Jeffrey Smith Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Jeffrey Smith at his home at 4936 Camp Street in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is Monday, July 16, 2007. I am conducting the interview for the Katrina Jewish Voices project of the Jewish Women's Archive in the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Jeffrey, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Jeffrey Smith: Yes.

RH: Okay, let's just begin with your birthday, a little about your family background, and your Jewish and general education.

JS: I was born in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1953 to my mother and father, who are eighty-nine and eighty-eight years old right now, who have also been married sixty-five years August 2nd. And their parents are from Lithuania. Both of them. And my mother is Orthodox. My father was more Reform, but because obviously, my mother ran the household. We lived in a – I don't know – semi-Orthodox environment. We drove on Saturday, but we kept a one hundred percent kosher house. My mother has never eaten non-Kosher. She wouldn't even eat – well, now she'll eat in my house because my house is kosher. But until it was, she wouldn't eat in my house. So my mother was Orthodox. Father Reformed. He worked on Saturdays, but my mother pretty much observed the best she could in that environment. I have a sister and a brother. My brother is a clinical psychologist in Boston with his wife and two children. One of his sons is married to a rabbi – a Reform rabbi – in Boston. He runs the Jewish Studies program at a very large Reform synagogue in Boston. Let's see. And their other son is going to be a clinical psychologist, and he's engaged to a social worker – a nice Jewish girl. My sister is a psychotherapist – basically lived in New York City most of her life. Married –

both [inaudible] over thirty years. They have one son that's graduated with an MBA [Master of Business Administration]. Been at Columbia, and he's married to a lawyer. So, that's my brother and sister. They still live in the same house back in Longmeadow, Mass, and I'm going to go there in a couple of weeks with my six-year-old and try to go up every four, five, six weeks. I go up every – because of their age. Of the three children, I had probably the most Jewish education. I don't know why it happened that way, but I was the only one that went to a yeshiva, and I did that until sixth grade. Then, we moved to the suburbs, and at some point, I think my parents just thought, maybe I should assimilate into the secular school system in Longmeadow, Massachusetts, where we moved in 1960, and moved in there – the house. They're still there. Then I went from sixth grade right through my senior year to Longmeadow High School and all that stuff. At that time, I obviously went to Hebrew School until – Yeshiva – until sixth grade. We belonged to an Orthodox synagogue, Kadima. And, you know, basically, I belong to all the little Jewish organizations, and went to Hebrew School and stuff right until the end of high school and kept kosher until the end of high school. I guess I moved to New Orleans, and I stopped being kosher. First time I ever really had a cheeseburger was I guess [inaudible] in 1971.

RH: [overlapping dialogue; inaudible]

JS: So, I came to Tulane on a tennis scholarship. That's why I got in. I was recruited by Tulane, and I had a free ride for four years to Tulane, '71 to '75. So, that's how I got here and didn't really have much of a – whatever Jewish – I went to Hillel House and different things. Actually, I did go to Anshe Sfard back then in '71 to '75, which is interesting, because now I'm vice president over there, which is a very small Orthodox synagogue on Carondelet and Jackson. It's struggling, but we're trying desperately to keep it alive. It's a beautiful place. I hope my son, Zachary, gets to go to school – I mean, get bar mitzvahed there. I'd love to see that happen. Anyway, so I guess that was pretty much my – how I got to New Orleans. By the way, we belong to Touro also right now. I've sort

of jumped way ahead, but I graduated [inaudible] college in '75, played on the pro tour for a year, taught tennis for a year at a country club back in Massachusetts, and then decided to go to law school. I went to law school in Alabama because I knew a lot of tennis clubs there, and I had a job as a tennis pro while also in law school. Actually, I had a very nice religious experience there, because within the first week of being there, I was playing tennis, and I met a young man who saw my Chai, which I've had this particular Chai since I was fifteen. It's the only thing in my life I haven't lost. He noticed it and had said that his stepfather was from New York City, lived in Birmingham, and his name was Joe Dubowsky, and I ended up becoming very good friends with Joe and his wife, Dorothy, and they were – they had a wonderful love story how they met. But he was Orthodox and didn't really have a lot of Orthodox things going on in Birmingham, so I started going to synagogue with him every Saturday and having dinner with him every Friday night for three years. He passed away recently, like in '96. But Dorothy is still alive in Birmingham. So, I did my three years in Birmingham. A very good friend of mine named Ronald Rakosky, who's a lawyer here in New Orleans that I've worked with – his sister lived in Longmeadow, Mass. She said if you ever need an older, big brother when you get to New Orleans, call my brother, Ron. He was twenty-seven. He was working for NOLAC [New Orleans Legal Assistance Corporation]. I called him the first year I got to Tulane in 1971 because I was drafted to go to Vietnam. I was like weeks away from going, and he helped me somehow continue my hearing. That's probably why I'm so good at continuing things in court now. We continued my physical for like a year, got out of the draft, and Ron and I have become, basically best friends, law partners, brothers. You know, our [inaudible] together and hung out with them every day. I'm sort of jumping around, but after three years in Birmingham, I realized Birmingham wasn't for me, and Ron said, "You can always work with me," and I came down in 1980 after law school – '77 to '80 in Birmingham. In '80, I started practicing law with Ron over at 3604 Canal along with another Jewish person, Mayer Finkelstein. So, we all worked together, and you know, that was twenty-seven years ago, and we're all still very friendly. We're all

together today. And it's the biggest – I always belonged to Anshe Sfard. Oh, no – well, actually, I also belonged to Chevra Thilim, which was like an Orthodox/Conservative synagogue. My real religious goings-on in New Orleans was pretty minimal because I was single. I never got involved in Federation and those kinds of things because I was just a young – and then not so young. But I was a lawyer and running around and playing lots of tennis and traveling a lot, and played the Maccabiah Games, had been to Israel [inaudible] I don't know how many times. Played the games twice. Played the Pan Am Games in Columbia, Buenos Aires. So, played a lot of tennis, so Jewish kind of things. But I didn't get involved in anything because just being single, it just isn't quite – it'd be if you were – similar to my father wanting me to become a Shriner, and I tried it for like a year. And being twenty-eight, twenty-nine, and single and being a Mason just wasn't happening. Driving out to Kenner to the meetings with all the families. Similarly, I just didn't find much that the New Orleans Jewish community had to offer to me when I was single, and I would just go home a lot. I mean, I was free to do whatever I want, so I went home for all the holidays – Passover, the high holidays. I was always back in Massachusetts. So, my sort of Jewish upbringing – not Jewish upbringing – my Jewish, I don't know – I'm going to say roots. But whatever I have – let's say my house being kosher. That's a perfectly good example. All that happened after I got married. I got married at forty-seven years old and for the first time. I married my wife, Birgitt, who is from Germany, ironically enough, who has a whole other interesting story because her father, who just passed away, was Jewish, bar mitzvahed, lost his family in the Holocaust, married out of the faith, and then in his later years in life told his daughter that she was Jewish. She was living, by [then], in America. Started taking classes in it when she realized about her heritage. Met a friend of mine, and at the time, she was studying Judaism, and that's when we met. You're not (going to ask any questions. I'll just do the whole thing?].

RH: You're doing great.

JS: And the ironic thing about all of this – and I want to say this before Birgitt comes home because she's due home, but the ironic thing is in the strangest ways – and I hate to tell people about this because we're so lucky. As you can see my house – well, it wasn't flooded; (it's right here?). We had a lot of luck with Katrina. A lot of luck. Probably, if you had to go by percentage-wise, we're the top – better than the top ninety-nine percent of the things that happened. Just like our children were so small, they weren't pulled out of the schools. They actually were pulled out of the Torah Academy, which was bad, but I mean, they just – it was easy for us to leave for the length of time that we did. But what happened – most amazing – is Birgitt, because her mother wasn't Jewish, even though she was studying Judaism with a Conservative rabbi in Las Vegas, Nevada – even though he flew to Massachusetts to marry us in my parent's backyard, soon after that, Birgitt was pregnant with our first child. But I realized – and my parents loved Birgitt and were accepting of the fact that she had converted, but they were still very cognizant of the fact that it was not Orthodox and that our children would not be Jewish in the eyes [of] Orthodox Judaism. The rabbi at Chabad, Rabbi Rivkin, was very nice and – you know how important it was when we found it was a little boy. Zachary was converted by Rabbi Rivkin – or not by Rabbi [inaudible] Rivkin, and there was a whole Shomre Shabbos – you know, the whole, everything. He went in the mikvah, and we had the paperwork, and everything was wonderful. Everybody's excited. Meanwhile, Birgitt's still studying because I told her – and she wanted to learn more Orthodox traditions. So, along comes Gabriella. You'll meet all these beautiful children. Oh, by the way, when I married Birgitt, she had a twelve-year-old who also converted to Judaism – Melina – who also was bat mitzvahed at fifteen, which was a beautiful thing. It’s all beautiful because we went to Germany; Melina and I went to a synagogue in Frankfurt, and it was sort of like a true circle of life, with her father losing his family in the Holocaust, denying his Judaism, telling her he was Jewish, her realizing it after she had already had a baby girl, who now was almost a teenager, who then also converted, and then there we are back in Frankfurt, Germany in synagogue together. It was sort of a very – it was a

cool thing. It was very beautiful.

RH: So she had her bat mitzvah in –

JS: At Touro, no. Right at Touro. And she was fifteen. She did a beautiful job. It was sort of nice because she was even a little bit older, and really – you know how some have these bat mitzvahs, and they're more concerned about the party and the fanfare and the New Orleans – where I grew up, bar mitzvahs – there was no music. It was Orthodox. Hers, although it was in a Reform synagogue. She understood the significance of everything. I think more than maybe a thirteen-year-old. But that's a beautiful thing. But it's her life and can't quite impose the strictness that I maybe had being brought up Jewish. In New Orleans, it's just not quite the same environment. So, how her Jewishness will lead, I don't know yet. I just don't know.

RH: How old is she now?

JS: She's nineteen, and she's a sophomore at LSU [Louisiana State University]. She should be coming in, too. So anyway, now we have another baby. So, I go back to Rabbi Rivkin. Rabbi Rivkin says, “Jeffrey, I've talked to the powers that be, and we cannot do it.” He said, “We cannot convert Gabriela. Birgitt must convert. She must convert to Orthodox.” So, now we're going into Rabbi Schiff out of Beth Israel, and now we're joining Beth Israel. We're members of three synagogues. We're studying with Beth Israel and going there on Saturdays, and it's done through Chicago. It's a big – it's becoming – it's not easy. I mean, one, they're telling us we should sell our house; we need to be able to walk to Beth Israel. It's like two years going on, and Birgitt was studying, and we're taking classes together. We start the Melton School through the Federation, which we just graduated with the year break. I mean, we were doing a lot of things, and of course, I'm constantly questioning – I don't understand why I'm doing this. Birgitt and I lead a more Jewish life than my brother and sisters, who are big Reform Jews and could be having shrimp for dinner Friday night, and somehow it's okay for

them. They're all Jewish; their kids are all Jewish. But with my wife's father, who survived the Holocaust – and we're trying, and we're keeping a kosher house. Because when you converted Zachary, those were some of the rules – Jewish education, kosher house – so we abide by those things. We have a kosher – anyway, it was like, I cannot believe that – my mother, who is like eighty-five just keeps saying, "When is Gabriela going to be –? When's Birgitt going to –?" Zachary is done. I got to get this done while my mother's alive. Then my parents came down to visit, and I went back again and pleaded with the rabbi. "Please, can we do a conversion for Gabriela? Don't worry about Birgitt. Don't even worry about her. This is Gabriela." So, my two children can, in the eyes of – and I don't know why for such a liberal guy, I think I am, that this thing really – maybe my upbringing. It just was important. You can't justify it, really. Because I really don't know how people know what their genealogy truly is over the last five thousand years, and blah, blah, blah. But maybe because of my allegiance to my mom and dad, I say it's got to be better. So, Birgitt's not now – okay, so then the hurricane happens. Beth Israel's destroyed. We don't know what to do, and we speak to a rabbi in New York City, who used to be the rabbi at Kadima, who we all love very much. So, we call him up out of despair, and he starts working with Birgitt while we're in exile in Taos, and they're corresponding and working together on this. Birgitt and the kids are there for ninety months in Taos, New Mexico. That's where we evacuated to. We're getting ready to come back in June. I'm commuting a little bit. Birgitt's back June 1st with the kids because my friend Ron and his wife – how interesting that the person who gave me a job, gave me a house to live in, gave me everything – his house flooded, and they lived in this house from November 1st until June 1st while we lived in the house in Taos. So, Birgitt ends up coming home and then goes to New York and meets with the rabbi. The rabbi says, "I think you know enough. I think we will convert you to Orthodox. And Gabriela." So, on June 10th of last year, we all go to New York, and my mother, who kept asking when this is going to happen, and then my father – my father's like eighty-nine and developing Alzheimer's and things. So, it's almost like down to the wire. They

all attend Gabriela's conversion, where she goes in the mikvah, taken in the mikvah by me, [and] Birgitt's conversion to Orthodox Judaism, which happens with my mother being her aide in her – her maid of honor, as you might say. Then, my two little children, who are – Melina was in Boston at my brother's, I think, at that time. She couldn't make it. But the two little ones are witnesses to our wedding because they had to remarry us. They cried through the whole thing because they thought something was weird about it. They just couldn't understand how we're getting married again because they're always knowing about how you get married and you have children, and they thought there was something like a divorce going on. I couldn't get Zachary to stop crying. He just didn't understand that we're getting married again. But we got married again, while my parents were the witnesses.

