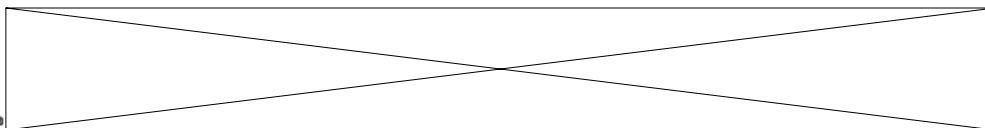


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## COLUMN ONE

### Calling Jews to New Orleans

Hoping to repopulate a dwindling Jewish community, leaders appeal across the country to help heal the city. They also offer cash incentives.

By Richard Fausset  
 Times Staff Writer

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New Orleans — "DO you have a pioneering spirit?" read the recent ad in the Jewish Week newspaper of New York. "Are you searching for a meaningful community where YOU can make a difference?"

To generations of American Jews, the pitch had a familiar ring. But this was not an invitation to settle the Promised Land. It was a call to repopulate New Orleans, a city known less for its Jewish culture than for its shellfish, sin and pre-Lenten carnival.

#### FOR THE RECORD:

Jews in New Orleans: A photo caption in Thursday's Section A, accompanying an article about recruiting Jews to move to New Orleans, misidentified a Torah cover at Beth Israel synagogue as a prayer shawl. —

New Orleans' Jewish population, in fact, has long been a subtle but important ingredient in this curious dish of a city. But its numbers, though always small, have declined precipitously since Hurricane Katrina. Of the 10,000 Jews in the area before the storm, 7,000 remain.

With fewer dues-paying members, some synagogues and Jewish service agencies have been kept afloat by donations from Jews around the country. But the bulk of that largess, provided by the nonprofit United Jewish Communities, dries up at the end of the year.

The Jewish community is by no means New Orleans' most afflicted demographic. But Jewish leaders do not want to see a single Jewish institution closed. They don't wish to consolidate any of the seven synagogues and two Chabad centers that offer a full range of religious observance.

The issue is plain.

"We need people," said Jackie Gothard, president of Congregation Beth Israel, a modern Orthodox synagogue that has seen more than 40% of its members move away.

So Jewish New Orleans has cooked up a novel solution: a recruitment drive. With an ad campaign crafted by an Israeli public relations firm, the city's Jewish leaders are hoping to attract at least 1,000 Jews to the city over the next five years. They will appeal to potential pilgrims' better natures, stressing the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*, Hebrew for "healing the world" — or, in this case, healing a broken city.

They also plan to lure them with cash. Starting next month, any Jew who has relocated to the city since Jan. 1 will be eligible for up to \$5,500 for moving and housing expenses, interest-free loans of up to \$30,000, half-price tuition at Jewish day schools, and a year of free membership at a synagogue and a Jewish community center.

The concept was hatched, in part, by Michael J. Weil, an economist who moved here from Israel in October to head the Jewish Federation, the umbrella group for the city's Jewish agencies and programs. As a consultant to the Israeli government, Weil helped settle thousands of Jewish refugees in Israel after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The New Orleans benefits were based, in part, on the *sal klita*, the "absorption benefits basket" offered to Israeli newcomers.

The recruitment drive springs from an acknowledgment that city officials have done a poor job touting New Orleans' progress in the two years since Katrina. The Jewish community will have to get that message out to its people on its own, Weil said.

"I would hope that nobody's going to move here just because of the incentive package, but it will be a lubricant," Weil said. "We cannot sit around waiting for the Road Home program and all these other things to take place, because we want to be in that great, better place tomorrow." Road Home is a state program that distributes federal funds for Katrina recovery efforts.

The only recruitment ad that has run thus far, the one in New York's Jewish Week, was paid for by Uri Topolosky, a rabbi recently chosen to lead Congregation Beth Israel. It touts the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans' subsidies and the chance to join in an "inspirational rebuilding effort." The federation will begin running its own ads this year in the nation's Jewish newspapers.

So far, Jewish leaders acknowledge that they have attracted only a few newcomers, such as Hal Karp, a former magazine writer from Dallas who is moving here to teach in the public schools.

