



Yossi Nemes Transcript

ROSALIND HINTON: This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Rabbi Yossi Nemes at 4141 West Esplanade, which is the Chabad Center? Chabad --

YOSSI NEMES: Jewish Center.

RH: Jewish Center in Metairie, Louisiana. Today is Friday July 13th. 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 Nemes, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

YN: Yes I do.

RH: OK. Let's start with your education, general and Jewish, mostly Jewish, and with how you came to be in New Orleans.

YN: I grew up in New York and went to, I guess what you call, yeshiva high school. After high school I studied in yeshivas both in Johannesburg and then back in Brooklyn where I was ordained. So it's the equivalent of a bachelor's and then a couple year's postgraduate with an ordination. And I got to New Orleans. After Chanie and I met and got married in 1989 I was studying in a kollel postgraduate studies program. And Rabbi Rivkin came to New Orleans and said he wanted to open up a Chabad satellite office in the suburbs and he said New Orleans is a small community, a very nice community, very haimish, and we came. We're here.

RH: And so you've been here since 1989.

YN: No. We moved here in August of 1990.



RH: Tell me a little bit about what it's like to be in the Chabad community and in New Orleans.

YN: Well, specify the question. What it is to be a Chabad rabbi in especially New Orleans?

RH: Right, thank you.

YN: OK, well the founder of the Hasidic movement, the Ba'al Shem Tov, one of the fundamental beliefs of Judaism in general and especially Hasidism is that all Jews are family. And just like every human being is created in the image of God and that's of infinite value separate from what they may or may not be doing, all Jews are mishpachah, family. And we try to live our lives here and to reach out and to not only get along but to plan together with the rest of our family, all of our Jewish brothers and sisters in New Orleans, to better the community, for what the community needs. Now every community is different. The one thing about Chabad that's very unique, when you look from afar it looks like it's like Burger King branches, you know, a franchise. And maybe in a sense it is. Everybody being. But the Rebbe said every place should be different based on what the people need in the place and the lifestyle and background and nature of the people. So every Chabad house should be unique based on the community. So we live in New Orleans, we breathe in New Orleans, we're here for life until Moshiach comes. And we're very happy to be here. And we become part of the community so that our work can be tailored for the New Orleans community. And New Orleans is a very unique community, even before Katrina. It was a small community, but people really get along. We were made to feel right in, not only in the Chabad community but in the general community. And it's a very -- in a way with everybody getting along, and it has all what's good about small communities, let's put it that way.

RH: Is there anything unique about being Jewish in a city like New Orleans?



YN: Well, we are such a small percentage. I know before the storm we were like 1%. And when you compare that with Houston and Atlanta and Dallas and the other cities around, which are much larger cities, but the Jewish community is still a larger percentage, it might be 3 or 4% of the greater Atlanta area, for example, whatever it is. And there's very large communities. So we are a very very very great minority. But again the people who are here really stick together. And New Orleans also has its flavor and its own culture. And this is a fact. It's not just another city surrounded by suburbs. It is very unique, I think in most ways for the better. To give one example of what I mean by unique, I can. People are definitely very laidback. So for example, when there's issues that stir up the Jewish world, and these are important issues, security of the state of Israel, whether territorial compromise or standing strong is the right way to go, that type of issue, more emotional issue might be the so-called "Who is a Jew?" issue, there are issues that stir up the Jewish world from time to time, important issues. And New Orleans seems to never get caught up in a way of -- that people are interested, certainly with communications today people are aware of what's going on, people care, but it never gets personal, it's never to the extent where relationships are broken where we throw out the baby with the bathwater. Of course these are important issues. That's one of the things that I've noticed most. That no matter what's come down the pike -- I remember specifically in the early '90s there were issues that tore other communities apart, in New Orleans it never happened. I think small communities in general are like that. But New Orleans is especially. People take things in stride and don't overreact, shall I say? And for me it's very rewarding to live in such a place.

RH: That's very interesting. So tell me about your family. How many children you have and --

YN: Chanie and I, we have seven children. Now the oldest is a girl, Chaya Mushka. She's 17. And the youngest is a girl. Her name is Risha. She's two. All in all we have six girls and one boy.



RH: And tell me about their education.

YN: Well they study at Torah Academy until eighth grade. And for high school we send them away. So far we've sent away our older two daughters and next year Libby our third daughter is going to be -- we send them to New York to Beth Rivkah High School. And we were very very anxious about it, sending away a teenage daughter at 14 years old. It is by the way the most difficult thing about being a Chabad rabbi in New Orleans. We need Jewish education for your high schoolers. Shall we say an observant, an Orthodox Jewish education. That is the only difficulty. Kosher food there's enough. If you have to have chicken in your freezer instead of your fridge that's not a big deal. Really in every other way we like our quality of life here. The only challenge, difficulty, is having to send the kids away. But you know what? We prepared, worked on it. We brought them first year. They go, they come every four to six weeks home during ninth grade when they're freshmen. And so far it's worked very well. They really found themselves and they're doing very well.

RH: Do the kids who go away, do they return?

YN: Will they come home to live? I don't know. Probably one or two of my children. I would say if you're a Chabad rabbi in Chicago or in Atlanta your chances of having more of your children come home are greater because of the opportunities there both in the Jewish career, in the Jewish world, and otherwise. So really it's like everybody else, I would say.

RH: Your story for -- well let me ask you one other question. If you could tell me one of your most vivid memories of your Jewish community, of the Jewish community here, that kind of encapsulates --

YN: Before Katrina?

RH: Before Katrina.



YN: To me it was I went on the Federation trip to Israel. A very diverse group. In that moment I realized that we're really -- it became clear to me, I already knew, that we're really one family. Everybody was made to feel included. Myself and the longstanding members of the New Orleans community. The wealthier people and those that weren't that wealthy. Those who were part of the dominant Reform community, which I guess at that time was Federation culture. And those who were not part of that. And I really felt a very strong bond. It was a very exciting trip, and it made clear for me why we're happy to live here. And I started seeing that everywhere. I knew it but I wasn't seeing it everywhere. And after that experience, I was able to visualize it everywhere, that we really are a united community.

RH: So now let's move into Katrina because your Katrina story is very unique, I think, because you stayed. So why don't you tell me first when you realized there was a problem and how you generally respond and what happened.

YN: I'll give you a feel and you want to put a question in the middle, because it'll take some time. Friday before the storm I guess it was August 26th. I believe the media reports were that the storm -- we're out of the cone, it will not hit us, you breathed a sigh of relief. This was obviously a very large, strong storm. Well, as you know, from Friday sundown until Saturday nightfall we don't listen to the radio or TV. It's Shabbat. So as far as we were concerned, when Shabbat started we were out of the cone and we actually had a special Shabbat in the community. There was a Holocaust survivor who had passed away a month before. That Saturday was his Shloshim and there was a very large kiddush with a lot of people coming that day to synagogue. In the morning people who came to synagogue said that "They're saying now it's moving towards us, there's a 20% chance it'll hit New Orleans." By the time we got to the Torah reading the people who were coming in by the Torah reading were saying they just heard that there's a 30, 40% chance. There are some people who show up to shul I guess for the kiddush. And they were saying now 50, 60%, there's a recommended evacuation, they strongly urge



everybody to evacuate. So we realized there was a serious problem. But we said we'll wait 'til after Shabbat. There was no emergency to do anything that day. After Shabbat, we realized that this is a very serious storm and it's coming our way. But we've had so many experiences over the 15 years that we've lived here up to Katrina, 15 years, where storms were constantly moving northeast, they were constantly ending up in the Mobile Bay area, Pensacola area, that we said we'll wait till the next morning. Next morning came, and the storm was still heading towards us. So beginning to look a little bit ominous. So we're following the path of the storm, and we're actually getting ready to go. Chabad had just purchased a 15-passenger van for our camp three weeks before Katrina. We had a camp in early August. We said that's going to be our getaway vehicle, because all of our seven children were here at the time, which is unusual, but they had finished camp, and they were not yet -- school starts after Labor Day in the northeast, so everyone was home. So we were nine people. Plus my niece came for a visit, first time, my niece from Manchester, Devorah Leah, she came for a one-week visit. She's always her whole life wanted to come to New Orleans. And that was the week she was here. She came Wednesday. And so we were ten people but we had a 15-passenger van, no problem. It was very chaotic here that morning, boarding up windows, trying to get gas rations. In hindsight, a lot of people probably took care of these errands on Saturday on Shabbat. But I was working on that. But then the phone, I came into the synagogue at 11:00 and we were seriously considering leaving about 1:00. I came in at 11:00 to take the Torahs. We have two Torah scrolls. And I didn't want to leave them here for various reasons, I took them to a closet in my house. We have a two-story, very strong brick home. I was going to put them in a closet without windows and cover them with garbage cans just in -- with garbage bags just in case the roof blows off, protect it as much as I can. So I came to take the Torahs and the phone started ringing. And there were calls, call after call from tourists who were stuck downtown. I don't know if you were aware, but many hotels actually closed their doors on Sunday morning and the airports had stopped flying Sunday morning and there were