RH: How did you feel about it?

JS: What?

RH: How did you feel about getting married again?

JS: Well, it's my third marriage to Birgitt because the first marriage was by the rabbi in Massachusetts. He flew from Las Vegas. Then, when we get there, find out, you can't get married in Massachusetts without a three-week residency. So, I said, "Well, this is our legal marriage, August 15th. It's the day your father was born, and it was a Tuesday." I wanted to be married on Tuesday. It's good luck. So, got married on Tuesday, and it's just a Jewish wedding. That's our wedding date. Then we come back to New Orleans on Wednesday, and then Friday, Jerry Winsberg, who lives around the corner and is just a criminal court judge, married us. So, that was the second time. That's, I guess, our legal one – would be the 18th. Then, we got married again in New York on June 10th of last year, and that's our official Orthodox wedding. I mean, I consider our wedding – our true wedding – August 15th, which will be eight years, I guess, this August. Seven years. So all this happened because of the hurricane. I just

know that the way things were going with Beth Israel and stuff, it was going so slow … Anyway, all this stuff I'm telling you, especially the conversion things – I just don't think we'll – Zachary would have. It happened already. But Gabriela and Birgitt – it really happened because of the hurricane. I mean, I hate to say this, but at the rate we were going, it was just like – going once a week, and we were going to have to fly to Chicago and do all these kind of things, and it would have been – it would have happened, but my parents would never have witnessed it, I'm sure … it would have happened, but my parents are eighty-nine and eighty-eight. I just don't think it would have happened in their lifetime. That would have been a major tragedy because that's all – I was the baby, and I was the one that was brought up the most Jewish and the most Orthodox, and it was really sort of – I don't know – it was just the [inaudible] the last thing that had to be done. It's almost like when it happened, my mother said, "You know what? We can go now." But they're not – they're healthy and they're alive. But you know what I'm saying. It's just like, she really – it was very important to my mother.

RH: The last order of business.

JS: The fact that she witnessed it, and was a part of it, a witness to our wedding, signed the wedding and [inaudible] – even though they were there at the wedding, obviously when we got married in [inaudible], which was a good old wedding because that's where my brother got married, that's where my sister got married, so it's a beautiful place – that all three children were married in the same place. And all three marriages are great. So, that was just a really nice touch, and I just think that in some weird way, that way [inaudible] it just happened that way. Never would have happened in one more year. When we left right before Katrina, no rabbi would have said it'll happen in one year. Just wasn't going to happen. It would have been another two, three years. So, we met with the rabbi in New York, and I think he just realized, "You know what? This is such [inaudible]. It's right." He interviewed Birgitt and Shomre Shabbos. The men came, and they interviewed Birgitt and asked us all the questions, and it just was – it was probably

one of the most beautiful things that happened ever. So, the children were there. That was the silver lining, I guess, was that – in the cloud for us. So, that's that.

RH: Wow. That's quite a story. That's a Katrina story.

JS: Yeah, but it's a Katrina story that isn't a sad story. We didn't lose our house. I didn't lose my job and all my – very lucky. I was protected [inaudible] insurance. The one bad thing was, and it is a bad thing, Zachary's schooling. He was at Torah Academy, and he was in an Orthodox environment. We came back. There's no doubt about it, my income was cut in half. I mean, because I'm a criminal defense lawyer. I represent poor people. The first thing people would say was, “There's plenty of criminals out there now.” I mean, “You should make a fortune.” But there were 450,000 people, and I don't know what percentage are criminals, but there's a much smaller pot to divide amongst all us lawyers. So, my income really suffered in the beginning, and I guess it came to be like we were looking for things that make our life easier. The school, at the time, was just – it wasn't like the seven or eight thousand dollars really that it would cost. That really wasn't a factor. But I was trying to get to court earlier, get more business, work more. And that just suffered because I didn't – I took them out of Torah Academy. That had a lot to do with the two hours a day of driving, and I wish more than anything, there was a Hebrew day school here in New Orleans and not out in Metairie. But it's [inaudible]. I talked to Rabbi Rivkin about it, and I think he was hurt, and he thought it was selfish on my part that – so you have to drive two hours. That's part of raising a Jewish child and all this kind of stuff. But I grew up where it was – I had a choice of five different yeshivas I could have gone to and chosen. But that obviously [inaudible] away, but I was – it was just really horrid to start back over and put Zachary in a school out in West Esplanade and Transcontinental forty-five minutes after coming back, [inaudible] back, and I was really trying to be in the courthouse more to just work harder to make more money and get back on track. That's still a regret. Zachary goes to a public school now. He goes to Lusher – ironically about to go to the rabbi at our synagogue in Touro, [inaudible]. His

kids go to Lusher. We try to do things – they go to school on Sundays. They go to Sunday School. We hired a Jewish tutor while we were at – Tuesday nights when we went to our Melton class. We had to go because they were coming to work with the children, just working on their Jewishness. I say this, and I hope I do it, but I hope that I don't let their Jewish education fall by the wayside. I mean, I obviously would never be less than once. I hate to even say that. I think the thing it's just once a week or even twice a week. Because they do go up obviously at a yeshiva. I haven't quite figured out what I'm going to do yet. But I've got to do something where they get tutored. I want them reading Hebrew just like I could read Hebrew when I was four or five. I want them to be able to read Hebrew. I don't want them to be sort of Reform Jews in New Orleans that might be active in – and I just want them to know a lot more about Torah and Judaism. But I guess I just wanted to [inaudible] the time to make the commitment to bringing them back to Torah Academy. Honestly, there was a problem with this. Not a problem, but we're not nearly as religious as most people at Torah Academy, and I never felt, watching Zachary, that he looked as comfortable in this world where everybody was ultra-Orthodox, and he was more Orthodox/Conservative. He didn't know anybody really well, and I just didn't see him – he didn't look comfortable there. They already were all speaking Hebrew, and they all were sons of rabbis. I made the decision, and I'm sticking by it. He goes to the Lusher, and he's very, very happy there. But I had to do something to make sure that he was [inaudible] because that fell by the wayside. We're probably going to take the whole family to Israel next summer. Certainly, go to the Maccabiah Games whenever they come up [inaudible]. Maybe next time I've got to – but no matter what I think, [inaudible]. So, that's that.

RH: So, when you were taking them out to the Torah Academy, why Torah Academy and not the Jewish day school? Was there kind of a decision about that? I mean, they're both in the same place, so it's still a two-hour drive.

JS: Well, I don't know who gets to see all this and the politics of things – I mean, who sees this tape, or who reads it, but I was very, very thankful to Rabbi Rivkin for what he did with Zachary. When he converted Zachary, and he made the house kosher, and tried not to drive too much on Saturday [inaudible], but we really made an effort to try to observe the Sabbath. Rabbi Rivkin said, “Jeff, you know you're sort of like a wild guy, single, and [inaudible].” He said, “If I can just pull you over a little bit towards – back to your Orthodox, and I'm happy.” So, when we could – he'd say, “You need to keep your house kosher.” I said, “But I'm still going to the Rib Room. And I'm going to [inaudible].” He said, “That's okay. Let's take it one step at a time.” And then he said, “I want you to put tefillin on,” which is another very, very nice story. But one day, right from the day before we left for Germany –

RH: I'm going to ask you to move your – it fell.

JS: The day before we went to visit Birgitt's family in Germany – I think it was two summers ago – we went to a Chabad fundraiser, and Rabbi Rivkin's wife said, “Jeffrey, are you putting on your tefillin?” I said, “Not very often.” She said, “Please do it for me. My sister's had a child, and the child is on its deathbed. It's days old, and I need everyone to pray.” I said, “Okay, I will.” I said, “I'm leaving for Germany, but I will put on tefillin every day as long as I'm in Germany and when I come back,” which I did. But minutes after that, they had the raffle – a diamond ring. Sure enough, Birgitt wins the diamond ring the day before we leave for Germany, and the rabbi's wife gets up and says, “You know what? I just talked to Jeffrey minutes before he won this.” There were hundreds of people there. I mean, there was a two-carat diamond. So, it was just a very, very sweet thing where she said, “I really think it's Jeffrey's commitment to putting on tefillin that gave him the luck to win the diamond ring.” But anyways, after he did the conversion, maybe like two years later, when he was two, he came over to this house, sat right here, had tea and pastries. He said, Jeffrey, “I know you're thinking of the” – we talked about Jewish education – “and I know you're thinking about Jewish day school.”

But he said they wouldn't take Zachary until he's five or four. I forget what it was. Don't remember. But whatever it is, he said, “We take them a year or two earlier.” So he said, “If you're thinking of the Torah Academy, please – I mean, if you're thinking of the day school, please think of the Torah Academy, at least for a year before that.” Anyway, so that's what happened. So, I said, “You know what? Why not?” It was a preschool year, and so that year before Katrina – in fact, after we did that year, even though I had – I wasn't sure how much Zachary liked it – Birgitt got on the board of Torah Academy, and I mean, days before the hurricane, Birgitt was there every day, and helping to fix it up and trying to raise money, and she's like Jeffrey – and they were both enrolled at the Torah Academy for the Wednesday after the hurricane. I mean, it was the 3rd or so of September. Like I say, Birgitt was on the board, both kids were going to go, and we were excited about that, even though like I said, I wasn't convinced Zachary was happy in that world, but I figured his sister will be there now. So that's why they went to Torah Academy, was because Rabbi Rivkin, my relationship with him, and he asked me to try it for one year. And so then next year was the hurricane, and then the following year, Zachary was in kindergarten, and he went to Lusher, so that's what happened with that.

RH: Okay. So you're talking a little bit about it now. What's it like to be an Orthodox Jew in New Orleans?

JS: Well, first of all, I'm not Ortho – you know what? Just from the amount of time I've spent at Chabad – not Chabad – well, Chabad, Anshe Sfard – I'm not Orthodox. I'd say I'm a Conservative that was raised in an Orthodox synagogue. I mean, our house was kosher, but we certainly were not Shomre Shabbos; we certainly drove on the Sabbath. We observed obviously all the holidays, always went to synagogue every Saturday, but I didn't go every morning when I was going up, put on tefillin and things like that. I didn't wear tzitzit once I got out of the – once I left the yeshiva. So, I'm not Orthodox. I never would say I was Orthodox when I came here. The thing that I think was the biggest – the thing that really stands out to me about New Orleans and Orthodox Judaism is that there

really wasn't – you have Chabad, and then you seem to have Reform – well, I guess they have Conservative, too. But I never really met the Conservative movement. You know, and I [inaudible] maybe a little bit, but that to me, I still hung out with more Orthodox people there, where there used to be Orthodox. But the people that were really Orthodox that I met tended to be Chabad people. The rest of the people that I knew that were Jewish would be very involved in the Federation, but not at all involved in Judaism per se. People like – friends of mine – like Allan Bissinger, a wonderful human being that does a tremendous – but he'll play tennis on Saturday. You just meet a lot of Jewish people that do wonderful things for the Jewish causes but they probably rarely go to services Saturday morning, and I was much more used to all Orthodox people going to synagogue on Saturdays, and even the Conservatives who go to synagogue every Saturday. I really grew up in a world where there weren't a lot of Reform Jews, in Springfield, Mass. They had one temple, Sinai, but there were far more Orthodox and Conservative temples than Reform in Longmeadow, Springfield, Mass. When you came down here, it was kind of like the opposite. [inaudible] with Sinai and Touro. I'd never in my life been to a Jewish family that had a Christmas tree. Ever. The first time I saw that was when I came to New Orleans, and I went into peoples' homes, and they had Christmas trees, and they also have Hanukkah lights. But you know what? I was single, so I didn't really have that much – I never really paid much attention to it. I would just go back home when I needed some of my doses of Judaism. And, like I said, I would go – I would stay – when you're single, and you're trying to make a living as a lawyer, you can take off two weeks, and it wasn't going to be the end of the world. You didn't have to really be here too much, and I wasn't. So I would go home for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkoth, and stay home for like the month of September. So I never really gave that much thought about it and just looked at – I never really had a connection with my Jewishness and New Orleans. Plus, New Orleans was often – to me, was in some ways – and I don't mean this in a bad way – but kind of a cliquey thing with the Jewish world. Fathers and grandfathers were big philanthropists and donators, but it was a very

