Edward Cohn Transcript

ROSALIND HINTON: This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Rabbi Edward Cohn at Temple Sinai in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is Wednesday, the 25th of July 2007. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina's Jewish Voices project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Rabbi Cohn, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

EDWARD COHN: Yes, indeed.

RH: So, I'm going to ask you to just state when you were born, a little about your general and Jewish education, and how you came to New Orleans.

EC: Sure. I was born in September 1948, and I grew up in a little town outside of Baltimore, Maryland, called Glen Burnie, about fourteen miles from downtown Baltimore. We were the only Jewish family in this little community where my grandfather settled in about 1905 when he came from Hamburg, Germany. Ours was an intermarried family in that my mother was the daughter of an Orthodox Rabbi, and my father grew up in a classical Reform environment. So, we compromised and pretty much did it my mother's way. Usually makes for a happy home life.

RH: So, how did you end up coming into the New Orleans area, and why Temple Sinai?

EC: [In] 1979, we were in Macon, Georgia. It was my first solo congregation after an assistantship in Atlanta.

RH: When you say “we,” tell me –

EC: My wife and I. My wife Andrea and I, and at that time, we had one baby girl, and now we have two daughters, one son-in-law, and soon to be a second son-in-law, and a first grandchild on the way. So, Andrea and I came over to New Orleans from Macon in order to do a wedding for one of our congregants. I had heard of Temple Sinai and knew of its wonderful history within the Reform movement and the city of New Orleans. One of the relatives was kind enough to bring me over here. I stood on the bimah, looked out, and said to my wife, “If we ever get an opportunity to come back here, I'd love to be the rabbi of this congregation.” In 1987, our opportunity presented itself, and the congregation had been looking for a full year for a successor to their retired rabbi. And after we met, within two weeks, we had a contract and an agreement.

RH: Explain to me Temple Sinai's mission, how it is a Reform community, what type of Reform community it is.

EC: Well, this congregation was established as the first Reform congregation of the Crescent City. They had wanted to establish a Reform temple prior to the Civil War. With the outbreak of the war, they realized they had to wait. Shortly after the war concluded, they began the process of building a temple.

RH: Just a second. I'm so sorry. Where is it? [Telephone rings.] … Let's go back on here. I apologize for that.

EC: No problem.

RH: So after the Civil War.

EC: So they quickly succeeded in bringing back a rabbi. His name was Rabbi James K. Gutheim, who had been here and served several congregations prior to the war. But the deal was that he would come back from his position at Temple Emanu-El in New York and, after a temple had been erected, would serve as the Temple's first rabbi. Rabbi Gutheim was a rare bird in those days because he was an English-speaking, ordained-in-

Germany Rabbi. He helped to establish this first Reform congregation. It has continued to be a very liberal congregation theologically, liturgically. It has had classical Reform roots, though moving now toward the mainstream of Reform Judaism. It has always had as its purpose being a telling presence in the life of the larger community as well as being a leader within the Jewish community. For instance, our rabbis have always taken very active roles in the civic and political life of New Orleans. Rabbi Feibelman, who served our congregation as rabbi and rabbi emeritus for forty-four years, was a mover in the efforts toward desegregation here and, in fact, invited Ralph Bunche, the Nobel Peace Prize winner, to deliver the first address to an integrated public audience in the sanctuary of Temple Sinai. That was in 1949.

RH: Wow, that is quite a –

EC: Quite something.

RH: How do you see then the Temple today, how it's situated across racial and religious lines?

EC: Well, we try to be a good neighbor. We are active in working in many different organizations, clergy and lay, to be a force for bringing people together. The Human Relations Commission of the city meets in the library of Temple Sinai, and we have various organizations, Jewish and non-Jewish, that convoke here for services, public meetings, and classes. We host lectures.

RH: Is there something distinctive about the Jewish community since you've had some experience with other communities here in New Orleans?

EC: Distinctive. New Orleans is distinctive. Everybody says that we're unique. Everybody feels they live in a unique city. Well, perhaps. But New Orleans truly is unique. It has all of its ethnicity and its many cultures that have formed this gumbo. There are so many expressions that cross communities – Black and white, Christian and

Jewish, gay and straight. It is an open, truly, I think, liberal community in many ways, which is not to say that we don't have our own problems with racism and with other unfortunate realities that are always a part of human nature. New Orleans is interesting and it's fascinating. One is never bored for better or for worse when you live in this city.

RH: Does the Jewish community –? Does it reflect that same kind of gumbo diversity that you're talking about? Where do you see its place in this?

EC: Well, I think in all of America, the New Orleans Jewish community, in many ways, is probably one of the most Reform. It's always been led by – at least since the 19th century – by the Reform congregations, to which the majority of the Jewish community has affiliated, belonged, and led. Reform Judaism has taken off here from the start, and we are definitely, I think, on the liberal-leaning edge of our movement nationally so that kashrut, various features that are taken for granted of Jewish ethnicity in the north and in Florida and other places where there are large Jewish communities, they just are not prominent here in our community. This is not a town that you would want to go to for a good corned beef sandwich or a good bagel. But if you want a fantastic barbecued shrimp po' boy, this is the place where you would go. So this is not the place where a great number of Orthodox observant Jews will want to settle, most likely.

