation to make sure they have a place to evacuate, but as we've spoken to and visited with people who have specific issues, we have asked the question of "Do you know what you're doing?" kind of thing. We have plans. Our Torahs were all left in place. The chapel ark is not so high. Our sanctuary ark is very high off the ground, especially because there is a basement under it. But we actually have a plan in terms of – debate about what happens to the Torahs. The answer is that they're going to a room without windows on the second floor. They're being covered in tarps just to play it safe.

RH: And did you ultimately take them out?

AB: Actually, Federation, together with the East Baton Rouge Sheriff's Department, was in New Orleans, I guess, two Saturdays after the storm – came in to rescue Torahs and computer servers from the Jewish organizations. Our Torahs were at B'nai Israel and Beth Shalom in Baton Rouge until Rosh Hashanah. The ones at Beth Shalom had to be rescued from Beth Shalom when their roof collapsed but, and we brought one to Houston that we used for the one bar mitzvah. We actually had a bar mitzvah in evacuation. Have a young man who wanted to keep with his date. He had a second bar mitzvah in the spring, but we had a bar mitzvah for him there. We officiated a conversion also, and we used that Torah there. So, they were evacuated. In terms of our concern for our staff, actually, the Torahs are the interesting piece. I told our Executive Director we could not find either one of our custodians, our head of maintenance, or his nephew who works for us, both of whom have worked, whose family has been part of the congregation for a long time as employees. It took us two weeks to find them, actually. We knew that one of them was having a baby two days after the storm. They are the only members of the staff who didn't get direct deposit and so hadn't been paid twice. We really had a plan of getting them money as quickly as possible. I told Mark, the Executive Director, that if he had to choose between helping our staff members or saving the Torahs, the staff members came first, and he said, “How can you say that?” I said, “It's easy. You're not going to possibly face that decision.” The day he was actually in the sanctuary getting the Torahs, his cell phone went off, and it was actually Ulysses our custodian finally calling him. So, part of our evacuation plan is that all our staff members need to tell us where they're going in terms of that. He was okay. Financially, he was okay.

RH: Where was he?

AB: North of Houston. Anthony was outside of Baton Rouge or in Baton Rouge. They were both okay. Ulysses’ baby was born two days after the storm in a small town north of Houston instead of here in New Orleans like it was supposed to be. But we have a very clear plan laid out this year. Hopefully, we won't need it.

RH: I don't even need to ask this question in one way because I can tell you're very proud of your family. Is there anything you're proudest of?

AB: Well, they haven't kicked me out yet. That's good. I think specifically –though my sons will be mad at me for this – my daughter, who is eleven [and] was ten during the worst of this and was capable of telling Debbie to tell me to stop crying somewhere in the middle of Oklahoma as we worked our way to Houston. It was really more good news after good news as we found people and figured out what was going on. But she really sort of, in an old immigrant fashion, as I was pulled a million directions, and we settled into an apartment in Houston, really stepped up as the oldest daughter in the house. Only daughter. And really just has been in some ways absolutely as immature as a ten-year-old should be but at the same time, has really been very mature and learning and dealing [with] this. As people come into town – Johanna really only lived here four, five weeks before the storm because of camp – has been very loyal about making sure that every friend or visitor that comes in either just to see us or to volunteer – and a lot of our friends from across the country have been here volunteering over the year – she has wanted to make sure that they all have to have the tour. Even if some family member said, “Oh, I don't need to go see that,” she says, “You know what? You need to go see that. You need to go home and talk to your senator.” She's been very proud and gives a cute little detailed tour and gets most of it right, frankly.

RH: Is there anything else you would like to add?

AB: That covers much of it, including some of the best lines that become stock lines over the year. The people of this community have been wonderful. We are all burdened with a tremendous amount of uncertainty and yet a real reinforced sense of the worth of the Jewish community and of the importance of general society, and all of that sort of sounds like pat easy words to say in terms of the right things, but I think in many ways a lot of the mishegoss of life is sort of pushed to the side – comes back only in the way that's healthy

and the ability to really put things in perspective. As I said, I don't think it's switched my prioritization in life; it's just intensified knowing what matters and what washes off.

RH: It seems like we might have some lessons to teach the nation.

AB: I think there may be some things there in terms of how that plays out in political discussion and decision-making. An old friend of mine whose father was very sick [who] I was complaining to once years ago about something that I suddenly realized was ridiculous given the fact that his father was really sick. He said the old lesson that I learned from him at that moment, which is when you stub your toe, you stub your toe. So, as individuals deal with mishegoss, we've got to deal with that and recognize that's part of human life. A rabbi taught me once that everyone has a right to gripe. So, there's some truth to that. But I think also in terms of what it means to be America, what it means to be Jewish, what it means to be part of a society I think are very real lessons.

RH: You're proud of the Jewish community and how they've responded?

AB: I'm very proud of the Jewish community, all the branches of the community, and how we've done. I've actually had a couple of ministers back in the fall [say] that to me, in terms of how we shared information, how others far more than me stepped up to the plate to make sure our own community was served, [and] how both the United Jewish Community and truly the Union for Reform Judaism stepped up. The Jacob's Ladder program we ran out of Jacobs Camp in Utica provided tons of materials to communities that were being ignored by some of the larger relief efforts and were overall not Jewish in terms of that. The efforts we're doing now in the community to make sure that we're part of rebuilding housing and taking care of our own. I don't think we're doing anything unique, and every now and then, I see a project that some church is running, and I think to myself, "Oh wait, we should have thought of doing that." But at the same, this community has pulled together and done some tremendous work in terms of taking care of its own and doing it in a way that is not working anyone to death but rather is truly

being menschlichkeit and respecting the members of the community. Just yesterday, I was at a planning session at the Jewish Federation with representatives of all the agencies and synagogues talking about what can we do at this moment in terms of providing some stress reduction programs for our staff, recognizing that we've got some new employees, that we've got old employees, that we've got members who lost everything and members who lost nothing except the context of their whole city and recognizing that we need to be taking care of those who work for us as well. I think that is something that the entire Jewish community can be proud of.

RH: I think we can wrap it up. I want to thank you very much.

AB: Thank you very much for the opportunity. Thank you.

RH: [inaudible] member of Touro [inaudible]?

AB: We met Father's Day. I met her at a Father's day dinner.

RH: I've done a lot of political work with her, too. She's also been – it seems like we've been getting the ones that have been out in the community more and the leaders because those are the most obvious that we just started.

AB: The obvious ones [inaudible]

RH: Allan Bissinger's going to be tomorrow night.

AB: That's good to get the story of someone who should have evacuated and didn't.

RH: [laughter] He said, "Well, I really don't have a place for us to interview because I'm still living in one room." I said, "Well I would like to have it there just so people could see what it was like."

AB: It would make sense. You need some of those interviews.

RH: Except that it would mean his wife would have to sit somewhere else for two hours, and I really don't want to –

[END OF INTERVIEW