sort of small – everyone knew everybody. When I grew up in Springfield, I knew every Jewish family there was to know, practically. Here in New Orleans, I didn't know any of the real Jewish families. I knew a few Jewish people, but I didn't know the connections. I didn't know, like you said, Hermann. I didn't know – "Oh, Hermann." "You know Hermann, Hermann, Hermann." They're lawsuits and synagogues against each other. I didn't [inaudible] all the intricacies of the Jewish connection. I was young, single, and just didn't have any reason to get involved. So, there wasn't a big issue about how was – Did my thing, you know? If I wanted to go to synagogue, I would go to synagogue. They were very happy to always have me. You ever go back to a Chabad, they're always happy to have you there because they barely can make a minyan. When I was back there, I'd go, Mr. Henry – at the time, the tailor was – he would say, "Jeffrey, you have to join here." So we'd join – I'd join Chevra Thilim, and then he'd get into a fight with them, and he would call me up and say, "We have to leave Chevra Thilim." "Where are we going?" "We're going to Anshe Sfard. They wouldn't give so-and-so an aliyah. I'm mad at them. We're going." So I'd go. I'd follow him there. You know, I had to sit with him. Then he'd get mad at them. "They're mad at me. I gave David – whatever, Ralph … [inaudible] I gave him an aliyah, and they got mad at me for doing that because he had David Duke on his radio show. So now we're going back to this synagogue." So, I'd follow him. And now with a family, I'm very happy at Anshe Sfard because I take the children there every Saturday. Both children go to services every Saturday, which I like very, very much, and hopefully they will learn more through that experience. I'm glad we belong to Touro, too, because they go to Sunday School there. Touro is a very – politically, I think I like the Reform synagogues here because Anshe Sfard just doesn't have the power and the magnitude to do much in the community, whereas Touro has some clout, and so they have good speakers, and they have lectures and things that they're never going to get at our little synagogue. For a while, at least. So, I like belonging to both, and they're both close. Touro is a mile away – not even that – and Sfard is like two miles. The kids and I – we can even ride our bicycles. I know it's not

totally [inaudible]. We ride our bikes to the synagogue, and it's okay.

RH: How many are at Anshe Sfard right now?

JS: Well, we have a minyan every Saturday, but barely. Maybe we have like thirteen to fifteen every Saturday. I mean, active members, maybe there's fifty, maybe even seventy-five. But it's hard to tell. There are a lot of older people that are members because of the cemetery rights. It's very important to be able to be buried in a Jewish cemetery. When you are a member of Anshe Sfard, and if your mother is Jewish and your father, and if you're truly an Orthodox person – or not Orthodox person – Jewish by Orthodox standards, you'll have a guaranteed burial. So, there are people that belong that I'll never see, but they are dues-paying members because they want that right to have a place to be buried. But I think maybe – we had a general meeting the other day. It's somewhere between fifty and seventy-five.

RH: And you're talking people, not families.

JS: Right. Well, because unfortunately many people that belong to Anshe Sfard are over seventy, so they're not families anymore [inaudible]. Their spouses are gone.

RH: Do you have very many who left? Mr. Henry left, I know. Does he still [overlapping dialogue; inaudible]?

JS: No, we lost so many because anybody that was over seventy after the hurricane – same with Beth Israel – similar problem. Many, many people at that age – if you lose your home, you aren't going to rebuild. So they now live with children in Memphis and Dallas and Houston. We lost a lot of people – not a lot because we didn't have a lot to start. But we lost a significant amount of people. Dr. (Tulmus?) was one of the five founders of our synagogue. He no longer – I mean, his brother passed away, but these are people that were in there for sixty years, and they're not back in New Orleans. Mr. Henry, he's in Dallas with his daughter. There's a bunch more. To some extent, we're

trying to rebuild and start off – Lonnie Schaffer is our president from London, and she's got four kids, and her daughter's bat mitzvah made the front page of the Living section. It was a beautiful thing. There were like 250 people at the synagogue [from] all over the country, flying in for a bat mitzvah. We were there the week before painting and refinishing, and now Gary (Reimer's?) son is being bar mitzvahed. He just donated five thousand dollars to have this portion fixed, and we have this money that's supposed to be coming to us, but there's a little bit of a court battle and something going on with the Federation, but I hope we get the money because we need it desperately. We don't have a rabbi right now. We need a rabbi. It's truly an Orthodox synagogue. You know what's really nice about Anshe Sfard? It's like – besides being absolutely gorgeous – I mean, I love it. It's just the same reason why I think I practice criminal law. I love being at Tulane and Broad. I love to try a case in front of juries as opposed to the modern courtroom. You really get into it with these oak walls. It's the same with that synagogue. It's so beautiful. It just evokes such great memories that someone said to me even like – are you following this? Sometimes, I just sit and smell … sometimes, you just smell the smells, and I had my children in my arms, and I can think back, close my eyes, think back about being with my father and my grandfather back at Kadima in Springfield. It's just a wonderful, wonderful feeling. Also, it is the only synagogue that a tourist that's Orthodox can go to if they're visiting. Believe it or not, we can't get a minyan, normally, without at least one tourist. But we get one every week. I mean, we're talking – it's the only synagogue that you can walk to from the French Quarter or from Canal Street. Saturday, we had two people. Even though we had over ten – we had like thirteen. But a lot of times we can't – we need these tourists because I show up at like ten every Saturday. So, it was nice that they didn't have to wait for me. A lot of times, we're literally waiting for the tenth person. But with tourists, we're always rocking and rolling by 9:30. In fact, this past week, I didn't talk to them, but I heard there was an Orthodox man and his wife, and they were from Rutland, Vermont. He was here on a convention. I don't know what he does. They walked from the Marriot to our synagogue. So, we are the only Orthodox

synagogue that you can go to in New Orleans. So, I think it's a – it is a reason for everyone to want to keep it alive and well because it's good for tourism. If you were ultra-Orthodox or Orthodox, and you're orthopedic or whatever you are, and you're looking about where to go for a different convention to get your CLEs [continuing legal education?] for law or whatever, and you find out that there is no synagogue in New Orleans that you can attend, maybe you won't come. But if you know that there is a synagogue, it's really not hard. You call the Orthodox Union, and they'll tell you. Anshe Sfard – it's a mile and a half from your hotel. It's great. It's really nice to see, every week, people there that are from other parts of the world. I mean, we get them from London, from Paris, from Australia, from South Africa, and if that synagogue goes, there won't be another Orthodox synagogue built in uptown New Orleans or even in proper. It just won't happen. So, they're not going to walk up to Touro, and then there's rarely – there's not always even a service on Saturday morning. So, Bicycle Michael – he's the young Jewish guy that – and people that never went to synagogue, all of a sudden, they're showing up at Anshe Sfard. When I used to go there before the hurricane, I was the youngest guy by far. Now I'm not the youngest guy anymore. There are people in their thirties showing up. I'm hoping that with the whole rebuilding of New Orleans, there'll be a rebuilding of – and not so much Orthodox Judaism – just at least that Orthodox synagogue, and that people will really – just want to make sure that it's always there, maybe go there once a month, even though they belong somewhere else. Just to help it along, and if we get the money that was promised to us – that was left to us by one of our members and with the Federation – now there's a little bit of a legal battle. The (Tulmuses?) are fighting it and – blah, blah, blah. But I mean, to be honest with you, it's desperately needed just to repair termite-infested wood, and it is sad that you still look at parts where the plaster is all on the ground, and it's just not really safe for children to be in that place. You just want to get it so it's structurally sound, and then we can have the young rabbi.

RH: So what are the –? Are there plans to get a rabbi?

JS: Oh, yeah. But we do need that money. I think it's eighty thousand dollars a year that we need to get [inaudible]. That's the interest off the money we [inaudible] to the Federation. I don't even know why we don't have it now because it's in his will that he's left our synagogue, as long as we maintain an Orthodox synagogue. Well, we had this – I mean, it's just been tough. We had this man from Israel that was sort of our unofficial rabbi, but his visa ran out, so we already paid a lawyer, but it was just so difficult – immigration laws are tough but he was a terrific man and older but was doing a great job. But now (Gary Reimer?) and some of the others are taking the position, and you know. I mean, it's a true Orthodox ceremony, but we definitely need a rabbi. Maybe we can find some young rabbi that wants to work in New Orleans, and if he has a young family, and you know, we can get him situated in that area. Because that area is coming around now, around Carondelet. They're starting to rebuild condominiums. So, maybe it will happen. I think it will. I mean, before Hurricane Katrina, there were many times when we didn't have a minyan. Many times I would go there and turn around [and] have to leave. Just didn't have it. And now, since we have reopened, maybe out of a year, we've had three times with no minyan. So, that's already an improvement. We're on our second bar mitzvah, and hopefully, we'll have a wedding. So, I'm very optimistic.

RH: Do you attribute it to anything that you're able now to make the minyans?

JS: Well, a perfectly good example is this. Prior to Katrina, I didn't go every Saturday. Now, one reason why I go every Saturday is because I have children, and I like to take them. I like to take them. I can say goodnight to them. I want them to be there. Because of them, I want to bring them every Saturday, and then I decided to get involved and get on the board and things like that. You know what? I think a little bit of it is like that psychological principle. I forgot the name of the famous case everyone studies in psychology where a girl is being beaten in New York City, and hundreds of people witness, and no one goes in there to help her. Kitty Genovese was the name of the story. Then the basic psychological principle is, you know, if you think someone else will

do it, you'll let them. If you live on a country road, and someone's got a flat tire, you'll stop. But in New York City, you don't stop. And there's a little bit of that going on. The city has changed. The population is cut in half. It's not as easy to say, oh, someone else will do it. You got to step up to the plate because there isn't so many somebody else's. So you know, I actually will spend a Friday night, whatever, making a phone call I'm not supposed to. But anyway, Friday afternoon, before the Shabbos starts, I'll call some people and say, “Michael, we really need a minyan.” Joe Stahl, a lawyer that is so learned in Torah and Hebrew, hasn't been to synagogue in years. He comes to Anshe Sfard once a month. I mean, he can't chant beautifully. He stays at home normally and reads the Torahs reading and the portions and knows all about the parshas and what's going on. Well, he just doesn't come to synagogue. I say, “Joe, I'll play tennis with you on Monday. Come on Saturday. Deal?” “Deal.” You're actually getting people – like, “Please come.” I called Mayer Finkelstein once. It was like, nine people at 9:45, and Mayer was at the office over at 700 Camp Street. I said, “Mayer, we need you now,” and he zipped over from – I never did that kind of stuff before. I didn't even go that much. I mean, I just really – I guess the kids were four and two at the hurricane, so they'd been going to synagogue for about a year with me at that point when they were three and one – and not so much Gabriella, who was one. So, I really didn't start going until about a year before the hurricane because of the children. But now, after the hurricane, the three of us go every Saturday. We do not miss. Unless we're out of town, we don't miss. It's just very, very – well, it's important for me to be there. I mean, I actually feel guilty now if I'm not there because I know that they may not have a minyan because of me. It’s funny because when people show up, it's like they cheer you on when you're the tenth person, almost like – you feel important, like wow. Everyone shakes your hand. It's like an aliyah that you – or a mitzvah that you're the tenth person, so we can start reading the Torah finally. So, it's definitely, I think, a little bit of the Kitty Genovese Syndrome that less people – and you just feel like you have to step up to the plate. I don't know the statistics. Are there more Jewish people moving to the city? I don't know anything about

that. I doubt that's a big factor. It's not like we have a bigger membership, but we're definitely – when you hear about somebody – if I hear somebody's Jewish, and they had some sort of Jewish – perfect example. Seth Blum. He's a young lawyer from Jacksonville, Florida. Handsome, eligible young bachelor, twenty-nine years old, good looking, good law practice, [inaudible] had a good Jewish background. His mother was president of the Federation in Jacksonville. But typical [inaudible] Loyola. He probably didn't go to synagogue once in the whole time he was at Loyola and law school. He went to [the] University of Florida, where you have a million Jewish friends, but things weren't happening for him at all Jewish-wise here, and then I met him, and he started working with me. Now he has his own law practice, and we're on the same floor. I said, “Seth …”. I met his mom. His mom was even saying, “Jeffrey, when are you going to fix him up with a nice –? When are you going [inaudible].” So, I'm like, “Hey, you know what? He can be a board member. He can go from nothing to being on the board.” It's almost like if you decide to join the club, you're going to be an automatic officer because we're that small. Well, he's not on the board yet, but he joined. He gave us his dues, and I call up Seth, and I got to call him twice because Friday night, when you're twenty-nine and single in New Orleans, it's not exactly a night where you're studying Torah. So, I got to call him up at ten, midnight, and two and say, “Seth, go to bed. You got to be at synagogue [at] ten o'clock. No later.” I hope he settles down, gets married, has children, and lives in New Orleans because he would be someone that is a perfect example of somebody who knows how to do an aliyah. He knows how to read a Haftorah, and he never would have thought of coming to synagogue. He was like me. He's actually kind of just like me. He'd go to Jacksonville before he'd go to synagogue here. He'd go to Jacksonville. Just fly home.