RH: Well, that's a good lead-in to Katrina and then the changes in the community. So, tell me personally about when you became aware of Katrina and what your family does for –

EC: Well, Katrina came a year after Ivan. The previous High Holy Days, we had canceled the Rosh Hashanah evening service and held our Rosh Hashanah morning service in our chapel, which seats a hundred and fifty. There were about seventy-five people from four or five different congregations present. That turned out to be a dress rehearsal for what was to come about a year later. There was no surprise about the ferocity of Katrina. Our Jewish weathermen, there are two in our community, alerted us

expertly by television and radio to the severity of this storm, and many people quickly identified this one as the one that we have always feared. And so, on the Friday before the storm hit, I made reservations for my wife and me and our dog and for our temple president, her brother, and her mother, and their dog to find safe refuge in Jackson, Mississippi. So, bright and early on Sunday morning, long before the sun rose, we were on the highway with everyone else headed toward Jackson, and it was in Jackson where we met Katrina. It was surprisingly fierce even in Jackson. Watching television, we thought – a little black-and-white battery-operated, because the electricity had gone out in Jackson too – we thought that we have – and I'm sure you've heard this – that we had missed the worst, and then it was only later that we heard about the collapse of the levees and the misery that is well documented here. But we really were despairing, wondering what had become of our home and what had become of our magnificent Temple. And no one knew. You just couldn't tell for a while. But there were people who stayed in the city, who, for one reason or another, didn't leave, and they quickly got word to us that, “Guess what? The area around the Temple was not severely hit. There was no flooding, and they had picked up the lantern off the front of the Temple, but the beautiful windows that were created from German glass and the Tiffany lanterns and ner tamid that had been installed when the Temple was dedicated in 1927 that all of that was intact. So we were relieved collectively. Institutionally, we knew we weren't – Temple Sinai, at least – facing catastrophe. Not so for so many of our temple members and for their relatives. Individually, the scale of destruction and loss and displacement and trauma will really be felt, I'm sure, for the rest of our lives. The storm, almost two years later, still rages in many people's nightmares and affects their personal lives, their dreams, and their sense of tranquility or disease profoundly.

RH: How in your exodus – and you're reminding me here of the comfort that you gave Sandy Levy, too, and the dogs – and how hard it was for you to part. Could you explain what your decisions were when you realized you wanted to come into the city, what you did, how you tried to get in touch with your congregation?

EC: Well, the first thing was to get in touch with dear ones. They wanted to know, “Where are you going to stay? You cannot stay in Jackson, Mississippi.” And so our daughters gave us the ultimatum: you're going to either come to be with one in Boston or the other in Atlanta. Atlanta had been home for us. So, we went to Atlanta. We had conference calls with members of our congregation. We emailed members of the congregation. The Jewish Federation clearinghouse of numbers and emails and all was very helpful because they would put up messages constantly as people were located, and we could be assured that of the most vulnerable ones, they had been saved. Little did we know that there were individuals who had enormous dramas that were taking place in the hospitals of this community – people who had been sick, who had had operations, and they were so poorly timed as it turned out that they needed to be evacuated by private airplane to other locations and hospitals and rest homes. My own mother, ninety-three years old, was in the Poydras Home, and I had been assured that they had taken her by bus to Baton Rouge, where she was safe and secure, and she was there prior to the storm.

RH: Prior to the storm.

EC: Prior to the storm.

RH: The Poydras Home evacuated.

EC: The Poydras Home was sterling in its evacuation. Every person was secure, had their medical records with them, and was well cared for in the nursing home in Baton Rouge. Ironically, we decided that we would hold High Holy Day services in Baton Rouge at Temple B'nai Israel. That High Holy Day was without their rabbi and needed a rabbi. So, instead of a rabbi, they got a rabbi and a cantor. And so Cantor Colman and I went there, and we had over two hundred Temple Sinai families nearby. So, we had double services, early and late services, at Baton Rouge, and I was able to visit my mother. I flew there from where we had taken an apartment in Atlanta.

RH: So you flew into Baton Rouge for the High Holy Days.

EC: Yes. Now, it should be mentioned that for Kol Nidre, Temple Sinai had a service in our sanctuary conducted by our cantor. He had always kidded me, “What would you think, Rabbi, of me delivering the sermon on Kol Nidre?” I said, “Never in a million years until hell freezes over would I do that because I pride the privilege of preaching on those occasions.” Little did I ever know that while I gave the sermon in Baton Rouge, he was conducting services for members of many congregations here in New Orleans in our sanctuary.

RH: What do you do for a service after such a traumatic event? What goes through your mind in planning something?

EC: I had written a good deal of my sermons because I work on them all summer long. They were all on a theme, which I've forgotten now. But they became renamed and reconfigured obviously around the title “After the Storm.” And I tried to speak to people's pain, to their loss of faith. Many people took the destruction of Katrina and its ruination of their security, their private lives, their home, and their accumulated hard-earned stuff that we predicate so much of our sense of well-being upon; they took that as a personal affront. “Why did God do that to me?” And so we talked about that. They needed to hear that several times throughout, at least the first year after the storm, from many different theological angles. That was an important issue.

RH: So, how do you understand that? How do you understand God in the midst of a storm like that?

EC: God in the midst of a storm is a refuge and a rock. The storm is the product of Mother Nature, not the creator God. The storm is the result of a couple of degrees of water that's warmer way down in the Gulf, a couple of degrees that results in a perfect storm as we experienced. So, God is totally absent as God was with the Holocaust. The

Holocaust was a human disaster brought about by human hands and human hate. The storm was a natural disaster, and the role for God was to enhearten and encourage and strengthen humans to act as humans and to be loving and kind to one another, and to increase their concern for one another in a time of incredible stress and not insignificant torment.

