Martha Bergadine Transcript

ROSALIND HINTON: This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Rabbi Martha Bergadine at Beth Shalom, 9111 Jefferson Highway, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Today is Friday, November 3rd, 2006. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina's Jewish Voices project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Rabbi Bergadine, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

MB: Yes, I do.

RH: So, let's begin with how old you are, where you are from, and your education.

MB: Well, I'm forty-five. I originally grew up in Michigan and went to Michigan State. My Rabbinic ordination is from Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati. I was ordained in 1996. Do you want me to go more into my background at this point?

RH: Sure.

MB: Yes. I didn't grow up Jewish. I converted to Judaism as an adult after meeting my husband, who's Rabbi Stan Zamek – he wasn't a rabbi then – and got very involved in our synagogue at that point. We were living in Chicago. He was an attorney, and I worked in advertising, and we both felt it was time for a career change. He first thought about the rabbinate, and I kind of investigated along with him. I originally thought about Jewish education and, after looking into that, thought that I really wanted to become a rabbi. So, we both applied to HUC at the same time, separately, but we applied at the same time and got in and went through Rabbinical school together, which was interesting. [laughter] Because we'd been married for a while before we went in. We

were both ordained in '96, went out to San Francisco for three years, where he served as the Associate Rabbi at Sherith Israel, and I worked for Congregation Sha'ar Zahav out there as an Interim Rabbi and then worked for two years with the Bureau of Jewish Education. Then we came to Baton Rouge, and he became Rabbi at Beth Shalom here. I worked with North Shore Jewish Congregation for a couple years as a part-time Rabbi, and then after the birth of our second child, stopped working there and started working for the Jewish Federation here in Baton Rouge, which at that point was a little, small, part-time job in a very quiet little Jewish community. [laugher] It didn't stay that way.

RH: So, tell me about the Baton Rouge Jewish community. In your opinion, what's it like?

MB: Well, we love it here. Before the storm, it was about a thousand individuals. Being that it's a smaller community, everybody knows everybody, which I think is mostly good. It can be bad at times. But it's close-knit, and just very good people. People in a large city like New York or Chicago, especially New York, don't have to affiliate; you don't have to participate to be Jewish. There's such a way to be like a cultural Jew. But here everybody is involved, and everybody's needed to make things happen. Every person really counts. Every person makes a difference. That's something that we really, really like about this place, and it's been a wonderful place for our family. There are wonderful connections all over the region. We're involved with Henry S. Jacobs Camp, and that's been really important to kids all over the region, including our daughter, who's gone. Our little boy's too young to go camp. He's just a faculty brat right now. I told my husband, when we were leaving San Francisco, I missed snow, I wanted to go someplace where there was snow. I wanted to go someplace where my daughter could go to public school because we were both public school kids. We ended up here. We had the option of going to Cornell University, and I was accepted to a Ph.D. program there. He was offered the position at the Hillel there, and we still came to Baton Rouge. [laughter] So, that tells you something about – I gave up the snow and the public schools and came

here because it tells you what a good community this is, and we've been very happy. Yes.

RH: So, we might as well get kind of into how the Jewish community has changed. So, let's talk a little bit about Katrina and get right into it. Tell me, how do you prepare for a storm up here? Have you been through one before?

MB: We have. We haven't been through – people talk about Camille and Betsy, and those were a long time ago. What's interesting about Katrina – [in] Baton Rouge, we get wind, and we get rain, and our power goes out for a couple days. But in our neighborhood, our power goes out every time the wind blows because we live in a neighborhood with old trees. So, prior to Katrina, we'd been through a bad tropical storm here, and there was a hurricane that came ashore around Lafayette that we got quite a bit of rain and things from, but Baton Rouge really doesn't – people don't evacuate. People have mentioned to us since Katrina about evacuation plans, and people just laugh. If we have to evacuate, we've got a monumental problem, and evacuation's not going to help. It's not like being on the coast. It's not like New Orleans and being in a bowl. We're far enough inland that we get a lot of rain and wind, but it's not such an issue. So, in the past, when there's been a storm coming, we had what we called a hurricane box and made sure that there was some – we lay in some water and some canned food and check out the batteries and stuff. But nothing had ever been that bad. In fact, with Katrina, for some reason, I kind of totally missed that it was even going to happen. I mean, I was vaguely aware it was out there, and the Sunday that – I guess it was between Sunday night and Monday when it actually made landfall or early Monday morning – there was supposed to be a faculty education workshop in New Orleans, and I was planning on my teachers going. I walked in here on Saturday morning, and that's how I kind of found out about the people who were really leaving New Orleans. I mean, we just weren't locked on. UJC [United Jewish Communities] had been calling; Howard Feinberg from UJC had been calling to see what they could do. He spoke to Erich

Sternberg, who was the president at the time, who basically said, "It's really nice of you to call, but we think we'll be fine." Baton Rouge's attitude was, “We've been through this before, and because of where we are, it's never that bad.” Now, the prior Rosh Hashanah, there had been a big evacuation from New Orleans, and the hurricane actually never really – it hit more towards Mobile. But a lot of people had come out right around Rosh Hashanah the year before. So, services here were bigger, and a lot of people went up to camp. But that being said, I don't think anybody here really anticipated what was going to happen or what it was going to be. I don't know what you've found from talking to people in New Orleans, but there were people who didn't leave New Orleans because they don't leave New Orleans. [laughter] They ride the hurricanes out there. Nobody, I don't think, anticipated what was – people didn't anticipate the flooding and the devastation.

RH: So, when were you first engaged in the storm?

MB: Well, I mean, we knew we were going to get winds and things like that, so we kind of hunkered down, and that night, like, we slept in our living room. The next day, actually, I remember Stan sitting with the cell phone and working through the congregational directory, calling to check on people and see if they were okay. Now, you have to remember we were cut off, communications-wise, here with the power. We did lose power for a couple of days. So, the cell phones worked sometimes. Regular phones were down. It was hard to tell from the radio what was really going on. I mean, we listened to the radio during the storm, and I remember the last thing before stuff started to really cut out was hearing that the windows had broken at East Jefferson Parish Hospital, and there was water coming in. But I think at that point, it was still rainwater. It wasn't real flooding. Didn't have TV, so people outside the region had a much better idea of what was going on. I actually, in thinking about seeing the horrific pictures in the television coverage – I didn't see it until much, much later because then all hell broke loose here, and no one had time to watch TV. So, when I watch it, it's almost like with a

historical view, not having seen it. So, the next day – then we did a crazy thing because it was still very quiet. I said to him, “When is the next time that you and I aren't going to have any work that we can do or have to do?” We tore up our living room carpet because I had been wanting to get at the wood under the carpet and bring out the wood floors. We spent the day in the heat, tearing up the carpeting because we didn't have anything else to do and did that. Just about then is when – the end of that next day, I guess, is when the phone calls started coming, people who had made it to Baton Rouge who then were realizing what had happened in New Orleans. Because the people who left New Orleans, even if they did evacuate, they thought it was going to be for two or three days. They maybe took a change of clothes. Then, the initial reports were that people couldn't even go back to the city for six to eight months. So, people really realized they were exiled, and the Jews started calling the Jewish Federation.

RH: That would be you. [laughter]

MB: That would be me. I mean, prior to the storm, we really were small. We did a little bit of programming. But mostly, what we did was serve as a fundraising arm to support a lot of regional institutions and UJC. It was a way for the community to support the camp and things like that. We didn't have infrastructure at all. We didn't have a Jewish Family Service here. We had me part-time and a lot of involved volunteer leadership. So, they started calling. Also, I guess you know that the New Orleans Federation had pretty much found itself in Houston, and I know people were calling Houston. But it just became apparent that people needed all sorts of help. I don't know if Erich called me, or I called him, or whatever, but somehow our leadership coalesced, and we started –

RH: Well, do you remember the first phone call you got?

MB: The first phone call I got was almost – I think it was before the storm. It was someone who had evacuated early. It was an elderly person, and I don't remember who she was. But she had one of those Lifeline devices where, if you fall or have a problem,

you can push the button and get help. She had it through Jewish Family Service, and she called and said she didn't think she was going to be going back for a while. She was going to stay with a friend and maybe go to a daughter, and did I know how to cancel her Lifeline subscription? I said, “I have no idea.” I mean, it was that benign a call. Then, when the calls started coming, people were looking for housing. They were looking for – it was interesting. People wanted to put their kids in school right away. That was a big concern. Again, people were being told, “You can't even go back to the city for six months.” But where can they get their kids into school? Housing. Some people were looking for medical assistance. We're fortunate; the community has a lot of doctors. So, we just called a few people, and they took whoever we sent to them. Then, eventually, we did develop a list of doctors. One person who is a doctor went and called and checked that they would all take Katrina people. So, we had this great list of specialists that we could refer to. People who started to realize that their funds were running out, or they couldn't get money because the banking system was just shot, or the ATMs were just out of cash – I mean, and here, too, you have to understand it wasn't just Jews who were here. The city like went – we're like four hundred thousand. We went up over a million overnight in the city. You couldn't move. There was just so much traffic. The stores never ran out of food, but you'd go in, and all the yogurt would be gone or something. The deliveries weren't coming. I remember driving to three ATMs to try to get cash, which is something that's never happened here. The infrastructure here was just strained to the maximum. So, we immediately – Federation leadership immediately authorized taking money from reserves. I mean, we had no idea how we were going to pay for things, but it really didn't matter. So, we started giving out Walmart cards to people because those seemed to be the most useful. People could get gas. They could get groceries. They could get clothing if they needed it.