RH: Okay. We're going to, just stop for a minute and change the tape, and you want to go tell your kids goodnight. [Recording paused.] All right. This is tape two of Katrina's Jewish Voices, and I'm with Jeff Smith at his home on Monday, July 16th. So, let's just circle back a little bit and cover a little bit of ground. When did you guys decide to leave

for Katrina? Was it automatic to go? I know you have a second home in Taos.

JS: No, not automatic. We knew we had the house to go to, and the year before, when it was Ivan – no one ever thought you'd have to go anywhere for long. If you had to go anywhere, maybe it's just for a day or two. So the year before, we went to Austin, Texas to stay with my friend, Peter (Zandermuth?), my childhood buddy. We got there in one day for Ivan, and already you could come back. Everything was fine. Your hurricane is not hitting. Come on back. But we stayed there for a week and had a vacation. So, we kind of thought it's going to be the same way here. We really weren't sure where we were going to go. I mean, we packed a suitcase. In fact, the stupidest thing we did was, on Saturday, which was only two days before the hurricane, we went to Gulfport to the water park. Already, when we were coming back from Gulfport, we saw people evacuating. Birgitt and I were like, “Oh, man, are we stupid?” We should have just packed up our bags, gone to the water park and just kept going because what happened was then we got stuck on Sunday – is when we left. We got back, and luckily my contractor friend came here on his own and boarded up all the windows. So we got here, like at five o'clock on Saturday. Everything got boarded up. The whole house. So that was good. We just had to pack our bags. But Birgitt, being from Germany and fastidious, cleaned the house from top to bottom. Like from four AM until about noon. I mean, the table was set. Everything. The house was perfectly – we kissed the mezuzah and left on noon that Sunday. Everything seemed okay, although it was bumper to bumper. I mean, no, we weren't worried about being caught in the hurricane. We had other friends. By phone, it's like, “Well, you're going to have like an eight-hour drive to get out.” So we knew we were going to be out – by six o'clock on Sunday, we'd be well out of New Orleans, out of the hurricane. The real problems didn't evolve for another twelve hours. So we were okay, but we weren't sure. We thought maybe we'll go to Jacksonville. Taos is twenty hours away – twenty-one hours. As we were listening, they're telling us the storm looks like it's going to go a little east of New Orleans, and we're thinking, “You know what? It looks like it's going to miss us. It's going to hit past

the [inaudible].” It wasn't until – I don't know. I really can't remember. I know we were in a hotel. The first night, we drove forever. We drove at least eighteen hours. It was like two or three in the morning, and I think we were somewhere in Texas at that point. They wouldn’t let us go East on I-10. They just stopped you. You couldn't go to Gulfport. They stopped you at Meridian or at Emery. At the Hattiesburg exit or go to the – you got to go north. So now, I'm like, “Well, shoot, we can't even go to Jacksonville.” Because we thought maybe we'd go all the way east of the hurricane. We had friends in Mobile that said, “Come to Mobile.” Even if it hits us, we're on high ground, we'll be all right. We really weren't sure, but we're talking to my friend Ron Rakosky, and Herb Larsen didn't – our other friend that owns a house – didn't go to Taos. I forget where he went. Maybe Texas somewhere. So it was just – we knew Ron and Gay were going to head towards Taos. They were already convinced that we're going to take a vacation. Worst case scenario, we'll be there for a week or two. So, when we were headed up through Mississippi or somewhere like that towards Texas, we said “You know what? We don't know what's happening. Let's just go to Taos. We'll take a week's vacation with either Ron or Gay. We'll go there for a week.” Then, I just can't remember if we're in the hotel – at three in the morning when we're hearing that the levee might be breaking. But we certainly heard in the beginning, good news that the hurricane – the eye was not going to go – it was going to go east of New Orleans. So, all the damage would be east of that. So we're thinking we'd only be gone for a week. Then, by the time we got to Taos, we realized the devastation of it all. We had Melina with us, our seventeen year old, who was going to be a senior at De La Salle. So, now it's like, everyone's on the computer trying to figure out the elevation sites. Within about forty-eight hours, we realized that tragedy was really happening, the city was flooded, but already we were learning that – well, we had a friend that stayed right around the corner. Actually, his cellphone somehow worked a little bit. He called us in Taos and said, “Jeffrey, your house is high and dry.” He lived out in Soniat, so I knew my house had no water. Then, the computer tells you how many feet or inches of water you have. And Ron's house – the mid-city –

Ron Rakosky over near Carondelet Canal – we knew that his house had like eight feet of water. So, already we kind of knew that – of course, then, like two days later, we learned that – we'd see on the news fires in New Orleans, and the fire is at Upper Line and Camp, which is right there. They say six houses burned down. Upper Line and Camp. I'm like, six houses? One, two, three. I'm the sixth house. Turns out it was three and three. It was three on – if you go down this block, there's six houses burned down to the ground. The only reason why our house was saved – and this happened like just three days after the hurricane – and I have friends that are firemen, that told me, “Jeffrey, we were right on your front lawn, and we were all saying, ‘Poor Jeffrey, he's going to lose his house’ because we had no equipment, no water to save your house.” Six houses were totally burning, and they were just spreading. We were here just to make sure it didn't hop the street into another block. So, we were just here with axes. But we couldn't put out the fire. The house started to burn – burned down those six, and it started to burn this lady's house. It was one house, then the spa house, then the nice house. It started to burn her house, when some police – some fireman said, “There's a swimming pool here,” which was right behind us. Right there. They stuck the hose in the swimming pool, and they drenched – I guess I'm 4936, so it's like 4932 Camp. They drenched it with water, and that stopped the fire. But my house was literally – what the fireman actually told me, that were on my property, [was], “Your house was history. We had no plans of saving your house at all. Or your neighbor. The whole block. We were going to let the whole block go. We just were surrounding the block, making sure it didn't cross Magazine, or cross Camp, or cross Robert. We just didn't want it to go. So that's all we were doing, was trying to contain one block, and if we lost one city block, that was it.” So, that was a miracle. Another miracle that our house wasn't burned down to the ground, even though two days after the hurricane, we realized that we didn't flood. Of course, then you're worried about looting and things like that. Oh, well. So then, the next big step was what to do with Melina. She was a senior in high school. Totally had her – she had her dress picked out for her prom. I mean, she's into that stuff. No big deal. I

was happy. I mean, it's just like – she's like, “Jeffrey, I was going to be the head of this, and I was going to be president of Latin Club, I was going to be captain for the volleyball team.” You know, all this stuff. It was like Melina had no control over this. She was very upset. She's like, “Well, I don't want to be in Taos, New Mexico. I don't want to go to a Latino high school where there's gangs, and I don't know anybody here, Jeffrey.” We live on six acres out in nowhere, and we're talking like our town in Taos has two other people. It's not a big city. You’ve got to drive like fifteen miles to get to the grocery store. But she's like, “Jeffrey, this is how I'm going to spend my senior year?” I'm like, “I don't know what to do.” So, we had like a powwow after about four days because you can't wait too long with a – she had SATs, and everything was crazy. There were seven of us. There were five of us, and two – Ron and Gay. Seven in a little teeny, little vacation house, two-bedroom house. So, it was crazy. And, of course, everyone [was] glued to the TV. It was a total nightmare. I mean, I say it – it was a total nightmare, but it was sort of a surrealistic world. We were like the Hot Springs of the Rio Grande, which are natural. They're right down the street from us. We really live out in the country. We went for walks in the daytime, in the mountains. There was still snow on the top – I mean, it was sort of just – God, you come home, look at the TV, and you get depressed. Talk to people, you get depressed. Then you do very beautiful nature things. We were lucky to have a nice house to live in. We had clothes there already. We were well stocked up. We all ate, the seven of us, in a big family every night. There are some things that were actually pretty nice. But then the question is, what to do with Melina? I said, “You have a choice. You can go live with my mom and dad, who are like eighty-seven, eighty-eight, whatever, or you can live with my sister and her husband, but they go to New York City every day to work. You'd be going to Weston High School. Or you can go to my brother's house. They live in Bedford, Massachusetts, and they're home more, and they live in a town where you can walk around.” My sister's kind of in a fancy town where you can't just walk around. Homes are big giant homes. People live miles away. So, she said I'll go to [inaudible]. Actually, there's a third person. I have a very

good friend who lives in Cape Cod, and he's a retired teacher, and he said, “I'll take her.” Her first [inaudible]. She said, “Yes, I'll go live with Peter.” She thought Peter wouldn't be nearly as strict as my brother and his wife. He gave her a car, all this kind of stuff. She's going to go to Bourne High School. So, she started at Bourne Senior High School, right by the Bourne Bridge in Cape Cod. For three days, she cried and said, “Peter doesn't have any food in his house. He has nothing but peanut butter and jelly.” I said, “Well, Peter's never been married, and he retired. He just expects people to invite him out to dinner and stuff.” She's like, “Jeffrey, he hasn't cleaned his house, probably, in years.” It's like a big old kind of funky house in Cape Cod. It's beautiful. It's on the water. But it's sort of like a haunted house. She's like, “Jeffrey, there's cobwebs in the bedroom.” So, I called up my brother and said, “It's not going to work. She needs a feminine – she's a senior. She has to have a woman.” So, my brother and his wife drove down to Bourne. She had been there for one week at school, picked her up, and she went to Weston High School, where it turns out that there was another boy whose father was from Weston, who was a doctor in New Orleans, and they evacuated to Weston, Massachusetts and – not Weston, it was Bedford, Mass. Weston is Connecticut, where my sister is. Bedford, Mass. So, there were two people on the front page of the newspaper, both students, my daughter, Melina, and this other little boy. They both are at this school in Bedford, and they both graduated from Bedford. They both were seniors. There were sort of like celebrities. The Jewish population in Bedford went nuts about Melina. She had a thousand dollars, two thousand dollars’ worth of clothes at the Bedford mall. She went to – her Jewish education really was excellent because they have such a good program, there. It's a Reform synagogue, but it's huge, and it's wonderful, so she went to Hebrew class. She graduated from the Hebrew High School there. They just couldn't do enough for her. So, my sister-in-law, Fran – just kudos to Bedford, Mass and the Jewish population. I mean, someone donated a car for her to use for the whole season. She had her own Mitsubishi Galant, and I wouldn't even give her a car because that's too dangerous here. I mean, she got a job at the Friendly's. She

didn't have to wait for a year to get her name in. She got a job working at the restaurant. If you're from New England, Friendly's is sort of like the neighborhood restaurant that everyone likes to work at when you're in high school. So, she had this great year. She had what she needed – prep work for her SATs. My brother had a student from Harvard come. Her SAT scores jumped up. Her ACTs jumped up three or four points in six months being in Boston. I remember her calling me, saying, “Actually, you know what? I went to their prom. They donated their money to Iraqi women.” I said, “Well, that's Boston.” She's like, “None of the girls wore dresses. They all wore blue jeans and t-shirts to the prom.” I said, “Well, that's because they’re more concerned about things like women in America and women's rights, and they're not so concerned about dating the football quarterback.” She's like, “You know what? They don't have big rules at this high school. You can come and go as you please. But guess what? No one leaves. These girls are talking about [how] they want to lead this, and they want to run for state rep, and it's a different world.” So, it was a wonderful year for her. That all happened within five days of being in Taos. We had to get her situated. So, she ends up in Bedford, Mass and had a very good year. Then, she decided she wanted to go to – the only thing she hated was she said, “This is too darn cold.” We went to visit her in December, and it was like two feet of snow in one to two days. She's like, Jeffrey, “I can't do this.” I got to go back to school in the South. So she went to LSU. But she had a wonderful year, and a great Jewish experience in Bedford. My brother's son at the time was just married to a rabbi. She just had a very wonderful year, which never would have happened. Who would have thought that would have happened? I mean, a lot of things happened that were kind of crazy. Certainly, that was one of them, that she lived away from us with my brother and his wife and had a taste of New England for a year. The other thing was I didn't practice law for nine months. So, that was sort of –

RH: What was that like?