RH: So, God ends up being present in human interaction and how they –

EC: To help us and to be the Friend, capital F, that allows us to choose the best that is within us and that beckons us to care about one another and to selflessly protect one another. People were heroic, and I might add, continue to be heroic, in their reactions to the storm and to the disaster. There was a small, small percentage of people that took advantage at a time when we were largely vulnerable. By and large, people gave of themselves and looked out for others in a way that I only wish our leadership had. I heard the story of the redwood trees. The redwood trees of California are, of course, the tallest trees we know. But they have very, very, very shallow root systems. When these huge Pacific storms come on shore, the question has always been asked: how do the redwood trees keep themselves from falling over? The answer is that under the ground, the root systems of one tree intertwine with the others, and they hold one another up. And that's exactly what the people of this region have done and continue to do. They hold one another up with remarkable tenacity, and I will confess unexpected grace, unanticipated grace.

RH: Why do you say you confess?

EC: I would have personally not given sufficient credit or anticipated the kind of heroism and patience that the people of this region have displayed. Had I lost and suffered so long as so many people have and continue to, I don't think I would, knowing myself, have been as patient as many of our fellow citizens here have been.

RH: What were the losses for your congregation? Did you lose any lives in your congregation?

EC: We did not lose anyone whose death was directly attributed to the storm. There wasn't, I don't believe anyone, possibly one I heard of in the Jewish community, who did die as a direct consequence of the storm. But we lost in our congregation, I guess, four or five older citizens, members, who were just undone by it. Couldn't handle it and who came back in urns and were buried later. Yeah, it was a great tragedy, great tragedy.

RH: Do you know how many people suffered – lost their homes – in the congregation?

EC: Oh, goodness, I couldn't even guess. Some people are only getting back in their homes now.

RH: How did you fare with the storm?

EC: We were lucky because we live just a few blocks from the Temple. And we had to get rid of a very smelly refrigerator, we had to replace our kitchen, and so we had several months where we didn't do much cooking. We had a little tiny dorm refrigerator and a microwave and that was it. But we have nothing to complain about. There's so many people whose homes and everything in them was lost.

RH: Can you relay to me some of the stories of heroism that you personally have seen and how you define heroism?

EC: Well, there are different types of heroism. One of them is the kind of heroism where people went by boat to rescue people off of roofs and to pull them out of attics. We had members of the Jewish community that were quick to do that and who arranged for private airplanes. I was a part incidentally – this has nothing to do with heroism, but I was a part of an armed convoy that came from Baton Rouge down to New Orleans on the Friday following the storm, and we checked on the condition of the synagogues here

uptown and in Metairie. I collected some of the Torahs of our congregation and brought them with me to Baton Rouge, where we had them in the ark during the High Holy Day services. We went to the Jewish Community Center, to Touro Synagogue, and to Shir Chadash, where we couldn't get in because someone didn't have the key, but it looked like it was terrible damage there. We didn't go to Gates of Prayer because we knew there had been extensive damage there. We went to the Jewish Community Center in Metairie, and of course, we knew the terrible fate of our sister congregation, Beth Israel, out at the lakefront and on Canal.

RH: When you came in, were you afraid for your life?

EC: Well, I was never afraid. I knew that we had protection. There were people with machine guns. And no one disturbed us. We were alerted that we had very few minutes inside every one of the places, not even fifteen minutes inside this building. Of course, all the lights were out. It was dark, it was hot, and you had to use flashlights to find one thing and another. One thing, one privilege I was given that no one else was, and that was while the group was at one of the synagogues, I was taken to our home in order to get the invitations to our daughter's wedding that had all been addressed and stamped, and the dress my wife was to wear in our daughter's wedding. Then, of course, we had to have something printed to put into each of those invitations – we did it in Atlanta – to let people know that the wedding had been moved to Boston, where our daughter and son-in-law live. But I was given – what was it? – twelve minutes, and if I hadn't been out in twelve minutes, they were going to leave me. You wouldn't want to be left in New Orleans at that point when the sun was getting ready to go down. So I went through the house and blindly – you've never seen a husband get – because my wife said I could use some other clothes once you get the wedding dress. I got two parts of more three-piece outfits than you've ever seen in your life. But it was dark in there; that's all I can tell you. But I got the invitations to the wedding, and I got the wedding dress, so it was a success.

RH: Well, tell me about this wedding, too, that you totally [inaudible]? What happened?

EC: Well, the wedding was held at Temple –

RH: When was it supposed to be held?

EC: November 5th, and it was to be here, and then the reception at the Windsor Court. Of course, the Windsor Court was closed, and there wasn't any way in November of having – all of our friends were gone anyway. So we had the wedding surrounded by many, many of our children's friends because they were all doctors in residency programs and able to attend the wedding, whereas they probably wouldn't have been here, and then very few of our friends were able to be there. The cantor flew in, and our President Sandy Levy and her children all came. Of course, some relatives came from other parts of the country. But the congregation in Boston was so kind to us.

RH: Where did you have it in Boston?

EC: We had it at Temple Ohabei Shalom on Beacon Street in Boston and the reception at the Copley Square Hotel. And they bent over backward, all these people, to be hospitable, to help us at the last minute. We planned a wedding in six weeks that had already been planned for eight months. It just shows in six weeks, you can do it with a lot of goodwill and a lot of help from people whom we didn’t know and who will probably never see us again.

RH: Can you describe –? How long were you away? Let me ask that first.

EC: We were away from –

RH: New Orleans.

EC: – August when the storm hit, and we came back on the 12th of November. From the 12th of November, we had services every week here at Temple Sinai.

