



# Theodore Lichtenfeld Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: Interviewing Rabbi Ted Lichtenfeld at Shir Chadash, 3737 West Esplanade, in Metairie, Louisiana. Today is Tuesday, August 21, 2007. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina Jewish Voices Project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring and Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Rabbi Lichtenfeld, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video-recorded?

Ted Lichtenfeld: Yes.

RH: OK. And let's just start with the year of your birth and then a little about your general and Jewish education.

TL: I was born in 1970, August 10, 1970 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I grew up and was bar mitzvahed in a Reform Synagogue in Abington, Pennsylvania, Beth Am Congregation. And after my bar mitzvah, my family switched to a liberal Conservative synagogue Temple Sinai, in Dresher, Pennsylvania. The rabbi at the time was Sidney Greenberg (sp?). The late Sidney Greenberg was one of the very prominent rabbis in the conservative movement. I was confirmed at Temple Sinai, I was an active member of USY, of the United Synagogue Youth, I went to Hebrew religious school. I went to public school and I went to Hebrew school. Following Confirmation for some study during the summers and so forth, I went to Gratz College Hebrew High School in Philadelphia, which is a communal supplementary program. I went to college of the joint program between the Jewish Theological Seminary in Columbia, and then continuing rabbinical school afterwards. I have ordination from JTS in New York, and from the Academy for Jewish Religion in New York as well.

RH: And tell me about how you came to New Orleans.



TL: I was in a job search and was hired by Shir Chadash Congregation to be their rabbi after Rabbi Jeffrey Specter was leaving. And he'd been here for 14 years, and I took the job and officially moved here in July of '05, and began officially on August 1, 2005.

RH: OK, this is kind of a fateful event. Did you move into Metairie, in the Metairie community, or were you in New Orleans --

TL: We moved into Metairie, the synagogue has a house for the rabbi a couple blocks from here.

RH: OK. And I guess your story in New Orleans begins with Katrina, practically, doesn't it?

TL: Right, that's definitely true. There were a few things that happened before that, a funeral or two, there was one prominent member of the congregation who died, but that was all a different world before Katrina.

RH: So tell me a little about your family, before we get into the Katrina story.

TL: You mean my --

RH: Your children who you brought with you here.

TL: I came with my wife, also a rabbi, Miriam (inaudible) Lichtenfeld. At the time, we had a two year old daughter, Tali), and Miriam was pregnant with a son. So we came with one child and one on the way.

RH: OK. And so, does Shir Chadash have a hurricane plan? I mean, did they have one at the time, and what --

TL: There were some plans of what to do in the case of an evacuation, but there wasn't much that we knew about. I mean, it was very unusual coming from the East, so we knew



there might be a hurricane evacuation, but it just seemed like this exotic thing that might happen. So we really didn't expect it. We didn't expect it to happen so soon, also, the mother of all hurricane evacuations right after we got here. Because at the time, when I was coming down, I was thinking, wow, there might be a hurricane evacuation, how unusual that was. I mean, I'd lived in Philadelphia, New York, and northern Jersey, and that had never happened to me. So we heard about Hurricane Katrina coming, and we hadn't heard that much about where it was going to hit land, we'd just heard it was in the Gulf of Mexico and might be coming or so forth, and then -- we don't watch television on Shabbat, so by Friday afternoon and into Saturday morning we hadn't heard anything. And then we came to the synagogue, and certainly by Shabbat morning, people were talking about that there would probably need to be an evacuation, because Katrina was really heading towards New Orleans. And we talked to people in the synagogue who had been here longer than we had, including Mark Schlefstein (sp?), who's an active member here, who's the main environmental reporter for the Times-Picayune. And so people we trusted and who knew something about the issues said, you know, this really seemed like it was going to be a category five and we really needed to get out. So one thing we did was we moved the Torah scrolls over to the JCC building across the street, put them in the top floor, wrapped up in an office. And then we went home and then we turned on the television because we needed to know what was going on as far as Katrina. And we made our plans to evacuate early Sunday morning.

RH: What went through your mind in making the plan, you and your wife?

TL: You know, everybody at the time was telling us, you know, this is going to be for a few days and then you'll be back, don't worry too much about it. Because evacuations happen once a year or so. We were more concerned with the hectic nature of having to evacuate, and we'd just gotten here a few weeks before, and having a child, and Miriam being pregnant and just needing to make plans for the car trip and everything, we went to Atlanta where we have friends. And we were actually very lucky because -- I mean,



going through our mind was just, having to plan. There wasn't much we could do with the house as far as -- I mean, we still had, you know, boxes of books in the garage, and a variety of other things. And there wasn't much that we did to prepare the house. We really didn't think there was too much chance of anything happening, we had to hurry up and get out. So we were just concerned with getting out and making sure that we were all OK and that we got to Atlanta OK. And we were lucky, actually, going to Atlanta because, going that way, the roads were fairly clear. Because if we had gone to Houston like everybody else, they would have been -- the traffic would have been a nightmare. But we actually were able to make it to Atlanta in one day. So we had concerns and so forth, but -- like everybody else, especially being new, we never dreamed that anything that bad could happen, or would happen in this case. And I had joked -- that weekend was supposed to be my first bat mitzvah, here, of Jodie Goldberg (sp?), who -- because she was the daughter of the head of Jewish Children's Regional Service, they had a lot of links in the community. So I was told that, oh, this was going to be a big bat mitzvah, that it was going to be of a prominent family in the community. And so I was joking with Jodie as she was practicing the Torah reading that Shabbat, right after services, I said, you know, you better learn how to do that under water.

RH: Wow.

TL: Because, you know, I was making a joke out of everything, and really hoping and thinking that we'd be back in a few days, and everything that was scheduled for the next weekend would go on as scheduled. Presumably.

RH: Yeah. So you made it to Atlanta, sometime Sunday night, and you were with your friends, and I guess started to watch TV a little bit to see what was going to happen?

TL: Right. We were watching CNN all the time, and what I remember is that we felt so lucky after the hurricane passed, because it seemed like New Orleans had missed the brunt of it, and that all the concerns about all sorts of things being destroyed and the



water coming over the levies and all the things like that seemed like it hadn't happened. So we felt this relief, and thought, OK, we'll be going home in a day or two. And then --

RH: Did you go out shopping? So many people seemed to have. After they were relieved, they decided to shop.