no flights to be gotten and you either had to find a place in one of the other hotels that were open, which was very hard to find a place, because you have all these New Orleanians that had slots in hotels, they thought that was great to be in the Hilton or the Hyatt. So it was very hard for those tourists who were literally asked to leave their hotels to find a place and they were told to go to the Superdome. So first I got a call from a woman in Memphis who I happened to know her sister-in-law from Israel, I met her once, and she says there are eight guys who are here for a bachelor party, eight young Jewish men, they're here for a bachelor party, they're stuck, there's nowhere to rent a car, they don't want to go to the Superdome. I couldn't bring them to my house, I had a few young ladies, a bunch of daughters, and there wasn't a place to bring eight guys in. But I found them a place in the French Quarter that was taking people. I found them a place. And this took a long time to arrange them a place to go. Instinctively, I knew that people should not be in the Superdome. I didn't realize what kind of -- of course I didn't know how difficult things would be over there, but there was once before already where the Superdome was torn up, it just was not a good situation, especially for out-of-towners who might not be ready for such an experience. So I got them a place in the French Quarter. Later on, much later, I heard that they actually had to -- they got out a few days later walking in waist-deep water and they got out to a boat, they got out and they were all fine. And this was happening all day. And Chanie was getting calls at home. We were also calling all the elderly people that we knew to see what their plans are. It was such -- see, what people don't realize, the chaos in the city of that morning, and not because anybody dropped the ball or anything, you had 750,000 people leaving town within 24 hours, there was traffic and chaos and we needed to account, we called all the elderly people we knew. Many of them were taken by their kids to other places. To safety, I guess you can say. Some had to remain. So we couldn't -- we brought them some bread, some food, but we didn't really know what to do. I was working with the other Chabad staff. It was very chaotic. Half the Chabad staff left and half the Chabad staff was considering to leave. In the meantime I just remember going, taking the 15-



passenger van to fill it up with gas and waiting on line, helping elderly people, some of them had never filled gas themselves. I remember first of all there was almost no gas stations open. Finally found a Discount Zone on West Esplanade. What was going on on Sunday was very chaotic and it was eerie. I didn't know, nobody knew, to what extent the city would be blown away, but to see everybody check out, to see the panic that was coming. Then we got a call from two young ladies, Marnie and Renata, it was like two Jewish girls, one from New York and one from Toronto, who were vacationing here in the French Quarter. And their hotel asked them to leave and they called me and they got ahold of me at the office when I was there and they said -- this is again like 11:00, that they were asked to leave, and they were actually standing on Canal Street with a sign, "Please take me out of town." Because there was actually a picture in the Toronto Star of this girl Marnie standing with a sign, please. Asking for a ride. They didn't get a ride. They said, "We're stuck. We're going over to the Superdome." So I told them, "Don't go to the Superdome, let me try to see if I can get you a ride." I couldn't find them a ride. They ended up taking a taxi for \$75. They came to our house. About 1:00 they made it to our house. So now we have 12 people. That Shabbat there was a young artist, very talented artist, her name was Ilanit, and she came the first time Shabbat, she lived in New Orleans for a while, I think she went to other synagogues like the Chabad house uptown, the other Chabad house. That Shabbat she came to our house the first time. She's a very vivacious, bubbly young lady. We really hit it off. And then after Shabbat I gave her a ride home. She's what you imagine a real artistic type to be. She lived in -- it's not really New Orleans East, but it's somewhere out there past Elysian Fields in one of these -- it's on the way to the Ninth Ward, between downtown and the Ninth Ward, I don't know what the name of that neighborhood is. I don't know what the neighborhood is. She would take a bicycle to the French Quarter and do her painting, had a little studio-- was working in somebody's studio, and the JCC was about to have her first exhibit of her paintings. Was going to be a couple weeks after Katrina. She was very excited. This is what she was working for the year she was here. Anyway, to get to the



bottom line, I took her home Saturday night and she was living in this like -- she was renting almost like a bungalow, one of these houses that you see in the Ninth Ward, although this is right before the Ninth Ward, very old wooden house.

RH: Upper Nine I guess that is.

YN: It's past, around Elysian Fields. And I realized in the morning that she can't stay alone over there. First of all, it's not a very safe neighborhood to begin with. Who knows what's going to happen? There might be curfews and who knows what's going on there? I called her and I said, "You got to get over to our house." It was too late to get out of town, we're talking now about 1:00. Now she didn't even have how to get over here. I couldn't go pick her up then. At least I thought I couldn't. There was just so much going on. And she had her bicycle. It was about to start raining. So luckily one of our members had just boarded up his store downtown. I got ahold of him and he picked her up and brought her to Metairie, and then he ran away, left with his family. He was the last person in our community to have left. He probably left about 2:30, 3:00. So now we're 13 people in our house. Chanie, ourselves, our seven children, four young ladies. And we still had room in the 15-passenger van. But by now it was getting very late and we were getting very concerned. It started raining. I wouldn't say there were squalls yet but it was getting windy. And we just sized up the situation. I called a rabbi that I respect in California very much and discussed the dangers of leaving, what happens if you break down on the road, get caught in traffic with little babies. I mean, we were making the decision by what we knew then in August of 2005, not in August of 2007. And we knew, which turned out to be correct, that we had a very strong house with steel hurricane shutters and we decided to stay. We had lots of food. We had probably five, six days' worth of water. So we started going through all the precautions that you go through. Filling up your bathtubs with water. Making sure all the flashlights, transistor radios worked, putting in batteries. Closing all the hurricane shutters, which we had very -- steel hurricane shutters. And on the phone friends calling me and saying "What are you doing,



what are you, crazy?" Said, "No, it's a big deal." I'm not going to say – well, we have a two-story brick home and we'll be fine. And one other, the Chabad rabbi uptown, stayed. And we were talking to each other. He lives in a very large strong brick home as well, two-story.

RH: Which rabbi is that?

YN: Rabbi Rivkin, Rabbi Zelig Rivkin. And so we kind of got ready. We battened down the hatches. I remember that I'm not sure if the curfew was 4:00 or 6:00 when the curfew started. But I know that at 4:00 I took everybody except Chanie -- Chanie was baking bread for the next day -- and I took everybody else in the 15-passenger van and took them for a ride around Metairie to see the city empty and boarded up. The roads were not completely empty. There were quite a few people. One of our members actually had left earlier in the day, and she got caught in traffic so bad that she turned back and came back and stayed here also in Metairie. So we were in contact with her. She was only a block away. I advised her. She went out of her house, went to somebody else's house, that was a two-story home. And we got ready for the storm. And then it was curfew. We were stuck in our home with the shutters closed. And it built up. It was such a large storm. The outer bands were so large that it was very gradual. At 9:00, 11:00 at night I said, "Oh, this is pretty strong but we can deal with it." Little did I know the winds were probably 75-80 miles an hour then. And it was raining very strongly. So we had a lot of people there. One of the nice things was that the girls that were staying with us, they almost -- they were running like a camp for our kids, for our younger kids, they were doing games with them and programs. It was a very strange -- we felt like Noah and his family in the ark. We were stuck there and we had dinner together. They played games with the kids and read stories. Then when the kids went to sleep, the younger kids, my older daughters and our guests and ourselves, we went from playing board games to reading psalms and saying prayers that we should be safe. Around midnight my niece and Ilanit were saying psalms under the -- we have a skylight in the lower part of our



house. There was one part of our house, only one story. And there's a skylight, and a tree actually fell on the skylight. That whole section fell. Thank God it did not come in. The tree just blew off. We had some damage to the roof but it was not major. And that shook us up a little bit. But ultimately we heard things knocking against the shutters. Besides the skylight every other window was shuttered. And the winds were howling, things were blowing, it was pretty scary. We, of course for the children and for the young ladies, we, were of course, expressing confidence and calm and Chanie is especially good at being calm under pressure. And certainly looking calm under pressure. When we got into our own room, one of the things we did, we had one transistor radio, we had it in our bedroom. And so we were giving all the news, we were censoring things, because as the storm was -- as things were progressing and the storm was getting stronger and stronger and we realized that this is -- we didn't know what it means to be in a Category whatever it came in at, 3, sustained winds, we had no idea what we were getting into. So brick home, this is before the flooding, it was a brick home, shutters. But the way things were pounding against the house, the sounds of the wind, so we were censoring the news. And the truth is at that time the news was it's a very strong storm, it's coming through, mandatory evacuation, you should be out, but the fact was that 25% of the people were still here, hundreds of thousands of people right through it. Everybody went to bed about 1:00. And I woke up at 5:00 and I still had power. I went on the Internet. I saw the storm is getting really close. And then about 5:15 the power went out and about an hour later it got very very hot obviously right away, the heat and the humidity eventually would be a very big problem over the next couple days. About 6:00.

RH: We were at 6:00 a.m. and something happened at 6:00 a.m.

YN: OK, well, let me think. At 6:00 a.m. Monday morning August 29th, again we're talking about almost two years now, although I remember the events vividly, that week is etched in our mind, I don't know exactly as far as the timeline might be off 15 minutes or a half-hour. In fact it was probably more like 7:00. The water started rising in the house.