JS: Well, we got to Taos. This is sort of – I should have my cards. I don't have my cards. They're great. I have new business cards. I taught tennis for a living because I've done that all of my life. I'm still a USPTA [United States Professional Tennis Association] teaching pro. Even though I haven't needed to do that to make a living in thirty years, I did it, and we lived at a ski resort. The kids were four and two, and we went to the ski resort and asked them about skiing while we were going to be there, and told them that I just didn't have the money to – it's so expensive skiing. They said, “Well, guess what? We don't really have a Katrina sort of program for people. You're like the first two people from Katrina to come here. However, if you take a job here at Ski Valley, your children can go to ski school for free.” So Brigitt and I applied for jobs. We had to have background checks because we were going to be working with children, and we started on Thanksgiving Day, and I taught three to five year olds skiing from Thanksgiving day to April 3rd. Ten bucks an hour. My supervisor was nineteen or twenty. I'd have to go before him to make sure I brushed my teeth and shaved. I mean, it was all kind of great. I ended up becoming like the father figure because half these kids really were – you needed a lawyer because they got caught with marijuana or something, and the bottom line is, at fifty-three, I had a lot more life experiences than most of my bosses. I just couldn't ski very well. But, like they said, teaching three to five-year-olds, most of the time, you're just picking them up. You're not going down a big ski slope. You're just doing the beginning. So, I did that. My children, my two and four-year-old, skied six days a week for six months. They're both absolutely fabulous skiers, and I think there are pictures of them somewhere. They're just great skiers. They're the best. I mean, you can't take two athletic kids and put them on a ski slope for six days a week for six months and not expect them to ski. So, we worked and lived at the Ski Valley. They were very nice to me. I told them I'd need to go back and check on my law practice and things, so they would let me go back. They would just say, “Jeffrey, just do what you got to do.” So, I would teach maybe two weeks, and then I'd go back for ten days. So my first time back was in October, when I came to this house and opened the

doors for the first time, and I had to take the things off the windows. So, the house was pretty much in shape. Some fences were blown down, but basically, the house was working. All of the food was spoiled, and I had to get rid of – I had to get new appliances and things, but the house was okay to live in. And then, like I said, my friend moved in November 1st. I came in the middle of October for ten days and basically would do a lot of checking on things, but it was very hard to practice law. I'm a criminal defense lawyer, and Tulane and Broad was closed, and it was just –you're trying to find people and get people out of jail that shouldn't have been in jail, people that might have gotten a traffic ticket two days before Katrina were still there three months later for a speeding ticket.

RH: Did that really happen?

JS: Oh, God, it happened. I mean, the better example would be let's say you were – you pled a guy – I pled a guy guilty to drunk in public, and the judge gave him six days, and I did it like three days before Katrina; it took nine months to get him out of jail. Couldn't find him. He was supposed to be released in four or five days.

RH: Where was he?

JS: Oh, he was somewhere in Angie, Louisiana, in some prison. They didn't have any name tags. They didn't know who was who. No identification on people. Oh man, I was getting people out of jail – a lot of people out of jail – by phone. People would call. My cell phone would still work, and I would say, “Well, I'm in Taos.” And they would say, “Jeffrey, you represented my son. You pled him guilty. He got thirty days.”

RH: Ten months ago.

JS: “It's now January, and he's still in jail.” I said, “Well, I've got to find him. Where is he?” And they were all over the state. They were in makeshift prisons. Oh, there was a ton of that.

RH: Where did you find him? I mean, how did you find him?

JS: Eventually, there were websites you could do, and the Department of Corrections, and I've been doing this twenty-seven years. I know people in Baton Rouge. You can track people down. And then I started – I was working for the public defender's office since 1980, so over twenty-five years, I guess. Yeah, twenty-five years, I worked with the public defender, and they laid me off because they had no money. So, I lost that job, which was a big hardship because – although the pay wasn't a lot of money, maybe thirty-thousand dollars a year, but my whole family health insurance was under that. So, I didn't have health insurance. Well, I had the COBRA, but my family helped me out tremendously financially. You live a certain lifestyle, and I don't think I was extravagant but you don't plan on going from X amount of dollars to zero overnight. You could have a bad month, a bad year, you could be down twenty-five percent, but I went down a hundred percent. You know? I mean, the month of September, I made no money. Whether I made ten, twenty, thirty or forty the month before, whatever it was, to go from that to zero was ridiculous. Plus, you got a mortgage and this house and you got – it was like, whoa. I had insurance. I had –what did they call it? – business interruption.

RH: Business interruption?

JS: Yeah. But all of that stuff took months to file and get. Luckily, I had just – Julie Oreck – I love Julie Oreck, because Julie – I changed home insurance with her maybe months before and – because I didn't have a very good insurance agency, I don't think, the policy. I changed to someone that she recommended who was very, very good – Chubb. Anyways, they sent me a check within forty-eight hours to Taos to live on. But to be honest, I was very lucky. My family took my daughter. My brother took my daughter in. My mother and father, sister and her husband, everyone said, “Jeffrey, whatever you need, if you need money to get by, to get your mortgage payment paid.” The kind of thing that – no one expects this kind of stuff. So, you call your mortgage company, and

they go, “Don't worry about it. Don't worry about it. You don't have to make your payment this month. So, I didn't make it September, I didn't make it October, I didn't make it November – and then December, you get a bill for like fifteen thousand dollars, and you go, “What's that for?” And they go, “Well, we didn't say it was forgiven. Just you didn't have to pay it September, October, or November.” So, you got four months of bills at one time. That’s what I had to do. I had to pay like fifteen thousand dollars in one month. I didn't make any money the last three months, so my family helped out. They just said, “You can pay us back, but here is the money. Then little things. My car got flooded. One of my cars I left it downtown, and so GEICO sent a check for that. I started working and teaching tennis and skiing, but that wasn't a lot of money. I mean, ten bucks an hour. My wife, she's working in the daycare center. The whole thing was an interesting experience. I went there like a month – I mean, two weeks out of each month, maybe ten – not two weeks, but ten days the first month and maybe ten days the second, and then by around February or March, I started working again. I lost the public defender's job, but then I got hired back in May or June. Then in September of last year, they said, “You have to be full-time. Give up your private practice.” I don't know if you've read the whole history of the public defender's office in the newspaper – it's like front page news. To make a long story short, I was basically forced to quit. They said, “You've got to go full-time,” which I couldn't have afforded to do at what they wanted to pay, “or quit.” So, I quit. And now, I work for the Southeast Capital Defense Program. I represent Jewish people on death penalty cases. That's my sort of specialty, I guess. The guy who just made the newspaper who killed five people – that's my case. I mean, I will defend him and – I don’t know – win, but we've got to go through a lot of this stuff. The woman they found, finally, the witness, the one that is making all of the news, I'm – that's my team. There is three of us working on that case. So that is what – I have a private criminal practice, which is slowly –

RH: So that's not a private practice, then.

JS: No. I have a separate job. I'll put it this way. Rarely will anyone be hired on a capital case. When they're asking for the death penalty, if you were to come into my office and say, I want this to be done right. I'd say, “Well, I hope you have at least a hundred thousand dollars because that's what you're going to need for experts and litigation specialists and psychologists.” So, actually, the public defender's office and all of these different agencies can do a better job because they are funded to do these things. I just represented this young boy that allegedly killed this woman at the Lakefront, a seventy-year-old woman. They don't have that kind of money. I mean, we did the things we could, but if I said to her, “Listen, you'll need twenty-five thousand dollars to hire this team of psychologists to do the whole gamut of tests from the Rorschach's, and this, and the multi-phase personality,” she'd be like, “Jeffrey, I can barely scrape together ten dollars for you. How am I going to get another twenty-five for this?” And after that, you need another expert. You know? A blood splatter expert to show – they don't have it. So, when you do a capital case, you are better off having an appointed – a good appointed lawyer than privately unless you are someone like Aaron Mintz –

RH: Yeah, I remember that.

JS: – who hired Michael Fawer, and they had all of the – but they might have paid him a half million dollars. Who knows what he paid him? But he ended up going to our synagogue after he was sort of kicked out of different synagogues. Aaron was a regular at Anshe Sfard, and he was a sweet man, and then he died a couple of years later. So, the work thing was really a little bit screwy, but honestly, the time I spent from September to almost April was some of the best quality time I've ever spent with my wife and two children. Lina was in Boston, unfortunately, but I was with them every day, seven days a week, except for when I had to go visit New Orleans. We had breakfast, lunch, dinner together. They have a beautiful little Jewish community in Taos, and the kids went to Hebrew School. They had a very good Jewish education in Taos. They had a very, very nice Hebrew School that just meets on Sundays. Of course, it's a very eclectic Jewish

population in Taos. I mean, it's like concho belts and turquoise, more than tzitzits, but it's very liberal. I mean, it's the kind of thing where we would sometimes – when I was single, I would go to Taos a lot for Jewish holidays, and they would have things like Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur at like twelve-thousand feet under a waterfall. I mean, they don't do things – Taos is like this place of harmonic conversion, where people come from all over the world. So, the last couple of years, they were having services in an actual kind of university building out in the wilderness. It was a beautiful place, but it was actually in a building. The people that come to synagogue in Taos are all very artsy and all very, very – extremely liberal. Extremely liberal. So, it was a great experience for even the Jewish thing because we led a simple life. We lived at eight thousand feet out in the desert. We were healthier than ever before. I was thirty pounds thinner. We didn't have all of the garbage to eat. We didn't watch TV at night. We were outdoors every day. The kids were getting a Jewish education. We spent a lot of time home-schooling them just because they weren't in school at all. We actually met some wonderful people that – we're talking that we lived in a town of two hundred people. Within days, people were bringing us eggs, fresh eggs, every morning. Fresh fruit. I mean, it was like the little community of Arroyo Hondo, where we lived, all heard about us coming from New Orleans. I mean, they knew we lived in New Orleans and that we had this summer house. But then we were sort of, to them, wealthy, city people who came here to enjoy the cool evenings. But when they heard we lost things, like our – Ron lost his home, and I lost my law practice, they came with arms full of fruit. Then, one day, I was there like two weeks in Taos, and I'm going to get the name wrong, but we went – we were taking the kids everywhere every day, especially before we started working, and we were at some little historical museum, something about Spanish something. I heard some lady in her seventies talking about New Orleans. I think maybe her name was Lillian Kahn, who was a very well-known activist. She lives right – she'd be a great person to talk to about this, too. I think it's Lillian Kahn, and [she] and her husband –

RH: Vivian.

JS: Vivian Kahn. That's it. That's it. You've got it. I think they live down [inaudible] or something. It's right over there. So, I said, “Are you from New Orleans?” and she said, “Yes.” To make a long story short, we ended up having dinner together, and then they would come over to our house for Shabbos dinner. She, with her husband, or significant other, I'm not really sure – but he had a brother that was an extremely wealthy landowner in Taos, so they came there because he gave them a place to live. So, we would see her, and in fact, she was even living up at the ski valley at one point because her brother-in-law owned some property up there. So, we had dinner with them many, many nights. In fact, when I came back here, I checked on things for her house. I met her daughter, who lives right over on Soniat Street just around the corner, and she wanted me to bring her daughter something. Her daughter wanted me to bring her something. So that was kind of a cool thing that happened in Taos. She was very friendly with Robert Glass and John Reeve, who were big-time criminal defense lawyers. I don't know how she knew them. I guess through her activist years. It turns out that she knew who Ron Rakosky, who was just a very, very – Ron left pretty soon after and moved into here. Taos was just a really good experience. My wife also got a job making jewelry in New Mexico. Some people took her under their wing in Santa Fe, so she would go to Santa Fe every week for two days a week to make jewelry, which now she's even started her own jewelry business, which would never have happened – and she makes gorgeous jewelry. But, I mean, all of my jewelry she makes.

RH: Wow.

JS: She's really done well with that. So that would never have happened without the hurricane and her going out to live in Taos. So, I guess the best thing about Taos is – of course, you always enjoy something knowing that our home was preserved out here. It was hard to enjoy yourself if you knew your house was in rubble – was the time spent with the children and Brigitt. How many men at fifty-three years old that are practicing lawyers, that are concerned about making a living to support a – here I am at fifty-three

with a four-year-old and three-year-old – whatever, two or three. The last thing I wanted to do was go from a good living to no money, and somehow my parents assured me, “Don't worry. Enjoy yourself while you're there. When you come back, and you're ready to practice law – when things are ready, you'll be back.” So, I spent just a huge amount of time with my children, and I think I was pretty well known because I waited so long to have children, so I spent a lot of time with them anyway. Even before the hurricane, I would come home every day at noon and hang out with them for three hours, and I would normally go to work at nine, just so I could be with them until they went to bed. Then, I'd do my work from nine to midnight. But during those months from September to April, I was just – I would be skiing with my two-year-old daughter and my four-year-old, and we had – sometimes the three of us or the four of us would just ski all afternoon together. It was like, never in a million years does a fifty-four-year-old Jewish lawyer man basically retire from the practice of law and just devote his time to his children, his children, and teaching kids tennis and skiing and all of that good stuff and just being home every night. I mean, normally, it seemed I'd have to go somewhere a lot for work or whatever, but it was a very, very, very – it was a great year for us, for the family. We got very, very close. The only disadvantage was we lost one daughter to Boston. But like I told Brigitt – and Brigitt was very upset about that. She wanted her to stay with us. But, in a way, it's almost like she skipped her senior year and went off to college.

RH: That's what it sounds like.

JS: That's the way you should look at it. She got a great deal. She's in Boston. But, other than that, we just lucked out, I think, is the way I look at it.