RH: So, who made that decision?

MB: About the Walmart cards?

RH: Yes. [laughter]

MB: I honestly don't remember. I know that Erich Sternberg and Ralph Bender, at this point, were calling a lot of the shots and approved the – they got the Executive Committee to approve just pulling money from reserves to pay for things. Actually, I have a little chronology. That was actually around September 3rd when it became official. But we were doing it before. I think probably – I don't know if I decided to go and get the Walmart cards. I might have because I was very much the person who was seeing people one-on-one. So, I might have decided – I got some cash and got some Walmart cards, and we just kept going in there and kind of buying them [laughter] in lots of one thousand.

RH: How much was on the cards?

MB: I think we started with fifty-dollar cards. Then, people would come in and just say they had them, and they had their kids or whatever. It was just very much flying by the seat of the pants and knowing that anybody who showed up needed things. We also had – anybody who showed up got help. We didn't say, "Oh, you're Jewish, you're not Jewish," whatever. If you somehow found yourself on our doorstep, we're going to help you. So, that's predominantly what we were doing, was a lot of Walmart cards, and some cash, a lot of referrals. I'm trying to think. It's actually hard for me to remember it because it really is kind of a blur. Everybody was just working hours and hours and hours. The 30th is really, I think, about when all hell broke loose. I was trying to get a meeting of community leadership together and calling around, trying to get leadership of the synagogues and Federation together to sit down in a room to figure out how we could address things. I remember I called over to talk to Richard Lipsey, and I spoke to his daughter, Laurie Aronson, and she said that her dad was on the phone with the East Baton Rouge Parish Sheriffs, trying to arrange to get out some relatives of theirs who had stayed behind. That's how that whole seed got planted about the rescues. We did have

a meeting later on where everybody got in a room at Starmount Insurance, at Erich Sternberg's company, and took portfolios, if you will. Someone said they'd be the housing person and the education person and to take some of the – when people called with certain questions, things like that. So that was going on.

RH: So, you kind of divided up the tasks?

MB: Yes. Yes.

RH: Do you remember when you did this, around?

MB: That actually was by September 1st.

RH: Wow.

MB: That was the big meeting.

RH: Just who was at the meeting? Do you remember?

MB: I was there. Erich was there. I believe Donna and Hans Sternberg were there. Richard Lipsey was there. I'm not sure if Dr. Bob Krupkin was there or not. (David Deitch?) was there. Melanie Fields was there. Ralph Bender was there. I remember Bill Hess, from New Orleans, walking in. There may have been some other folks from the New Orleans community. But the professional leadership from New Orleans wasn't in Baton Rouge at that point. But people just sort of took on – for example, Melanie has an education background. So, she said she would take on the education portfolio and find out what schools were requiring and get back to people who had concerns about getting their kids into school. So, those sorts of tasks were divided up.

RH: All of these people were in the meeting because of their role with the Federation?

MB: With the Federation or with one of the synagogues. Or, in the case of Bill Hess, and I think maybe the Bartons from New Orleans, they were leadership in New Orleans who happened to be in Baton Rouge and somehow heard about it. I think Marcus Hirsch was in the meeting as well. It was sort of like, "What are we going to do? How are we going to get some sort of handle on this situation?" That was on September 1st. In the meantime, people were calling the Federation like crazy and leaving messages, which I would return, or I got a couple volunteers who would return the messages and triage them or refer them or say that I needed to talk to them. Then people would come in, and if they needed things, we tried to get them what they needed. It was just a blur, and it was just constant.

RH: So, this is how your life kind of changed.

MB: Oh, yes.

RH: This is what your daily routine was like?

MB: It was like this for a while. I mean, and it got to the point where my kids – my daughter was still home from school because the school had stayed closed for a couple of days. It really was to the point of “Sit on the couch, and here's a box of cereal, and feed yourselves cereal.” [laughter] Finally, I called my sister in Tulsa, and I said, "I need help." My niece is a young widow. She's got two kids. I said, "Is there any way Justine can come?" My niece Justine and her two kids and her brother Nathan came from Tulsa, and Justine took over running our house, and kept us fed and whoever else showed up at our house. I mean, there was always food there. There were various people that were working on things, that – "Okay, come in. There's food in the house." She got the kids to school, and she took care of my kids because there's no way we could have functioned. Then, my nephew Nathan came and just did whatever needed to be done, basically went to work for the Federation, whether it was driving people around – I can go on and tell you about how we ended up finally getting ahold of some apartments and furnishing

them. He was schlepping furniture. He ended up managing the apartments. They were here for a good two weeks, just doing whatever needed to be done. It was amazing.

RH: So, tell me about these apartments.

MB: The apartments. I got a call – I was trying to remember. I got a call from – I don't remember his name. It was a local architect who knew Richard and said, "I hear you're looking for housing." Everybody needed housing. There just wasn't any. I mean, there just was no housing. He said, "I know a guy who is in the process of warehousing some apartments that he's converting to condos." It was an apartment development. As people moved out, he was just holding them off the market so that he could get them empty. He said, "He's Jewish, and he's from New York," or something – he's out of state, nobody knew him here. "But if you call him, he may give you some apartments." So, I called this guy (Hank Mann?), and he gave us six apartments. We held them aside for – I think he actually ended up giving us seven. We held them aside to try to have a place to put professional and lay leadership from New Orleans. Because people were trying to get back closer to New Orleans. So, we went ahead and rented those apartments, and then we had to furnish them. I called Harvey Hoffman, who used to be the – I don't know if he's officially the president or CEO of Fraenkel Furniture here. But he had recently retired. Harvey got us furniture from Frankel, jumped the line on their production for us, and we managed to put beds in these apartments and tables and chairs and some lamps and a sofa. Harvey and Nathan [laughter] basically moved the stuff into these apartments. Francine Fisher and her sister, Elaine Kaplan, went shopping for me and bought all the dishes and soft goods and sheets and things, towels, to put in these apartments and moved them in so that when people got to town, they at least had a place to live. I think Alan Bissinger was the first person that got here. You've probably talked to him. He walked out of New Orleans in chest-deep water and ended up here. So, we at least had a dry place for him to stay. Then, before actually the professional leadership landed, Chabad had sent rescue people in, and there were people from ZAKA

that were here. So, they stayed in the apartments for a while. So, it was just we had these places that people could crash, basically, and then go off and do that rescue work. Then, eventually, they moved out, and we had people from Jewish Family Service move in for a while, people from the Jewish Endowment. Some of them were in the apartments until, I think it was through December, and we needed to give them up. But it was about that time that people were starting to be able to go back to New Orleans. I mean, they were not deluxe or beautiful, but they were dry and had the minimum of what people needed. It was at least a place for people to stay. So, that was sort of – we went into the real estate business, [laughter] it seemed like, with that.

RH: Were there any other places that you secured?

MB: I'm trying to think. Over time, there were some other places that opened up. I think Sandy Levy of the Endowment found a house in the Garden District. She had her elderly mother with her. They had evacuated – I honestly don't know where right now.

RH: Jackson.

MB: Jackson. Okay. Then they found their way back here. Because Sandy came back here and helped establish the infrastructure that was here. So, she found a house, or someone found a house for her in the Garden District. So, she was in a house. Then there were a few other apartments that opened later on. But we didn't handle them in quite the same way. It was later on, when people had gotten here, and it was a better option for them. They were able to move in. But just initially, I mean, everyone wanted housing. There was no place. There was nothing. So, these six or seven apartments were like gold. We really felt we needed to put the leadership in there because if they were going to help pull their community back together, they at least needed a place to sleep through the four hours a night that people were sleeping. So, that was our adventure in real estate. But actually, my nephew Nathan was the one who was managing it and dealing with it and moving people in and moving people out. It was

pretty amazing. It was a crazy time.

RH: So, tell me, were you the behind-the-scenes for the rescue?