I saw the water coming close. The whole night it was getting close, close, close to the house. The house is elevated a little bit. And at about 7:00 the water started rising and the water started seeping into the house. It seemed to be coming like from under the foundation and also from outside. Just a little bit started coming in. I woke up Chanie and some of the older girls. And first we put under all the doors to the outside we put towels. And then in hindsight we were like trying to battle a Category 3 or 4 hurricane with some towels. But at the time we were just -- nobody obviously -- that's what we thought at the time. Some water coming in. There was a couple of -- there was one leak from the roof. So I had like a big pot under it. Well, within a couple minutes there was like between -- well, it took about an hour and a half actually. It was rising, rising, rising. At the end we ended up with between 12 and 18 inches in our home. There was a step down. Some of the rooms are a little lower. Those had 18 inches of water. In fact, the guest room had even -- some had even more, had two feet of water. And the highest parts of the house on the first floor had 12 inches. In the meantime myself and Chanie and the older girls were taking up like certain furniture, records, we were there. Drawers of file cabinets, we were able to get certain things upstairs that were very valuable. There was a lot of people that lost all their records. We actually carried it up. Also some other valuable things. Pictures on the wall, it didn't really get that high. But we actually took the pictures off the wall. In retrospect saved them, because eventually the mold went up four feet, and in some places even more. So we were real busy with that. And then we carried up some food and we had freezers full of food, we took up some stuff. And by about 9:00 we finished taking up whatever we thought we'd take up. We had all this water down there. The storm was still raging. So for the next two days the 13 of us were upstairs. There's four bedrooms. And two -- one bathroom upstairs, which wasn't working. The water also turned off. We lost power. The water wasn't working. And then, which didn't happen in many places, not only our cell phones went off but our land line was working for a while. And in fact I was on the phone with somebody and I was saying well the water's coming up now and I'm taking stuff upstairs. And then our land



line went dead. So we had no communication with the outside world for almost two days. Which is what set a panic in some of our friends and relatives. So we spent that whole day, early afternoon the storm started subsiding and we opened all the shutters and the windows and actually that day there was a very good breeze. The remnants of the Katrina wind. But there it was. We had the foot and a half to two feet of water downstairs. Our house was about three feet up. I would say there was about four and a half feet of water on the street. I saw one fellow was walking towards -- just an image pressed in my mind, sometime late afternoon on Monday when the storm subsided I saw somebody walking in the street with water like up to here, holding his puppy up and shouting they turned off the pumps. The parish turned off the pumps. That was the first I heard that in fact the pumps, the levees didn't break in our neighborhood, but the pumps were off. We kept each other company and things were still very much under control. This was the situation. We had water, we had food. We didn't feel any imminent danger at all. Monday night, this was. A couple rowboats passed by Monday evening. And at one point Monday night there was like a flatbed boat, heavy boat, maybe five, six officials I guess from the police department or some emergency officials that came by and I shouted from my second floor window and they shouted back and they said, "We're here for anybody who might have a medical condition or needs emergency care." And I knew of one person that stayed. I told them to go check it out. And later I found out that right across the street my two elderly neighbors stayed, which we'll get to soon. But they sent -- they took down our address, telephone number -- not -- our address and how many people we had there. And I made them promise. I said, "We're OK now, but we need somebody to come by tomorrow and check on us. We have no telephone service." They promised they would come back tomorrow. Well, the next time anybody came by it was like September. They sprayed our house. I think it was September 4th or something. Never came back. But it was amazing to see a full flatbed boat with five, six people going right by your house, motor. Monday night went through uneventfully. Tuesday morning we woke up. Basically the water was the same level. There was nothing



happening. If it subsided, it was maybe half an inch. So it was very hot. Everybody was shvitzing. But we kept things in good spirits. Everybody took turns taking sort of what you can call a bath with some of the water we had in the bathtub. And we were all upstairs trying to keep it clean. Again really like Noah's ark, worrying about where the garbage would be and whatever else. We improvised in a lot of areas, in the areas of how to use the restroom, things of that -- which is not important for the -- but there was something we had never been through. We had 13 people upstairs, no water, no power, no telephone, four rooms. The--Tuesday afternoon we saw the parish had very large trucks. These trucks that would go over these very high, the trucks that can drive in any kind of things. Brought in the workers back to the pumping stations. And eventually a couple hours later, the pumps went on. And then the water started subsiding. First from our house. Late Tuesday night the water was out of our house, except we were left with a big layer of mud. But in the street there was still a lot of water. And it was dark. You've never seen such darkness. You look out at the city, and all you see is darkness. I should go back to something which I forgot to mention. This was really the scariest time of our time after Katrina in New Orleans. About Tuesday midmorning we started hearing on the radio, Chanie and myself, that the water is rising in New Orleans. That's when they became aware of the levee break, which I understood happened earlier, but for whatever reason Monday night they weren't talking about it. Tuesday morning they said the water is rising all over the city. And at that point they weren't saying which neighborhoods. They were saying, "Everywhere." In fact, the announcer was saying, e "Everybody in Orleans and Jefferson Parish, if you're still there now, get out now. The water is rising. Everyone is in grave danger." Now, we couldn't go anywhere, there's four and a half feet of water in the street. And that was pretty scary for about three hours. They said, "There's a meeting of the Army Corps of Engineers..." and for those three hours it was very tense. Now we came out. We said, "We got water, everything's under control, worse comes to worst if we're out of water in a couple days they'll take us to the Superdome," whatever it was. But in the meantime, we were like going back and



forth to the room. And early Tuesday afternoon they announced that the water in Metairie is not rising anymore. It's the other side of the 17th Street Canal. It's Lakeview where the water is rising. And it was very frightening just to listen where it was such chaos. In fact WWL, which is the only radio station still on, the emergency broadcast system, they got knocked out downtown. So they were all from one place in Jefferson Parish. There was no communication with the whole Saint Bernard Parish. They said, "We understand the rooftops are flooded and even the emergency" -- I happened to do some work in Saint Bernard and Plaquemines Parish, because I do some kosher supervision and I go once a week. I know a lot of people there personally. And they said that there's houses covered with water. And I don't know if you -- the emergency radios didn't operate for a couple days. There was no communication with those parishes at all. And then we started hearing that whole areas of New Orleans was ten feet of water, 12 feet of water. They said the water in Metairie is not rising, it's as it is. This was Tuesday afternoon. That I can say was the most -- of our time in New Orleans, it was very scary. No other way of saying it. By Tuesday night, as I mentioned earlier, the water was out of our house except for all the mud, was terrible. So the girls went down. We were tired of being upstairs. They cleared out the dining room. Not completely clean, but kind of cleared all the mud into a different room. And we set up a plastic table with folding chairs and came down. Like 11:00 at night we had a dinner downstairs in the dining room. The gas was still on. So we only had gas, only our stove. Our oven was not gas, just the stovetop. So we like put meat in a pan and cooked it on top of the whatever it was, made a hot dinner, and we all ate dinner at 11:00. But the heat was so stifling on Tuesday, it was absolutely terrible. That was a very big concern, I have to say. But everybody went to sleep Tuesday night. I maybe slept an hour or two. The heat was terrible. In fact our baby was then eight months old. We woke her up in the middle of the night and gave her a bath with some of the bathwater. Just gave her a drink. Tuesday night passed. And all the meantime you had going from the -- I guess it was the airport area or somewhere in Kenner to north shore, which I now understand,



Lakeview and New Orleans East and other areas where the helicopters were taking people off roofs. You had military helicopters going by at very great speeds and very low, relatively low. It was just like being -- I thought I was in Vietnam for a while, besides everything else. We realized that they were going to save people off the houses. Although because we heard on the radio that some neighborhoods were filling up. It was surreal. Total darkness, helicopters flying through. And everything was calm. I don't want -- there was no panic in my house, especially after those three hours. Everything was calm. We had now about two days of water left. Our biggest fear was that we'll have to go to the -- at this point by the way our house held up beautifully, besides all the floodwater. We had no electricity, no water, no phone. And there was mud on the floor and there was still water in the street. But our biggest fear was that we'd run out of water, drinking water. We had probably a day and a half, maybe two days left and then we'd have to go to the Superdome, which we really didn't want to do. But still had two days left. 4:00 Wednesday morning I was looking out my window and I noticed my neighbor directly across the street. I see him standing, elderly gentleman, is by his window. And I didn't know what he was doing. He was like -- took a while for me to figure out. He was shining his flashlight in a mirror trying to reflect upwards, that the helicopter should see him, a distress call. And the helicopters were flying by so fast. They were not focusing on Metairie then. They were focusing on places where the water was worst-- and I noticed this. I realized they're in trouble. But I was afraid to go out. There was still water outside. And the guys told us the night before, and we also heard on the radio, but the police told us that even though the power is out if you step into puddle, some of those downed power lines are still alive, are active. I don't know exactly how that works. Says you can -- it's very serious. You can get electrocuted. In addition the snakes around over there. So how pitch dark it was, I was not going to go out then. But I waited till about a quarter to 6:00 when it started getting light. I put on a very old pair of sneakers and I went out in the mud with my flashlight and I knocked on his door and he came to his door, and I said, "What's the matter?" He said -- eventually found out