RH: While you were away, did you engage with an Atlanta congregation?

EC: Well, I went and, of course, attended services in Atlanta congregations, but I didn't conduct services there other than one night we had a special service; there were very few people that came because it wasn't well advertised at the Temple in Atlanta. Of course, there was a Jewish Community Center New Orleans night where leaders of our Federation and community leaders came to greet and give information to evacuees who had settled in Atlanta.

RH: Were there a number of evacuees?

EC: Oh, yeah, tremendous number. Unfortunately, a good number of them who haven't come back, who stayed in Atlanta. Yeah.

RH: Can you tell me, in your experience away, some of the kindnesses that struck you?

EC: There were so many people who, when they would see your driver's license, or you would write your home address, would immediately sympathize and ask, “How did you do? Are you okay?” Many, many kindnesses. If you needed to see a doctor, doctors would make a special appointment and room for you. You didn't have medical records, but people would extend every courtesy that you can think of. Fortunately, we weren't in a situation where we didn't have funds or that we needed anything extraordinary from anyone. We rented an apartment and we paid for our apartment. We found a place that would take our dog, and we lived, I must say, very nicely and comfortably in Buckhead, which isn't a bad place to be under any circumstances. I will say that things like opening a bank account – how do you get your money from the bank that's here that isn't open? I remember that was a big to-do, and the people were very nice to us, and they broke policies, they relaxed policies, I guess I should say, in order to accommodate us and to make sure that we had a bank account because by that time we were arranging for a wedding in yet another city. So, that needed to be done.

RH: Yeah, that's a challenge.

EC: Oh, sure, yeah, and communication, of course, was a major need.

RH: Who were some of the people that you felt a need to stay in touch with?

EC: Well, our temple leadership number one, and we kept in touch; we spoke every day. We had a conference call where we were able to sound the shofar at Rosh Hashanah from Baton Rouge for anybody, any member of Temple Sinai that listened. I'm trying to think of other things, but mostly communication with people. Emails, constant emails. There were nights when I was so exhausted because I really learned to use a computer during that time. I never have been computer-savvy, but I learned at that point things that I'd never imagined I'd have to do.

RH: What were some of the decision-making processes and some of the things that you and your temple leadership had to deal with?

EC: Insurance, insurance claims, adjusters.

RH: Very practical.

EC: Oh, we had to make sure, and we did, that the employees of our congregation received regular paychecks. To find out where they were. Many of them worked from their location, typed sermons for the High Holy Days, and FedExed them. Did bookkeeping [and] helped us round up records. We were in touch with people who were ill and the ones that were out of – in other states, in hospitals, and in nursing homes. We had to do a lot of planning in terms of, well, when we get back to the Temple, what will we do for this or that? Mind you, congregations from all over the country emptied their Judaica shops and sent us the contents. We received boxes and boxes of seder plates, Hanukkah menorahs, Shabbos candlesticks, kiddush cups, mezuzahs, you name it, and people were so hungry for them.

RH: Why do you think that is?

EC: They lost it. They lost those things that were so central to their religious identification, and they wanted to replace them as quickly as possible. After all, Hanukkah wasn't so far away. Very few people had a Hanukkah menorah. We had a Thanksgiving dinner here at the Temple, which we'd never had before, but people didn't have kitchens. They couldn't cook, and there were so few restaurants. The restaurants that were there were closed on the holiday because they couldn't get help. When you went to a restaurant, often you were served with plastic knives, forks and spoons, and paper plates. It was a whole different experience.

RH: How many people came to the –?

EC: We had a couple hundred.

RH: Really?

EC: Sure. We were lucky. We were able to find – Langenstein's Market, a few blocks away, cooked oven-roasted turkeys and made dressing, and people were strengthened by just being with one another. Shock and trauma continued. People were noticeably different. Different how? Different in their manner, different in their appearance. Their skin color was sallow. They looked like people who were mourners. The grief had changed their appearance. The old people, as I mentioned, were especially hit, and those who had been independent, driven their own cars [and] lived by themselves didn't any longer. They were in nursing homes. They were with help at home. Various levels of care. And many of them died. Many of them just curled up and died. It was very, very difficult. Also, we haven't mentioned all the thousands of dollars in Target cards and – what's it called? – home improvement, home something.

RH: Home Depot.

EC: Home Depot, yeah. One Shabbat, I took a huge stack of them that were rubber banded together, put them out on a table, and said at the benediction, “Here I'm putting these out. Those of you who need them know who you are, and those of you who don't, who came through unscathed, you know that this isn't for you, and we're going to end the service, and we're going to leave, and those who need to stay and claim some of these cards, you help yourselves.” That's exactly what happened. Many people went out, didn't come back in there, and other people went out and then did come back to get some of those cards. One fellow – I'll never ever forget this – one little boy when I gave his father the Target card – this was very early on, and they were marked on them ten dollars, twenty dollars, twenty-five dollars, fifty dollars, a hundred dollars; they were all different values. I gave his dad these cards, and people that had never ever gotten anything or asked for anything, that had tears in their eyes, and you could tell they would rather take a beating than have to do this, and the little boy, when his father got the cards, he said to his father, “Daddy, now I'll be able to get some long pants,” He was wearing these little gym shorts, flimsy, plasticky-looking gym shorts. That's all he had. His legs were cold in the air conditioning, and so really was something.

RH: The way you describe the benediction, it seems like dignity was a central feature of what you were trying to maintain for people who had lost everything. Can you tell me how you dealt with people who didn't want to take and didn't – who had been used to giving, suddenly had to –?