Karp, 43, said he was "ready to fix the ... world down there." After some financial problems, however, he almost bailed out on his move

— until he received an e-mail from the Jewish Federation. In addition to the money, they offered to pair him with a Jewish "host family" who would help him get to know the city.

"It was really like someone sending you a life raft," he said. "It was like they were saying, 'We need Jews, and if you will come, we'll welcome you.'"

Weil outlined the recruitment plan recently at the Jewish Federation offices near the shores of Lake Pontchartrain. The offices are on the third floor of a Jewish Community Center that was flooded with 1 1/2 feet of water. Now renovated, it will house a Jewish day school with an enrollment of 26 students in the fall. It had 69 students before the storm.

Weil acknowledged that New Orleans, with its corruption, crime and uncertainty, may be a tough sell to, say, the middle-aged ophthalmologist ensconced on Long Island or La Brea Avenue. But he thinks he might be able to lure the ophthalmologist's children.

New Orleans, Weil said, offers a few novel selling points — a sense of purpose, for instance. "It just doesn't turn anyone on, ideologically," he said, "to build Las Vegas."

IN December, attorney Serena Pollack headed south from Chicago to take a job with the New Orleans firm Lowe, Stein, Hoffman, Allweiss & Hauver.

A 32-year-old Milwaukee native, she fell in love with the city last year after she volunteered to gut Jewish-owned houses in the Lakeview district. Inside the homes, she would find the musty trappings of grandparents, or photos from Bar Mitzvahs, and they would remind her of the people she grew up with.

When she moved here, she found a Jewish community that strongly identified with her new Southern home. Law partner Michael R. Allweiss was helping to launch a public charter school named for Langston Hughes. The spring social calendar, for Jews and gentiles alike, was studded with crawfish boils. (All shellfish is forbidden under kosher law.)

"There's such a deep Jewish tradition here," she said. "But it's not overt — and that's what's so cool about it."

Lawrence N. Powell, a historian at Tulane University, has called the Jewish experience in New Orleans "unusual even by Southern standards."

Here, the oldest Jewish congregation outside the former 13 colonies, Touro Synagogue, holds an annual "Jazz Fest Shabbat" to coincide with the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. This year, it featured a jazz band and an interracial gospel choir.

At Touro's business office, Mark H. Rubenstein introduces himself with two business cards. The first identifies him as the temple's executive director. The second identifies him as a member of the Krewe of Orpheus (he is vice president), a large carnival club that parades in the streets on the Monday before Mardi Gras.

Carnival, Rubenstein explained, has evolved into a secular tradition, at least when it comes to the street parades.

"Southern Jews are very good at coming up with work-arounds," he said.

On Mardi Gras day, the irreverent Krewe du Jieuh parades through the French Quarter and nearby Faubourg Marigny. Its revelers have been known to dress up with horns and big noses — to them, an empowering, Borat-like goof on the ugliest myths and stereotypes.

Since 1991, a beloved bar band called the New Orleans Klezmer All-Stars has explored the parallels between funky black parade rhythms and Eastern European wedding music.

In the late 1990s, during one particularly uninspiring football season, local poet Andrei Codrescu remembers watching with astonishment as a rabbi marched through Jackson Square with a handful of congregants. He was playing "When the Saints Go Marching In" on the shofar.

Then there is the food. Though some Jews keep kosher, everyone seems to have a joke about the lure of a local cuisine that is anything but. Linda Epstein, who moved from New York in 2000, smiles when she tells of the local rabbi who is said to go out for oysters on the Sabbath.

For those who do keep kosher, there are two restaurants. The best known, Kosher Cajun, serves a mock shrimp po-boy made with fried Alaskan pollack. During Mardi Gras, it makes its own "king cake," the traditional ringed pastry with symbolic ties to the Jesus birth story.

"All Jews in New Orleans grow up a little Catholic," said Catherine C. Kahn, a Jewish historian and archivist at Touro Infirmary, a Garden District hospital founded by Jews. "My family never served meat on a Friday night."