MB: Yes. What happened with the rescue was, when I called to get Richard to this community meeting, I talked to Laurie, and she told me Richard was talking to the Sheriff about getting these relatives of theirs out. I know Richard has a really good, strong relationship with Greg Phares, with the Sheriff. I think it was a day or so later; I got a call from Adam Bronstone in Houston. He said to me – I mean, just it was so wild. Because every call you would make, at that time, you'd just make it once, at the same time on your cell phone and your landline because one of them might go through. Sometimes it was the landline, and sometimes it was the cell phone. So, I got this call from Adam, and he said, "I know where people are in New Orleans. People have been calling us, and they say they know where people are. I need you to go to Search and Rescue and stand there and tell them to call me. But Search and Rescue has to come and call me. Here are these numbers, and you need …". I said, "I don't know where Search and Rescue is." He said, "Well, here are a bunch of phone numbers. Call them, find out where they are, and go there." I said, "Okay." So, I tried to call all these numbers he'd given me and couldn't get through and couldn't get through. Then I realized that Richard had been talking to Greg about getting people out, and I called Richard. I said, "Here's what's going on. We need help." He said, "I'm going to give you Greg's cell phone number." So, I called Greg and explained the whole thing to him. He said, "Have Adam call me, and we'll see what we can do." So, I then tried to call Adam and, of course, could not get through to him because he was in Houston. I did manage to leave an email message. I remember I wanted to make that connection so badly. So, I called a friend of mine who's a doctor, who was working at a hospital, and I said, "Do you have Internet?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Okay. You have to send an email to this guy, Adam. Here's what you have to say to him and send it to him." So, she did. Then I thought, "I can't call Houston, but maybe I can call Dallas." Because the traffic was so heavy between here and

Houston. So, I called a friend of mine who's a Rabbi in Dallas, and I said, "I need you to try to call this guy, Adam, that you don't know from anybody. You need to tell him X, Y, and Z and ask him. If he says yes, he's done this, that's fine, and if he says no, then you need to give him this other phone number, and you need to call me back." Actually, Adam had somehow gotten my message. But I finally learned about it from my friend in Dallas, who got through to Adam and said, “Yes, he got the message with Greg's phone number on it.” So then Adam and Greg, apparently with Richard and Erich, did the front-end part of the rescues. People would call the Federation in Houston, and that information would get filtered back to us. So Erich and (Jeff Dubinsky?) were also involved in it, working the list because sometimes they would get information that someone was still in New Orleans, and that person actually had gotten out. So, they would be trying to call other relatives to find people. Then Richard helped put it all together with the sheriffs to go down there to pull these people out. So, I wasn't involved in the going down there part of it. Where I got involved was what happened when they pulled people out. Because they would bring them here to Beth Shalom. B'nai Israel, our sister synagogue, had opened as a general shelter at that point. Beth Shalom didn't feel that it could be a general shelter. Also, we have the nursery school here, which had thrown its doors open and took in all the kids it could because parents wanted to get their kids into some sort of normalcy. So, I think they upped their capacity by twenty-five percent or something. So, it was important to keep the nursery school open, and the feeling was you couldn't be a shelter and have a nursery school. So this became sort of a triage center here. What I did was recruit volunteers, to go down. The sheriffs actually, as I understand it, went down and found the people, but we had volunteers with vans to bring the people back here. I just called everybody I knew who had a van, and they went down. I found out later that they got to a certain point, and they put bulletproof vests on these volunteers. These are my friends. These are fathers of the kids that I work with. I had no idea that they were going to be in that kind of danger. Sorry.

RH: That's okay.

MB: I can remember saying to one guy afterward, "I'm sorry. I never would have asked you." Thank you. Probably go through a lot of these [tissues]. "I never would have asked you to do that." He said, "It wouldn't have mattered if you'd told me upfront. I still would have gone." But these were just people, you know, that were going with the Sheriff into areas where they had to wear bulletproof vests to get people out of the space. So, anyways, they would bring them back here, and we would round up volunteers to do sort of an intake with them. That was my job, and other people too. We had people here who – we always had a doctor. We had food for them. We had to find places for people to stay. Because it was pretty much impossible to get people out right away. Some people went out on an Angel Flight. Other people went out on commercial flights. Some people took the bus out. But you still needed a couple days to get people out. So, everybody who came through went home with a congregant and stayed with a congregant for a couple days. We'd bring people in, and the doctor would assess their condition, and we had food here. Then the process began of trying to figure out where people could go. What you have to understand is, with these rescues, the people who stayed, at that point, and didn't get out were there because they were elderly, they were ill, sometimes mentally ill, they didn't have the economic means to get out. So, these people were traumatized at that point. Some of them had been off their medication. I mean, we had a couple schizophrenics come through. People would have to sit with them for hours to find out, "Oh, yes, and I've got a daughter, and here's her address in my phonebook," sort of thing because it was just trying to pull information out of them, sometimes. So, we had volunteers who would just sit with people and talk to them and try to figure out how we could arrange for them to go further out because we couldn't keep people in Baton Rouge – how we could get them with a relative. So, every time –there was, I think, about three trips down – there would be a bunch of people brought back. We would take care of them and find them a place to stay. They went home with congregants, and some of them stayed for a couple days with people. People were just amazing. People were amazing – what they did.

RH: So, about how many would come back on each trip?

MB: I don't know the total numbers, but it was easily seven people at a time. They would go down, and they would go to places and find – as I understand it, they would go to places and find people weren't there anymore, that they'd been taken out. At the same time, they would take out anybody that they came across.

RH: So, all the people you were dealing with weren't necessarily Jewish?

MB: No, no. In fact – the majority were because those were the locations – people knew where their aunt was or whatever and gave her address and called the Federation. So that's how we knew it. But, no, they weren't Jewish. Anybody who they could take out, they took out. Those people went and stayed with people here and got flown wherever they needed to get flown. There was a couple, an African American couple that, the gentleman was very – they were elderly, and he was very stubborn and didn't want to leave New Orleans, and now found himself in Baton Rouge and was unhappy about that and wasn't going to be going anywhere. We finally got their daughter's name out of them. But they didn't have an address. They didn't have a phone number. So, Stan went and bought a background search on her and found her address. Then, I went and found her phone number through a reverse phone directory or something. Stan called her and said, "Is this your name?" She said, "Yes." He said, "Are these your parents?" She said, "Yes." He said, "Well, I've got them here. They're safe." She had no clue. She didn't know if her parents were alive or dead. He got to run the phone down to the parents and say, "Talk to your daughter." Everybody was in tears. We were eventually able to get them to her. I think she lived outside of Baltimore. But it took like three days to get them on a plane out of here. So, they just went home with the doctor who was there and stayed with them for three days. They got them on the plane. Then we got a nice email later saying, "I want you to know that they got here, and they're safe and sound and just had meatloaf for dinner. Thank you very much." Amazing, amazing

stories. But after the sheriff stopped going down, Chabad was also going and doing some of it. There was sort of a freelance rescue group from New York that showed up that brought people out. So, they would bring people here too, and then we kind of took that over.

RH: Do you have a Chabad community in Baton Rouge?

MB: No, we don't. We don't. There were two Chabads in New Orleans, though, and Chabad was aware of what was going on.

RH: So, did they set up here?

MB: They didn't really set up here. They stayed in our apartments. Some of them –

RH: Do you know who it was, by chance?

MB: I'd have to go back and look.

RH: Okay. That's okay.

MB: They may have initially come down to do Chevra Kadisha things because, on about the 7th of September, Barry Swartz from UJC and Burt Goldberg from Association of Jewish Family and Children Services came down to assess the situation and try to figure out what we needed here. At that point, the numbers were still – I mean, the numbers were horrendous. But the numbers were even – projections were worse, in terms of potential dead and things like that. We thought we may need a Chevra Kadisha.

RH: Explain what that is.

MB: That's the burial society, the group of people who handle Jewish burials, traditionally, and preparations. So, I believe some people were sent from Chabad to do that. They ended up actually participating in search and rescue efforts. I think they also did end up

doing some work with the folks at the morgue and things like that. But luckily, there weren't that many dead in the Jewish community that really needed to have the services of Chevra Kadisha. There was one person that we found out, months, months, months later, had died in the storm, who was Jewish. There were a couple of individuals who'd passed away before the storm at Woldenberg, and actually, their bodies had to be left when they evacuated Woldenberg, which is the Jewish nursing home. People from ZAKA went in and got their bodies out, and they were temporarily buried here in Baton Rouge. So, they weren't left alone. The rabbi from ZAKA who did that – I don't know if you've seen the famous picture of the Beth Israel Torahs. That was that same rabbi. So, he was brought down for that purpose. But all these people came down did just all sorts of things.

RH: So, were you involved with any of that or the Torah rescues?

MB: Yes, I was involved with the Torah rescues, too. That happened about September 12th. By that point, things had calmed down, relatively speaking, and people were out of danger. So, there was an interest expressed by the New Orleans Federation to go in and get out the Torahs. So, with Richard's help, again, we coordinated with the East Baton Rouge parish sheriff and drove down. We got a bunch of people and a bunch of vans again and drove down to New Orleans. Eighty miles an hour. It's the fastest I'd ever gotten to New Orleans, with police escort. It was the first time I'd been there after the storm. It was eerie. I mean, it was very, very eerie, just sort of the absence of people. We made our way around to – I guess we went to Sinai first and then Touro and Hillel, and then we ended up at the Federation office. But I remember standing outside of Sinai – and there was [the] National Guard, by that point, there – and watching a tank roll down the street. Yes, it was weird. But by that point, they didn't put bulletproof vests on us. The sheriffs were wearing body armor. But things had calmed down and gotten a little more under control. People would go in, and they would take out – it was interesting. They took out the Torahs. They took out the hard drives of the computers. I learned any

disaster plan for a synagogue, it's take the hard drives and take the Torahs. We labeled them all and put them in the backs of vans and SUVs and covered them with talesim, and just collected them up. Gates of Prayer had put theirs, I guess, on the third floor of a building, so theirs were safe. Chabad had taken care of their own, and Beth Israel had been, so far, underwater. So, we got them from Sinai, from Touro. Shir Chadash had put theirs upstairs at the Jewish Federation building, along with the Day School Torahs. I remember going into the Federation building. The water had receded by that point. Although, just driving around, there were still places where we had to go – this was on September 12th – [we] had to go weird routes because there was still too much water in places, or there was a boat in the median of a road. I mean, just because that's where it got left. But we went into the Federation. It was really, really hot, and you could see where the water line had come to, and it just felt kind of moldy and damp and horrible. We went upstairs. Upstairs was fine. It was hot. [We] opened up the room that the Torahs were in, which was some sort of A/V or computer storage room. There was just – I don't know how many – twenty Sifrei Torah piled up there. I was with Josh Pailet, the photographer who came along, who was photographing it. I just started to cry. But we packed them up. We labeled them all. We packed them up, and we brought them back here, initially.