TL: Yeah, we went -- I don't know if we were shopping, but we were just relaxing at our friends'. Our friends had a vacant apartment that we were able to use, and I don't remember if we went shopping, but we were --

RH: Lighthearted --

TL: -- enjoying ourselves in Atlanta, I mean, we were fairly -- I can't remember, exactly, what our mood was, but it all seemed very hectic because, you know, Miriam was pregnant and that was affecting her and Tali and so forth. So it all seemed very hectic, and we were in this different apartment, and it always a pain when you're not living at your home. And we hadn't even unpacked completely at our home, yet. So then the main thing is that just the next day -- I barely understood what was going on, but the next day suddenly they were talking about all this water which had come into the city. And gradually -- Miriam understood it better than I did at first, that what had happened was that the hurricane had passed through and things were relatively OK. And I had desperately made calls to members of the synagogue and so forth who I knew who had stayed, trying to make sure that they were OK after the hurricane. And then we realized that there had been this disaster that had happened -- that there had been a time delay, that the hurricane had passed through OK but then that it had damaged the levies enough and put the water up high enough that the levies broke. So that then suddenly there was this huge disaster which happened, and you know, no one had anticipated that kind of flooding because people -- no one assumed -- everybody assumed -- no one had thought -- in terms of levies breaking, people thought in terms of the levies being over the top but not breaking.



RH: Right, right. And so Tuesday, what a terrible thing. You're new. You don't know what's going on, it's kind of a different kind of isolation, I think, isn't it? Do you think?

TL: Yeah, it was definitely a kind of isolation, although certainly we never felt completely isolated -- we had our friends there to talk to and so forth, and we never felt completely isolated because we also knew so many people had gone through a similar experience. And we talked to members of the synagogue who were able to get through -- I mean, I was amazed, Hugo and Lis Kahn -- and Lis is now the president of the congregation. I mean, they're very important people in the community, and leaders of this synagogue. I knew they had stayed in the city, and I was actually able to reach Hugo by cell phone, which usually -- the common wisdom was, no cell phone was working, no cell phone was working, but I was actually able to reach him by cell phone and talked about what was going on. And I think that was even before the levies broke, because they had driven a certain way. I couldn't remember what point, but they had, like, actually driven through the French Quarter, they'd driven from one place to another and it seemed like it wasn't that bad. But I can't remember if that was before or after the storm. But what immediately happened was, after a day or so, I was able to get in touch -- Mike Hampshire (sp?), who has since gone to Florida, was the executive director, and we agreed that the first thing we were going to do was, that Mike arranged for, was to open our listserv, which was basically meant to inform members of community events -- open our listserv so that it could be two-way communication, so people could -- anyone could post to our listserv. So that was how the congregation basically stayed together, communicated with each other for those few days. And I sent a message to the congregation and basically, you know, people posted to the listserv, and that's how we knew what was going on. And I was trying to just keep in phone or in email contact with various people because I was gradually learning that the cond -- I mean, everybody in New Orleans learned that the conditions were very bad, and that somehow there didn't seem to be immediate assistance coming. And it just seemed like there was this urgent need for things to happen and nothing seemed to be happening. And I found out that we



had various people who were still trapped in hospitals, you know, friends, new friends of ours from the congregation, who were trapped in Memorial Hospital, which is where Miriam was supposed to have given birth. And I heard different things -- that was the Brown family, Donna and Howard Brown, and Theodore and Alana (sp?), who had just moved to Denver. And then I heard the Barrocuses, Al Barroco was, I guess, the CEO of Methodist Hospital, and I heard that they were trapped there, so I ended up, actually, at a news conference in Atlanta at one point, with Congressman Louis and the mayor and Rabbi Sandler of -- what is it -- Achim, in Atlanta, just saying that, you know, there were still these people trapped at the hospitals, and trying to find ways to get them out. We'd heard that there was 100 degrees of heat, and water coming in throughout the hospital, and poisonous snakes in the hospitals, we were hearing all sorts of things like that, and in the meantime the Breaux family, Lainie and Tad Breaux, Miriam and Bruce Waltzer's daughter and Phyllis Breaux's son, had had to leave their immediately newborn baby at the hospital, who was still there, and the doctors had said the best thing was for them to leave the baby at the hospital, and then all the children were evacuated from the hospital and they didn't know where their new baby was for three days. So there were various things like this going on that I was trying to keep in contact with people, and I was getting all these calls from friends of mine, colleagues of mine, friends of mine from the Conservative Rabbinate who were calling just to see what was going on because I was the conservative rabbi in New Orleans. So there was a lot of just, sort of, crisis mode in the immediate days after, and luckily we weren't worried about -- our family was all there, and we didn't have any family in New Orleans -- but there was this crisis mode about trying to find out what's going on, trying to be in contact with people, and it was very hard, you couldn't get people on their cell phones. The 504 cell phones were down. And there were a lot of people you couldn't get in touch with, discussing where is so-and-so on the listserv.

RH: Wow. So how did you get involved -- I think it's pretty heroic to have gotten with the Congressman Louis and kind of put in a bulletin from Atlanta about who you knew in the



hospital. How did that kind of come into being?

TL: That came into being because I made contact with Rabbi Sandler in Atlanta, whose wife grew up in New Orleans, who was married by the previous rabbi here, I can't remember which one, I can't remember which rabbi it was. But one of the previous rabbis here. And I didn't know Rabbi Sandler that well, but I'd known he had had a pulpit in New Jersey when I was on the board of the New Jersey Rabbinical Assembly, so I knew who he was. And now he was in Atlanta, and I met him in the synagogue a day or two after the levies broke, or I guess maybe a day after the levies broke, and he said he was going to this news conference and whether I wanted to come along. Which was about how people could help to -- a news conference to encourage the government to do more. And the Atlanta -- certainly there was, as was usually the case with politicians, I mean, I think they're very good people, but the mayor of Atlanta and Congressman Louis were also expressing their concern, that they felt because of Iraq, there were not enough troops to send to New Orleans to have people to deal with the issue. Certainly some of it on the part of Congressman Louis and the mayor was also to try to prod the Bush Administration and other organizations, and other institutions, to try to alleviate the issue. So I ended up there because Rabbi Sandler told me about this and invited me, and he was a prominent rabbi in the community, in this big synagogue.

RH: So were you in contact -- I have interviewed Lainie and her mother, and did you talk with them within that period of time, those days? Do you even know them? Because you --

TL: No, I didn't know -- some people I knew. But I barely knew anybody. For the most part, I knew the people who were summer Shabbat regulars, because that's who I had seen. I knew the people who were the most active in the congregation, and the people who I really was seeing over those first few weeks. And I knew people who were members of the Leon (sp?) family because Dr. Will Leon (sp?) had passed away, this





was the funeral I'd done for the prominent family in the congregation. And I had done that funeral. So I knew them, and I knew various other people who were extremely active and so forth. But I didn't even know all the Shabbat regulars yet because I hadn't had a chance to meet everybody over just the two or three Kiddush's of that August before Katrina hit. So I really did not know -- I figured, I think I knew who Miriam Bruce Waltzer was, but I couldn't picture Lainie and Tad. And then I was able to get Judge Waltzer on the phone, and she told me what was going on through email and everything, and then finally she had -- Miriam called to say that they'd figured out, first, that they knew the baby was safe, and then that they knew exactly where he was, Zachary, and were able to fly and get to him and that was safe. But during the time, people were telling this story too, including Rabbi Prince (sp?), the assistant Rabbi at AA, Agudas Achim in Atlanta. I was just saying -- I was meeting with her, and then I had my cell phone, and I was saying, oh, I have to do this call because this couple can't find their baby and I just want to know what's going on. And she said, can you imagine what that's like? I think someone else said, can you imagine, and she said, no, I really can't. What that's like to have a newborn baby that you don't know where it is, in this kind of situation. So they were -- there was a lot of just trying to find out what was going on and whether people were out of danger.