EC: Sure. Well, we sat them down, and we talked with them, and they were many of them young couples who had lived in a quarter-million to a half-a-million-dollar home in Lakewood South and whose children went to private schools and who had a Volvo, and I don't know, whatever other kind of nice car, two cars, and who lost it all. Ten feet, twelve feet of water in your house. They found it very difficult. Older people, who thought they were long past that stage in their life when they would ever have to ask anybody for anything, would often disagree with one another. There was a lot of domestic tension.

People were tired. They were tired of questions and uncertainty. It all began as the storm was approaching and it continued for at least a year of uncertainty and questions. It began with, “Shall we go or shall we stay? And if we go, where shall we go? And when we go, what should we take? And are you staying where we have gone to or are you going to go on yet? When should we go back?” And then it just – with the insurance issues and the issue of rebuilding, selling versus reinvesting, all the tremendous number of questions – and mind you, of course, none of the authorities that you would think to depend upon for definitive answers were forthcoming with any help. The city government, the state, the national government – they would give you six answers to a single question in the course of a day. Departments, if they answered the phone, would be conflicting in their advice. So, it was a very tough time for people. Of course, if you were in a relationship that was troubled at the start, you had a bad situation. People needed to stick together.

RH: Did you notice a rise in the Jewish community in domestic violence or anything like that?

EC: I'm not in a position to know that. I can tell you that our Jewish Family Service deserves a gold medal. They are such an extraordinary institution on an average day, but in this situation, they were just magnificent. I can't think of an agency of the Jewish community that didn't better their best. That includes every synagogue and every rabbi and cantor and educator and the officers of the synagogues. There was a cooperative, collaborative spirit that was obtained across all Jewish denominational lines. And it continues to this moment.

RH: For you personally, what has the Jewish community meant to you just being in this experience?

EC: Well, it means the same as it always has meant. It's really my life. I decided to be a rabbi when I was twelve years old, and I wanted to serve. I really believe that the first

eighteen years of my rabbinate here were, in a weird, mystical way, nothing but preparation for what I needed to be able to do when this disaster came. I knew my people, and they knew me, and we were able to be there for one another. And our temple leadership was extraordinary. The vision and the expertise that Sandy Levy brought to the whole community as well as to her own congregation, Temple Sinai, someday will be written down by historians and noted because she had all the – what is it? – acumen. She had the facts. She had the technique. She knew from a long career in fundraising and in foundations – what is that? Whatever that's called.

RH: Development.

EC: Development. She knew where the money was. She knew exactly how to press the buttons, address the envelopes, send the emails, and get the people on the phones that across the country would come to our aid. The Union for Reform Judaism – we can never thank them enough for the hundreds of thousands of dollars that the million Reform Jews in this country have sent through the Save the Synagogues. The United Jewish Federations people – the same thing. With our various agencies and with the synagogues, they didn't just send checks; they came personally, and they sent groups that worked in our community. They have called us, and they have checked on how do you feel, how are you doing. The caring has been really the proof of the value of faith in action. These agencies are more than fancy stationery. The American Jewish community proved itself and passed the test in this historic incident. I don't think my Christian colleagues are quick to say the same about the Episcopalians, the Baptists, the Presbyterians, or the Lutherans. They did not feel the loving, caring sunshine of their denominations and the generosity we have been blessed to feel.

RH: Do you have an understanding of why that might be?

EC: I think that's what Jews have always done. We have always had – because we haven't had anyone else to fall back on, we've always had caring societies that have,

whether it's been free burials, bikkur cholim, preparation of the dead, visiting the sick – all these – we've made sure that there was a wedding gown for every bride that needed one. We have provided the money that kidnappers and pirates have demanded for Jews that were captured on the high seas that Jewish communities knew they'd never see the faces of those people, but they came up with the ransom money. So, we have thousands of years of tradition of taking care of one another, and that slogan “we are one” is really the truth. We understand it. And we've lived it. And we're the proof of it right here.

RH: I think we'll take a break now and change the tape because this is a good place to stop. [RECORDING PAUSED] Okay. This is tape two of Rabbi Cohn of Katrina's Jewish Voices. I wanted to ask you if there were any teachings or concepts that either came to mind for you through this past couple of years or that you felt were particularly important to share with your community.

EC: Well, I think the basic Jewish values of tikkun olam, of working to help to repair the brokenness of our world. In this case, we have to look a little closer than we're used to looking. Respect for the aged, maintaining quality and dignity, and a high level of concern for our aged and for our sick are certainly something that's important. Also, I'll tell you the value of celebration. Never submitting to despair. Never allow yourself to despair. Always have confidence. This, too, shall pass. There's going to be a future. We're going to go on. Now the future of the Jewish community will be a very different one. Our community is going to be different. We're not going to be the same community we were before the storm. We're going to be smaller. I don't believe that for all the efforts the Federation and others are going to – I don't believe it's going to enlist that many new people to come to New Orleans, not right away anyway. So, congregations are going to be smaller. Every congregation's smaller than it was before the storm. Funding is going to be tough. We're going to have to collaborate in ways that – and not duplicate in ways that we've avoided out of a sense of institutional pride. But we can't

afford that anymore. There's certain things that we will continue to do separately, but there's certain areas that we can jointly and for our benefit actually join together in, such as certain kinds of educational programs. I think that, in some ways, New Orleans may come to be a model for how the American Jewish community is going to reorganize itself, given our shrinking numbers and our demographic realities.

RH: Really. You're the first person to say that.

