

in the U.S. and the “best place to weather the recession.” Ad campaigns have targeted mainly the Northeast seaboard and Midwest states, not necessarily the South or West.

“We’re not going to people who are happy and content to get them to come here. So we went to places like Cleveland, Ohio and other dying Jewish communities and said to them, ‘Why not come here?’ And we will give you a sweetener if you do,” Weil says.

According to the Federation, some 800 Jewish newcomers have moved to the city. Of these, some 250 have taken advantage of the help, which includes cash grants, moving expenses and up to \$15,000 in interest-free housing or business loans, as well as free membership in a synagogue and the Jewish Community Center.

Weil says that the Federation has also received inquiries from around the world, including from Morocco, Ukraine and even Israel. But he is quick to add it does not in any way want to compete with the Jewish Agency and Zionism by drawing away potential immigrants to Israel. “We give them the cold shoulder and ask them to consider aliya instead. We don’t want to compete with Israel,” he says.

They are also targeting the 3,000 plus Jewish students who study at the Ivy League Tulane University in Uptown New Orleans, where Jews make up some one-quarter of the graduate student body. The Federation has set a target of some 50 graduates each year who are also eligible for similar benefits.

Kevin Falik, the new youth director at the Uptown Jewish Community Center, said he has taken advantage of the incentives and received moving expenses and help with leasing an apartment after moving to New Orleans from Houston, Texas. “This is a fantastic program,” Falik says, and particularly praised the efforts made to arrange meetings with other young Jewish adults.

“I was not exactly here to rehabilitate the city at first,” Falik says. “But in my position as teen director, I feel I have rehabilitated a group of people who are always overlooked.” He boasts that membership in the local B’nai B’rith Youth Organization has almost tripled in the four months he has been working in New Orleans.

“The Newcomers’ Program and the comfort of moving to a place with people who are so welcoming makes New Orleans a place I would tell Jews to move to,” Falik says. ●

# Katrina’s Jewish Story

**Katrina’s Jewish Voices, an oral history project, aims at telling the stories of how Jewish lives were affected by the hurricane**

**Etta Prince-Gibson**

**H**URRICANE KATRINA HIT New Orleans and the Gulf Coast on the morning of August 29, 2005, devastating the city and creating hundreds of thousands of stories of tragedy, destruction, survival and resilience.

Neither the violent hurricane nor the U.S. government’s inept and inadequate response to the crisis discriminated according to race, wealth, or religion. In August 2006, just one year after the event, the Jewish Women’s Archive (JWA), a women’s history archive located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, located in Jackson, Mississippi, initiated Katrina’s Jewish Voices (KJV), an oral history project dedicated to telling the stories of Jewish lives affected by the disaster.

By December 2007, KJV had conducted 85 interviews on digital video with members of the Jewish communities of New Orleans, the Gulf Coast and Baton Rouge, and collected digital artifacts in an online archive, thus amassing a comprehensive and diverse collection of stories about the Jewish community’s experiences of Katrina.

But is there a uniquely “Jewish experience” of Katrina? “A city is made up of different communities, and the hurricane did not discriminate among them,” Gail Twersky-Reimer, director of the JWA, tells *The Jerusalem Report*. “So we should know how each community fared, for better or worse. Understanding how the Jewish community responded to itself and to the needs of others tells us an important story about the Jewish community in New Orleans and in America, and about the meaning of community in America in general.”



**KARLA GOLDMAN: This strange American Jewish community may indeed have a logic of its own’**

New Orleans is home to one of America’s oldest Jewish communities. The first Jewish settler came to New Orleans in 1757, and the first Jewish congregation was chartered in 1828. Before Katrina, New Orleans had a thriving Jewish community of some 11,000 and served as the hub of regional Jewish life.

“The interviews conducted by KJV point to the ways that Jews understood their own lives and the life of this important Jewish community,” says Twersky-Reimer.

**I**N A COMPREHENSIVE, UNPUBLISHED paper, based on a public lecture presented in 2007 and made available to *The Report*, Michigan University Prof. of Social Work Karla Goldman writes: “These Jewish



JEWISH WOMEN'S ARCHIVE

**JAYNE GUBERMAN: Having to cope with loss and displacement**

voices of Katrina demonstrate the surprising ways in which so many New Orleans Jews experienced the storm and its aftermath from within the context of Jewish identity, community, and memory.”