he's 75, his wife is 73. And even though they're not Jewish they're very close friends of the owner -- I found out later -- of the owner of Casablanca Restaurant, of Linda. They happened to be very close friends of Linda from Casablanca. He told me that his wife has a heart condition. And they had stayed. They lived through everything, never left. They lived through every hurricane. In the 15 years I was here there wasn't a hurricane, but they were 73 and 75 years old. And they had no problem with it, but never anything like this. And she had an anxiety attack. She was having pain in her heart, her chest, she needed to get to a hospital. I didn't know -- also they were out of food. They had only drink. As of -- they only stayed with two days' food to begin with. They were so used to this. This never happened where there was such kind of flooding. So they were out of food. They hadn't eaten since sometime Tuesday, early Tuesday. So I ran right back home. We had bread. We had deli meat chicken. Kosher food, since we get about a ton. Our freezer's full of food. I said, "I have two days of water." We literally, food-wise, could have lived as long as the food would have stayed fresh, some of the stuff, salami, probably could have been there for three weeks. So I brought them a bunch of food and I sat with them. They right away relaxed and calmed down. And I said, "Look, a little later we're going to find a place to make a phone call. Let me go now." Go to the 15-passenger van, our getaway vehicle, it doesn't start. So that was a big downer for everyone, because I thought right now it's mud outside, I thought we had our 15-passenger van to take everybody. So we didn't have our getaway vehicle. And later we found out although it was pretty high and I put it up in a very high place, the engine didn't get water but the starter and other stuff. It didn't start. Two months later I fixed it. I just drove it here today. It's still here. But for the purposes of this was our great hope. Parked right in front of the house to get us all out of there. And we heard on the radio there's only one way out of town, that's west. Every other road is broken down. And we live west of the city. We live pretty close to the highway. We thought we had a chance to get out. That was our dream to get out. But 13 people. So I noticed by then, 6:30 in the morning, there's nothing doing. At that point I went with this -- I walked over a block



away to where this other person was staying. And they indeed had phone service, regular Bell South phone. I went, I called my mother and my mother-in-law. And my mother was -- the emotion of that call, because everybody was watching Fox News and people didn't realize that in some neighborhoods, not other neighborhoods, nobody was able to speak to us. They saw people being taken off the roofs. So I can't even describe my mother, of blessed memory's, reaction to the call. Interestingly enough the Chabad rabbi in Washington was trying to get somebody to come with a helicopter and take us, whatever. And this was just a few hours before, early Wednesday morning. And someone in Homeland Security told from the satellite maps that his neighborhood was not -- there's only four feet of water, he has a two-story house, he's not even in danger. We have other -- they said, "You want we should divert a couple of helicopters from pulling people off roofs that are literally a matter of life and death?" He said, "No, let's take care of them, we'll see in a day what we can do." So he called my mother a few hours before, they said that there's not 15 feet of water, there's only a few feet of water, but my mother said until she heard our voice she didn't necessarily believe it. So she was very very excited. I told her, "We're going to get out today. We're working on getting out. We don't know how, but we're going to try to get out. Things are under control." Then I went back to the house of my elderly neighbors and I took him to -- I went back to the people living right across the street and I took him to the next block, where he called his son. Eventually, his son who lives in Baton Rouge came with rescue workers later that afternoon at 3:00 when we left town. They were taking her, they decided not to take her to East Jefferson and get stuck there, they took her to Baton Rouge to the hospital. And she was OK. Thank God. We can say -- literally we can say -- that it's possible that we saved their lives. Her life. A little bit later at 9:00 -- I forgot to mention, I have also a minivan. And the minivan I put away. I found one parking lot that was open like all the way up, it was like a mile and a half from my house. And before the storm I put it up on higher in the parking lot. And I started walking to West Esplanade. I started walking in the mud and everything. And then this fellow from Oriental appearance is driving with a



very fancy Lexus. He had just stayed, him and his wife. And here I was. And I hitched a ride. He pulled up and I showed him my feet and my boots. I'm thinking now, then I was even thinking about, I said, "You want I should come into your car with this?" He said, "Come in." And he gave me a ride the mile and a half to my minivan. And the minivan started and I drove by my house and I beeped, beeped, everybody came to the window, and there was great excitement. But we still had 13 people. Now all this driving. You're going around power lines and downed lines. It was very treacherous but you can get by. There was no way to start clearing anything at that point. Nothing had started yet besides that the pumps were on. About--one other member of our synagogue that was here came by. He was very helpful. His name was Shmuel. Him and his sons, they tried to fix the van, and the big van. Didn't work. So then he got -- he had a vehicle working. There were only three people, which they were going to go eventually to Miami. They went the next day to Miami. And then he took me to Kosher Cajun, the kosher store here, and he gave us the refrigerated van. So it's two seats in the front and we put two folding chairs. And the back is where they keep the refrigerated food. And so I had now the minivan. Where eventually we had these two vehicles that were working. And we put -- everybody took -- the guests took their suitcases and we all took a little suitcase and filled up the refrigerated van. I was almost tempted to take the Torahs with me. At the last minute I said, "Let me leave them in the house." And of course everything became moist in the back of the refrigerated van even though -- so it was very fortunate that I left the Torahs in my house. And the rescue team rescued them a week later. They were fine. We're using them today, they're here now. There was so much else going on just getting ready to go, getting the vehicles ready. And then finally about 2:00 we didn't have any -- there was no -- at that point we had spoken to my parents and we got the word out that we were alive but there was no other communication or anything. But we realized that this is -- maybe on the radio, they said Monday they're going to let people in Jefferson Parish come back. New Orleans is going to be at least weeks. At least a week till anybody can come back anywhere. So there's a family of our



members then, they were having a wedding in their family in California that weekend, and they had evacuated to Memphis. And we were going to Memphis because the kosher van belonged to Joel, who lives in Memphis. So we got into their house. I guess I was an unlicensed locksmith. We got into their house and we filled up suitcases with their wedding dresses. Because we're very close to them, we knew already that everybody had wedding dresses and suits. And we ended up --

RH: Can't believe you thought of that.

YN: It might have been Shmuel, this other fellow, who said, "Let's go in there and just get it." But we did. We went in together, we filled up two suitcases with wedding clothes for them. We brought it to them. And they left from Memphis to California the next day, and they all dressed for the wedding. About 3:00 we went out of town. It was a great feeling. It took the mile and a half driving, we weaved around, we got up on the interstate. And we were listening to the radio. The only way out was west. We headed out west and it's 3:00 on Wednesday. And the joy of -- and the two vehicles, 13 people, it was just such a relief to get out. Unfortunately it wasn't such a smooth situation. There was no power until we got to southern Mississippi. Even at the beginning of southern Mississippi. And each vehicle had a half a tank of gas. Both vehicles by the time we got -- I think the city is Brookhaven, Mississippi, it's like 15, 20 miles in Mississippi. We were both almost on empty. Finally we see on the interstate this huge long line coming out of an exit of the interstate. And we realized we could see a gas station like next to the interstate. There's like a line around the block going onto the interstate, and if you know what was happening right after the storm not only there was no -- they had just received -- Brookhaven also lost power. Most of Mississippi lost power. They had just received power a little while before. And there were two gas stations up in the city. And there was big terrible gas shortages. But we got off. This is 9:00 at night. Took us about three hours to get to Brookhaven. No, not 9:00, I'm sorry. 6:00 at night. We left 3:00. This was 6:00. We had to stop once. We got off over there and kind of drove around town,



spoke to a police officer and he said, "There's two places that have gas." There's one by Wal-Mart with a line; that was the one going out to the interstate. And then there was another place in town. So we went to the other place. And again here we are. And many of the people are from New Orleans. There's some locals trying to get gas. We waited from 6:00 to 9:00, three hours. And so after everything we went through, we were there but we were glad we were out. As long as it takes, it'll take us five hours to get gas, it'll take five hours. In the meantime we filled up our freezer with ground meat, hot dogs -- not our freezer, our cooler. We actually took a cooler full of meat. And Chanie said go to Wal-Mart, because Wal-Mart had just opened. I bought a small grill. And we actually started barbecuing in the gas station parking lot. There was a strip mall, a lot right next to the gas station. And a lot of people, a lot of -- it was like African Americans and others were coming over, and we were giving out hamburgers and it was strange. It was like right in the middle of the empty lot over there. We had this big barbecue and people, we had all this meat, and we used most of it that night. At 9:00 at night actually while the barbecue was going on, and Chanie and one of the girls were with the vehicles, and I was with the barbecue with the kids and everybody else. We were fourth in line to get gas. There was an altercation at the gas station. Somebody -- everybody was tense. There was a major altercation and apparently somewhere else in Mississippi there was a violent act by somebody who had come from New Orleans that day. So the locals were -- the locals were personally very nice. Some of the local officials were very anxious. They were overrun. They didn't know how to handle it. And they shut down the gas station. They said, "It's opening back up 8:30 tomorrow morning." Shut down. And apparently the other station was also shut down or didn't have gas. There was no gas to be gotten. Our things are on empty. So we were devastated. I actually did something that I -- I actually told Chanie to take the baby, eight-month-old baby, and go over to the officer by the gas station and say, "We came through three days, this is not something we usually do." And all I know is that he started shouting at everyone. And he was probably under tremendous stress as well, and she started shouting at Chanie "No, we're