RH: Tell me why you cried. Thinking back, what was the impact?

MB: I don't know. It was like they were a little bit of hope. They were just waiting patiently. It was a contrast between the devastation, which, the worst of it, we weren't seeing. We were in Metairie and Uptown. But just the absence of people, and to see them there. The Torah is such a powerful symbol to Jews. It was almost – almost – like rescuing people. Obviously, people come first. This wasn't even attempted until the people were okay. But it was so important to get them out. It just was sort of symbolic of the community, I guess. It was just such kind of a loaded moment. There are awful pictures too of Torahs that the Nazis had warehoused, and I guess I probably had kind of

an echo of that, too, because they were stacked up for – but this was truly for safekeeping. They had taken the time and the effort to make sure that they were safe, sort of thing. So, it was just very, very powerful. We brought them back here. It was on a Saturday. It was all done very quietly. The minyan was meeting here and was just finishing up as we got back. So, people helped carry them in. I remember there was this one little Torah from the day school, and its breastplate, you could tell, had been made by kids, and it was little. So, they got piled up here and then got divided between B'nai Israel and Beth Shalom to go with the arks. They [laughter] were literally turned sideways to fit in the arks, to store them. But it felt good to sort of go, "Okay, they're safe." Some of the extras were piled up here for a while. Then, we got a call from a family who had evacuated to Shreveport. Their daughter was going to have to have her bat mitzvah in Shreveport. It was right around the time of the storm. Their family had donated a Torah to the day school. Did we have the Torah? We did have the Torah. So, they drove down and picked up their family Torah. I mean, I emailed around to everybody and got the President of the Board of the day school. He said, "Absolutely, give them the Torah." She got to use it at her bat mitzvah in Shreveport. It's amazing. Then the irony is, with the Torahs, a few weeks later, just before Rosh Hashanah – this building had sustained horrible damage because of Hurricane Rita. There was roof damage, and the sanctuary and the social hall flooded. The water was working its way from the back to the front. When they found it, it had not gotten to the ark. It was good. I mean, our Torahs were in it, and I think Touro's were in it. So, they were evacuated, once again, to a congregant's house and finally brought back for Simchat Torah when everything had been cleaned up here. So, it's an amazing story.

RH: Tell me about those first services or the High Holidays here.

MB: High Holidays here? Well, there was actually a Shabbat service, I think – I have my list here – on the 9th. It was the day before the Torah rescues. It was huge. It was at this synagogue because B'nai was still operating as a shelter. People from UJC and the

Union of Reform Judaism came down, and the place was full of New Orleans people and Baton Rouge folks. People just really needed to be together on Shabbat. And so this place -- it was before it was damaged -- was just full. That was one of the first times that the community kind of all came together as a community. High holidays that year were interesting. Rabbi Cohn from Sinai did services at B'nai Israel, and they had to have two shifts, something that in a big city is no big deal, but here is a big deal. So they had two shifts because they had their own people, and they had a lot of New Orleans folks. Rabbi Loewy and Rabbi Busch from Gates of Prayer and Touro took turns coming in for services for the holidays. Those were held at the Unitarian Church in Baton Rouge, which was, I think, something that Stan worked out. He's good friends with the Unitarian minister. So, they had a location.

RH: So that was kind of for New Orleans.

MB: Yeah, I think it was largely New Orleans people who went, but they needed to see their rabbis, and the rabbis really knew they needed to be here. There were also people ¬– New Orleans people, though, obviously – in Houston. As I heard, in New Orleans they did some services there, and many more people than they expected showed up at services there. So, I think the rabbis and the cantors did a really good job of trying to be available and visible at that time for their people. I mean, obviously it would be impossible to be spread thin as they needed to be spread. But those were sort of New Orleans services, if you will. Then here, because of the damage to the synagogue, services were held next door at Jefferson Baptist Church. It was amazing. I mean, within a couple hours of the damage, I think there were three offers of places to hold services. The Unitarian minister showed up and said, "I can't give you holidays because I've already given those away to the other rabbis, but I've checked the calendar, and you can have every Friday night from here for the rest of the year," which we didn't need. But we went next door to Jefferson Baptist Church. They were amazingly welcoming and wonderful and just went out of their way. So, services were over there, and they were

large. It actually worked out well because there were New Orleans people that were over there. A lot of Shir Chadash people came to those services. Actually, things had been cleaned up enough here, then, that they were able to have the receptions and the break the fast and stuff here.

RH: At Beth Shalom.

MB: At Beth Shalom, for those services. I know they had very nice receptions and things at B'nai Israel. So, it was bigger, but it was a real special sort of High Holidays, I think.

RH: Was anything said at the first Shabbat that you recall, worked into the service in any way or just a recognition of –?

MB: I don't remember. I don't remember services before that September 9th service. That in itself was all about that. Because Rabbi David Saperstein spoke at it. The mayor was here, and he spoke at it. I don't remember anything anybody said, real honestly. There were representatives from UJC that were here. That was what it was all about was people coming together and – I think it was kind of the first time people could draw a little breath, maybe, just a little breath, but draw a little breath and sort of pause for a minute. And then the holidays were – I'm sure you can get copies of people's sermons, but they were just – talk about trying to figure out what to preach on, and how do you console people, and what do you say to people. It was quite a challenge, I think.

RH: Were there any surprises to you over this period of time, any gifts?

MB: I don't want to say it's a surprise, but I really got to see the absolute best of people. I had the job of calling people and saying, "Can you do this? Can you do that?" and recruiting people to do things and to take people. I truly think, of all the things I asked people to do, maybe there were a total of ten requests that people turned me down. They were all because they couldn't take in people because they already had people in

their homes, and we didn't know it. I mean, they were all legitimate sorts of reasons. One of my favorite stories I tell about people is that we got a call that these New York search and rescue folks were bringing in two men and their six dogs. They had refused to leave because they couldn't take the dogs with them. But the dogs were all small, and they would all fit in cat carriers. They were all these little, tiny dogs. We said, "Okay," and managed to find a couple – he's a physician, and she works at the vet school – who would take these people and their dogs in and rounded a bunch of little cat carriers. They're on their way. They pull up, the door opens, and the first dog gets out, and, indeed, it's this little, tiny dog. And the next dog gets out, and it weighs about eighty pounds. There were not only six dogs. There were seven dogs – because they adopted one on the way out – and a macaw, this giant parrot. I just remember calling Richard Lipsey and saying, you know, "These dogs are …". There were dogs all over the place. And dogs on leashes. These guys had been told that there would be an apartment waiting for them, which wasn't the case. They also somehow got the idea that there was a private jet to fly them to San Diego. I was on the phone with a nephew of theirs, who basically was saying, "I have set up someplace for them in San Diego, but they can only take one dog. And I don't have a private jet." They were saying that they had been lied to. It was this crazy situation. I was on the phone with Richard, saying, "They won't all fit in these dog carriers. We need big dog carriers," and Richard said, "Okay. I went to Wal-Mart, and I bought out what they had, and now I'm going to Target to buy dog carriers." And crazy, crazy, craziness. We finally got everybody kind of calmed down. Then I had to call this couple and say, "By the way, it's not six tiny dogs that'll fit in a cat carrier. It's seven dogs, and they're rather large, and a big parrot." I got on the phone, and I called Frank, and I told him. There was a pause, and then he said – I'll never forget what he said – "Well, then I guess I should bring the big truck." And they took these – there was no hesitation. "I'll bring the big truck." They didn't take the parrot – couldn't take the parrot. Parrot lived in a lounge here, and we fed him peanut M&M's, and he lived here for a couple days.

RH: I'm going to wrap up for a second because I'm afraid we're going to run out.

MB: Okay.

[END OF TRACK 1]

MB: "I'd better bring the big truck." So they took them. The parrot stayed here. And then actually, we found through the – we got a call. It's a long story. But we got a call from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, that they had a house and acreage that someone was willing to lend to these guys with their dogs. We just needed to get them up to Harrisburg. The people they stayed with actually arranged, through the LSU vet school, to borrow their dog trailer and their driver and got them driven up to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, with all their dogs. The guys stayed there for a few months. The people in Harrisburg took great care of them. Then, finally, we were able to get them back and back to New Orleans. They really, really wanted to be back in New Orleans. So, indeed, they ended up back in New Orleans. But I'll just never forget Frank saying, "Well, then I'd better bring the big truck." And that's just one story. People just really stepped up.