RH: Tell me how you decided to come back. When did Shangri La end? It sounds like –

JS: Well, one, I think if you didn't lose your house, that was one thing. And if you lost your house, then you've got to think, should I rebuild? Should I move somewhere else? I can only practice law, really – I'm a fifty-four-year-old solo practitioner. I can't send

myself off to Houston or Dallas and say, “Can I work for your firm?” I can't even turn on a computer. I mean, what I need to make a living is the fact that I've been doing this for twenty-five years, and I've built up my reputation here, so I would have had to take a different kind of job. We thought about that. We thought about everything. We thought, “Well, my parents are eighty-eight. Maybe what we should do is sell whatever we got here and move to Longmeadow.” My parents are eighty-nine and eighty-eight, and I'd like to be with them the last few years of their life. I really would. I love my mom and dad, and Brigitt just lost her father while we were in the hurricane in Germany, and I said, “You know what? Maybe God is telling me that I should go back to Springfield for a while and live in my home, and it's big enough for the whole family, and I could be with my dad.” I've always wanted my mom and dad to be with my kids every day, and my biggest misgiving is that now that I've got new babies, they don't get to see their grandparents too often.” So, we thought about that for a little bit, doing what I could do – I guess I could get a job teaching tennis and then take the bar. I know enough people in Springfield, Mass that I could have made a living as a lawyer within a few years. On the other hand, I thought, “Gosh, if I lost half my income if I come back, that might be better than starting at zero in Springfield.” And we really couldn't make up our minds about that. Starting in November, I started coming back ten days, and I would stay here. You know, Ron and Gay – I would stay in the guest room. Ron and Gay would stay in my room. I said, “You know, Brigitt, the phone is starting to ring a little bit. There is some money to be made out there. With all of this confusion, you can make a living.” I came back in December for ten days, in January and February, and I could see – and I told Brigitt this. I said, “I see my law practice will come back. It may take a few years to get it back to where it was, but I definitely see my law practice coming back because just from month to month, crime is picking up, people are coming back, and we may have to kind of cut down on our lifestyle and change a little bit, but I think it's going to happen.” And Brigitt was like, “Well, I love New Orleans.” She'd only been here four years when the hurricane happened. I think the fact that I saw that I could make a living, that our house

was okay – we knew that Ron and Gay were guarding our house beautifully. They were living here, so we felt very safe in Taos, knowing that there was a couple living in our home, so that was nice. They were telling us – well, in June, Brigitt was ready to come back. I mean, Taos was nice, and it was a wonderful experience, but it wasn't our home, and uptown was really developing. If obviously we had lived in Lakeview, it would have been maybe a different decision – or mid-city, but I mean all of our neighbors – I'd be coming back, and I'd say, “Guess what? Almost all of our neighbors are back, Brigitt, because nobody really – no vacant houses in a five-block area of us.” It's all happening. On Britannia Street, the drugstore has opened and the dry cleaners and [inaudible] and all of the restaurants were opening. The Audubon Zoo was opening. The kids love that. The aquarium is opening. My office is certainly open at 700 Camp Street. That was open by November. So it was just like – it wasn't really that hard of a decision. We thought about other –what we decided was, no matter what happens, we're going to be flexible. You know? If it means moving out of the country, if it means teaching tennis again to make a living, I'll do it. The most important thing is that we're healthy. The kids are – we're all alive and well, and that's the most important thing. So it really wasn't – and obviously at fifty-three, fifty-four-years-old – I mean, obviously, the older you get, the scarier it is. If you're thirty-three, it would be a lot easier to start a new life. Just like if I was sixty-three and this happened – I don't know if I would – of course, I didn't lose my – if I had to rebuild a house at sixty-three and the kids would all be like almost four years away from college, maybe I'd just say, “Let's do something else.” But there really wasn't any strong consideration for anything but coming back here. Really not. And especially when I knew that I could make a living still.

RH: Can you tell me what's going on with the criminal justice system here?

JS: It's a mess.

RH: Is it working? It's a mess?

JS: It's a mess. I mean, I can clearly make a living in this mess because, like I've always told people, you can't judge your income as a criminal defense lawyer based on the economy. I mean, obviously, when there is crime, I do better, so I guess if everybody had jobs and drugs weren't a problem, then I'd be out of a job. So, it's never been like a barometer of how our economy is doing and how a criminal defense lawyer does. Sometimes, it's the opposite. In this chaos right now, it's actually easier to make money as a criminal defense lawyer because there is so much confusion. I mean, if you know where all of the weaknesses are, the links – I'm not saying getting guilty people off, but you certainly know – I know the system after all of these years and how to – not manipulate it, but how to work within its flaws, which is – and I'm not talking about doing anything wrong. You just know how to – I mean, for instance, if someone right now called up and tried to call 822-8000 to find out about someone in jail, they'd be on the phone for three hours while I could find out in thirty seconds because I know how to reach the right people and the phone systems don't work like they used to. It's hard to find out information. So, it helps if you've been around the DA's [district attorney] office and all of that kind of stuff. I mean, the system was not in perfect working order before the hurricane. And then when you destroy all of the records and destroy evidence and the building got destroyed – it just set it back just really bad. It was like thousands of people that needed to get to court. But it's actually not as bad as people think. I mean, it's not like – it's not running real smooth, but it's improving. Within a few years, it will be – in two years or so, I think it will be a lot better. I mean, the whole thing with the DA, he'll probably not make it, and he won't – but let me just give you one quick example about this. Let's take this Michael Anderson case, this guy that – what the public doesn't know –

RH: This is the guy with the five –

JS: Yeah.

RH: Right.

JS: The public does not know this. The one witness is so bad, there's no way they can win this case with her. She's a liar. We've got her on tape lying. She basically needed the money. She's a crack addict of the highest caliber. I mean, she's so cracked up – I mean, when we met her, so high on drugs, and we have witnesses after witnesses after witnesses that will tell us she wasn't even near the scene when this happened, but she wanted the free money. So, she basically went to the police and said, “I saw who did it.” And that's it. So, the real reason why they stopped trying to reach her and contacting her [was] because she was a terrible witness. You live and die on the strength of your case. There are cases that there can't even be – there shouldn't have been an arrest. If they had checked her out a little bit better, they would have realized, “Wait a second,” she was lying. She wasn't at the scene, and she's given like five different versions as to what she saw, where she was standing. How she could have seen –? The truth of the matter is she wasn't there. We interviewed a guy two nights ago that said he heard her admit to him that she lied. But she needed the money. She just needed the money. They gave her like fifteen thousand dollars for this case. That's a lot of money. I mean, it's terrible. So, why Eddie Jordan – now, Eddie Jordan's problem is that he's so out of touch with his own office – he's never in the building. He's never seen there. He's never tried a case that he didn't realize – basically, they didn't want this case to ever go forward. They really didn't. She's a terrible, terrible witness, and they're going to lose.

RH: So why is he out of touch with his own office?

JS: He should have said that in the press. You know what? It's not that we couldn't find her. We didn't want her. We’d already interviewed her. She's lying to us. We don't think she saw who did it. So, we don't know who killed these five people. We're not going to go to court based on her. That's what they should have said. Instead, I've talked to some people that were there when they picked her up in Baton Rouge. She was just so

high on drugs she couldn't even talk. She was foaming at the mouth. They had to bring her to a detox center before they could put her on TV and all of that stuff. I mean, it's just a bad witness. I have no idea whether Michael Anderson did this or not. He said he didn't do it, but when you have all of his school results, he's basically retarded. He's got an IQ of sixty-eight. He's just not there. So nobody knows what's going on and why this girl said it was him. I guess he had done – he did shoot a gun somewhere else. That's the thing with the feds. They have some information that he just shot a gun recently in a crowd. They were thinking he might be a suspect, and then this woman goes and says this. But I honestly don't believe that she was there. That's why they – if she was a good witness, they would have kept with her and protected her and all that. But I think they just felt they are like stuck with her. The other thing is the trial was set in September. They dismissed it, not because they couldn't find her – they had found her. We even got to interview her. They could have found her. I don't think we really wanted – they just didn't want to go forward with this trial anymore. Because normally you'd wait until – if the only problem was we couldn't find her, then you wait for the day of trial in September, and you look until then, and then on that date when it's set for trial, and you don't have her, you say, "Judge, we just can't get our witness." They did it a month early, two months early, three months early because they just didn't realize it would get all of the flack that it got. They should have handled it better. So, that's the problem with the office. They got just stupid – I mean, things that are almost comical. I represent these – it was in the newspaper, another article about these two young boys who shot a cab driver and shot him in the ear, in the head, actually – and they've been in jail five years waiting to go to trial. They're fifteen and sixteen. Now they're twenty-one and twenty-two. And back five years ago, they were offered ten years on the very first day in court. The very first day – ten years. Everybody was happy with ten years. They didn't take it. Whatever. This is the thing when they confessed to a priest, a minister, and then he told the police, and then we had to go up to the Supreme Court and argue whether or not you could confide in a priest and where – does it matter where you are? They did it in a hotel

room, not in a church. We lost. The Supreme Court said they didn't have an expectation of privacy when they went to that hotel room. It wasn't like a real confession. So, they came in. Anyway, it's now set for a trial two weeks ago, and they walked in – and I told you, the ten years was on the table for years. They've had like nine, ten different DAs on the case. They walk into the courtroom, and they say, “Judge, we have a deal for them.” We're like, “Okay, we're ready.” We were hoping for five; that's what I wanted. They go, “Fifteen years.” Eddie Jordan has approved fifteen. The judge says, “Why would they want to take fifteen when you've already offered them ten five years ago, and it's always been ten?” They've been trying to get it down to five. It’s almost like, does anybody bother reading the file to see that ten was offered for the last five years, and you come in and say, “We're offering them fifteen. The judge says, “You can't even offer them fifteen.” The statute says ten to ninety-nine. I've already said ten. How can you, as the DA, offer them fifteen? I can give them ten right now. You can't stop me.” And they're like, “Oh.” So, every day, it's that kind of – not very competent. So now, they're bringing in a bunch of new people, and it will get better.

RH: Is it less competent than it was under the last DA?

JS: Yes. Oh, yeah. There were better lawyers under Harry Connick. Definitely better lawyers. And they have a lot of new people. You know what happens when you put new people in charge of very serious matters? No one wants to admit that they screwed up, so then they lie – “Oh, I did tell him that.” You get all of these stupid things that are just clogging up the system because they don't know the law. I have a case that finally got resolved – a guy stole some gutters. Very serious because copper gutters are a big deal. But the value is like $350, and they're telling me it's over five hundred dollars, and that means it's a ten-year sentence and – blah blah blah, and I'm like, “How did you get to a thousand dollars?” They gave me the bill. The value – $1,080. How do you get $1,080 for three gutters? They go, “Well, this is how much they had to pay the contractor to replace it. This is how much they had to pay the contractor to install it.” I go, “That's

not how you figure out the value of something." You know? I mean, if someone stole that TV, it's what I paid for it. It's not how much I have to pay to take off from work to buy a new – but it's just sort of this level of young people that don't know, and when that happens, the time isn't spent on the more important cases, like murders. But the last thing about – living right here where I live, and I say this, I hope – knock on wood – that nothing happens to us, but the city is much safer than people realize.

RH: Is that right? That was going to be my next question.

JS: Yes. Much safer. I mean, if you're going to live in a new city, what you want to be concerned about is home burglaries because those are people breaking into your house while you're asleep. Not drug dealers killing drug dealers. I mean, I hate to say that, but – and that's a problem of our city. You don't want to have young people shooting young people. I'm a firm believer that [fewer] penalties, more – instead of building another jail, why don't they take some money and rebuild Nord Tennis Center at Saratoga-Marango because when I used to play tennis there, every Saturday, there were tons of young Black males wanting to learn how to play tennis. Now it's locked up. That was a place that got people off the street and onto a tennis court. We used to give clinics. As a USPTA teaching pro, I would, even in the last ten years, go to inner-city areas and would set up tennis courts on the street and teach clinics, and kids would –they want to be like the next James Blake or one of the twin sisters and all that stuff.

RH: Venus.

JS: Yeah, Venus. They want to do all of that, but now they're gone, and to me, if you – just from doing this for twenty-seven years, the problem and why we have crime – again, like I say, it's safer than – that doesn't mean rest on your laurels, the fact that no one breaks into this house. The problem is when I go interview people, which I do on a daily basis, I put a gun in my pocket, and I go in the projects, and I talk to people. I sit there and look at a six-year-old boy, and I see cocaine on the table. I see guns on the wall.