RH: So who were your connections the first few weeks, and what was the kind of decision-making process, for you in your family, personally, but also for the synagogue?

TL: For myself and my family, what happened was, after a day or two it became completely clear to us, after they'd ordered everybody out of the city, it became clear to us that there was going to be a long time away, and that -- especially since we knew what had happened at Memorial Hospital -- we knew Miriam was no longer going to deliver at Memorial Hospital. The baby was due in November. So at that point we began making plans that we were going to have to go to my in-laws' house in New Jersey, and make plans to have the baby in New Jersey. Which is what ended up happening. In the



meantime, I was in contact with Mike Hampshire (sp?), the executive director, and Robert Kutcher (sp?), who was president at the time. And I was in contact with Adam Bronstone at -- I forget how early I was in contact with Federation, but I knew the Federation had moved to Houston. It had temporarily relocated to Houston. And I was in some contact with Eric Stolman (sp?) and Adam Bronstone, both of whom are now in Florida. But they were the director and programming director of Federation, and they were both members of my synagogue. But I was in contact with Bob Kutcher (sp?) and Mike Hampshire (sp?) about, what are we going to do now? And as I said, the first thing that ended up happening was that the listserv was opened so that everybody could post, and that was a real life-saver for the congregation. It gave everybody a sense of community. And then they helped me know what was going on, and we ended up having -- I forget what point this was, it might have been even two weeks after Katrina, we had an impromptu phone conference call board meeting. And at the moment I forget how early that was, but we had an impromptu conference call board meeting, and I had gotten the idea to -- that we should try -- since so many people had moved to Houston, I had gotten the idea that we should try to have High Holiday services, Shir Chadash High Holiday services, in Houston for the people who were there, since that seemed to be the best location. Could you just excuse me for a --

RH: Yes. OK. And so, we were talking about your idea for the High Holidays, to do them in Houston, and that was a great idea, as a matter of fact. So --

TL: So we ended up having -- oh, another thing that happened was that Mike was able to set up a -- since so many people were calling me and calling and asking what they could do, how they could contribute to the congregation, we set up a Shir Chadash Katrina Fund so that we had an address where people could send money to a fund for our synagogue for Katrina. And then in the Board meeting, we tentatively agreed, when we had this impromptu board meeting, we tentatively agreed that we would really try to have some sort of services in Houston, that seemed to be where the community had



reconstituted, even though people were all over the place. So we made arrangements with Beth Yeshurun Congregation in Houston, which is a huge, 2,200 families, congregation in Houston, Conservative synagogue. And David Rosen, who was very helpful there, and the staff there, Rabbi Rosen. And the staff there, everybody was really helpful, and we ended up arranging to have services at the JCC. And Beth Yeshurun helped us to make arrangements in various ways. And in the meantime, as I said, all sorts of my friends and colleagues had contacted me about what was going on, and I just have this memory of not being exactly sure what to say. I would get these calls, and at the time, one of the big things was, we had no idea what had happened to the synagogue, we had no idea what had happened to the house, we really did not know what had happened on the ground after the levies broke. So we were -- I was making these calls trying to see if anyone was there, and some people told me, you can assume the synagogue and your house are both underwater. And someone else said, oh, I hear in that area there's three feet of water. Which seemed better, since we knew in some areas there was ten feet of water. So we heard different things. We thought maybe we had lost our own house, we thought maybe the synagogue was all underwater. But at a certain point, Will Samuels was one of the -- well actually, what happened was, the Cantors, David Cantor, David and Sherry Cantor, who have since moved to Birmingham -- I mean, the effect on the community is shown by the fact that every time I mention somebody, I'm saying where they live now. But they were the first people to look at the synagogue, and the door was open, for whatever reason, maybe it had been blown open by the storm or something, so they would have walked right into the synagogue, and we found out that it was a mess, but the water hadn't been that high. And then I asked them if they could -- I asked them if they could go to our house. So they went to our house, and it seemed like there wasn't water -- it seemed like things were more -- at least outside the house, were more OK than we might have expected. But then Will Samuels, who was the vice president, executive vice president, and who was one of the first ones back, and he was the one who, largely single-handedly ran the ritual stuff at the



congregation and around the synagogue in my absence, in the absence of real -- some organized leadership, he was the one running things on the ground. And he was able to get to my house and actually go into my house because he had a key. And found out that some rooms had gotten water and rugs had been ruined, but that basically the house was in decent shape, given what had happened in other places. But in any case, we had all decided on trying to have these services in Houston. And so we were planning for it. And then I ended up flying to Houston for Rosh Hashanah. And I think -- I forget how long, when Rosh Hashanah was that year, exactly, but it was several weeks after -- I ended up, I think on the way back, stopping in New Orleans and actually looking at the house and the synagogue and see what was going on. So this was the first time I had seen it. But in any case, as we planned these services in Houston, just by that point, a whole slew of people ended up back at the synagogue, back in New Orleans much sooner than we expected. And suddenly there was a large group of people here who were upset that we weren't having our Rosh Hashanah services here, that we were having them in Houston. And it ended up being that we needed to figure out something for those people. And a member, Anne Brener, who's a former rabbinical student in California, who had grown up in our congregation, whose father had been an active member of our congregation, emailed me, is there anything I could do? And I said, well, the one thing she could maybe do is lead Rosh Hashanah services in New Orleans, in Metairie for those people who were here already. And in the meantime, I guess, I think before Rosh Hashanah, I had a little meeting in the chapel with the rugs taken out and so forth, with the people. And people were very upset that we weren't having the Rosh Hashanah services. And so what ended up happening was that we had a service in Houston for Shir Chadash, it was maybe 60 people, and that the synagogue here at Shir Chadash had maybe 150 people for Rosh Hashanah services. So at that point it became clear that we were going to need to have Yom Kippur services here. So that's what we did. And we had Yom Kippur services with the rugs gone, and luckily we had a contractor, because there were renovations going on at the synagogue already. So



luckily we had a contractor on site, so he was able to get in both to the synagogue and my house pretty quickly and get the rugs out, and do all sorts of things which prevented more mold buildup. So without the rugs and with these folding chairs and things like that, we ended up having Yom Kippur services in the sanctuary. Through the good graces also of the National Guard. Ralph Lupin was an officer in the Louisiana Guard, and thirty Guard members came and helped pick up the synagogue and prepare it for Yom Kippur services.

RH: That was helpful.

TL: Right, that was very helpful.

RH: So tell me, what did you do -- did you do anything special, either of these services, in New Orleans. How did you prepare to speak to your community? A community you didn't know too well.