EC: We could well be cited as a paradigm, if you will, for just what's going to happen by the mid-century, if not earlier, in virtually all of the American Jewish community.

RH: Do you see now – what's some of the foreshadowings of that that you see?

EC: Well, again, smaller numbers, greater collaboration, communitywide schooling, a lot more sharing between Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox. Dare I use the M-word, merger? There will be mergers of congregations in all of America within the next fifteen to twenty years because membership is declining and costs are rising.

RH: Do you see in New Orleans particular challenges around the infrastructure, just the size of the infrastructure and trying to maintain the infrastructure?

EC: Are we talking Jewish infrastructure?

RH: Jewish infrastructure.

EC: Oh, sure. We're sitting now in the midst of a three million renovation of our congregation. The money was raised prior to the hurricane. We are gratified that ninety-five percent of that money that's pledged is still good. Those pledges are being paid. It could have been otherwise. It really could have been. But maintaining synagogues of this size and the Jewish Community – two Jewish Community Centers – for a community that is now one-third smaller than it was before the storm that's not an easy task.

Endowments are going to be crucial. If a synagogue or institution has no endowment now, well, the chances of their surviving long into the 21st century, I think, are slim. If you have an endowment now, you better get busy and increase it. There are only a certain number of people in any community that are going to have the wherewithal to make endowment bequests. And you better reach out to them before – well, while they're on this side of the grass.

RH: Do you ever see Touro and Temple Sinai combining?

EC: I think it'd be easier to ask if I think the Messiah is going to come tomorrow, and probably safer. During my rabbinate, and I'm going on fifty-nine years of age as we speak, I expect that there'll be no merger in my rabbinate. What happens down the road? I'm not a prophet or the son of a prophet, so I can't tell. But we'll have to wait and see.

RH: What are some of the strengths you'd like to see preserved in the Jewish community?

EC: Well, the strengths that we've come to understand that we enjoy. Our pride in our traditions and our uniqueness as I said earlier. Our devotion to our institutions and our synagogues. The backgrounds that many people have, not everybody, but many of them, as having come from families that settled on bayous and along the river. I buried a lady not long ago who was a hundred and three years old and who lived into the 21st century but who remarked and delighted in telling stories of how, born on a plantation, she waited for the steamboat to come to take her and her family down here to New Orleans so that they could have a meal at Galatoire's and her father could play cards late into the night with his cronies. So, she grew up in a 19th-century background and lived to use a computer in the 21st. So, there are many people who trace their roots to tiny little towns where there are no longer Jews, but there are Jewish cemeteries in some of them. That's a heritage that I don't want us to lose.

RH: How big is your congregation now?

EC: We're about 750 families. We were 825 before the storm. Now, that doesn't sound like a very significant loss. But it hasn't all shaken out yet. We don't know how many people are looking to sell their homes if the market improves and to leave this community. I know there are some. We don't know how many – we do know how many people are remaining members of our congregation but unable to pay any membership dues. And for those people, they will remain members; they won't be excluded. There are also plenty of people who have decreased their dues significantly and those who have moved but remain on our rolls because they want to maintain their historic family roots in Temple Sinai. Now, how long is that going to last? I don't know. So our number is, as with every other congregation, somewhat based on shifting sands. We'll see. We'll see. I can tell you that Temple Sinai's membership will be strong enough to maintain this congregation and its program, and it looks very much forward to a bright 21st century of service to the Jewish people and to the larger community here.

RH: I'm sitting here trying to think of where to go for a minute here. What do you think have been some of the most meaningful programs, observances to the community since you've returned?

EC: Well, I think that the appearance in our sanctuary of Rabbi Harold Kushner was a very special night. The sanctuary and balcony were almost totally filled. He offered some very good advice. Again, his theology is one which emphasizes the loving nature of God and the responsibility of human beings to be partners with God in finishing the creation of the world. Pray to God as if God controlled everything, but work as if you control everything. That kind of an attitude. So, that was a special time. We had a very poignant first anniversary of Katrina's interfaith service here in our Temple with our Christian clergy friends, with whom for twenty years we've celebrated Thanksgiving. We've had observances at times of national stress, declarations of war, and the

celebration of peace. We met with our Baptist friends, our Episcopal friends, our Muslim friends, and our Presbyterian friends. Another important thing – this is great. We opened our sanctuary to the Saint Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church for their Christmas services. I never thought I would sit in our sanctuary and hear “O Come, All Ye Faithful” sung with such fervor. They really made themselves very much at home, we were happy to say. Now, they have returned to their beautiful church, which has been completed, and while we're under renovation have offered us their fellowship hall to use for bar mitzvah receptions or perhaps during the High Holy Days for our break-the-fast or our New Year's reception. So we're good neighbors, and we enjoy being neighbors.

RH: What are some of the challenges that you think your community has here at Temple Sinai and then the larger New Orleans Jewish community?

EC: Well, financial challenges are certainly very real. Looking way down the road, four or five years from now, I can see that there could be difficulties in all the synagogues meeting their budgets. We're always concerned about our numbers. We want to maintain that.

RH: Have you lost many children? Families?

EC: Of those members that have left, certainly our religious school is smaller than it was. Children we had named and anticipated having here in our religious school and for bar or bat mitzvah are no longer here. We've been lucky in that regard. Perhaps fewer than some of the other congregations we've lost. We're just redoing a youth lounge, a children's library, and three classrooms for pre-K, first and second grades that are going to be state-of-the-art. It's going to be very exciting.

RH: Do you see any type of new programming coming into being?