Jewish New Orleans has always been a sort of paradox. It is a minority largely assimilated into the broader culture, but one that has remained remarkably cohesive. In a 1998 survey, 79% of Jewish respondents here claimed affiliation with a Jewish institution of some kind, compared with 43% nationwide. But 35% of New Orleans Jews oppose intermarriage, compared with 59% nationally.

Though most Southern Jewish communities tended to assimilate into the communities around them, Jewish roots run particularly deep here, and are tightly intertwined with the city's history, Kahn said.

When the first significant wave of Jews arrived in New Orleans after the Louisiana Purchase, many of them were French speakers from Alsace, in the Rhine Valley. A number of the single Jewish men married Catholic women. Gentile wives were allowed to be buried in the Jewish cemetery — and their children were considered Jewish.

Jews were central to the establishment of the New Orleans Museum of Art, the city's largest community college and its largest city park. They dominated the local retail and wholesale industries, and remain well represented among doctors, lawyers and the boards of major philanthropic groups.

"This city couldn't be half of what it is if it weren't for the Jews," said Sheri A. Tarr, the Jewish Federation's campaign director. "I mean, I hate to toot our own horn, but it's true."

But Jewish New Orleans, like the city in general, was on the decline long before Katrina. The Jewish population peaked at about 13,000 in the 1980s, but the numbers declined along with the city's economic fortunes. Synagogues were graying, and grown children moved away to follow professional careers.

Then, as now, the Jews of New Orleans were a bellwether for the city's economic health. Now, Weil is hoping they will become a small but crucial component of the recovery.

Thus far, according to the federation, about 150 new Jewish households have relocated to the city since Katrina. Some are young idealists like Nathan Rothstein, 23. He moved from Massachusetts a year ago after gutting houses here on a spring break.

Now he works as a recruiter for New Orleans College Prep, a new charter school in Central City, one of the poorest and most dangerous parts of town. He also is helping to organize the Jewish Federation's recruitment campaign. He likens his work to that of the Jews who traveled south in the 1960s to help spur the civil rights movement.

"This is our Freedom Summer," he said. "... It would feel like a letdown going anywhere else right now."

Weil said the city also had attracted newcomers making a living from the reconstruction: loss adjusters, builders and businesspeople. He noted that law firms and hospitals also were hiring.

But for some families, the uncertainty outweighs the new opportunities. Glenn Hartman is the accordion player for the Klezmer All-Stars; before Katrina, he was also a music teacher at the New Orleans Jewish Day School. His wife is a doctor. Since the hurricane, they have been living in San Francisco. They have two young children, he said, and are not ready to put up with the hassle and crime in New Orleans.

The recruitment plan, he said, might be attractive for people a little less encumbered, and who are wired to appreciate the city's charms.

New Orleans, he said, "is like the last cultural place standing in the U.S.... If you can see that, and you love that, you can't get that anywhere else. I think it's probably not dissimilar to the people who do go to Israel. Because all of their relatives think they're crazy. They say, 'Why do you want to move into the middle of a war?'"

RABBI Topolosky of Riverdale, N.Y., has spent some time in an Israeli yeshiva. Now he is packing his bag for New Orleans.

The 29-year-old's new congregation, Beth Israel, was located in the badly flooded Lakeview neighborhood. The water was as high as 8 feet in the synagogue. A reform synagogue is allowing the remaining members to hold services in an annex until they can figure out where to rebuild.

Topolosky said his ad had generated only nibbles — no pioneers yet — but he had more ads planned. "There's a tremendous amount of energy surrounding New Orleans and the Jewish community," he said. "A lot of it is negative ... but a lot of it is positive, like the rebuilding. We figure we can rechannel it for good."

Some of the new Jewish faces are already making themselves known. On a recent Tuesday, a group of Israelis approached the counter at the Kosher Cajun deli.

Shico Shargian, 27, is in the mold removal business. He moved here from Los Angeles just after the flood and he was planning to stay for good. Shargian passed up the mock shrimp po-boy: He kept a strict kosher diet, he said. The pleasures of Creole and Cajun cooking were a mystery to him, and would remain that way.

So it was chopped liver, then back to work.

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