TL: Part of what I had been doing was sending out messages on the listserv, both -- I think already at that point I was sending weekly Divre Torah, I was sending like a little sermonette every week. And messages to the community just so that everybody could see, you know, that I was present and was in contact with people and that -- in short, people thought we were going to leave after that, since we had just been there a month, and this huge catastrophe happened -- I was trying to make it clear that we weren't going to leave, that we'd already grown attached to the community. And then on -- as far as sermons, I spoke, it was -- really everything was about Katrina, obviously. And in Houston on Rosh Hashanah, the first day, I spoke about dealing with disaster, and the fact that we -- in Jewish tradition, Rosh Hashanah is the day human beings were created, it's the birthday of the world, it's the anniversary of creation. So I said that there were different ways of counting in Jewish history, and at certain points in the bible there is reference to, so many years after the earthquake, it was -- in many places in rabbinic times, they sometimes counted from the destruction of the Temple. So I said, but



Judaism made a decision that our official counting of years is going to be from creation, and that that's a sign of hope, that's a sign of hope that we don't -- even though some places in Jewish tradition tried to count from destruction, that ultimately we'd decided against counting from destruction, we counted from creation. And that's what I spoke about the first day, I believe. And then the second day I spoke about tselem elohim, about being in the image of God and just what had happened that the gap between rich and poor, and gap between black and white had become very clear with -- Katrina made certain things stand out, even in more of relief, and that we really had to really act and really decide, do we really believe that every human being is created in the image of God? And that if we do, and obviously the message is that we do, then we need to do more to lower the gap between rich and poor and the racial gap. And of course it wasn't only -- it was much more than a race issue, because obviously we had lots of well-off white congregants who had lost their homes also, in Lake View. So it's obviously not as simple as people who say all the suffering was along racial lines. But still, it came clear, I think, some of the gaps in this country between rich and poor.

RH: Well, what kind of needs did you find in your community? What were people's moods and how did you comfort them?

TL: There were a lot of people who were just so amazed, when they were talking, and when they were talking to me they just couldn't believe that this had happened. I mean, because everyone I had talked to said, you know, we had expected to be back in a few days. Nothing like this has ever happened before. You know, just giving me a sense of just how shocked everybody -- I think there was just a lot of shock. I think there was a lot of shock and in emails and in talking to people on the phone I gave my sorrow if they had lost their home, or tried to talk with them. I didn't have a lot of long pastoral-type sessions actually on the phone. And part of it at the beginning was just staying in contact with people in crisis-mode and trying to give them comfort, and then as it got less crisis-mode but people were realizing the long haul and these disastrous things that had



happened to the city... one of the main things, more so than doing a lot of pastoral counseling over the phone, was just keeping in contact with people. That at least I was around there, because we had this virtual congregation here. And there were a lot of people back here, and what I ended up doing, I mean, after Yom Kippur, I ended up coming back and forth. I think what happened was, after Yom Kippur, I was going to come for Sukkot, and then I realized it was just too close. I needed to make sure I was in New Jersey when the baby was born. And I realized I'd just -- oh, and my wife got sick, she got a case of the shingles, that's one -- she was really not feeling well, and we had -- and she was pregnant, and we had -- so I just couldn't leave from already -- I think that Yom Kippur was fairly late and that I couldn't leave. I guess the due date was the beginning of November and I wasn't leaving from two weeks previous to that. And then it ended up being the baby was two weeks late. So there was a month when I tried to be in a lot of contact but just couldn't come. (pause) And then Aryeh was born on November 20, and then shortly after that, shortly after the first week, or I guess after the Bris, I made arrangements to come down a few times, but my family was still in New Jersey so I had to go back and forth. And so we made arrangements a few times, and then it was finally in January, I guess it was in January, that we all actually came back.

RH: Why did you decide to come back?

TL: Well, we were --

RH: What kinds of discussions did you and your wife have?

TL: Well there was no question we were going to come back. Because first of all, we had already liked it here. We felt attached to the community. And the idea that I was going to -- I would not have -- and we all agreed on this, I would not have left. I just, I mean if I was the leader of the comm -- it didn't matter if I was only there for a month, I was the leader of the community or so forth. And as the leader of the community, I wasn't going to just desert the community after a few months. You know, obviously the



community needed a rabbi. And it was just assumed from the beginning that we were going to come back. You know, we realized a lot of things were going to change, it was going to be a smaller congregation and so forth, but we didn't really have a conversation saying, you know, should we come back or should we go somewhere else? But we were talking a lot about exactly how to handle things because then we were going to go down, and there was our garage to go through, which had gotten water in it, and bunches of things had been lost. But I was already doing that before -- you know, that was when I would come down for a few days and then go back. And it was around that time -- I guess it was actually around Yom Kippur Miriam got her case of the shingles and it was just this awful situation where she was there pregnant, feeling terrible, and I had to be in New Orleans for Yom Kippur, and it was just a very -- that whole time was very difficult. So there was a lot of stress, and then there was stress because we had a new baby. And then one of the times that I was down in New Orleans, Aryeh ended up being hospitalized for RSV virus --

RH: What type of virus?

TL: RSV. It's fairly common in infants. Which is a breathing disorder, so his breathing was very -- very difficult breathing. So he was in the hospital, I forget how old, two months old, a month old. So I think then, I guess, I had to rush back, I guess then I stayed a shorter time than I would have otherwise and went back to New Jersey.

RH: OK, so he went into the hospital in New Jersey.

TL: Yes, he was still -- they were still there. We moved back in January, but this was before it happened.

RH: Wow. So you were also a person in need of help. How did you take comfort and...?

TL: Well, luckily we had -- it wasn't as traumatic for us because we hadn't lost our home. I don't know exactly how other people dealt with it who lost all their possessions. I





wouldn't have dealt very well. But I think I got hope, I got some hope in giving hope to others, as far as the things I said, and I was also in contact with some of my mentors. In addition to support from family, I was in contact with some of my mentors, who were helping me sort of navigate how I should do things. And were giving comfort. I mean, it was a big shock. It was a big shock, because there had been this long job search process, and job search processes are always stressful, and it was a fairly stressful process, and then it was sort of in a second batch that I ended up getting connected to Metairie, that I ended up getting to Metairie. So there had been this process, and finally it seemed like a good match, and it turned out, the synagogue and I clicked, here, the community and I clicked, so it was like, finally, there's something that's going to work out, and we made the arrangements, and I'd come down for an interview, and came down again with Miriam and Tali because we wanted to see if we would move there. And all of that, and then there was just the shock of, we went through all this and everything had got -- and it seemed like a great deal, and then this huge disaster, the biggest environmental disaster in the history of the United States, happens to us right there, right after we had come. It just seemed amazing, as it seemed for Rabbi Busch and Rabbi Pine at Touro, who were in the same situation. They'd come a month before us, so when I came at first we were joking that, now Andy was the veteran in the community. And we never dreamed something like this would happen. And there was just this feeling of amazement, and I always -- as well as the shock and upset that people we know were in these horrible situations, at first, that the government didn't seem to be doing enough, that no one seemed to be handling it competently, at first.