EC: We're going to do a lot more for our aged population. I want to increase the opportunities for continuing education for our older members. Many of them did not have

tremendously sound or thorough Jewish educations, and at this point in their lives, they have the desire and the time to study Jewish philosophy [and] Jewish history, to learn about Jewish theology. I think we're going to make sure that we offer creative programming for our older people on the art of aging.

RH: I do believe everybody who's here is much more aware of older people than they were before the storm.

EC: It's because we all feel older. We all have at our core a vestige of weariness. You know how when you cut a tree, you look across it, and you look at the rings, and you'll see when there was a drought, you'll see a ring that has less growth? That's what spiritually – or maybe not spiritual because spiritually, I think we're very vital and alive and sharp. I think maybe psychically then, our psyches where there is a weariness and a wariness that didn't exist prior to the Katrina horror. There are a lot of people who will say I don't think I have it in me to do that again. If I had to, I would leave, but I wouldn't come back. So there's a certain amount of control we have and a certain amount we don't.

RH: Tell me how you feel moving to the city, state, federal government, how the response has been.

EC: Miserable. Disappointing.

RH: What would you have liked to see happen?

EC: Some kind of a direction projected, an ardent insistence upon relief for the suffering, no excuses.

RH: Do you believe that the first response was racist?

EC: No, I really don't. I think it was just clumsy.

RH: And do you yourself see how resources are being given out at this time, any differences across race or ethnicity?

EC: I'm really not in a position to know. I don't know. I think more people have applied for help and have been so disappointed by the lack of response. I think it's every color of the rainbow. Everybody has an excuse why you need to go back and fill out your form in a different way.

RH: Do you think racial tensions are more intense since the storm? Are you aware of anything like that?

EC: I think there are extremists at the two ends of the spectrum who are always opportunistic and, under any circumstance, will look to exacerbate tensions that are in existence. I am not by any means a dreamer thinking that – or a Pollyanna, that there aren't problems. But I do not believe that other than, again, the fanatics and extremists on either side of black and white – I don't think the large center of the people of New Orleans sense that. I think that we feel like our problems are not rooted in race. They're rooted in leadership that's irresponsible, inefficient, lazy, and lacking in vision.

RH: Are you involved in any networks or alliances with the city? Temple Sinai itself and you personally?

EC: Not so much Temple Sinai as an organization. But through my participation in citywide programming and dialogue groups, working with the Archdiocese and the Episcopal bishop, I helped to found the Human Relations Commission in 1989 and have served as its chairman and co-chair for four or five years and continue to serve on it. So, I'm very, very active with human relations organizations in the city.

RH: What type of work are they doing, and who belongs to that?

EC: We have representatives of most of the ethnic groups in New Orleans. Ethnic, racial, religious, gay community is represented. We are conducting a fourteen-month – every month, a study of all of these aspects of our community and asking them, number one, tell us your history, and two, your contributions to New Orleans, when did you come, what have you contributed, and finally, what do you see as stumbling blocks for your group, your entity's continued success in the Crescent City. We have a court reporter who's taking it all down, and it will be published when we finish our last session, which is this coming January.

RH: So when you say a fourteen-month study, are you going neighborhood by neighborhood?

EC: Groups by groups.

RH: Groups by groups.

EC: African American professionals, men and women, African American activists, the gay community, Italian, French, and Irish immigrants and organizations. Everybody has their own little organization or their neighborhood association or whatever, and we're trying to examine New Orleans through the lens of distinction and examining how classes perceive life, different classes perceive life here. So, I think it's relatively sophisticated – it certainly is a time-consuming process. We got a $25,000 grant, so it doesn't cover any city money, and the city council and mayor's office are pledged to give credence and attention to our report at the end and to help respond to recommendations that we make. So, I think that's a pretty good thing to do.

RH: That's an amazing thing.

EC: Yeah, in this day. Yeah, we're looking forward to it.

RH: When's it going to be –?

EC: I don't know when the final publication will be. I would guess in the spring because it's going to take time to digest and make recommendations based on it.

RH: So, is it a survey? Or you're actually having people come –

EC: Oh, they're coming. They're invited. Leaders of these various communities and groups are invited to come and to make presentations. We have somewhere between twenty-five and fifty people in attendance at each one of them. They're held at the Basin Street Station. The next one, I think, is this week.

RH: Is it really? That's a rather remarkable organization.

EC: Oh yeah, our Human Relations Commission is really a great organization. I work a lot with the Human Rights Campaign. I try to do whatever I can to alleviate discrimination against the gay and lesbian community. That's one of the things that Temple Sinai's been very active in. We have a great number of intermarrieds. We have an outreach to the gay and lesbian community, a chavurah. We have an interfaith gay lesbian seder every year. And we officiate at commitment ceremonies for gay and lesbian couples. So, that's why I say Temple Sinai is theologically much more – tends to be much more liberal than other congregations in our city in that regard.

RH: Let me move to a few questions that are a little more personal, I guess in nature. For you after – even though your home was fairly intact loosely, considering you did have some damage –

EC: Yeah, we put in a new kitchen. We came out better. We're not complaining.

RH: But how does home –? What does home mean for you now, and has it changed any?

EC: That's a very good question. Home has always meant a lot to me. I've typically, from boyhood on, come in the front door at the end of a day and always said, I'm home. I've come to realize that I can make my home in other places. Not as comfortably, perhaps, and conveniently. But that home is something that you carry with you. And it certainly is more important than the walls or the leaky roof. And I think people that didn't think they could ever live anywhere but in New Orleans, many of them, have come to realize that as long as they have the people that they love, they can live anywhere.