not" -- so we came back and we were again trying to keep a calm disposition, but we realized here we are in a city we don't know, we don't know anybody, we're going to be after the three days we went through, we're going to be in the vehicles all night sitting in the heat in the vehicles again. This was a beautiful thing. About 9:30 a car pulls up, middle-aged woman, resident of Mississippi, she pulls up in the car, we're in the parking lot trying to do some kind of strategy. There's no strategy. We said we're all going to sit in the van all night. She pulls up and she comes over to me and she rolls down the window, says, "What's going on, what's happening?" And I just poured out my heart to her. She asked me. I told her the whole story. And she said, "You know what, we just got power back at our place, we have a large backhouse," some kind of -- I don't know -- they use it for something, some kind of gathering room. Says, "We have power, we don't have beds over there, but you have chairs, tables, TV," whatever they have. And air conditioning. They took us in over there, all 13 of us, and then she went to Wal-Mart and brought us ice chips and water, and we sat there. The kids slept on the floor and some blankets. And for us it was like a five-star hotel. It was just unbelievable. There were restrooms with sinks and CNN was playing, which wasn't pretty, what we were seeing obviously back in New Orleans, but -- and that's where we were, and interestingly enough at 4:30 in the morning -- I slept for maybe an hour or two in the chair, at 4:30 in the morning I went with one of the girls, Marnie, to get in line for gas. I was thinking it's like a little bit excessive but stop obsessing, go get gas, at 8:30 they're opening up. And at 4:30 I went in line. And by the time it was 7:30 there were lines around the block, there were hundreds and hundreds of cars waiting for the gas. I hope everybody got gas that was there for gas. And we were actually the first ones in there. Then it came 8:30 and there was a block-long line of emergency vehicles that they said are going to be filled up first. But actually they started to then -- they must have looked at our faces, the people there, they said that whoever is already under like the -- whoever is already parked over there can fill up first and then go on and then they'll -- so at 8:30 in the morning we filled up both tanks of gas. Came back to the place we were staying, and



everybody was good, they were having breakfast, kosher milk and cereal. Everybody was eating, did our prayers, at 9:30 we drove up towards Memphis from Brookhaven, Mississippi.

RH: OK, I'm going to take a break right now so we can change the tape.

END OF AUDIO FILE 1

RH: And it's for Katrina's Jewish Voices Tape 2. So at 9:30 you were on your way finally to Memphis you said.

YN: North yes. Now when we got -- one of the girls' cell phones at some point this morning started operating. I think it was Marnie from Toronto. And her mother had bought her a ticket, probably who knows what, but she got her a ticket from Jackson to Toronto. So we stopped at the Jackson Airport to say goodbye. We dropped off Marnie. So now we'd be 12 instead of 13. Interesting antidote, I'm sorry, interesting anecdote, that when we stopped at the airport we asked somebody, we took a group picture, because we hadn't taken a picture of the whole group, and we asked a girl who was working at the airport, "Can you take a picture?" Said, "You don't want I should take the picture?" Said, "You don't know how to use the camera"? Said, "No, I know how to use the camera." But she showed me her nametag, it's Katrina, K-A-T-R, spelled exactly like Katrina. Anyway, so we took a picture.

RH: Katrina took your picture.

YN: Picture, exactly. And Marnie went off. And then by the time we got to Memphis the other parents of the girls had arranged tickets for them from Memphis to New York and we went straight to the Memphis Airport, dropped off the other three young ladies. The parents had already arranged. So about 6:00 or 7:00 that night my family and I -- because everybody else is gone, the nine of us, seven children and us, rolled into the Chabad rabbi's house in Memphis. And I'm looking back. We came in, we were



zombies. Especially myself. I was just very wound up. And really they took a few days. They really put us back together. Because he was screening my calls even because--we were getting like 1,000 calls. Some rabbis of large synagogues, they wanted to speak to me then about -- because they're giving a sermon on Saturday, what can I share with them, say what you -- not to belittle the importance of that, but it was like -- so he started screening my calls. And there was a pretty large segment of our community in Memphis already that night. Late that night we got together at a local kosher restaurant. It was very moving, the embraces, the reunion of our community was a very very special thing. But we did hear then that there were quite a few people still unaccounted for, either from our community itself, from our very narrow community, people we knew very well. Just to give you two examples, because they're important a little later in the story, we heard that Meyer Lachoff, the gabbai at Beth Israel, we didn't know what happened to him because he was at Woldenberg and his family made at that point the right decision to leave him here, because he was very ill, instead of moving him. They had backup generators and all that. Nobody had contact with him. We had a list of like ten people. Another person is Alan Krilov, who's a board member of our school, very good friend of ours. Not only did we hear that he's missing but we heard that he was on his roof in Lakeview with the water coming up and that he -- I didn't know this. Apparently, we were able to text message. Many cell phones which did not have phone service were able to text message. And he text messaged a distress call to Rabbi Shiff from Beth Israel. And we heard that he's not been heard from since. So, on the one hand it was very nice to see everybody. We were thankful that we were safe. It was very distressing to hear this. We had not realized that there were people we knew even that were still unaccounted for. Next day we went shopping, whatever, tried to have some kind of semblance of normalcy. It was too late. We were going to stay there for Shabbat 'til we planned what to do. And then, just interesting sidebar. I know would you document this very well. The kind of outpouring of kindness and people really putting themselves in other people's shoes to see how to help, we didn't know what hit us. We didn't know what we owned,



what we didn't own, where we were, what our future is. And this rabbi called me from California from a Chabad synagogue. Couple of his members wanted to do something. They wanted to speak to me to see what we needed. So I said, "We're OK, we're here, we have food and everything." Finally he starts asking me, says, "How many people are you, nine? What do you have?" "A minivan." Says, "Well, where are you going to?" I said, "Eventually we're going to New York." Says, "So we're buying you two tickets for your oldest two daughters." That was their initiative. So Sunday my older two daughters flew to New York. It was that kind of thought, that people put themselves, and I didn't even think how the nine of us, there's no way for nine of us to go in a minivan. And there was a lot of that, really a lot of that. I heard that some members of my community ended up in northern Mississippi. There's a casino, it's about an hour from Memphis. Forgot the name of the place. Maybe you know. It's in like -- it's northwest -- it's southwest from Memphis. It's a big resort and that's where they evacuated to. They got into a hotel. There was like three families there. In fact one of them was Linda Waknin from Casablanca, and another two families. I heard they were alone there so right before Shabbat Friday afternoon I said I'm going to visit them. And Rabbi Klein said you're not driving anything. He got me a driver. And by now my cell phone started working also. And while I was on the way, somebody called me that Meyer Lachoff died. He died in the nursing -- he was 87 years old. He was very sick. When they tried to evacuate and move everyone they --

RH: OK. Now you were just telling me that Meyer Lachoff had --

YN: I was riding Friday afternoon towards this resort in northwest Mississippi. And I found out that Meyer Lachoff had passed away. And of course I knew him and I cared for him, but it was also the whole emotion of the whole week was hitting me. I cried the whole way there and then for the whole weekend really it was just like very strange. Shabbat when the community was singing Lecha Dodi, I was like saying, "We used to have community in New Orleans. We did that last week, and now it's not there



anymore.” Now at that point we didn't realize that we'll be able to come back to a large extent at least. And there's a lot of vibrancy. At that point I thought it might be over. I didn't know what's going to be. And it was very -- besides everything else, it's just -- like I said, we used to have kiddush at shul. And everybody was there and now it's like in one minute, in one day, everything's changed. Saturday night we actually had a meeting at the Chabad house of Memphis of all the people from New Orleans that we knew from our synagogue and the other Chabad house. Came, and we just spoke about the future. Nobody knew exactly what was going on. A few people planned to come next week with a convoy and see their houses, when they would open up Jefferson Parish. And the only thing I could think of was just telling people, “Don't make any major decisions now.” Sure, the Jewish community will help us, and it did of course. “Any decisions you make now to move, not to move. We really need a few months for things to become clear.” One of the greatest gifts that the Jewish community did for the people, Federation, the Chabad community also, we gave people help with this focus in mind. Was the first few months they should not have to make any major decisions for their lives. We knew, of course, some people are going to move. Many people are not going to come back. “But don't do it under duress. You know what I'm saying? Know that you're provided for, for a couple months. You can figure out what you want to do. Do you want to stay? Do you want to go? Where do you want to go?” And so on. That's just an aside. I've almost finished the narrative here, unless you have other questions. I can tell you a very very -- on Sunday middle of the day we packed up our five children. The oldest two had flown to New York in the morning. And in our minivan and whatever stuff we had. And we were about to drive to New York. And there was another family from New Orleans who had evacuated before the storm, the Kehaty family, Uzzi and Caroline, and they were going to go in their vehicle. I think they had with them two or three children. We were going to go together. And Uzzi is also a very good friend of Alan Krilov's. That's the person I mentioned before, the board member of the school, and by the way if you haven't interviewed him, his story is the story to end all stories.



RH: I have interviewed Alan.