RH: Tell me, did you worry about being paid? Did you pay the staff? Was all that handled?

TL: What happened was, we were able to get staff salaries out pretty quickly, but at first I was going to miss a paycheck. At first I was going to miss a paycheck. So the rabbinical assembly, the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly, wired me money as a loan. But then



we ended up -- Mike Hampshire (sp?) was able to get the checks coming pretty early, like almost immediately, so that the direct deposit thing. So we were OK as far as that was concerned, and there was money -- the synagogue had enough money to be able to do these things. So staff was being paid, and -- I'm trying to remember exactly what the Federation contributed. I forget if there was Federation money helping us at that point. There was some United Synagogue money, from the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. There was some money, but they weren't really -- the Union for Reform Judaism paid staff salaries for months for their people, and we didn't have that. But we were able to pay salaries pretty early on.

RH: And so, how did you kind of coordinate with the other synagogues in New Orleans, in the Federation and...?

TL: I think -- I forget if there was a rabbinic meeting on the phone. I mean, I hadn't even met everybody yet. I guess I met some of them. But I was in contact -- I forgot how early I was in contact with the other rabbis. But I certainly was in contact with Bob Loewy and with Jeff Kurtz-Lendner, Jeff Kurtz-Lendner who I knew. We had gone to school together. And Bob Loewy was nice enough to do things like help me go through my garage. And there were other people in the same synagogue who were helping me. Like, go through the garage and so forth. But in any case, I forget to what extent I was in contact with all the different rabbis, but I remember just being in contact with a lot of people. I remember being in contact with them and sort of seeing what they were doing or finding out, what things were going on at their congregations and advice as far as what -- talking to some of the rabbis about advice as far as what's been helpful for their congregants. As far as, asking what to do when people call me, and say, or, you know, what can we give to New Orleans. What can we do for your congregation? You know, what the others were saying.



RH: I was just curious if amongst the rabbis, you felt like, because you and Rabbi Bush were so new, that if there was one of the rabbis who had been here longer, like Rabbi Loewy or Cohn, or even Nemes, or any of those kind of -- if it felt like there was some mentoring in that regard. Or was the mentoring thing mainly through your own friends and your own mentors, traditional mentors?

TL: I don't know if there was -- certainly several of the rabbis were very nice and supportive to me. I don't know if there was a direct mentoring relationship, I guess partially because I didn't know anyone that well at that point. But it was also that -- I mean, Bob Loewy was old enough to be a mentor type, but several of the rabbis were not. So --

RH: Well as your peers.

TL: Right. They were more like peers. So I -- you know, I'm not sure I would say mentoring relationship so much. Bob Lowey was very helpful as a more senior colleague. Because there were people -- just, there were one or two people who I'd looked to for years for mentorship, mentors of mine at the seminary and so forth. I talked to Rabbi Billy Lebow a lot, a former dean of the seminary's rabbinical school.

RH: Tell me what you did at Yom Kippur? How was that -- ?

TL: We fasted, we said prayers. That's about it.

RH: (laughter)

TL: We had maybe 200 people here. We did everything we would have done normally for Yom Kippur, I mean, people were doing things differently, they were going out for the meal before the fast instead of having their family dinner at home, because no one had kitchens. I actually went to Chabad in Metairie's pre-fast meal, which was very helpful because I wanted a hot kosher meal, and they had that. And so for Yom Kippur, I tried to



make some things -- beside just going through the service as we normally -- I mean, we had had to check, did we lose any prayer books, and we really didn't lose very many prayer books. We'd lost maybe 100 of our machzorim, of our High Holiday prayer books. But we were really fine. And Will Samuels, who was really great throughout this whole period, as I said, he acted as cantor. He knew how to do it, and he was the main one available who knew how to do it, because obviously at this point, the cantor who had been at the synagogue for 20 years and so forth couldn't come, wouldn't be able to come, now, to New Orleans, you know, it was a completely different situation. I'm trying to remember now, it might have also been a health thing, but basically, right after Katrina there was just no way that was going to happen. So Will acted as the cantor for services, and I tried to fit in, certainly with sermons, but also with explanations of prayers, and so forth, I tried to link in Katrina, or just speak as to a community having shocked mourning. And tried to relate various things.

END OF FILE 1

Rosalind Hinton: OK, this is Rosalind Hinton with Rabbi Ted Lichtenfeld, and this is take two for Katrina's Jewish Voices. And so I thought we would just go ahead and discuss a little bit about your community here, Shir Chadash, and its challenges, and what your hopes are for this community.

Ted Lichtenfeld: I think that this is a very special community. That's what drew us here. We were looking for someplace where the congregants were friendly, seemed like warm people and not, sort of, bitter types or harshly critical or so forth, because in some places, you get the feeling of -- my rabbi at the seminary, who I mentioned before, said that in every congregation, 98 percent of the people are wonderful, then in every congregation there are two percent who are just terrible people. I wanted to go somewhere where there was at least not more than two percent. And it really clicked here. And this



seemed -- it was a community which had a lot of dedication, a lot of people who had dedication to Judaism, to the Jewish community. It was a place where there was a nice crowd for Shabbat -- at least, pre-Katrina there was a nice crowd for Shabbat morning services. There still is. So a lot of people -- people who are open to new ideas for the religious life of the congregation. So this synagogue really had a lot of the things that we wanted, and it still does. I mean, some of the things that go on here are things that the rabbis in other places will kill for. We have a group of teenagers who are largely Ramah, a lot of them are Ramah kids, who are very into Jewish observance. Who come every week, who sing zmirot, who sing Shabbat songs at the table and say the Birkat Hamazon, grace after meals, together, like, Ramah style. We have commitment to helping make the minyanim -- make services, to come to services both on Shabbat and on weekday minyans, which we have on Sunday and Wednesday. We have, I think, despite all the people who left, I think we have people who love this community and -- some people who left love this community, obviously, also -- but we have people who really are interested in trying to improve this community and rebuild after Katrina. I think we have potential to get new people in the community, especially younger people, make commitments to have a job here for a few years or come down here and do service work. I mean, that's for the general New Orleans Jewish community, but I think it could benefit us and the other synagogues as well. So I think that there's still a lot of upset, a lot of uncertainty about the future, but there's also optimism, there's also people really wanting to make a communal life here. And I think there are a lot of the resources to go forward at a time like this, in this community. Certainly there are the challenges of having lost -- we were a congregation of 395 families, now maybe we're 275. A lot of people who were very dedicated to the synagogue and the community left, especially on the two ends, you had younger people who have fairly young children who left, and you had older people who were retired and so forth and then may have lost their homes, who left, especially if they had children somewhere else. So some of the retired people were significant contributors, so you have that challenge. Because of the loss of membership



and that, we have monetary challenges. There's a challenge to get -- there are people who are interested in coming to New Orleans to help out, but there's also still a challenge of encouraging this community to grow, because it's very -- to most people around the country, New Orleans now doesn't necessarily seem like a great place to go, unless they don't have too many attachments and they're interested in service work or so forth. I think that'll change, but -- there's the challenge of not having people already. We've had some people who had stayed after the hurricane, but have since decided to leave. There's the challenge of keeping people here while somehow the recovery process seems to go very slowly. I think of the Jewish community as one of the best things about the recovery process, because the Federation and the community really have town forums and so forth, to envision what the community will look like in the future, to plan and so forth. And I haven't seen the same gung-ho attitude among the --