RH: How did you and your wife recreate home in Atlanta?

EC: We went out and we bought a big pumpkin to put there in front of our door as we always do for Halloween. We bought some gigantic mum plants that lived longer incidentally than they do in our heat when the fall came. We celebrated our harvest festival, Sukkot, at a neighboring synagogue. We were able to have Shabbat with our daughter that we rarely can do. We enjoyed simple things. We missed dear friends. But I think the experience deepened us in many ways. Also, to be very honest, it made us less trusting. Less trusting of the world and of fate and fortune. I don't have anywhere near the same sense of rock-solid trust that I had before the storm. When you find yourself in a car in the dark, fleeing for your life with very few of your belongings, you realize how truly vulnerable you are.

RH: Well, that was going to be one of my questions. Has your worldview changed any?

EC: Yeah. I relate much more completely with the wandering nature of my ancestors. I understand how they were able to hold it together because they were much more than the accumulation of things. Their worlds were much bigger than that.

RH: Do you think between you and your wife that one coped better than the other?

EC: Well, she had it so hard because I was doing an interview for the show that I was doing at the time with MSNBC called The Ethical Edge, and I was in New York to film

another one of those shows, and she went to a vet to get some food for our dog and tripped on nothing because it was an unknown area to her, and she fell and broke her left wrist and her left ankle. So, in that time, trying to put the wedding together, there she was with a crutch and a big boot and her arm in a sling, and I was caring for her needs, so I had it easier than she had. So we had to find an orthopedic surgeon, we had to do all those things, had the emergency room experience, and all that happened, of course, when I was in New York. So, a lot of it fell on our daughter, who lived in town, to help her mom out at first, but then the High Holy Days came, and so Andrea wasn't able to go with me for the first one of them. She came for Yom Kippur. She did not need surgery, and that was lucky. So, yeah, I came through better.

RH: Wow. What do you believe for yourself that you've learned about yourself from this experience?

EC: I think that as far as an individual is concerned, I'm probably as strong as most people, but that as far as individuals are concerned, that's not necessarily saying a lot.

RH: [laughter] Do you want to explain that?

EC: We are strong – someone said – was it Hemingway? – “We're strong in the broken places.” But human beings have very short little arms. There's only so much we can do. But we can show incredible fortitude and strength and resolve, but there's so much that's really beyond our control. So what's the lesson? Live a good life and enjoy life.

RH: Are there any ways that you try to incorporate enjoyment in your life now more intentionally?

EC: Yeah. I am much more prone to take time off to enjoy hobbies. I'm not as driven. I don't think I'm as essential to the workings of the world. I work very hard and am lucky because I love my work. I am my work. But maybe I don't take myself quite as seriously.

RH: What are your hobbies?

EC: Enormous passion for organ music. I'm the only rabbi member of the American Guild of Organists. I listen to a lot of it, and I collect it. I love architecture and studying and reading about architecture and history, especially Civil War and American history.

RH: Now I understand that you lost your organist.

EC: She died, yeah. She was a very close friend. She died in the midst of trying to put her house back together. She was so tired. She had been the organist here for over forty years. She was truly gifted. We were very, very devoted to one another. She was so tired. She sat down in the chair and just died while the people were working on a roof. She'd gone through so much heartache about – oh, the frustrations, you cannot adequately describe the frustrations that people endured. She told me one time in tears – she said to me, “My neighbor …” How did she put it? “My neighbor's workman took all of the …”. What's that stuff called? “All the junk, all the stuff you pick up from construction and left it in my driveway.” And she couldn't imagine. The two driveways were right beside, adjoined one another. And somehow they took that – what's it they call? – demo. When you tear something apart, what do you do?

RH: I don't know.

EC: It's called demo. That's the junk from the demolition. They were demolishing something in the neighbor's house. Instead of hauling it away, they just pushed it over in her driveway, and that was like the straw that broke the camel's back, and she was in tears. She couldn't understand how anybody could behave so uncaringly. Because people were strengthened by an improvement of appearance. If you were able to paint a wall, or if you were able to put in – get rid of one wall and put in drywall, people felt like, “Wow, we got something done.” Everybody had junk in front of their house. When the junk was finally picked up and taken away, there was an air of normality, and these

people went ahead and took their junk and put it in her site, and she couldn't imagine it. She died shortly after. Not two weeks later. But that just shows you how tired people were.

RH: Have you found a new organist?

EC: Oh, yeah. We found a new organist who's exceptional, and she approved of him. He came in to substitute for her. There weren't many people that she was as – she would never say a bad thing about anybody, but she went ahead and said good things about this guy. This was a woman who knew many rabbis. She was here for Rabbi Feibelman, Rabbi Rosenberg, who struck out quickly – anybody following Rabbi Feibelman would have – and then Rabbi Blackman and Cohn, so four senior rabbis. She never told tales about anybody. Let me tell you, from her church jobs and all the ministers and all the things that went on and the scandals that she knew about, she knew where all the bodies were buried, but she was a really righteous lady, and she would not do that.

RH: Is there anything that you took for granted before that you would never take for granted again?

EC: I don't know. I don't know what to answer. I'm tired. Let's end.

RH: Okay, we will.

EC: No one has as much wisdom as I've attempted to impart.

RH: [laughter] You're right.

EC: Nobody.

RH: Is there anything else you want to add?

EC: Nah, you've covered the waterfront.

RH: Okay.

EC: I'm so glad. Thank you.
[END OF INTERVIEW]