Not surprisingly, much of the media attention during the Katrina crisis, and in its aftermath, focused on New Orleans’ poor, needy and largely African American community. Jayne K. Guberman, director of KJV for the JWA, acknowledges that the Jewish community of New Orleans was, in contrast, a privileged community in terms of status, education and personal and community social and financial resources (including insurance to cover the losses).

“Privileged individuals and families, too, had to cope with loss, displacement and at least temporary homelessness,” Guberman tells The Report. “These interviews show that even privileged lives are fragile, and they point to the impact of the loss of our most essential connections.”

Furthermore, she notes, the massive response by Jewish organizations and individuals demonstrates how America’s well-organized Jewish community, with its extensive networks and established outreach connec-

tions, was able to make a real difference to families, individuals and communities.

The National Disaster Committee of the United Jewish Communities coordinated and distributed some \$28 million in aid, quickly and efficiently, to Jewish and non-Jewish communities – in sharp contrast to the government agencies’ inability to mobilize the resources ostensibly at their disposal.

The timing of the interviews was particularly important, says Guberman. “We interviewed most people about a year after the event. On the one hand, this was close enough to the event for the interviewees to still feel the impact in a very emotional, almost visceral way. On the other hand, this year also gave them time enough to gain an initial sense of perspective, to reflect on the communal as well as the individual experience, providing us with valuable insights and conclusions.”

**T**HE INTERVIEWS REVEAL THAT Jews in New Orleans attempted to understand the storm and its destruction within a Jewish framework, says Guberman.

“People suddenly realized that they had no idea what would be left of everything they owned, no certainty about their future, no

access to their financial resources and, for periods of time, no idea where many of the important people in their lives were. And while many of them did have resources – a place to go, a profession and skills they could use in their new community – they were comforted by a sense of Jewish belonging and community.”

The importance of community was felt both in its disruption and in its presence. “The disorientation of not knowing where people were and gratitude for the connections made possible by technology were recurring themes in these narratives,” writes Prof. Goldman, who is also director of the university’s Jewish Communal Leadership program. Indeed, one of the first projects initiated by the organized Jewish community was to gather information and create a data bank simply of locations, contacts and e-mail addresses.

“There may be no other oral history project where the phrase ‘God bless computers’ appears as often,” she quips. Not surprisingly, Goldman continues, “Many Jewish survivors of Katrina turned to Jewish historical frameworks to help give meaning to their experience. In the terrible experience of displacement and uncertainty about where loved ones might have gone, many found a resonance with past historical experience.”

True, she acknowledges, “From a historical perspective, any suffering on the part of American Jews can seem almost trivial, over-

#### **Judge Miriam Walzer, who survived as a girl in Nazi Germany**

*“What you learn is that it’s a really equal opportunity shocker for everybody. The phones don’t work, the radios don’t work, you don’t have money, you don’t have identification, you don’t have anything to wear, you don’t have a house, your doctors are gone, your friends are gone, the city is in chaos, and you’ve gone through it once before, because when the war was over my hometown looked like the city now does. I still remember that. Bridges destroyed. Things just sticking out, things smoldering. When I was a child. How often do you have to do this? How often do you have to see this?”*

*Excerpts from an interview conducted for Katrina’s Jewish Voices*

powered by the long and extreme history of Jewish persecutions elsewhere, culminating in the Holocaust,” but for many of Katrina’s Jewish victims, “Jewishness turned out to offer not only communal support and personal strength, but also a lens through which to process an otherwise alien experience.

“Unlike Europeans, with their experience of war, or Israelis, with their intimacy with uncertainty, most middle-class Americans have no firsthand experience with massive loss and displacement. Most American Jews, reinforced by affluence and numerous supportive institutions, have taken their security in America for granted.”

“There was also a very practical Jewish component to the way that many New Orleans Jews navigated the storm’s aftermath,” Goldman writes. “What was so striking after Katrina was that whatever one’s level of identification or affiliation and whatever the location or nature of the receiving community, Jews found that if they sought assistance as Jews (and often even if they didn’t), there was a Jewish community there eager, ready, and prepared to assist them.