RH: General population, huh --

TL: Well, a lot of grassroots among the general population, at least among the civic -- the political leaders of the city. And you know, the city blames the state, the state blames the federal government, and the federal government then blames the city. I mean, you know, it's -- for not getting money, for being corrupt, whatever. So that, I think, is a big challenge. To have people continue to have confidence in the New Orleans community. A big challenge, certainly, we were -- before Katrina, we were the largest contingent at the day school which meets across the street, and I think a day school is extremely important in Jewish life, and it also is the type of thing which brings in young, active, Conservative Jewish families, as well as various Jewish professionals. So the future success of the day school, I think, is very important to the congregation, even though it's community, it's not our day school. But it's a community day school. But I think that its success is very important, and I've seen optimistic signs, there are more kids in it this year than last year and so forth, so that's very good. And we've got -- one terrific thing that we have is a new educator, Naomi Chase, who is the Judaica director of the day



school and the education director here at Shir Chadash. And she comes with -- she is somebody who had tons of experience in Jewish education in Cleveland, and was at a point in her life where she was more free and wanted to try to make a difference and she was very interested in helping to make a difference here. So that's extremely promising, to have someone with that level of Jewish educational expertise, to be helping with education in our community. And I think also, quite frankly, there are challenges facing the Conservative movement in general, which isn't the topic of this interview so I'm not going to go into it. But the Conservative movement has been facing issues of losing numbers and so forth and making itself popular, making itself desirable and relevant and so forth, for various reasons. And so I think as the only Conservative synagogue in the New Orleans area, we face both the challenges -- which I clearly believe can be overcome, and some of which are exciting challenges -- we face both the challenges of the Conservative movement, as well as the challenges of post-Katrina New Orleans.

RH: It seems like you feel the response of the local Jewish community has been positive.

TL: Yes.

RH: And how do you feel the larger Jewish community has responded?

TL: I think an awful lot of the larger Jewish community has done a wonderful job. There's a lot of concern -- the Federation, the National Federation, gave lots of money -- pumped lots of money to Federation to help fund the various congregations, to help fund things, things they needed to do in the community. They created a position of a rabbinic pastoral counselor, to come down and essentially advise rabbis in the whole Katrina-affected area. Her name -- she's a colleague of mine, actually, a Conservative rabbi, her name is Isadorah Nermatza (sp?). And so they created her position so there would be someone to do pastoral work with the rabbis themselves, and then some non-Jewish clergy in various places. They've come down -- there've been a bunch of Federation



missions. There've been – other synagogue's in -- all sorts of groups have come down here. I guess, this was done a year later than it would have been otherwise, but the USY Spring Convention, the regional USY Spring Convention was held here. And that was a large success. We had a group from Seaboard region USY from the Washington area come down a couple months ago. We've had groups from different synagogues. We've been developing this connection with Congregation Sons of Israel in Briarcliff Manor, New York, where they invited me to come speak -- about a year ago, now, I guess, they invited me to come to speak about how things were over a year after Katrina. And now -- their groups, both with Federation and with just members of their synagogue, has come down several times, and they're going to have a mission from their congregation coming in November. So -- and we've had relationships with several synagogues like that where, certainly, people still, when I went to the Rabbinical Assembly Convention this year in Boston, people were asking, what can we do now, what can still be done, and how's the community now? There has been an awful lot of, I think, help and support out of national Jewish organizations.

RH: So you're not getting this, we're over Katrina, we've moved on, kind of attitude?

TL: No one -- the people that I've been dealing with -- we have still had a lot of contact and visits and (pause) outreach from various Jewish congregations, and from federations, from United Jewish Communities. And that has emphasized to me, both in what people say and in what they do, the extent to which people are aware of that problem and are trying to combat it. In other words, more so than I've had people say, look, everybody's over Katrina, I've had people say, you know, people begin to get tired after a while, so we really want to make sure we keep up the connection. And certainly there's that -- I mean, I think there's Katrina fatigue here. People will get -- like, for instance, on the High Holidays this past year, I gave several Katrina sermons, but they weren't all on Katrina. Because already, a year had passed, and people sometimes are coming to the synagogue to escape. They know about Katrina, it's why they're rebuilding





their house. They don't necessarily want every sermon on Katrina, and so forth. So I think even here there's an element of Katrina fatigue, and it affects every aspect of our lives. So I certainly understand that people out there, you know, it's not as intense. You know, everything's always the most intense right after it happens, that's just the way it is. But at the same time, I don't believe it's been forgotten. I've been impressed with Anderson Cooper on CNN, that's he's really made an effort to keep it in the spotlight. And the New York Times, I think, runs front page articles on various Katrina things. Not all the time, I mean, not as much as we would like, but I think the great run of the Saints, last year, helped keep New Orleans in the public eye.

RH: I hope you're praying for that.

TL: Right, exactly, exactly. Well I had a very difficult situation this year, because I'm from Philadelphia, and the Eagles played the Saints in the playoffs, so I found myself in the position of rooting against the Eagles, because as much as it was so important to the city, I feel such a connection now to the city and everything it's been through, the Saints just need it, this year, more than the Eagles. So I found myself in a bad situation. My family was mad at me.

RH: (laughter)

TL: But I think, certainly, clearly money's coming in, all sorts of things are happening, but I expected that. So I've been happy with the extent to which various groups really do try to seemingly keep up those connections. And we have something called a Chaverim Membership, where we have a non-resident membership for people, let's say, people who moved to Dallas or Houston or Atlanta or wherever who still want to keep their membership in our congregation. Who were physical members here. But we also have -- a Chaverim membership, for \$100 or whatever donation you'd like, anyone in the country can become a friendship member of our synagogue, and get our bulletin and get information about what's going on. And it's a way of connecting themselves to our



synagogue. And so we have gained thousands of dollars from it, and also the support and the connection with various Jews all over the country.

RH: You were saying that this community was open to new ideas, and I was wondering if there were some things you were planning in the future that are a little different, you know. I think your community -- is it a little older community, now, or -- I don't even know.

TL: Let's say it skews older.

RH: Skews older. What does that mean?

TL: What it means is, we are not a congregation, very clearly -- we are a congregation where you get a feeling of vibrancy when you walk in. We are not a congregation where you go to a Shabbat service and there are 25 people, all in their 80's.

RH: (laughter) OK, I got you.