YN: Anyway, as far as we knew at that point on Sunday, he had given a distress call from his roof to Rabbi Shiff. Malkie Rivkin, Mrs. Rivkin, called me on Sunday and said, "We just heard from Alan Krilov. He's OK." We actually danced in the street then. Uzzi and I started dancing on Simchas Torah. The Chabad rabbi, because there was such tension over that. It was the most amazing, it was just an amazing experience. It was spontaneous. We started dancing in the street from joy. Anyway we went to New York, took us a day and a half. Slept overnight in Knoxville in someone's house, then we made it straight to New York. Came on Tuesday morning after Labor Day. And it was -- we helped, tried to get settled in a little, get my kids into school, try to come back to some normalcy, although we were always going to meeting with the rescue crews, being in contact. And then after a couple weeks I started going back and forth, one week in New Orleans and one week with my family in New York. Total we were in New York for four months. And Hanukkah 2005 in December, end of 2005 we came back. And that's pretty much the --

RH: Tell me what you were doing when you were coming back.

YN: First of all, some of the personal things you're doing. Overseeing hiring a company to gut out the house. I wrote an article. A very emotional time was when I actually cleaned out a lot of stuff. I was throwing out all of your kids' toys and dolls that they love, and they're all moldy. I've often said that my mother, of blessed memory, used to tell me all the time, "Never cry over something that can't cry back for you." But at that point I didn't really stick to it. I was throwing out dolls or other sentimental things and it was really -- it was probably not just because of these things, it was just it was still very overwhelming at that point, two weeks into it, three weeks into it, it was still -- emotions were very raw. It was very overwhelming. At the same time we didn't lose focus that we had so much to be thankful for. We were all safe and sound. Everybody who we knew in



our immediate community was safe and sound. Yes, we were very devastated that 1,800 people lost their lives. In our city we call home. At least six or seven Jews lost their lives. But we had so much to be thankful for also. But still there were some very raw emotions. Coming back the first time was its own interesting experience. The city was just -- I brought suitcases full of MREs kosher, ready to eat meals. And we're going around giving it out and just seeing people and seeing the devastation. That was common I'm sure. Even the people who evacuated, they had the same experiences. There's nothing really unique I would say about that. If I can add, maybe if I have a few minutes I'm going to add something interesting. The High Holidays that year September, Rosh Hashanah the Chabad community with about 150 people got together in Monroe in a hotel. The King family gave us the hotel for cost price. We bought the food. And it was a very moving Rosh Hashanah.

RH: So you came down to Monroe?

YN: I came back from New York. My whole family.

RH: The whole family.

YN: I thought it was important for my kids to come see all the other kids. Basically like the whole, all their friends, everybody got together in Monroe. We actually flew into New Orleans, big van was just fixed the day before, and we drove it up to Monroe. And that was very therapeutic for my children to be here at Rosh Hashanah.

RH: Whose idea was that to do that?

YN: I don't know if it was Rabbi Rivkin's. I don't know. It was a great idea. It wasn't my idea. It was very special. Everything was so memorable about that year. I want to talk a little bit about what happened on Yom Kippur. New Orleans was nowhere ready. They didn't even have power yet in the uptown area. New Orleans wasn't ready yet by Yom Kippur. Jefferson Parish was just starting to clean out, the first stages. I realized there'd



be a lot of people around. I heard that Gates of Prayer was going to have services at night Yom Kippur in Baton Rouge, then by day they'll come here. And that Shir Chadash will probably open. I realized there was no Orthodox services anywhere. And besides that there are some people that came back, there were rescue workers and FEMA and Red Cross workers. So a couple members that were here and the crew that got out the building, we had knocked down the walls, took out all the carpets, there was concrete, cleaned the chairs --

RH: So this flooded. The Chabad Center flooded.

YN: The Chabad Center flooded about ten to 12 inches. So we cleaned out the place as much as possible. Tried to get out the smell and the mold as much as possible. And cleaned off the chairs. We're about to get new chairs by the way but these are still the chairs that went through Katrina. And we ended up having about 75 people throughout Yom Kippur. And it was some members, some other locals, FEMA, Red Cross, very diverse group. And one of the other things, interesting thing that happened was again to show the kindness, and the unique kindness, I got a call in New York a couple days after Rosh Hashanah and a woman said from Kendall, Florida, she said, "We want to do something for your community in New Orleans. But my friends and I don't want to send money. And we're not sending clothing. Tell me what you need." So I spoke to her for a while. Then I said, "You know what, I'm going next week, I'm opening my shul for Yom Kippur, there's no kosher food. Maybe you can --". "I'll take care of it." Said, "I'll take care of it." She got a kosher caterer who prepared 70 meals for before the fast and 70 meals for after the fast. Had it trucked in here. Got in there, we got one fridge working and one freezer working. And one of our women volunteered and prepared other stuff. And we had a huge meal before the fast, all 70 people, and after the fast. And it was just again -- this was an amazing experience. Had one young man who now -- who came from Baton Rouge then, and I didn't know exactly -- I didn't get to know personally all 75 people who were here on Yom Kippur. There was one young man, Brock, who showed up this



Pesach. Said he lives in Baton Rouge and he, for whatever reason, came here for the services that Yom Kippur. And it left such an impression on him that he's been growing in Yiddishkeit and doing all kinds of good things in his life since then. And now he started coming here. I didn't know about this for a year and a half. And almost two years. And then this Pesach, he started coming every week. Now whatever it is. It was a very special thing.

RH: So he's joined your community.

YN: Yeah, he's moving now from Baton Rouge to New Orleans. He's transferring to UNO to be part of the community. He's now actually in yeshiva for a few weeks. He's a 21-year-old. He was 19 at the time. And his parents are very supportive of what he's doing. Mother was here with him actually this week. Really had a very positive impact with him in his life. And we had no idea until he wrote to us before Pesach.

RH: Is there anything particular that you felt like you needed to say to the community on --

YN: I don't remember the content of the sermons. It was not -- it really didn't matter that much. In other words--of course I prepared something to say. At that time, something appropriate. But it wasn't -- that's not even what people remember. People remember about being in the gutted building together for the first time. There were no children there. 75 adults and no children. Very -- that was a sad element because even the people with families that were here were here by themselves. Certainly the rescue workers. So that was very sad. Interesting thing, we had community dinners here every week for a year and a half. And it started from that Yom Kippur because people liked it. Nobody had kitchens. And at some point Kosher Cajun -- there was no way to get kosher food here. I think just some groceries were just opening up. And then two weeks after Yom Kippur, even though I was coming in and out, but one of our members together with Joel Brown when he came back a few weeks later, one of our members, her name



was Sarah Pertuit, just organized shopping and cooking and the shul financed it. And for a year and a half everybody was eating together every Friday night. And it had tremendous positive energy and positive impact on people. All started because of the kindness of these few women in Kendall, Florida that said, "What can we do for you?" and listened to what I was saying and did the exact right thing at the right moment. And that grew into on our own doing this for a year and a half. So we still have, but now we get together about once every five, six weeks. Just last Friday night we had a Friday night dinner here. So for a year and a half we ate here every Friday night and Shabbat day, the whole community.

RH: So did it eventually start to populate with children?

YN: Very slowly. The first year people stayed where they were in school. Numbers, on a Saturday morning before the storm we had about 25, 30 children. Let's say 25. Right now we're probably up to between ten and 12. So young families is where we're -- and a few of them are mine. And it's basically from four families. We had probably 12, 13 families with children, regulars who came every Shabbos. Now we have maybe four or five. You see, from what I'm hearing is that New Orleans took its greatest hit in two areas, the older, people over 80 who stayed where their children -- it was too hard for them to come back and start rebuilding. And this is a treasure really for any community, that type of experience. Really lost a very large population of our people who are retired and people that are older. And also young families with kids. So it's a mixed bag. It's very difficult. A shul or a Chabad center can adapt because you can always -- there's other people trickling in. Here we maybe have instead of 60 people on a Saturday morning, men, women and children, 65, 70, so we have now 40, 45, but there's new, there's Israelis here. And there's some people who weren't coming before, who moved here or whatever reason. There's energy. There's a good feeling. There's a positive atmosphere. A synagogue or outreach center, you can always -- if you're forward-thinking and with a positive attitude you can really adjust. Schools and camps, they're



much harder. That's where we're really struggling. But hopefully we're seeing a trickle of people coming back. My observation is it's growing very slowly, but it's going in the right direction.

RH: How do you feel about the response of the Jewish community in general to the storm?

YN: Nationally?

RH: Nationally and locally.