RH: Do you have a story that – perhaps your most moving story?

MB: Yeah. There were a lot. But I started getting – I got a call on my cell phone, and the communications were very, very garbled. I couldn't hear who it was from, but it was someone saying, "You're getting this person, and I wanted to tell you about her background and who her social worker is." It was cutting in and out, and I absolutely couldn't get all of it, but they were bringing in someone who, it turns out, had MS Multiple Sclerosis], and it had affected her brain. This was an ex of hers who wanted us to know the background. We didn't know until people got here, who they were, basically. I tried to call her back and couldn't get back. I tried to get ahold of her social worker and couldn't get ahold of her social worker. So, the woman arrived. She was very disoriented. She hadn't wanted to leave. She had a little dog with her that was

paralyzed [and] used a little dog wheelchair. The dog was incontinent, too. The dog was running around here. All she wanted to do was go back, and she couldn't tell who she knew or what friends she had or anything. And she did finally – they got the name of a friend out of her. And it turns out when they called the friend, the friend's like, "Yeah, I'm going back." We couldn't get her with this friend because the friend was headed back to go stay in the French Quarter. I finally got ahold of the person who had called me, and there was a good enough connection. We learned that this woman had been a very brilliant rabbinical student before the MS affected her. She had worked with the professor who's now the President of Hebrew Union College. But she had been a very brilliant student and was making her living reading Tarot cards in Jackson Square at that point because of the effects of her disease. We learned from this friend that she had another friend in Los Angeles that the woman herself had not brought up. So, we got her, finally, into a congregant's home, her and the dog. I mean, these people have a little kid, and the wife was pregnant at the time, and they took in this woman for like three days. But Stan got on the phone and called Rabbi Ellenson, who's the President of HUC, who she had worked with. He remembered her. We finally got to the friend in LA, made arrangements, and the friend said she could come out and stay with him. Then, through Rabbi Ellenson, they were able to set up that the HUC community would check in on her and try to get her connected with the social services and things that she needed. And so after like three days we were able to fly her out. The woman that she stayed with took off from work, and they took the dog to the vet to get its vaccination certification and stuff so it could fly. And got to the point at the airport where they got a special ticket so that they could walk her on the plane because she was so confused and got her out to LA to this friend. But it just struck me how poignant it was, someone who had lost so much, then to have sort of built a life that they were relatively happy at and to lose that as well and to be in a situation where there's such confusion and to be able to go back to the people that she had once been with and them being able to help her was really amazing. So, she went out to LA and stayed with this friend. The dog went, too. We had lots of dogs at the

time.

RH: So you pretty much secured housing all over the country.

MB: Oh, yeah. Yeah. It was with people's friends and things like that or relatives, and then we got them there. But people went all over the country, and by all sorts of means, by Angel Flight, which usually flies cancer patients. We had an experience with that. We had someone who was staying with some people and got a call at 4:30 and said, "Your Angel Flight's ready to leave at 5:00." Well, just to get from here to the airport in a half hour – so they got him out there, and then something happened it wasn't ready to go. So, I ended up going out there with Gail, who I should tell you about, and we ended up sitting with this man. He was an elderly gentleman. It became apparent that he's like – I guess the term is sundowner; when evening comes, they get more and more and more confused. And so we ended up – we weren't going to leave him. We ended up sitting there, I think, until about ten o'clock at night at the airport, just talking to him and trying to keep him happy, and he was, and finally got him on the flight. His son met him there. But we had people go out by Angel Flight, which was wonderful but kind of sometimes catch as catch can. We had people who wanted to go someplace on the bus. We had a wonderful person, Sheila Horowitz, who's a travel agent, who just would book people if she could book them. We'd call her and say, "We need to get people to Baltimore. We need to get them here," or wherever. She would book them. And even to the point of – some people wanted to go to San Antonio, and they wanted to take the bus. And she said, "We can get them there now. Where are they?" And she went to their hotel and got them and bought their bus tickets and got them on the bus. People went all over, all different ways, because they couldn't stay here. I mean, the city was bursting at the seams. It was better to get them with family, where they could be cared for.

RH: So, how'd you pay for all this?

MB: We didn't really think about it. Some individuals just reached into their own pockets. But the Jewish Federation had said that they would dip into – we'd spend our whole endowment, which isn't that large anyways. We'd spend everything that we had. We didn't have to, though, because UJC came to town and met with the leadership. I'm trying to think. I think some of the initial planning was done sort of at the same time that we were down doing the Torah rescues. But by that time, Sandy Levy was in town from the Endowment. Donna Sternberg was key in this, along with Howard Feinberg of UJC. Eric Stillman was involved in it. They basically put together a grant proposal, if you will, to the UJC Emergency Committee because there was no infrastructure. It was, "What do we need to build infrastructure, basically, overnight." UJC came through very, very quickly with a million-dollar grant to what was a new organization called the Jewish Community Partnership, which was comprised of the Federation in Baton Rouge, the New Orleans Federation, and the New Orleans Jewish Endowment. And then, we worked in a real close partnership with the Jewish Family Service of New Orleans. But basically, that money allowed us – Sandy was amazing. And she actually found office space when there was no office space to be found. Because, again, all the New Orleans law firms and businesses and things had relocated here and snapped up all the office space. But she found office space, which we furnished, not real deluxe but functional. There was funding to pay for staff, so some staff was hired. There were funds then to provide direct relief to people. Through UJC, we were reimbursed for relocation expenses and things like that. So they really, really stepped up, and not just us but New Orleans as well and Houston and Mississippi. They've been extremely generous and really, really supportive. UJC really worked in a situation where not a whole lot worked. I really say anything good that happened was because people just did it. Then UJC was really instrumental.

RH: So were you struck, at the time, by the contrast of how well your community was working as opposed to other communities or the larger community?

MB: Yeah. I mean, I don't know, at the time – I think in retrospect it becomes more clear. Because, at the time, you just did what you had to do, and was hard to have that perspective. It's only later, I think that people started to realize and find out. I was very proud of Baton Rouge as a whole. Because we're a small city, but the city just opened its doors. I think the Jewish community did an amazing job because we had sort of an organizational structure because people knew to call Federation – and then it could be kind of filtered out. I think it's just in retrospect and as things come out -- I mean, you'd hear odds and ends, but I was so busy that I wasn't aware of how badly, you know, things were handled, other than the Coast Guard in Mississippi, which did a good job. It's only really in retrospect. And again, being sort of in the midst of it – if I'd been in Michigan or Chicago, I think it would have been easier to have a bigger picture and see what was going on.

RH: Well, tell me how your duties now have changed.

MB: I'm still full-time. After the immediate aftermath of it, we really started trying to – the idea being to have people feel welcome in Baton Rouge for as long as they were in Baton Rouge. Now we're kind of, I'd say, you know, in sort of a transitionary point. We've got some people who are staying. Anecdotally, I'd say that, of the people who are staying, more of them tend to be elderly, or more of them are people who don't have economic resources or have some sort of vulnerability. So we have been working with Family Service, which has decided to stay. So, I work very closely with them. We sit in the same building. They've been doing a lot of older-adult programming and a lot of referrals and things. Now what I'm doing is really trying to look at the future and what it's going to look like here in Baton Rouge, you know, who's going to stay, who's going to go – our community's changed. How has it changed? And UJC has been helping us with that as well. We've gotten a two-year grant from them to continue providing services, and they're working with us to do strategic planning and do some consulting work to understand how the community has changed and what the potential is. So, it's kind of a

transitionary point. But as I said, we still have – in the past week, two people that we didn't know were here have kind of arisen and with needs. They both have needs, one more severe than the other. So we're still serving those people. We'll see. I mean, it was a horrible, horrible thing to have happened, but we're trying to find the good things that have come out of it. We've gotten wonderful new people in this community. The Hillel at LSU has really taken off, not so much because there was an influx of new students but because it looked like there was for a while, and they got some resources behind them. They were poised to kind of flourish anyway. So we're working with how can we kind of help them keep that momentum going. Having Family Service here has – it's something we needed, but we didn't know we needed it until we had it. They've made a huge difference in the lives of a lot of our older adults and also, being available to families here who have issues. They can help them with resources and referrals and things. So, I guess finding some good things is a way to redeem so much suffering and loss. We obviously don't wish that it ever happened. There may be some good things that come out.

RH: Do you have a sense of how large the community is now?

MB: The projections we get from New Orleans, and they've been tracking it, seem to say that there's about three hundred new folks here. I can't give you three hundred names of new people. It's easily grown, I'd say, by ten to fifteen percent, for sure. I don't think it's quite up to the thirty percent [which] the projections would show, but somewhere, I'd say, between fifteen and twenty percent growth, which would put it at about, you know, twelve to fourteen hundred.