TL: You know, you go to places like that and you realize, this is really an elderly congregation. We're not like that at all. But I'd say, we have a larger percentage. And this is happening in many places in the Conservative movement, not only here. We have a larger percentage of middle-aged and senior people. But, I mean, my bar or bat mitzvah class this past year was 12, 13 kids. So certainly we have a continuum. We have, as I said, a group of teens who are very active in the synagogue. And we have more teens who are sometimes shul-goers. So yes, I'd say it skews older, if you look at it that way, the demographics or whatever. So what were you saying, for why (inaudible) --

RH: Oh. Well, I was just asking if you were introducing some new ideas. It sounded like one of the memberships is a new fundraising idea. I didn't know if there were new classes, or different ways the community might seem like they want to get together that are a little different than before.



TL: There are a lot of things which we've done, and even a lot more that I'm interested in doing now. And some -- a lot of these aren't things -- are things we probably would have wanted to do wherever I had a congregation, or whatever had happened in this community. But certainly post-Katrina, doing innovative things, keeping membership and so forth, is more urgent than it was before. All the synagogues, some of the synagogues are in more of a position of competing for membership, although I certainly see us all as working on the same side. But certainly there's some competition for membership because there are fewer Jews in New Orleans now than there were. But we are instituting, from time to time, a musical Shabbat. We had a band, Jeremy Marks (sp?), and members of his band -- he's a high school student in our synagogue who plays very well. We've had musical Shabbat a couple times. We're going to try to do it with some regularity so we have a musical Friday night service. We just started doing family Shabbatot, a service appropriate for young families and for young kids for Friday night. I've been trying to do more creative things. At least once a month, I've been trying to do more creative things with the Shabbat morning service, within the context of the traditional service. Trying to put in more readings and things like that, things which people might find inspiring. And we're interested in -- you know, we really want to get together some sort of Chaverim, a young singles Chavarah, young families Chavarah, however we want to do it. Just groups for social or Jewish discussion meeting. So there are a bunch of things that -- I mean, I also want to try to put more of a focus on social action in the synagogue.

RH: I was going to move into a question about the relationship of the synagogue to the larger community, and what you think its role is, so just that.

TL: What do you mean?

RH: Well, I'm wondering what the relationship is, and what you believe the role of the Jewish community is in the larger community in New Orleans.



TL: I think that the synagogue fills a very important place as, first of all, the only Conservative synagogue in the New Orleans area. And I think it fulfills a very important place in having lots of -- it has a lot of very prominent and important members of the community, both -- who do a lot and who contribute a lot financially -- are members of our congregation. And I think that people want us and I want us to play a vital role in the New Orleans Jewish community in general. I mean, I was on one of the task forces, which is led, also, by -- task force one, about demographic issues and so forth, of the Federation trying to deal with post-Katrina reality. And that was led, actually, by another member of our congregation, John Berenson. Chuck Stern led another of these task forces. He was another member of our Shul. So I think there's just a lot of physical and financial contribution to the Jewish community now, as there was before. And I think the role -- in the wider society, I think, part of the role of the Jewish community is -- the Jewish community has always had an important philanthropic and volunteering commitment to the wider community, to music and art and various good works. And so I think that -- that was the case before Katrina, and I think that it will continue after Katrina. But in addition, as I said, I think the Jewish community has shown a good example of how to try to be aggressive in recreating New Orleans. That is, to such an extent that it was the lead story in the Times Picayune about how -- about how the Federation's doing under Michael Weil, and the leadership of Federation. What they're doing to really try to re-imagine New Orleans and really think about, what are our top priorities, and what the Jewish community is doing was a discussion in -- it was an article in the Jerusalem post. It was an article in the Los Angeles Times. What the Jewish community is doing, I think, can serve as an example of sort of aggressive re-ima -- and it's not that everything we do is going to come to fruition, but, as an example of how to aggressively re-imagine. And I think that that fulfills a role the Jewish community has had for a long time, of leading by example. Of leading by example, and of being one of the most helpful and dedicated groups in the city.



RH: You talked about the fact that the storm showed us that there was a lot of disparity between rich and poor, and not that everybody, rich and -- it didn't hit that way, but it did show us, did reveal that. What do you feel the responsibility is, or what are you doing -- are you involved in anything in the community across racial lines or class lines or anything like that?

TL: I haven't been as directly involved as I would have liked to have been. And sometimes I speak out on topics that are related to that. But what I'd like to do is really get more involved in -- you know, one thing that's happened is that, I'm not naturally a with-my-hands type of person, so there are some people who would just automatically gravitate to rebuilding homes. I have to force myself with it a little bit because it's not something that necessarily comes naturally to me. But that's part of -- when I say I want there to be more focus on social action, I want to be doing more of those things and I'd like for the synagogue to be doing more of those things on an official basis.

RH: Maybe there's something with the library. Maybe it doesn't have to be building houses --

TL: That's (inaudible). I'm just saying it as something --

RH: Public libraries --

TL: Things people are doing with, you know, hammering in...

RH: Do you feel connected to the city of New Orleans, being in Metairie, which is, like, the suburb, here. What's that relationship?

TL: I think it's very related. Because a lot of our people were -- certainly were and still are living in New Orleans proper. And the distance is so small and the interplay is so great that -- I mean, I go to uptown all the time for various things. And the distance -- to me, it seems -- to everybody else, it seems like, oh, it's such a huge way you've come to



Metairie from uptown. But to me, who lived in New Jersey, where everything's an hour away, it seems -- everything seems very close. So I think everything is so intertwined. I think Metairie is doing better because I think Jefferson Parish is doing better, partially because the damage wasn't as intense in most places, and because, I think there's more money in it, and perhaps the Jefferson Parish authorities have been doing a better job than the New Orleans authorities. But you know, I think that Metairie's doing a bit better because of all those things. But I also think that there's so much interplay, you know. It's not going to help anyone if -- Metairie exists because of New Orleans, ultimately. It can't be this disembodied thing where suddenly, you have a suburb without a city. So it's clear to me that rebuilding the city itself is integral to rebuilding Metairie. I think they're both just very related.

RH: What has being Jewish meant to you during this experience?

TL: I think that it's a little -- it might be a little bit of a -- kind of harder is the question. It's an interesting question for me because Judaism is my life, so both as a rabbi and as an observant Jew -- I mean, my Judaism comes up naturally to me all the time. You know, I say Brachot whenever I eat, I daven three times a day if I'm able. But I think one thing is, it gives a paradigm of coming back from destruction, for one thing, which has happened over and over in Jewish history, where some of our central ideas are the idea of how Judaism is recreated after the destruction of the Temple. After the destruction of the second temple. How there was a second temple after the destruction of the first temple. Rebuilding after the Inquisition, rebuilding after the Holocaust. We have the state of Israel coming -- I mean, there is so much -- that central idea of exile and redemption, or of fading and then coming back, I think is integral to the Jewish experience. So that gives me, when I'm doing sermons or when I'm doing whatever, that gives me a real model to work from so that it's something that I think that Jews have a way of relating to this whole situation. And I used, for instance, one of the Haftorot, actually, the Haftorah we'll read in, I guess, this week, one which -- last week there was a bat mitzvah in Atlanta



that I did from our congregation, where it was that Haftorah. And the Haftorah, the prophetic reading, is -- this is, God talks about how He'll come back to us and how He'll redeem us. It says, "For this is like the waters of Noah. Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would no more cover the earth, so I promise not to reject you or rebuke you." So I've quoted that. Especially when you read this portion, I've quoted that a lot. It just seemed very apropos.