There is no father, you know. There is just a grandmother raising – because the daughter is fourteen and the father is in prison. I called up Seth Bloom today, my little young – and I said, “Seth, I've got good news and bad news.” He calls me up and says, “Jeffrey, I've got to figure out a way because Antoine Stewart owes me more money.” I said, “Guess what? The good news is you don't have to go to trial on Antoine Stewart. The bad news is he was killed this morning. I read it in the paper.” A guy we both were with a few days ago sitting in my office, talking to him, laughing, having a good time. He was involved with drugs, but he's dead now. They went into his apartment and killed him. The problem I see is just no mother – there are mothers, but no family unit in this inner-city Black community. I am almost always paid by aunts and grandmothers. I am almost never paid by a father. I represent a young boy that allegedly killed the pretty girl from Miami that got killed at Robert and St. Charles about two years ago. She was in the French Quarter, Crescent City Bar. Came home by cab and got off – and he allegedly killed this girl. I've never met the father. The mother is very sweet, but since I've been involved in this case, I guess three years, there has never been a male figure for this guy, and his other brother is in prison, and his uncle is in prison.

RH: Is this about the same as before Katrina? Is it just replicating itself now?

JS: Yeah, I think it's the same. It was the same problem before Katrina because – you know what? – we didn't do anything better with our money before Katrina regarding programs, and people keep thinking, “Make the penalties stiffer.” You can't get any stiffer penalties than Louisiana. We have the stiffest penalties in the United States of America. We're ten times stiffer than New York. Ten times stiffer than Los Angeles. I mean, you read about people killing people in other states, and they get out in four or five years. Our second- and first-degrees are life. You never get out. Double bills, flatten out the sentences – if you are a convicted felon, and you get caught with a gun, it's a minimum ten years, no probation – I mean, literally, if I had a conviction for cocaine nine years ago and today, they found a rifle in my house because I wanted to protect my family from –

ten years. Ten years. That's the sentence. Not nine. Not five.

RH: That's kind of a form of disenfranchisement, isn't it? Wouldn't you say?

JS: What do you mean by that?

RH: Well, if you're a felon, you can't vote, you can't get a job, you can't –

JS: You know what? There are certain crimes, maybe you shouldn't have guns, but this whole idea of ten years – and then the juries hate these sentences. When they hear this, they don't want to find the guy guilty. They're like, "The guy had a good job. He was working, making thirty thousand dollars, paying taxes, and now he's going to go to jail for ten years because they came into the house because there was a complaint about loud noise, and they saw a shotgun on the wall that was his grandfather's shotgun, and that's still breaking the law." If you have a gun and a marijuana cigarette in your car, that's a minimum [of] five years. Not four, but five. I don't think people really understand – I got yelled at today in court in Jefferson when the judge said, "Does your guy want five years?" And I go, "Well, he needs time to think about it." He's got ten minutes. Does he want five years? I mean, it was drugs and stuff, but he's got a two-year-old baby, and now he's got a good job, and he's off of drugs, and he's straightened himself out through Katrina and this and that – he got himself right, and I don't think people realize that just sticking people in jail is not the answer. I mean, it just isn't. That's the mentality of – and it's funny. I had a marijuana trial last Tuesday, which I won. I don't know how because it's hard to win those in front of judges. In front of juries, it's better to win trials. The guy got on the stand, and he said they had found some marijuana in his pocket, and I said they found it because he works at Emeril's, and they just put on these chef pants – there are piles of them. They wash them like once a week. It's a big – a big, big fat guy. So, he got off work at like – he worked from eight to eight, and he got off, and he saw his pants were just a mess, so he took them off, and he grabbed another big pair, and there was a little bit of marijuana. I mean, so little, maybe a thumb-full. A thumbnail amount.

He got near his house, and he saw the police hassling his cousin, and he said, “What are you doing? He's eighteen. He's a nice kid.” And they're like, “Up against the car,” and they search him, and they find the marijuana. So, they arrested him. The guy got on the witness stand, and he said, “The first thing is, I'm twenty-four years old. This is my first arrest of my life.” I’m like, “Wait a second. You’re under oath. Don't lie to me. What do you mean?” I said, “How can you be Black in New Orleans and not have at least one arrest and be twenty-four? I mean, that's impossible. That's almost like an anomaly. I mean, you can't be that way.” And people were laughing in the crowd. The cops were laughing. But it's true. I don't know what they say, but seventy percent of black men under the age of thirty in New Orleans have at least one felony arrest, whether it's legitimate or not. It's almost all drugs, and I know good people that have been stopped and harassed about drugs and this and that, so I'm totally against the stiff sentences for possession. They need to get kids involved. They need to give women who are fourteen and fifteen instructions about sex and birth control and parenting skills and all of these things are just why we are what we are in New Orleans today. That just comes from twenty-seven years of interviewing people and parents. Lots of wonderful mothers, but it's just not enough mothers and fathers sitting down at six o'clock, having dinner with their kids saying, “What happened at school today? What did you do?” Hugging and kissing them. I mean, there just isn't enough of all of that stuff, and you can't have a city full of just aunts and grandmothers, and I think you need – there needs to be a Black role model for boys, especially about what's good in life. I mean, I've taken a couple of kids under my wing. I'm talking kids that were like sixteen, and one that I had taken under my wing for over fifteen years.

RH: We're going to have to stop for one minute.

JS: Okay.

RH: And then change the tape and then we can go back. [Recording paused.] Katrina's Jewish Voices. So you were talking about – you think there needs to be more mentoring programs.

JS: Mentoring. You know, I have a friend, Ron Rakosky, who helps – I don't know if he's still doing it after Katrina, but a busy, busy, successful lawyer that's going into some inner-city school, teaching a third-grader math, a young girl. I mean, that's a great thing. Maybe that will happen more with the city being now – half the city – people will start saying, "You know what? I'm going to do that. I'm going to go to a school and work with some of the kids. Help them with math, help them with …". I've taken a number of young kids to – when I lived on Constant Street, I would take them to Tulane and Broad. Let them see people handcuffed. Let them see what it looks like to walk into Magistrate Court at ten AM and see thirty Black men sitting there all in cuffs for a variety of crimes. Just let them see what it's all about and that it's not a joke. It's not cool to smoke pot. It's not cool to do crack. This is what happens to you. No matter how cool you are, you're going to get caught. Guess what? You can live like this [gestures around the room] if you want to get a legitimate job. I'll introduce them to Black lawyers. "Look at this guy who's ten times more successful than me." You should see where he lives and what he does. I mean, he grew up in the St. Bernard Housing Project, but he chose to go to school and do the right thing. And I just think – but that's just a personal example. I just think that they should spend the money on programs that – sports, education, and arts. There's all these talented kids.

RH: Do you think there was racism in the Katrina rescue, and do you think there's been racism in the Katrina recovery?

JS: I don't know the answer to that. I've certainly heard everyone's version and things like that. I was certainly appalled at the threatening police on the bridge. They're not letting people – how can people accept you in Albuquerque, but they don't accept you

five hundred feet into the city? I thought that was a terrible black eye on the city then. A neighboring parent [inaudible] at gunpoint, keeping people from coming over and threatening – but I know that's not what you were talking about. Listen, I mean, the city was settled in the French Quarter, and through the uptown area, and it was probably settled in the 1700s there, as opposed to in Lakeview or East New Orleans or the Ninth Ward because that was higher ground. I mean, they obviously knew that a long, long time ago. They knew it was right by the river, which was important. So, historically speaking, the wealthier areas were in the areas that didn't flood. I mean Uptown, Garden District, that was just historical – not so much because of racism or not, but I mean, that's just – maybe it was racism. I don't know, but that's just the way it happened. The higher ground made it. I mean, this house here is like six or eight feet above sea level. There are some beautiful homes both lived in by white and Black in Lakeview and East New Orleans, that are underwater because those areas just were low-lying forever. There were swamps, and that's what's going to happen. As to how money was dished out, I'm just not qualified to answer that question. Have I seen racism in my twenty-six years here? Twenty-seven years here? Definitely. Have I heard racism spoken by judges and other people? Yes. By and large, though, that's changing a lot. In the courthouse, certainly. When I first came to New Orleans, there was one Black judge. Now, it's the reverse. It’s mostly Black judges now. So things are certainly changing a lot, which I think is good. Actually, all I care about is that the judge is smart and qualified. I don't care what color they are or what sex they are. I just want smart judges. I think there's still racism in this city. Maybe not as much as in the north, actually. I grew up in a town where no Black people live. None. I graduated my high school in 1979 without one Black person living in the town of Longmeadow. That's like ten thousand people and not one Black person. But they looked at themselves as the most liberal town you could think of. But when Bill Cosby was going to UMass, when I was in high school, getting his doctorate degree, I don't know why he couldn't buy a house in that town. He ended up living in Amherst. So everyone acted like they were real liberal, but now it's changed.

Longmeadow is hugely populated. It has Black and white. So, I've always thought the North, in many ways, covered up a lot of their racism. In the South, people are more comfortable with Black people. White, Blacks living – I'm sure it's still there, racism, especially in New Orleans. I mean, I went to law school in Birmingham. Birmingham was racist. I saw it all over the place. New Orleans I always found to be a very forgiving – that's why I'm here. People think I'm passing for Black. I mean, I'm not too dark right now, but normally by the end of August, people always are thinking I'm Black in New Orleans. Doesn't bother me at all. I like New Orleans. I like the mixture of it all. So, if there's racism, I would tend to think that racism is more from the federal side, that maybe they just didn't care about the poor people in New Orleans as opposed to New Orleans itself. I have much more faith in the people of New Orleans that are comfortable [inaudible] I've always felt that way.

RH: Maybe there's another way to put it, as you're talking, a difference in opportunity.

JS: What do you mean?

RH: I mean, does it matter about your color? Do people of color have [fewer] opportunities than white people, Jewish people?

JS: New Orleans is just one of the most unique cities in the world. I think that there's a definite difference in New Orleans if you're light-skinned or dark-skinned. You haven't seen a dark-skinned mayor in this city, like Marc Morial, Sidney Bartholomew. Why is it that there's no jet-Black mayors of New Orleans? Even [Ray] Nagin is not too dark. So, I still think there's some sort of class differences of Creoles and just how everything is viewed. It's not so much white and Black as it might be in Boston or New York. There's all sorts of sublevels going on and intricacies for the people from the Seventh Ward, and the Thirteenth Ward, and then there's real – I mean, I've known Black people in New Orleans that would not go out with a guy because he's too Black and won't go out with a white guy because he's too white. They want to go out with someone that's similar to

them, which is like a Creole color. It's getting on a whole other subject, but my general impression of New Orleans is New Orleans is a forgiving city, it's an accepting city, and they take you like you are. They accept you, and for me, it's a primary reason for living in New Orleans because you can be what you want to be. In my particular case, sometimes I want to be an Orthodox Jew. Sometimes I want to go into a funky bar in the Ninth Ward. Sometimes I want to play tennis at the Lawn Tennis Club, which is a snobby, snobby, Uptown club that has like two Black members out of like a thousand. But I love my tennis, and I love my club, and I'm putting in a Black member right now – I'm sponsoring. So, it has nothing to do with color, but I love the – just like I love Anshe Sfard Synagogue, I love New Orleans Lawn Tennis Club. It's where I first walked into in 1969 when I got my scholarship, and it just has the most great memories, and it's a great tennis club. Then, I like to play in public parks, tennis, where you can wear blue jean shorts and no shirt, as compared to what you got to wear – you're in always white with lawn tennis. So, New Orleans is good. You can be what you want to be. I can wear my yarmulke if I wanted to wear it to court. Whatever you want to be just seems to be accepted here, which is wonderful, especially for people like me. I'm fifty-four. I'm still not sure what I am, who I am. My children think I'm a gypsy and that I was – because I have an earring, or they think I was a pirate, and they think I'm a cowboy. That's what I want them to think of their father because some days, that's how I feel. This city lets you be that way. But I don't know the actual – I'm not that political, and I just don't know the answers about – I have nothing – I have no knowledge of road home, grant money, and whether or not if you're white, it was easier to get your check – or Black. I have no idea whether insurance companies screwed with Black people and not the white people. I just don't know, so I'm not qualified.

RH: Let's move back to the Jewish discussion a little bit. Are there any concepts over the whole year that – or Jewish concepts – that sustained you through the time of – I guess there was – it's still a lot of flux even if you were in Taos, constantly trying to figure out what you're going to do, what decisions, coming back every ten days?

JS: What Jewish ideologies and things were prevailing for me and for others?

RH: Yeah, that maybe you grew up with that came to your mind, or readings from Torah

JS: This is getting very Jewish now.

RH: Yeah.

JS: It has been so hectic since we got back. I remember coming back once and going to the Federation [and] getting a check for like 750 dollars, I think, for Birgitt and myself. I was extremely impressed with just how Jewish people were, I guess, looking out for each other. I guess I oftentimes thought that Anshe Sfard was my sort of grassroots synagogue, and Touro was my uppity, more snobby thing. However, Touro was immediately sending letters saying, “Whatever your dues were, don't worry about it. We're here for you.” I mean, all the right things were being done and said by Touro, which I'm very proud that I'm a member of Touro, and that whatever we do for the community as a member of Touro does have all the principles of Judaism. So, whether or not people are very religious at Touro or not is irrelevant. They're certainly showing kindness and generosity. Of course, when we came back, the kids started school there, and I was very impressed with the whole educational program at Touro. I'm trying to think. But I really can't think of any more specific things about – like I can't think of a Torah portion or parsha for anything that I can relate to.