“Moreover, the local Jewish communities

**Lainie Breaux, whose newborn son was transferred from a local hospital to an unknown destination and located only after three days**

*“And remember we’re the lucky ones. That’s what we have to remember. We were the first good news, our story was the first good news to come out of New Orleans.*

*“Maybe also turning 40 has made me become more aware of community in general. It’s been an evolution, because before you’re married and when you’re young, you don’t necessarily connect to the community. You know you’re Jewish, you know you belong to the community, but you may or may not really have anything to do with it. But the Jewish Family Service in Dallas and the Jewish Family Service in Fort Worth and the Jewish Family Service in Houston – the response that our story brought was amazing.”*

*Excerpts from an interview conducted for Katrina’s Jewish Voices*

responded to the challenges they confronted not just in an immediate, reactive way, but with strategic and thoughtful planning that enabled them to draw upon the strengths they had been building over a century of philanthropic communal effort. In the midst of so many governmental and organizational failures, the Jewish community leadership quickly identified short, medium, and long-term goals and set out to reach them.”

First to be addressed were the immediate needs, and the Jewish organizations quickly decided to provide every Jewish individual affected by Katrina with a \$700 cash payment – crucial for people who had fled the rising waters with little more than the clothes they were wearing, and had no access to their bank accounts or to credit.

After a lifetime of comfort and prosperity, many in the community were uncomfortable as they were, of necessity, turned into the recipients of charity. Goldman writes that “Jews had to learn that the full meaning of *tzedaka* [charity] entailed not just a willingness to give charity but the ability, when needed, to accept it.”

**M**UCH OF THE JEWISH COMMUNAL response was directed toward rescue and relief efforts for non-Jewish residents and communities of the Gulf Coast. According to Guberman, these included the direct rescue of stranded individuals, the distribution of gift cards so families could purchase basic necessities, millions of dollars in financial assistance to smaller Gulf Coast communities and projects in the area, and thousands of hours put in by Jewish volunteers from around the country.

Goldman writes that the locus of immediate Jewish relief work was the nearby Baton Rouge Jewish community, “which threw all its energy and resources into bringing Jews and others safely out of New Orleans. A coordinated effort between the city’s Jewish community and the sheriff of East Baton Rouge resulted in a series of increasingly dangerous rescue missions.

“The rescuers were able to gain entry into New Orleans because they came with a list of names and addresses of missing persons. People of all backgrounds were brought out, cared for, sheltered, helped to find new homes for the short or long term, and provided with transportation by the Jewish community.”

The Jewish community was unquestioningly responsive to the needs – and many Jews from Baton Rouge set off on repeated rescue trips to New Orleans wearing bulletproof vests

## Cantor Joel Colman

*“Throughout the long history of Jews, there have been significant events. When we think about the Portuguese Jews 500 years ago, who had to get out of Portugal within two days. And, of course, the Holocaust and the pogroms in Russia and parts of Poland. And you think about the significant events in which people lost their community or something happened in their community; and they came back and it wasn’t the same. This is one of those events, it truly is.”*

## Ann Levy, Holocaust survivor

*“The biggest thing that made an impression on me is when we came back to New Orleans and we were told that the Jewish community from all over the United States had collected money and sent it to the Jewish Federation here. And that everybody needed to register because they had money for us. I had a very, very hard time with that. Because, I guess, it brought back memories...When we first came to New Orleans, we were dependent on the Jewish Federation, on the Jewish community here, which helped us find an apartment and furniture and all of the things that you need when you’re starting a new life. My husband said, ‘We’re going to register at the Jewish Federation for the \$750 that everybody was going to receive.’ And I said, ‘I can’t do that. I don’t want to do that. But even the banks weren’t working right and so I said, ‘OK.’ And then I found out that everybody did, so I guess that was OK.”*

*Excerpts from an interview conducted for Katrina’s Jewish Voices*

to protect them from the lawlessness and violence in the flooded city.

In conclusion, Goldman writes: “Katrina showed the rest of us that this strange American Jewish community, with its scandalous taste for shellfish and its full investment in a city from whose central rituals (like Mardi Gras) it has long been excluded, may indeed have a logic of its own.”

● **For more information on Katrina’s Jewish Voices, visit: <http://katrina.jwa.org/>**

**For more information on the Jewish Women’s Archive, visit: <http://jwa.org>**