YN: I thought the response was very very positive. I thought people really opened their hearts and their pocketbooks and they really donate a lot. UJC raised a lot of money, and I'm not involved in exactly how they spent all the money. But I know that part of it came to the local organizations, to all of us to help people. UJC is helping us cover the deficit. 2006 and 2007 we're being helped greatly by the Federation from the UJC money. Not only us, all Jewish organizations here. This is one part of what they raised. And did, I'm sure, a lot of other good things with the money as well. And this is direct individual donations of people, tens of thousands of Jews, maybe hundreds of thousands of Jews donated. Many people got involved. The crews, the volunteer crews, people came and took vacations of helping rebuild. Building houses in the Lower Ninth Ward for Habitat for Humanity. Many of them teenagers coming and spending -- teenagers want to have a good time. Instead of going on spring break to Panama City, Jewish teenagers came with their guides here to work. Some of the work was necessary. Some of the work maybe wasn't that necessary, but that's not the point. That's totally not the point. I was very very impressed and very touched. And I would say that that bodes well, actually, for Jewish people. I really have to say I was very -- we all know that the government response on all levels, federal, local, state, I think it's undeniable, was not up to par what it should have been. And God forbid if there ever is such a catastrophe again, we hope that they learn some lessons. I would say the Jewish community



response was probably better than I would have predicted in a very loving way. Chabad community, the first four months until we got to 2006, tremendous outpouring of different people. Each synagogue and movement got help from their members, besides the help from the general UJC fund. It was very -- there was a real outpouring, there really was. For the first few months, and even for the first year.

RH: Did you have trouble receiving help after so long being the one to give?

YN: It was very unusual. We're very proud people like everybody else, like most people. And my wife is especially a very proud person. But you know what? We did what needed to be done. And this is the situation. We didn't make the situation. We came to New York. We needed help to get established. At that point I didn't know if I even had a job. So even basic furniture. It was a situation where people, middle-class people, middle-class Jewish people, maybe even some upper-class Jewish people needed help. Because they didn't know if they had jobs. And it was very -- it was not something -- very uncomfortable, not something we ever want should happen again. But at the time we did what we needed to do. And people were really helpful when we came to New York. You hear all over the south and even in the northeast people came to communities. And we were really helped by the community in Brooklyn who set us up for the apartment. And then we used it for four months. 2006 we had a job again. We were able to come back and continue working. So I thought the response was very good. It was very unusual to take help anyway. Thank God, after a few months we didn't have to do that anymore.

RH: Did being that vulnerable, has it changed your understanding of how to help other people or the kind of help people need?

YN: It's a good question. I think yeah. I think you know -- there's this famous -- there's a book written by a doctor after he was a patient in the hospital and he had his own illness. He totally realized that he doesn't -- now he just started to understand how to give proper



care. I think it's the same thing. You learn how to be sensitive to people's needs. On the other hand what people might need. There's no question. I think that the New Orleans community has a lot to contribute to the national Jewish community when they have a crisis taskforce or if there's ever another event like a tsunami or something like this, how to help people. I think we've learned a lot. I think people are ready here to contribute their time and to help, to volunteer in these areas. It's a very good point.

RH: And did you have to say anything to some of the people? Like if they didn't want to take help? Were you able to --

YN: Yeah, a couple people very very proud, and that's the way they are. And you know what? I think most of the help was given in such a sensitive beautiful way that even those people we were able to convince to take help. Had one person I knew needed a lot of help. A very proud person. And I got him, somebody came here to help people. But I was sitting there by the meeting with the two of them. The person was ready to give away a lot of money, his own money. But he was interrogating my friend. And I understand that. Hard-earned money, you want to make sure. He was interrogating, "What are you doing with the money, what do you need it for? Let me see..." He was asking him 1,000 questions. My friend walked out. Said, "I appreciate it, but I don't need the money." But that was an exception. I think people were very sensitive the way they gave the help. Ultimately, most people that needed help got it. And when I went to get \$700 from the Federation I was in line with an attorney and another businessperson. That's very unusual. And hopefully an experience you're not going to have ever happen again.

RH: Tell me about what you think moving forward is one of the greatest strengths of this Jewish community.

YN: Say the question again. I'm sorry.



RH: Moving forward in the recovery what one of the greatest strengths is do you believe of this Jewish community?

YN: I think the people are pretty -- those that came back certainly, were able to come back, are pretty spirited. We have a pioneer spirit, and there's a lot of frustrations going on with the politics and the economy and the slow road home. It's not easy to live here now. But I think they have a good spirit, and I think it's going to help us overcome. They know the tasks. I think most people are reasonable in their expectations. This will not turn into a booming Jewish community any time soon. However, we're hoping to see growth. And I think people are committed to New Orleans. And that was probably the greatest strength, that they're enthusiastic, they're committed to the city, but realistic as to what I think our goals are limited goals. We want to see some growth. We're not looking to have 15,000 Jews here from whatever it is now, 7,000 Jews. We're not going to have 20,000 Jews in the next couple years.

RH: Has that been a process of trying to really get used to a much smaller community?

YN: Yes. The Federation has all these taskforces and they're very important to make strategic planning. There's no question that's very important. But I'm talking about something more built-in. Those that came back--I had this feeling from the beginning. They're committed to New Orleans. And it's going to be tough going. Politicians are going to become uncrooked with the water flowing in. And I think people are mostly realistic. So at times there have been some people that have come back and then said, "I had enough." and left. Even though, originally, they were very committed. That's really just a few. Most people came back if possible, if they had jobs. If they have any kind of opportunity they're really -- I think those that are back are back, and there will be some other people trickling in.

RH: You intimated one of the challenges is the Torah Academy with so few children. Are there some other particular challenges the Chabad community has?



YN: I think the other challenges would be just like everybody else. There's going to be -- there's a challenge when you have a lot less people. A lot of our supporters either didn't come back or lost their resources. There are challenges, but these challenges can all be overcome. The school, Torah Academy, had 63 children before the storm. I think New Orleans Jewish Day School had 75. Now Torah Academy is in the high 20s and New Orleans Jewish Day School has 33 or whatever. That's a much harder challenge to overcome. But I guess you can overcome anything if you have the right attitude, you can overcome anything. But that's more difficult. As far as our challenges, yes, when the UJC assistance ends December 31st, 2007, 2008 will be a very key year. But I think already we've seen revenue growing from local donors. People want to participate. People are not taking handouts anymore. People are participating. There's going to be a shortfall. That's helpful I think not only in Chabad but I think all the organizations will find creative ways of covering that so that Jewish life can continue. For the size of the community, it's pretty vibrant Jewish life, and I think that will continue.

RH: Do you find yourself -- do you have different priorities now than you did before?

YN: Priorities? I wouldn't say priorities. Look, everybody's changed. Now some of the change--you can get used to anything, and ultimately we're human beings and people revert to a lot of our ways of thinking. So the changes, but there's still some change that's left with us, change for the better in a lot of ways. I was -- just to give you personally, yes, the Torah says, "We should respect every human being and love every human being and love every Jew, and treat every person as if they're the only person in the world." The reality is that you have sometimes other -- not bad, good agendas. I was into community-building. I was saying, "OK, we're growing, ten families, 12 families, 15 families." So soon we might not be Florida or California, but we're going to be a real -- we're going to have 85 people here every Saturday morning, we're moving, the indicators are going in the right direction. And that's good. Why not? You should have goals. Quantity as well as quality. We were trying to enhance our community as well as the



community as a whole. But then sometimes you lose sight of the individual. I won't say lose sight. You don't focus as much on the individual. After Katrina, that all fell apart. Because the goals right now are very different. The goals are to keep positive energy, to help every person, to inspire people one-on-one. It really made my focus being on, "Don't focus so much on community-building, focus on reaching out and helping and really bonding with people one on one. And ultimately when enough of those relations happen something will happen nice in the community-building." This is very real. This is not a line. I feel in a way much freer because it just -- doing what I was probably trained to do in the first place anyway, not build a community -- that's a nice thing. To teach and to be a shoulder to cry on. To help people, to listen, and things like that. I'm much more patient with people. Put it in real practical terms. Than I was before. I probably still look impatient, that's a little thing that I have. But I'm much more patient than I was.

RH: Was there any type of a Jewish teaching, Torah teaching, that sustained you through this, that came to your mind?

YN: It's a very good question. Another very good question. This is a brief one. And very powerful. My wife and I, actually, right before the storm, we were actually -- I don't remember why we were learning this topic. Before the storm ever came, there's a Hasidic teaching which is related to the whole concept of hope and trust. And basically, it's in Yiddish, "tracht gut vet zein gut", think good and it will be good. Basically, a man once came to Holy Rebbe, that his child was sick, and he was very distraught, and the Rebbe told him, "Think good and it will be good." And the person at first didn't take it so seriously. Then the Rebbe said, I mean it literally. Not just think good and you'll have positive energy so something good might come out. The thinking good itself, really focusing on the positive, being optimistic, actually produces positive energy and is half of the salvation. So within the confines of being realistic -- if somebody is so optimistic that they don't deal with the crisis at hand, that's a problem. So we felt, at least after the initial decision to stay, that we were very optimistic, we were thinking positively and at the



same time dealing with the realities on the ground, doing everything that we can do to better -- to get our family out safely and then to help rebuild the community. But to answer your question I think that this teaching of, "Think good and it will be good," I'm really thinking optimistically can really help the situation and really carried us over. I'm going to add one last thing if I can, since we have teaching. The previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, the father-in-law of our Rebbe, was in 1927 80 years of -- he was in a Soviet jail. And he was first sentenced to death. He was tortured. First sentenced to death. Then they commuted it to hard labor. Eventually they freed him. He was sentenced to death for spreading Judaism and for having underground schools and things like that. And he suffered a lot in prison and he said a very interesting thing. When he came to America he said -- somebody asked him about his experiences in the Soviet jail. He said, "If someone gave me all the resources in the world where I can support all my yeshivot to the end of time, to go back to Soviet prison for one minute I would not do it. I would not bring on myself one more minute of that kind of suffering. But if somebody gave me all the resources in the world to take away one minute of what I already experienced, I would not take it either, because the depths of character, the strength of character, the latent potential we have within us." There are things that came out in all the people around us and myself that I had no idea that I even had in myself, the strengths. The ability to rise to the occasion and help, there are attributes within myself, and I saw within many others, that we never knew we had. So do we ever want to experience it again? No, not for one minute. That kind of experience, of course not. Would I give it up for anything? No. I'm not comparing what we went through to what the previous Rebbe went through in a jail where they were executing people every night. The idea that I'm trying to say, to me that's a very -- I really feel that way.