RH: You were talking about a strategic plan. Are you in a planning process, or are you just beginning to mount it?

MB: Yeah, we're in a planning process with UJC. That, again, is something that they've been very generous with, which is donating their expertise. So, we just completed two

long days of one-on-one interviews. One of their consultants, Jonathan Kaufman, was in town and spoke to all sorts of people, from people who are young to people who are veteran leadership, people who are involved in the community, people who are just tangentially part of the community, but really trying to understand what people want and where it could go. So we're beginning that process with them. He was down here for two days and talked to a lot of people.

RH: Has the relationship changed [with] the New Orleans community?

MB: I think it has. I think it has – not that it was bad to begin with, but we were pretty separate. Now, everybody knows everybody better, although there have been some staff changes in New Orleans. But as people have said, that distance down the road has gotten shorter, the psychological distance. Also, people now, not just professionals, but people know other people better, I think. Some old relationships have maybe been rekindled for people. So, the New Orleanians have a huge challenge ahead of them, and their focus has been on New Orleans, but I think there's definitely more of a closer relationship. I mean, just having Family Service be here, for example, it's more of a regional idea now rather than New Orleans being New Orleans.

RH: I heard Jewish Endowment fund is thinking Louisiana now.

MB: Yeah, it has actually changed its name. And that, I think, is another indication. Alan Bissinger's in a class that I teach in New Orleans, and he was just saying we need to all get together so that we can all meet their new executive director, so everybody knows everybody, sort of thing. I think there's definitely a closer relationship. It wasn't a bad relationship to begin with. But we're, I think, a little more interdependent with each other. That's a good thing, too.

RH: Tell me about this class you're teaching.

MB: Oh, I teach at the Florence Melton [Adult] Mini-School. That's a program of the Federation and the synagogues in New Orleans. I've taught it for several years. I taught in San Francisco. When they started it in New Orleans, the woman who was hired as the coordinator had been a congregant of mine at North Shore, and I said, "Oh, that's a great program. You should definitely do it." She said, "Okay. Will you teach in it?" I love it. I was going down two days a week, but last year was sort of a lost year, and this year they've restarted. So, I go down and teach two classes on Tuesday nights. I love it. It's wonderful.

RH: What are you teaching?

MB: It's a literature or a Jewish literature-based program out of the Hebrew University. There are four classes. People take two classes a year, and it's a two-year commitment. So, the people who take it are really making a commitment to Jewish learning. Of the four classes, I teach Purposes of Jewish Living, which is like a theology class, and then Ethics of Jewish Living. I'll tell you, it was so good to go back and start up this year and see the second-years who were first-years. I had them as first-years. And then last year was last year. And to see those people again was just wonderful. I think, in both classes – I mean, we've talked about how coming together to study and be together is really very healing for people. After every period of Jewish history of real crisis, there's usually a flourishing of creativity and learning. So, in a microcosm, this is part of that. It's really good for me, selfishly, and I think it's good for them to just be together, to learn, to immerse ourselves in Jewish learning. I hope it kind of reenergizes them for the task of rebuilding and provides more energy to the Jewish community down there.

RH: Are there any Jewish frameworks or concepts that come to your mind that either helped you this past year or, as you reflect back, encapsulate the last year?

MB: I can only say – I'm actually doing a support group with Celia Vine from Family Service. We're doing it here. We're looking at Jewish modern writers who write about

hurting and healing. We keep coming back – we've looked at some writings by Joshua Loth Liebman and Irwin Kula, who actually has been to the region twice. We just looked at Viktor Frankl's book. And Harold Kushner has been to New Orleans. Thematically and in the discussions with people, I think it's the understanding or new appreciation for uncertainty. As Irwin Kula would say, life is messy, but it can be a sacred messiness. There's ambiguity. I think we've all had to learn to live with that more. We can, even in the midst of that, find meaning and connection with people. That's really where the power is. People have talked very passionately about their connections with other people, sustaining them, and their need for connections, their need for community. Jews are all about community. The idea of meaning and purpose, that, even if we don't see it, there is meaning, and that we can make meaning. And Viktor Frankl would say even in our suffering, we can derive meaning. So, those are the sorts of things I'm thinking about now. I mean, it's been horribly messy, but people have come together and supported each other, and that's been really powerful for me. As a rabbi, so much of what you do, you never see how it ends up. It's very rare if you actually see the end product. And so, for me, it's really been a blessing to see that my efforts have made a little bit of difference in people's lives. That's a gift that most people don't get. So, it's been a blessing and a gift for me, and it's been something that's kind of sustained me through a lot of chaos.

RH: Is there anything you'd like to see more of in the Jewish community now that you've –?

MB: In a way, it's hard to say "more of" because I feel like the communities have really done so much. I'm proud of our community here in Baton Rouge. I look at the numbers in New Orleans, and from what I see, the Jewish community has returned to an extent that the general population hasn't – the commitment they have. I guess I'd like to – I just hope that everyone realizes how strong they really are and what they're really capable of and that they can continue that, even beyond a crisis or this long haul that we're in now so that that strength and that vision that people have had is still there when times are

good again. Because then there's no telling what these communities can accomplish. So, I hope people realize from it how strong they really are.

RH: What has sustained you? Where did you find comfort in those intense four weeks and then as you continued?

MB: Well, really, in those early days, it was pure adrenalin, I think, really, pure adrenaline. You just do what you have to do. I don't know. I think when things slow down, that's when you can draw a breath, and that's when it can be difficult. But I think the fact that, for once in my life, I can say, yeah, what I did really helped somebody, somehow, in some little way, has been really important to me. And then just some of the people that I've met and the relationships that have developed will be with me my whole life. Again, it's that people coming together aspect. Some of the people I've worked with, I feel like I've gotten more back from them than I've given to them, you know.

RH: Do you have some new friends out of this?

MB: Yes, absolutely, absolutely. And that's something for the long run, I think. But there are times when it's really hard.

RH: Tell me about that, if you don't mind.

MB: I think it's when you just – fatigue, if you will. I feel funny saying it because what we went through here doesn't compare to what people are going through in New Orleans. So, it almost seems silly to say fatigue. But fatigue. I'm very bad at dealing with ambiguity. I'm learning a lot about that. What's it going to be? I don't know. I've learned to say, "I don't know what it's going to be like in two years. I don't know what it's going to be like in six months," and I'm trying to make peace with that.

RH: So that's kind of an entire change of how you approach the world. Or is it?

MB: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I don't know to what extent I would have gotten it just maturing, but, you know, all of a sudden to realize how unpredictable life really is, but you can't let that drive your life. You just have to realize that it's messy sometimes. That's sacred messiness.

RH: Do you get angry with God?

MB: No. Because I don't see God as being in the – as Rabbi Kushner said, “God wasn't in the hurricane.” I get angry at leadership that's failed. I get angry at bad decisions people have made.

RH: You don't mean in the Jewish –?

MB: No, not in the Jewish community. I really think the Jewish community has had wonderful leadership through this. I see God in the amazing things I've seen happen, the way people reached out to each other. The people who've gone through so much, who still are dealing with it and dealing with it well and in the way the community has come together. That support, that's where I see God – there was somebody who -- there were people who were saying God had the hurricane hit New Orleans because it's sinful, etc. That's not great Jewish theology, anyway. But I don't get angry at God about it. I feel grateful for the good things.

RH: Tell me what you're grateful for.

MB: I'm grateful for my family. I'm grateful for some of the people that I've worked with, that I've gotten to know them or have a new connection with them. I truly am grateful for having had this experience, I think, because of what it's taught me.

RH: You said a little earlier that you do have some anger toward – how do you feel the response by the government's been – city, state, local, federal?

MB: Not good. I haven't been able to delve into it, and I can't point to specifics, but I'm appalled that the United States couldn't take better care of its own people. I just expect more. There are two guys, Ben and Michael Beychok, with the Jewish community here, who weren't working with us but who managed to get some busloads of supplies down to the convention center. I honestly don't know the whole background about where it came from, but they got it down there. When they got down there and started unloading – things like water and diapers, I mean, very basic stuff – people came up to them and said, "Are you from FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency]?" They said, "No." "Are you from the government?" "No." "Are you from the military?" "No." One of them finally said, "Look, we're just two guys from Baton Rouge." If two guys from Baton Rouge can do that, gosh, they shouldn't have had to do that. My husband and his friend, the Unitarian minister, went out to the airport because they were asked to come out and do an interfaith service for National Guard troops that were being sent to New Orleans. These were guys who were coming back directly from Iraq, straight through to New Orleans. They were largely from New Orleans. They had lost their homes, and they were being sent back. So, Stan and Steve went out there, and they couldn't do the little service they were asked to do because these people were moving through so quickly. So, they hung around and talked to people and found out these guys were being sent down into New Orleans in the early days, and they didn't have – the military couldn't provide them with rubber gloves, couldn't provide them with hand sanitizer, couldn't provide them with basic stuff that they needed. They couldn't provide them with like the Vicks VapoRub that people put in their noses to deal with the stench. And they came back – and my nephew Nathan was with them – and started sending out e-mails. They got the address of their forward base. They sent out e-mails to their friends, and people collected stuff like hand sanitizer and rubber gloves and sent it on so that the National Guard would have the supplies they needed. I walked in – they came back and told me, and I went to the Walgreens on Jefferson Highway here, and I was cleaning out their hand sanitizer. The manager asked me what I was doing. He said, "Well, I'll give you

twenty percent off on it," and he gave me everything they had. And a woman was standing there at the counter, wearing fatigues, and she said, "I know what you're doing. Thank you." She says, "There are guys already getting dysentery down there." Then, we delivered some other stuff out to the staging area later and found out that they had a shortage of nail clippers. They'd found two pairs of nail clippers, and they tied them to the front desk so that they wouldn't get lost so these guys could clip their nails. I mean, it's appalling. So, that's the sort of thing why I'm angry. I'm angry about that.