RH: How do you explain to people -- what is your understanding of God and this -- have you had congregational people who wonder what we've done wrong? Certainly, there's been Jerry Falwell, people have claimed God's vengeance on New Orleans.

TL: And God claim, him, so --

RH: (laughter)

TL: Yeah. My attitude -- I have certainly had people who have constantly been -- sometimes constantly, sometimes once in a while -- been very concerned -- you know, asked me that question, about how God could have allowed this kind of thing. And, you know, a lot of people have read Harold Kushner, my colleague, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*, and a variety of other books which are very good, in which he talks about his belief that, really, God isn't responsible for the bad. And I don't know if I've always -- I'm not necessarily in lockstep with everything he says, but I agree with him on the idea that there are a lot of things that happen in nature -- I agree with him on the idea that basically, nature follows a natural course, so that if there's a storm which develops and it comes this way and the levies aren't strong enough and everything, God doesn't work by making a miracle and coming -- and I know traditional Jewish theology would often say that this is the way He works, but it just doesn't work for me to say, you know, God is there just planning whether this is going to come through the levies or not come through the levies, and involved with every inch of the process. Nature was set up a certain way, some of it very destructive, and I believe it was set up by God, but, you



know, I think nature follows its own course. So that you can't -- I mean, it's the same thing, I mean, I think of things like the tsunami, the Asian tsunami, in which like 200,000 people suddenly were killed. And I believe that there are plates that shift and cause earthquakes and cause tsunamis, and that's why. And it's not so satisfying as if you believe that your praying to God constantly is really changing things in the world. But at the same time, you know, I think that God -- to me, God is creator, and God is what gives us the strength to go on in these situations, whether it's adrenaline or whatever, that extra strength that we get, that ability to pluck hope out of sorrow, I think is God in our lives. And as is true in the Book of Job and in various works. You know, how God works in history all the time is somewhat of a mystery, even though Jews claim that He works in history in various ways.

RH: Thank you. I appreciate you discussing that. Why don't we talk about, a little, again back into your personal life, what have you learned about yourself in this process?

TL: I've learned that we should unpack our books immediately when we move somewhere.

RH: (laughter)

TL: I think I've learned -- and I want to avoid boasting -- but I've learned that I had the ability to help lead people through a crisis. People, following Katrina, people expressed a lot of satisfaction with the things I had done to try to keep the community together. So I learned that I was able to -- in this kind of crisis at least, luckily, I don't know what would have happened if something had devastated me more, if I had, God forbid, lost a family member or something like that -- but I was able to help lead in this crisis, and do some things that brought comfort to people and helped people feel like the community was staying together. I think I've (pause), I think I've learned, perhaps, that stress affects me. Which I think I knew for a long time. But it doesn't necessarily paralyze me, but I've had to figure out ways of dealing with stress when -- you know, especially in these situations





where my son was sick and my wife was sick and I'm here for Yom Kippur, or I'm here for Chanukah or whatever. I've learned that -- I guess this isn't about me, but I've learned that there are a lot of people who care, a lot of people that want to help. I've learned that -- I mean, I think that I have learned some things about myself. But I feel like I also -- I've learned, just over my years in the rabbinate, which is now, really, five years, and actually having come into the rabbinate, I've learned that I can't fix everything either, I can't be perfect. So I think some of all those things. (pause) And we --

RH: So how do you deal with stress?

TL: Well, I like to say -- none of this is very funny, but I tell people -- Miriam and I were in Manhattan for 9/11. We were in Israel at the height of the Hamas bombings in 2002. We were here for Katrina. So usually when I tell people this, they get up and don't want to sit next to me, because they're worried what disaster I'm going to bring next. So there's various stress that I've had to deal with in a lot of different situations. I think I try to calm myself, I try to have myself do one thing at a time and just sort of figure, OK, what's the one thing, I can't do everything at once and just run around, run around like a chicken without a head, I have to think, OK, what's the best order for me to do things in. And that I'm not going to be perfect, but that there are ways to get through these things. And certainly talking -- a lot of the time when I'm stressed, talking to people, both people in the congregation -- my wife, first of all, and then people in the congregation, and also some of my rabbis, everybody's been very helpful.

RH: Are there any priorities of yours that are different now than prior to this storm?

TL: Yeah, I think rebuilding and revitalization. We would have had the sense of trying to plan for the future, trying to have the community go in a different direction, but we would clearly not have the same kind of rebuilding and re-imagining issues for the synagogue or for the community, for the Jewish community, those things would not -- we wouldn't be talking in that kind of language. I mean, I feel like if Katrina hadn't happened, or since



the storm, everything is different. I mean, everything in life here is different. I think priorities -- it's hard to say that -- I think that -- it's hard for me to say that, well, my family's much more of a priority, because I feel like my family was always a priority. I mean, I was always, in any situation like this, I have a priority of making sure I balance, you know, try to balance work and home well. But certainly it -- when I wrote once about the tsunami in Asia, I said that the most we can do, when we hear these things, we can't always explain it, or, we can't bring the people back, (inaudible) [the most?] we can do is hug our children tighter and be glad for what we have.

RH: Right. A question went in my head and then it came out of my head from something that you had said. I know -- is there one memory of Katrina that kind of encapsulates what's gone on with you and Katrina, or your congregation, or just a fond memory of the events since the recovery, that you would like to share? (pause) I'm hoping there are a lot of them, since you can't decide which one.

TL: (pause) One of them would be, having Yom Kippur services without a rug and with folding chairs in the sanctuary, but having 200 people there. (pause) I think having my son's Bris in New Jersey, and not having -- realizing the extent of -- feeling this exiled sense, that all these things were going on that we thought were going to happen in New Orleans that hadn't.

RH: I think that we're about done, and I don't know if there's anything else that you want to talk about.

TL: (pause) I think we've covered a lot.

RH: You have. You've told me a lot about the congregation and yourself and your family.

TL: Right. I don't have so much more, except that -- especially having been in these three awful situations in various ways, that -- I feel a little bit like Forrest Gump. Every



historical -- you go to Vietnam, and Johnson gives you a medal, and then you go and you speak at a hippie rally, and then you look out the window and you see the Watergate burglars breaking in -- all these different historical things are sort of happening. I've made that joke, that I feel like, that's the way I feel.

RH: I don't know. It's like God works in history and you're working in history too, in American history.

TL: Yeah, exactly, right.

RH: In these significant moments of the new century.

TL: Right.

RH: Thanks, I appreciate it.

TL: Sure, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]