RH: About you and your wife and the decision to come back. What kind of decision-making process was that for you and your wife too?



YN: I think we needed to see that there's some community. It was really just to see if it's viable in any way. If there's some people coming back for sure and there's some work to do, and there's some resources through, we would make a go for it. We didn't know right away and it wasn't like for sure coming back. But I think that was the way we were leaning, always to come back, really wanting to come back and continue our work here, be part of the community. Then eventually we decided to come back.

RH: Was there a way of kind of coping that you felt like your wife had more than you, or ways you worked with each other?

YN: We're very private people. My wife especially is a very private person. But you ask this question. I think we're very different in nature. My wife is very reserved, very calm. I'm much more emotional and outgoing. But we really found a balance. I can say that, just like I told you about the latent energies and strengths, there's no question that our marriage is stronger since Katrina, and it was a good marriage, thank God, before. The depths of the relationship, it's only through the relationship that we coped. After the storm there were so many adjustments. Going to New York and then moving back, dealing with the frustrations, rebuilding the home and the shul, dealing with the insurance. You know, it's very stressful. Now things are settling down, no question. Now we have a basically normal life. But for a year and a half we were living in an apartment, rebuilding the house, rebuilding the synagogue, fighting with insurance. Arguing with insurance. And there's no question the strength of our relationship. And I'll tell you this, that on the darkest days -- and we had someone in our community that took their life, he was a member of this shul and another shul, pretty close to them. Just to give you -- that was probably the most difficult, for sure the most difficult day, more difficult than the Katrina days. At 10:00 at night I was spent like I've never been spent in my life and yet Chanie and I went out for an hour walk straight out there. That's how we coped with it. So and every day those days -- now -- we didn't do it before the storm, we walk about three, four times a week, not just for the exercise, together. Dealing with all



the issues, and we work through things. And interesting, I'm sure you met Rabbi Matsa. After the suicide she called me to -- she's a trained person. To make sure I'm dealing with the issues. And of course it's not about us, it's the family. So of course very very difficult situation but that's how we dealt with it. Dealt with it by talking to each other, by working things through and taking the time, make it a priority to spend time together. Does that answer your question?

RH: Yes.

YN: Don't put that on CNN, or my wife won't talk to me.

RH: Can you explain to me your understanding of God and how God works through events like this?

YN: That might be -- what time is it now by the way? I don't know if this forum is the right place for theology. But I'll give you a few minutes of my basic guidelines. The first thing about God is by definition we can't completely understand Him obviously, this is God, not us. I don't understand an iPod how it works, I certainly don't understand God. I think we believe ultimately that everything that happens to us is for the good. And Judaism is complicated because there's seemingly a lot of contradictory things that we believe or ask for. But of course when we study -- and we study a lot -- it all actually fits neatly how they come together. So on the one hand -- let's start off. On the one hand we don't ask for any tests or challenges. In fact every morning we say, "Please don't give us any tests, don't send us hurricanes, don't send a tsunami, give us good health, don't send us temptation, really we ask not to be sent any tests. Don't send us any illness." But once these things happen already we believe that this is perhaps -- we ask God to take away the illness and to bring us healing but at the same time we believe that there's certain closeness in our relationship with God, there are certain things that can be accomplished, a certain good that come out through this that didn't come -- it's spiritual opportunities as well. Now this is easier said than done. And, you know, Katrina, as difficult as it was, as



emotional as it was, as you all know, as you can see, it's still not like having a child with an illness. Whatever we went through doesn't compare to one hour of someone who has a child with cancer. We're talking now -- so it's easier to deal with something, Katrina this way, otherwise when you're dealing with something like that, philosophy and theology is much harder to really live by because of the pain. The pain is so much greater. But so what do we believe? We don't ask for this. We don't want it. But when it happens we believe it's a certain closeness from God, a certain spiritual opportunity. One thing I want to add, and this is -- again it's a little bit theological. This is very important in Torah teachings. A lot of people misunderstand this. If this is what we believe, that when we have -- we didn't ask for it, but when something bad happens or appears to us bad, there's actually an opportunity for a greater good that comes out of it, there's a silver lining. Certainly a lot of good came out of Katrina. Then maybe we're just that kind of -- we're letting God off the hook. All right. So we asked for things to go smoothly and they didn't go smoothly. They were very challenging. It was very difficult. But it was for a greater good. Good things came out of it. "God, thank you very much." It's not that simple. In fact in Judaism we believe in complaining to God, and that's what prayer is all about. If you remember, Moses at the beginning of Exodus when he goes to Pharaoh to let the Jews out and Pharaoh makes it even more difficult, he says you're going to have to build more -- you're going to have to work harder and accomplish more with less resources. You guys want to go on a holiday or vacation, actually after Moses came to Pharaoh the first time, Pharaoh made it more difficult on the Jews. And Moses turns to God and he says, "What did you do?" He cries out to him. "Why did you make it bad for these people? Why did you make life harder? I can't believe you did that." And he's complaining to God. He's upset with God. Because Moses was not a person of faith. He did not believe ultimately that the exile in Egypt, and even this intensification of exile, has something good come out of it. So I think from my understanding of Torah, what it means is God is not limited that the only way we can reach this good is through suffering. We believe -- in other words there is certain goodness and latent energies that



came out through this but we also believe that it could have come other ways. So for example, if we see a great miracle, we're also elevated. There's certain goodness that doesn't come out in the normal cycle of things that comes out. When you see an absolute miracle, you go to three doctors and they say they can't help you, you have six months to live, and you go to a fourth doctor and you're healed, it changes your life also. So we don't need a tragedy. God is not limited. So on the one hand we believe that something good definitely comes out of it. We can turn our pain into something positive. We can transform our tears into positive energy. But the reason why we're still upset at God is, or complaining, is because we believe he's almighty, there's other ways to get that. Now all this needs a lot, a lot of -- that's my basic -- so I believe in a God that's involved. I believe in Divine Providence, God's involved not only in the big picture but in the small picture. And that's why we complain to him when something goes wrong. Otherwise it doesn't make sense. If I don't believe God's involved why do I pray to God and complain when my child is sick? We believe that something good always comes out of it, could come out of it, and yet we complain because we want that these good things should come out without it. Does that make any sense?

RH: Yeah, "God, why didn't I get this lesson another way, a happier way?"

YN: Exactly. Absolutely. Exactly. Say that he can't do it, my God could do it. He chose not to, which is why we complain.

RH: What are you most grateful for, coming out of this?

YN: Coming out of this. Initially of course was health, our safety, security. You just appreciate having a community, having a job, having friends, just all the things that we -- family, all the things we appreciated before--should have been the priorities in our life, you asked about priorities earlier. I think it's really, I would say, they've come definitely into focus.



RH: Have you learned anything particularly about yourself after this test?

YN: Learned anything about myself? Yeah, I learned that I can handle a lot more than I thought I could handle. Some things I don't really want to handle. Probably in our analysis of ourselves, probably not fully giving credit to what we can actually handle and accomplish. So I'm talking about latent energy, I saw that clearly. How under the most difficult circumstances we can do something positive. And this is not just me. I saw this all around. And I frankly had no idea about a lot of this before. I lived a life where before this -- my parents both passed away since then and I had never suffered loss or any kind of tragedy before Katrina. The most difficult thing that ever happened to me was probably when I broke a leg or something. So we had a very blessed life before and what this brought out is the first challenge we had in life. And I think that I really learned a lot about what our real potentials are, what we can handle, what we can deal with, not that we want to deal with it.

RH: You've had quite a bit of loss then since the storm with members of your congregation, suicide, your parents.

YN: We had suicide and my parents. It was a difficult year, no question about it.

RH: If there's anything you'd like to add?

YN: No, I think ultimately it's a very -- I think you're doing us all a favor, really. I have said this, a lot of what I said today, some of what I said today I've said in the past. Some of it was recorded, but nothing nearly as extensive as this. And I think you're doing--first of all, besides whatever other objectives you might have and hopes of the use that this will be, I think for the people itself it's very beneficial.

RH: Thank you. Very thoughtful.



YN: Thank you. Have a nice Shabbat. Are you seeing anybody else today? You don't have anyone else today?

RH: No, this is just you today. Move into the lighter part of the day, people are a little busier.

[END OF INTERVIEW]