RH: Is that part of the uncertainty, too, because there's this thought that they're an American citizen, and they'll be taken care of?

MB: That's not part of the uncertainty for me. The uncertainty, I think, is just more existential, that we think we know how life is going to unfold. That's very naïve, but I think all of us have that. Then, you really realize life's full of surprises. That's not necessarily the way it is. So, no, those failures are not part of the uncertainty for me.

RH: What do you hope for your kids?

MB: My kids? I hope that they learn some of this earlier than I did. It's been interesting because as I was letting them just sit on the couch and eat cereal from the box and things like that, I've had some guilt around that. It's been a hard year for them. It doesn't compare to what kids in New Orleans went through. I mean, there were kids on roofs in New Orleans and kids on overpasses for days. But it was a hard year for them. I had the book The Great Deluge sitting on the coffee table, and my four-year-old picked it up and brought it over to me. He was picking out letters. He says, "This is a G. And this is an R." And there's a picture of flooded buildings on the cover. He pauses for a minute, and he goes, "Katrina did that." I just thought my four-year-old, who lives in Baton Rouge, is not supposed to know about Katrina. He just kind of absorbed it. So I hope, for them, that they learn from this that there's important stuff that people need to do and that they will have that opportunity to do important things. By important, I don't mean it's

so wonderful what I've been involved in, but that there are really crucial needs and that people can help people with those crucial needs. I really hope that they learn that they're empowered, if you will, and that they can look back on this eventually and say, "I understand why I had to sit on the couch and eat cereal from the box for two days." So, I hope they learn that.

RH: Do you have any visions for the future of Baton Rouge or the Jewish community here that you'd like?

MB: I don't know if I have a vision yet, but I'd like to see it more engaged in the way it was during the worst of times but engaged in the best of times that way. I think there are some things we're seeing – I mean, for the first time, we're having a Jewish Film Festival in January, and I think it's going to be wonderful. But to see what people can accomplish, but have people take that energy, if you will, and that engagement and do really good things with it because I think it's really, hopefully, taught people about what their resources are as people and what's possible. So, I'd just like to see that engagement continue and that energy continue, but with good things.

RH: Are any of your priorities different?

MB: Jewishly or in what sense?

RH: In your work life? In your personal life?

MB: I don't know if it's changed my priorities, really. It might have made my priorities more real. I mean, it might have made them, instead of being more theoretical, more real, to really have an opportunity to help people or to – my family is a priority – to really see what happens when they're not your priority, even for a matter of weeks. So, it's maybe kind of made what was theoretical real to me. I don't think my priorities have really changed.

RH: That's right, you have a ten-year-old and a four-year-old?

MB: I have a ten-year-old, and he was four. He'll be five in December. Yeah.

RH: Did the ten-year-old –? Was he aware? Was he talking to you about –?

MB: She had a hard --

RH: She. I'm sorry.

MB: Yeah. That's okay. She had a really hard time just because she wasn't talking to me about it. Her role just got really, really changed. I mean, the little one, he was with his cousins, and he was happy. In talking to her, I said, "Well, you felt safe and everything." She said, "Oh, yeah," because she was with her cousin, who was taking care of her and – but I think her existence had been sort of normal and happy, and then she wasn't the priority for a while. I did take her – I took them both to New Orleans. We went down to go to Kosher Cajun to buy some meat. We got down there earlier than we had thought. This was a few months ago. So, I decided to take them to Lakeview because I wanted Ayelet – I wanted my ten-year-old to see really why it had been so hard and what people had gone through. So, we went to Lakeview and drove around. It was sort of the first time I'd been back since the Torah rescues, too. It was deserted. We were driving along, and she said, "What's that line on the houses?" She was pointing to the watermark. I said, "That's how high the water came." She said, "Well, that's how high the water came outside the houses, right?" And I said, "No, honey. That's how high the water was inside the houses. Because when water's that high, it doesn't stay outside the houses." She got real quiet. She looked, and she said, "Well, how high is that line? Is it higher than Mr. Gus?" It's a friend who's very, very tall. I said, "Yeah, it's even taller than he is." We drove past Beth Israel, and she saw that. It made her really sad, but I think it made her understand a little bit about why her life has been crazy. Since then, I think it's been a little easier for her to at least think, "There's a good

reason why my life was a little bit crazy." We had to put our dog to sleep in May. She was crying about that. She did say, "It's been the worst year ever. First Katrina and now Goldie." She had stuff at school. They had more kids at school and things like that. We had some kids in the religious school here last year. It was a good opportunity for the kids to be welcoming and friendly to other kids. So, they got to do their part, too, I think, which was really good.

RH: Is there anything else you'd like to add to this?

MB: No. I just hope we never have to go through anything like this again. I will say that I'm very, very proud of Baton Rouge, and I'm very, very proud of the Jewish community on the national level and the Baton Rouge level and in terms of the leadership from New Orleans – and I'm sure Houston, as well. I just wasn't involved with them. It made me proud that the community could really step up and do as much as it did. Did what it was supposed to do, what we're supposed to do, as Jews.

RH: Thank you.

MB: Thank you.

[END OF TRACK 2]

MB: – after Katrina. We, in Baton Rouge didn't really think that it was going to be an issue. I mean, we knew we'd get wind and stuff from it. It was horrible. It was a horrible hurricane. If Katrina hadn't happened, people would have been galvanized by Rita. I heard a statistic where Katrina was the number one most expensive national disaster [and] Rita was number three. But people just haven't locked onto that because of the devastation from Katrina. I think, in Cameron Parish, there was one building left standing. There are these ridiculously horrible statistics.

RH: So Beth Shalom, here, was damaged.

MB: Yeah, right. Baton Rouge got wind and rain, and as we knew we would. But what happened was it was the Saturday of Selichot right before Rosh Hashanah. My husband, Rabbi Stan Zamek, who's the rabbi here, came in early because he wanted to see if there was power. He was coming in for the minyan, and he wanted to see if there was power, if there were big trees down or anything. He came in the building, and there was no power, and he heard water running. He said that his first thought was a toilet had overflowed. As he came walking down from the back of the building, he started walking in water. He got back here. I can't explain the mechanics of it, but basically, there was a roof failure. There wasn't a hole in the roof, but there was a roof failure. The water had come in and just poured in through the roof. It seems like it had started back here in the social hall and moved forward because the only dry spot was the ark, which had our Torahs and also, I think, Touro's Torahs. It definitely had New Orleans rescued Torahs in it. So, he managed to make a couple phone calls on his cell phone – called a couple people. Within, I don't know, not even an hour – half an hour, maybe, there were forty volunteers here, people just taking things out. So they got the Torahs out, got the computers out. I slept through most of it. A friend had to come over and pound on the door to wake me up. I didn't answer my cell phone. But all day, what happened then was that people came over and got the water out. We were able to get some professional cleanup people in, but it was really done by volunteers. Because here you have about twenty-four hours to get things dried out before the mold really sets in. There was no electricity. So they had to take the whole – all the roof tiles were falling down. They had to get the water out of here. The roof tiles that had fallen down were disintegrating. It was like mud in the social hall. So, everybody was over here. Little kids were over here, squeegeeing stuff. They did get the power back on at, like, hour twenty-three or something they were able to plug in the big blower. So, we really haven't had a mold problem. But the drywall got wet, so it all had to come down. So, everything has had to be stripped out here in the social hall. The insurance claim was for about $530,000, $540,000. It was denied by the insurance company in its entirety. So, no

insurance.

RH: Was there a reason?

MB: Yes, they say the – I can't really speak to it. But it would have been helpful if we'd had a giant hole in the roof, put it that way. I think the claim is that it's a fault in the roof and not anything that would be covered. But I can't really talk to that. They are pursuing litigation on that. But in order to put it back, they'd had to raise the –

RH: Because once a day, the insurance company has to deny someone totally –

MB: Someone, yeah.

RH: – and you were it this time.

