

Picking Up the Pieces in New Orleans  
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Usually when disasters strike, there is no time to ask questions. With a rational approach, we spring into action and move forward with helping those in distress and repairing the damage. As mere mortals, we cannot understand why some hurricanes strike land while others veer away. Facing the uncertainty of climate change and random storms is part of the human condition, and so is picking up the pieces afterward.

In the two years since Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, millions of people have been involved in the clean-up and rebuilding operation, including many Jews from the community and from across America. From members of the NCSY youth group spending *Shabbat* in New Orleans to the UJC's partnership with a national playground company to rebuild a local children's park, individuals and organizations have opened their hearts to give.

When Hurricane Katrina made landfall in New Orleans, it resulted in hundreds of deaths, billions of dollars in damage, and the total shutdown of a major port city and cultural center. As we marked the second anniversary of Katrina, we affirmed what it did not destroy. It did not wash away the Jewish community of New Orleans or extinguish its spirit. It has actually strengthened our survival instinct. And as we remember Katrina's devastating effects, our community here in New Orleans continues to reaffirm its commitment to rebuild.

Often after a great disaster or tragedy, when the media move on to a new breaking story, the general public begins to forget. But in Judaism, part of our responsibility is to remember and learn. From recounting the exodus from Egypt each *Pesach* or reading the *megilla* on Purim, we look beyond the surface to explore and understand the deeper meaning. Ultimately, we acknowledge that each encounter and experience we face as a Jewish nation – whether good or bad – offers something to learn from, something to build from, something to bring us closer to each other and to God.

In the generations since Noah's flood, natural and man-made disasters have afflicted Jews, often forcing them to leave their homes and communities. But we have learned that when one door closes, another one opens, and our versatile nation seeks and creates new opportunities. With great fervor and the resolve to create an even stronger community than what existed before, the New Orleans Jewish community is engaging its current members who in the past may not have been active, is calling its former residents back, and is working to reach out to other Jews who may want to make it their home.

In a concerted effort that has unified the community, the New Orleans Jewish Federation is inviting young singles and families from across the nation to move to our city and enjoy its renewed facilities (schools, *shuls*, community centers, and restaurants) and expanding opportunities.

With Rosh Hashanah days away, it's an appropriate time to be thinking about new beginnings. And for people who want to make a fresh start, New Orleans offers a revitalized community with plentiful jobs, schools, housing options and financial benefits on offer. There are significant financial incentives available – including up to \$98,000 in loan forgiveness for medical professionals, \$15,000 no-interest loans, as well as moving and rent subsidies.

But the most attractive offer on the table is the opportunity to make a difference – to participate and lead, shape and mold Jewish life in Louisiana. If we can rise to

the challenge of fixing the world after a disaster, we can rebuild it better and stronger, with a more unified community, as partners in its creation.

Members of our synagogue are a prime example of stepping forward. Congregation Beth Israel, which enjoys a 103-year-old history as a Modern Orthodox house of worship, is ready to meet the challenge of renewing itself after experiencing the most catastrophic loss of any Jewish institution in New Orleans. Our building took in more than 10 feet of standing water, destroying everything inside, including our seven Torah scrolls, which had to be buried.

Yet Beth Israel is back, determined to rebuild. I was hired as the new rabbi, three new *sifrei* Torah have been dedicated, and we secured a temporary meeting space for the next year until our synagogue is rebuilt. And, opening our arms to new residents, we are prepared to offer our own incentives to bring young families to our community, including \$1,000 in monthly rent subsidies for up to a year.

Moving to New Orleans after Katrina offered a great change for our family. It was quite a different life from what my wife and two children were used to in New York. Coming from the largest Orthodox community in the United States – with all the amenities to spoil us – to a small community in the midst of recovering and rebuilding will take some adjustment. While the community here is inviting and warm, that alone wasn't enough to bring us here. While the financial incentives may speak to some, that is not what drew us to our new home. And while the city is rich with culture and entertainment, we had enough of that in New York.

For our family, the most attractive offer on the table was the opportunity to make a difference. To help rebuild Jewish life in New Orleans. Unlike large Jewish metropolises around the country, our community offers each member the gift of necessity. Regardless of age, background, profession, or level of observance, in the Jewish community of New Orleans every person matters and his or her presence can make a tremendous impact on the quality of our daily Jewish experience.

As we approach Rosh Hashanah, let us activate our souls and show our Creator that we have risen to the challenge of rebuilding this city and renewing our Jewish community, and may we look forward to a New Year without any more such tests.

*Rabbi Uri Topolosky is the new rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel in New Orleans. He is the former associate rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, New York and a musmach of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School. He and his wife, Dahlia, and their two sons, Elyon and Itai, moved to New Orleans this past July to help rebuild the community. The synagogue website is [www.bethisraelnola.com](http://www.bethisraelnola.com)*