RH: Well, I don’t want to force it. If it didn't come up, it –

JS: So many times, through Anshe Sfard, we get all these people coming from New York City. These kids. I mean, lots of them – Barnard, Columbia, Harvard – all donating their time and efforts and things like that. They would always somehow tie in the sermon – when they gave a sermon – to the hurricane. They actually have a specific time, where Moses – if that was going with their goal. Each sermon should tie in with this hurricane. But I can't think of any. Although, another thing is I just – I'm very impressed with the

Jews of America, how they have poured into New Orleans to help. I mean, these are young kids that are – they're everything from down in the Ninth Ward building to just helping out synagogue. My nephew who works at a synagogue even said that they sent dozens of kids down to New Orleans, all kids that were in the Boston University and school system, and all of that stuff – Harvard, Boston, MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] – and all donating their time, which is very impressive. But everybody that I've talked to, and certainly in my synagogue – a Jewish friend. There's nothing but good feelings I have for being Jewish and back in New Orleans and hearing what everyone has done and how everyone is helping. I'm not hearing of any – I can't even think of one instance where I could think somebody I know that's Jewish is somehow trying to rip off the system through the hurricane. I can't even think of one example. Everybody that I've come into contact seems really wants to get back to building New Orleans, making it a better city, whether it's going to synagogue, helping in any way possible. I wish I was twenty years younger and doing this because I'd really be excited to think I have like forty more years to be part of this whole rebuilding. But I'm not over the hill yet. I've got three children, but Melina's already nineteen, and she'll be off on her – I mean, I don't have nearly the influence on her that I will have on these little ones. I'm really glad that they're back in New Orleans and that they will be leaders of this – and I think they'll be much better leaders than I am. I'm not a leader at all in this community, and because I didn't – but they're going to be. I mean, I'm not even – I have no doubt whatsoever that both of them will be Jewish leaders of this community because they're having a good, good basis of family Jewishness, and they're going to get good training. It may not be like yeshiva-type training. Maybe they'll be more like the Bissingers, and they won't maybe know as much Torah as they would if they lived in Boston or Springfield, but I think they will be very, very active politically and spiritually in the Jewish community of New Orleans. And therefore, I'm just going to hope to spend as many years as I can watching that happen. If I get thirty more years, I'd be very happy to see them move New Orleans forward in a Jewish way and a secular way. I'm glad we're back here for that reason, too. I have

tremendous confidence that my little ones will be very, very important in New Orleans.

RH: Well, I can't think of a nicer way to conclude than talking about your kids like that. If there's anything else, you'd like to finish with –

JS: No. I'm glad I got to do this. I'm sure you get some wild stories from different people. I know people like Allan Bissinger jumped out of his second-story window over on Vendome, or one of those streets he lives on, and literally had to swim to save his life. I'm sure that there's some very heroic things. We have a private investigator who's not Jewish – Gary Eldredge. Very smart guy. You'd probably know him by Herb, too. But he felt so bad about leaving his dog and cat behind that he illegally took a boat, like September 10th. Literally, slept in the boat and got it. He got back to his house over in Lakeview and saved his two animals that were on the roof. He got them, and he rescued them. Then he rescued a bunch of other animals in his boat. So, there's some great – there's some really terrific stories. Mine certainly isn't that kind of story, but I guess all these stories are made up from one spectrum to the other, somewhere in there.

RH: Well, I can't think that your wife converting, you being remarried for the third time, and with your children – that's a pretty amazing thing that happened.

JS: That was very cool. That was very cool. I mean, like I say, it was sort of a blessing. In fact, we just went up three weeks ago to New Rochelle, New York, where that rabbi is – Eli Rosenzweig – that converted us, converted Birgitt, married us, and converted Gabriela. We took my parents in, and all that kind of stuff, and we sort of sponsored the Kiddish because in honor of my parent's 65th wedding anniversary. It was just nice to see my brother and his wife, and my sister and her husband, and everybody. Fifteen of us all showed up for this thing. It was just a beautiful ceremony.

RH: How did you find this rabbi? Eli Rosenzweig?

JS: Eli Rosenzweig. He was the rabbi for Kadima when my father was president of Kadima. So, they had a very, very good relationship. Like I said, my dad's got Alzheimer's now, so although he recognizes the rabbi, he's definitely hurting a little bit in the memory department. So that was his favorite rabbi of all, and they had some very famous rabbis. They had Rabbi Lam, whose brother went on to be like the head of the – I don't know what yeshiva in New York City, who's written countless books and is a real scholar on Orthodox Judaism. He had his brother. That was our rabbi, who was the one that actually was very influential in my mother becoming so religious. But then, Rabbi Eli Rosenzweig was a lawyer and a rabbi. Because of my father's involvement – by that time, my father's parents had passed away. Our mother's parents passed away before I was born, but my father's parents passed away, and then my father became more religious. I never got into that, but after they passed away, he sat shiva for two years in a row because my grandfather died, and then on the day – the one-year anniversary of his death, my grandmother just died for no reason. Just out of sadness. So, my dad sat shiva for two years. By the time that two years was up, he could read Hebrew, he could daven, and so then he started doing Haftorahs, and all of this was sort of – then it led to Rabbi Rosenzweig teaching my dad. So, my dad, although he never really became Orthodox, he certainly learned a whole lot more under Rabbi Rosenzweig's tutelage. When everything was going downhill when we went to Taos, we turned it into Jewish training; it was actually my wife, Birgitt, who said, “You should call Rabbi Eli. Just ask his advice. Where do we go from here?” We were studying with Rabbi Schiff through the Chicago rabbinical thing, and Rabbi Rivkin said he's never going to convert an adult. He just doesn't do it. He said, “I'll send you to New York, but I'm not going to convert you. I converted a child, but I'm not going to do – I'll teach you.” Birgitt used to go to him on one day a week and talk to him, and that was like a conflict between him and Rabbi Schiff, and I don't think those two got along. It's a typical Jewish thing – I don't go to that synagogue; I go to this synagogue. That was Birgitt's idea. She said, “You should call because we actually called the rabbi at Kadima.” He just said, “You know what? I really

don't know Birgitt and Jeffrey that well. Jeffrey had moved away a long time before. I don't know him. So, I wouldn't be comfortable working with him and Birgitt, especially with her living in Taos." So he didn't work – and so then I said, "Well …". Birgitt said, "What about the rabbi that everyone loves so much? Rabbi Rosenzweig." And I said, "All right." So, we called him, and, God, we talked to him for countless hours about it. He was very nice because he was so busy. He's got six kids, and they're in Israel and here and there. He really took the – but he was dedicated to my parents. He loved my father and my mother, and he just made the time. He would set up a time for Birgitt and him to talk, and I'd leave with the kids, and they would go over things. Between the Melton class [and] the year we'd already studied with Rabbi Schiff, we really had put in a few years. The rabbi – Rabbi Eli Rosenzweig – I think he was really cognizant of Katrina and all the – I just think that maybe a different rabbi would have flunked Birgitt. If they just said, "Okay, show up in New York City, and now you're going to be quizzed. Give me this, give me that, give me that." Because the questions he can ask you are incredibly difficult – and Birgitt's only been in this country twelve years. English is not her first language. German is her main language. So, even when she's reading and stuff, her prayer book is in German, not in English. There's no way – what's Shemini Atzeret? What's this? What's that? And that's the way it was going to be in Chicago … I think it would have been very hard. Honestly, I think that the whole idea of whether or not when someone converts, what is the real reason to meet a Jewish guy, is it – I mean, is it just lip service to –? I think when Rabbi Rosenzweig really listened to Birgitt and her whole story and what we had tried to do legitimately through Beth Israel – I mean, we were all going to Beth Israel every Thursday to meet with the rabbi and on Saturdays to synagogue. We really were making a sincere effort. But I think if he were to really quiz this right to the Nth degree, we would not maybe have passed muster. Are you going to turn on your stove light Saturday? What do you cook out of – whatever blech – I mean, are you going to – you know what? When I want a cup of tea, I'm going to drink it. I'm going to turn on the gas range and boil some water. I'm just not going to do this. And I

just couldn't – see, if I couldn't feel it, I just couldn't see – how is Birgitt going to do this? My mother never did this. We always put lights on on Shabbat. I mean, we just weren't that – and I said, I just think this is going to be tough, and I think if maybe someone would have tested us or tested Birgitt, he might have said we don't think she's truly ultra-Orthodox. But when the rabbi heard everything we had been through, everything we tried to do – we tried so hard to do it right, and we did do the Melton class. We graduated recently. We really were making an effort at Torah Academy – kosher kitchen. It wasn't like it was just to fool people, and after it's all done, here, (go back to the?) – that's not true. We really wanted to have a Jewish household. Also, I think Rabbi Eli realized, you know what? My mother and father were very, very poor growing up. My mother's father was like a food peddler. She didn't have her first car – her first bicycle until twenty-one. Her first car was – she was already married. Just really, really, really poor. I think this rabbi realized that this is something my mother wanted so badly before she died. It's sort of like what I sometimes tell people in a jury. You know what? If you're wrong and find this person not guilty, and it turns out he was guilty, been in jail for four years waiting for trial. This was a one time. Never been in trouble before – what's the worst thing that can go wrong? You don't think he's learned his lesson after being in a twelve-by-twelve cell for four years if you're wrong? And that's the way I think the rabbi felt. I think he just felt, “You know what? I think that this woman would be a good Jewish mother and a good Jewish wife, and I'm going to give her the benefit of the doubt,” as compared to, I think, most true Orthodox conversion; you don't get any benefit of the doubt. We used to go to Rabbi Schiff on Thursday, and it was so hard to get there. I just hate driving. Leave court, pick up Birgitt, had the babies, the babysitter – Melina, Birgitt, and I go there. We get there at like four o'clock and no rabbi. We'd call him, and go, “Rabbi, where are you?” He'd go, “Just to test how bad you want this. No class today.” That happened a lot of times, where he would just say, “It's a test. I don't want this to be easy. I want you to really want this.” I called up some other rabbis. They go, “Well, there is some sort of old archaic thing about you really try to push someone away from

converting." You don't want to say – when I first brought Birgitt to Touro, I said, "Well, she's not Jewish because her mother's Catholic." Rabbi Goldstein is like, "Welcome. We love and embrace everything – your life, knowledge." I'm like, "I don't think that's the way it's supposed to be, Birgitt." I think that's a little bit too liberal for me. Even my mother [inaudible] you don't have to even learn anything. We love you the way you are. "You're married to a Jewish man. Come on in." I said, "I think we got to find something more in the middle." This is a little too freaky for me. But that's the way they were. They were like, "We don't care if you even convert. Come into our community." Of course, the other way, when Rabbi Schiff was like, "I don't want you to convert. It's wrong." Almost like trying to push her away. And you're supposed to fight him and go, "No, no, I want it." Well, I hated it. We went there on two or three occasions, hired a babysitter, did all this, and he just wouldn't be there, and he'd say, "It's just a test [of] how bad you want this." I don't have enough time to be tested. My mother's in her eighties. I want this done. And so, Rabbi Eli was our savior. He really was. Really saw the truth about what was going on and realized that this was something that he could never have given Bertha Smith any gift better than this, that she could be a witness to this. He gave it to her. So, you know what? I'm probably going to be a member of his synagogue, too. Not just Shalom in New Rochelle. Because I give him money every year, even more money than I give probably Touro. But I mean, because this man went on a limb for us, but she passed the Beit Din. They quizzed her and questioned her on all different Jewish aspects. She passed, and here we are. Well, I'm not going to say this to the camera, they're asking me all about the purity laws, and will you sleep in a separate room while she's going through her menstruation? I mean, it was like, this is not like a little brief thing. She was in there for an hour being quizzed by three very learned men about what we're going to do and what we're not going to do. So, she passed. But that was a wonderful thing, and we just saw him two weeks ago, and he was a lovely, lovely rabbi. He married my sister. He married us. That's the other thing. Besides being married in our backyard like my brother and my sister, Rabbi Eli did marry my sister and her husband, and then he

married my sister's son and his wife, and then Birgitt and myself. So that's pretty cool.

RH: Wow. That's nice.

JS: Anyways. Okie-doke.

RH: Okay. Thanks a lot.

JS: Anytime.

RH: It's just wonderful. I'm glad to meet you.

JS: Well, it's nice to meet you. Even though today, I was nervous because you said, “I'll see you at 3450” [overlapping dialogue; inaudible]. I'm like, “Oh no.”

RH: Yeah. You should. Well, not again.

JS: I didn't know how to reach you, then I went into my office, and I saw your note on my desk.

RH: Well, I left the message early enough because when I talked to you on the phone –

[END OF INTERVIEW]