MB: Yeah. So, they've had to raise the money to redo everything. And it was right before Rosh Hashanah. We had Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services next door at Jefferson Baptist. It was cleaned up in time that we could have the receptions here. It happened on a Friday night, early Saturday morning, and on Monday, the daycare opened. They kept it open. Volunteers went down there and bleached everything because they wanted to be able to open the daycare for people. So, they didn't miss a beat down there. People just worked all weekend. This is the social hall, and I can show you the sanctuary. Since just after High Holidays last year, we've had services here. We've had a number of b'nai mitzvahs, and none of the families – we've offered, in the beginning, especially – "We can do it at the Unitarian Church or a prettier location." No one has opted for that. They have stayed here. They said, "It's home." But before the first one that was held, Steve Winkler and Randy [Goldich?] – Randy's now in Colorado, but he came home for the bat mitzvah – came in on their own and covered the walls with muslin or drop cloths or something to make it a little better. But we've been functioning this way. But that was our own little hurricane damage two weeks after Katrina.

RH: So is this silver –? Is this supposed to have sheetrock against it?

MB: It's supposed to have sheetrock against it. All the sheetrock had to come down because it got wet. I guess once it gets wet, the whole thing has to come down. People in New Orleans know about that. We were lucky we didn't have a mold problem. You'll see there's theater seats in the sanctuary. They all had to be unbolted and moved in here so everything could be torn up in there, and then moved back and bolted in there. Some of them are starting to rust and stuff. But we're waiting to – hopefully, they'll be able to start the construction on the renovation; they're talking about February. So, we'll see.

RH: Well, let's go look at the sanctuary.

MB: The sanctuary. We'd better turn the lights on.

RH: Oh, my God.

MB: I'm showing the damage to some folks who are doing oral history interviews about Katrina … But these walls were taken down to the cinder block, like, and back there. Our sound system is car stereo speakers because we have a congregant who owns David's Car Stereo, so he rigged up a new sound system, which actually works great. But if you look at them, you can see they're car stereo speakers up in the ceiling. When the water was coming, it ended just before the ark. The bimah was just dry. This had been carpeted. That all came up.

RH: So the bimah was dry. It didn't come to –?

MB: Yeah, it was kind of encroaching. This was dry enough that they could leave that. But it had worked its way up. So, that was our own little –

RH: So, the plans that I see as I walk in are the new sanctuary.

MB: That's the new sanctuary.

RH: And they weren't planned before.

MB: No. No.

RH: This is, really –

MB: This was taking a –

RH: – a Rita addition.

MB: The idea was, "Well, if we have to redo it, let's not just …". Although there are some people who definitely said, "Oh, just put it back the way it was." But the leadership and most of the congregants felt – "Let's take the opportunity to think about it if we're going to have to redo it." So, they've been working with an architect, who's come up with some really, I think, beautiful plans. Because there's been no insurance, all the money has had to have been fundraised. So, the people who dug deep for Katrina had to dig deep – because they were keeping people and donating and everything, and then have dug deep again to do this. But it's moving along, and the hope is that in February, they're talking about starting the construction. And they say ninety days, which would be nice. But anybody who's done their kitchen knows –

RH: Yeah. That's a little optimistic.

MB: Yeah. But it's a very nice design, I think. So maybe something good will come out of it. But it's definitely added to the stress the past year.

RH: Did you get a lot of people in from Rita?

MB: No, we didn't get –

RH: – from outlying parishes?

MB: – a whole lot of – well, I don't know, in the general population how it was affected because the truth is that everything was still so – the infrastructure was still so stressed. We didn't get a lot of Jewish folks in. A few did come in, but they didn't stay long. They were able to kind of get back and start dealing with stuff. So they didn't stay the way some of our Katrina people have stayed.

RH: Well, they could get back –

MB: They could back.

RH: – to the areas.

MB: Yeah. I mean, it was a different kind of devastation. And I think most of them had damage, but their houses weren't totally destroyed or flooded. They had more typical damage from the hurricane.

RH: I have a friend who was doing some interviews for the Ms. Foundation, which is the magazine. They funded a lot of small, women-run organizations. They actually didn't ask any questions. They came down and funded very quickly, like for domestic violence and infrastructures that were destroyed.

MB: Destroyed. Yeah.

RH: There was a lot of trouble, evidently, in shelters, with people who couldn't leave their abusive partners, and violence in shelters and things.

MB: Yeah.

RH: So, this friend did these interviews, and she said she had someone who was on the intersection of Rita and Katrina. So she got hit both times.

MB: Both times?

RH: I think there were quite a few communities like that. There was another community – a Jewish man who's a theater person. He went around to –

MB: Frank Levy.

RH: Yeah. You know Frank?

MB: Yeah, I know Frank pretty well. He used to be a congregant. He's been here to do stuff.

RH: Because of the North Shore.

MB: Because of North Shore. Yeah.

RH: So I interviewed Frank.

MB: Oh. I imagine that was a really good interview. He's wonderful.

RH: He was in all the shelters, so he could describe what each shelter was like. He talked about this one shelter where everyone who had evacuated was from the same town. So, the shelter was like this town. He said it was so wonderful because it wasn't people who had been dropped in who never saw each other. One guy even somehow had his easy chair. They divided it up like the town. They told the FEMA and the Red Cross workers their food wasn't very good and told them what to buy, and they cooked. They cleaned this shelter.

MB: I mean, that's got to be empowering for people to sort of take care of themselves, too instead of being at other people's –

RH: Mercy.

MB: – mercy. That sounds like an ¬–

RH: And they set up –

MB: – unusually good experience.

RH: – the same babysitters, babysat.

MB: Babysat.

RH: Because they were there. I mean, he broke down and cried. Because he said, they could keep it off for a week or two, but everything they had was gone. Their town didn't exist anymore. So this was like the last time these people were –

MB: That they could be together?

RH: – going to be together. Yeah.

MB: Yeah. It's going to go on and on, the ripples in this. There were death tolls, but truly, there are people still dying from these hurricanes. I mean, we've seen it. We've seen elderly people who were doing fine in their homes because they had their social networks. That's just been disrupted. [They] have gone downhill because of it. I mean, it just is going to go on, and really change society around here.

RH: Right. I think so. Yeah.

MB: Yeah, we did that. We weren't able to do feeding programs or shelter work. I mean, we just didn't have the infrastructure. But we funded stuff like that. So, the Federation gave money to St. Vincent de Paul for its free pharmacy and shelter program, and the Federation of Churches and Synagogues, the YWCA, was doing a program working with HIV-positive people. Because everyone's resources were so stressed, and the infrastructure just was so stressed. So, we could at least fund some of this. We couldn't supply the actual programs. So were able to do that for a bigger community.

RH: Wow. As if you weren't doing enough.

MB: Well, that was from the money that Donna, basically, raised. We were able to try to support the larger community as best we could because everybody just did what they could do and more than they could do.

RH: Yeah, I think the domestic violence people are still – I think, they're coordinating from here.

MB: Yeah. I mean, that really –

RH: It's hard to believe all the layers when you lose a city of infrastructure.

MB: And to build up over time, and then you have to try to recreate it.

RH: I remember just hearing stories, and I'm like going, "Oh, yeah, you need that to run a city. Oh, yeah, you need that." And you just mentioned HIV, and it's like, oh, yeah, there's another community. So, it's just amazing. [RECORDING PAUSED] And you've got the bimah in the center?

MB: The bimah's in the center. It's actually a more traditional arrangement of –

RH: It reminds me a little of Beth Israel. They have that sunken area.

MB: Yeah, and then –

RH: It's kind of very contemporary --

MB: – we just took –yeah.

RH: – looking, even though – it's a gorgeous building –

MB: Yeah. Poor Beth Israel.

RH: If most of the synagogues have seventy and eighty percent – the Reforms – then the Orthodox and Conservative really took the hit in New Orleans. They really lost their members.

MB: My understanding is Beth Israel – it was an older congregation, in many ways.

RH: A hundred-and-forty-five years, something like that.

MB: Yeah. But I mean older demographically.

RH: Oh, yeah, age-wise. Right.

MB: It was interesting because only in New Orleans – when I do my first class, I'd ask people – they tell about themselves, where they belong, and I hear, "We belong to Beth Israel and Sinai." laughter] So only New Orleans, with its wonderful, sort of, tolerance – "I belong to the Reform congregation and the Orthodox congregation." Okay, that's good.

RH: Why not?

MB: Why not? It's good. "Because my grandfather …". Okay. I know the Gothards, too.

RH: Right. Jackie.

MB: Yeah, Jackie and Saul.

RH: Well, I almost, at one point, felt like Beth Israel was just a giant Gothard clan that was extending from – I know it's more than that because I went through, and I saw some of my friends in there. I called a friend of mine, (Alan Burstein?), and I said, "I think maybe a great uncle, who is the next president, his picture's water-stained and sitting up on the floor. You may want to go over and get it."

MB: But it's nice. Because, I mean, I guess they're still davening at Gates of Prayer. It's nice.

RH: And Anshe Sfard has –

MB: Anshe Sfard?

RH: – they're trying to make a minyan once a week there. This one man I talked to who he goes there to keep – to make the minyan. That's Bicycle Michael; he goes to the minyan.

MR: Good for him. What a mitzvah. That's really something.

RH: And he was at yeshiva when he was in Israel, so he's got quite an intellectual background in Judaism, but he doesn't really keep kosher.

MB: But he does make minyan.

RH: But he goes and makes minyan. So, there's also that kind of mix.

[END OF INTERVIEW]