# Jeffrey Kurtz-Lendner Transcript

Rabbi Kurtz-Lendner: -- waiting to see what the storm is actually going to do on Sunday, and then by Monday morning getting up and seeing that the storm had passed. And then I go, OK, how soon do we go back. And then, as we're watching the news during the day, waiting to see the damage report and we end up actually watching the levee break, watching the, you know, the helicopters trying to plug the 17th Street Canal, and we're all watching that on, I guess it was all Baton Rouge stations trying to survey the area because all of the New Orleans newscasters had been displaced. So they were from Baton Rouge trying to cover it and they didn't know the city very well. So they were saying, what is that what is -- it's interesting to see the breakdown in the media, which is what happened for a couple of days. Because the newscasters, themselves, had to evacuate. And then some of those news organizations were damaged, and they had to be operating out of New Orleans. But it really wasn't until a couple of days later that I was really able to get on the Internet. When I evacuated, I was at my in-laws' house, who have one phone line with no caller ID, no call waiting, no voice mail, so if you try to call you get a busy signal. There were nine of us living there and no computer. So I didn't -- I wasn't able to get on the Internet for a couple of days, but eventually I found a place through my -- my in-laws had some contacts of some people and I was able after a couple days to get on the computer, on high-speed Internet pretty regularly. Pretty much every day I was leaving the house in the morning and going and spending time on the computer, you know, trying to communicate with people through our Internet listserv. And trying to communicate -- see, our leadership, was mostly out of touch with the computers, also, so I couldn't get through to our president or to our vice president, to our treasurer, I couldn't get through to any of them. They had cell phones but the cell phones weren't working. The cell phones kept getting busy signals and all circuits are busy. So I was completely out of touch with our leadership, but very quickly, within a few days, I was

in touch with most of our congregation with the people who still maintained e-mail contacts because I was e-mailing out on the listserv. And if I was getting information, I was passing it out on the listserv.

Rosalind Hinton: So you had a Northshore listserv?

JL: We do. Yes.

RH: That was working? Were you kind of connecting at all with the Federation Listserv?

JL: Not at that time.

RH: OK.

JL: No. Not at the very beginning. I was really only connecting with our own congregants and with, very soon URJ, Union for Reform Judaism started contacting us and arranging conference calls and I think we had a conference call within about a week after that. Although, sometimes we were having conference calls and the Rabbis from New Orleans were all in Houston, so they were participating in the conference calls, but I was in Western Louisiana and the phones were still not working well from western -- I mean, you couldn't call 800 numbers. From Western Louisiana, you couldn't call a lot of 800 numbers. I couldn't get through to the conference calls because the phones in Western Louisiana kept getting "all circuits are busy." So, the Rabbis in Houston were able to connect because their phones were working fine. Just the landlines. I'm not talking about cell phones. I'm just talking about landlines. But the landline phones in Western Louisiana, I guess a lot of them were being switched through New Orleans, and the New Orleans/BellSouth hub was destroyed, so the phones in general were not working that well. I mean, I remember trying to call to get some of my prescriptions refilled and I couldn't get through to the pharmacy, the mail-order pharmacy, I couldn't get through on the phone number. And I was e-mailing them and they said, really, you need to call for this. And I said, but I can't call you. The phones aren't working. I went back

and forth with the pharmacy a few times and finally they said, I guess we have to get you your medication even though we can't talk to you.

RH: Yeah. You might want to recognize what's just happened down here.

JL: I was like e-mailing them, I can't call you. Can you help me with this issue? And they responded to that with you need to call us to address this. And I replied, I can't call you. The phones are not working. I can't call you, but I need my medication. And the response was again, we can't help you with this unless you call us. So finally, I sent a long e-mail saying, I'm almost out of medication. I'm in Western Louisiana. The phones are down. I live in the New Orleans area. New Orleans has been destroyed. You've got to get me my medication. And finally they sent me an email back that said, OK, we'll process it for you.

RH: Wow.

JL: It was a disaster.

RH: Wow.

JL: And just like little things like that. And they didn't have my home address so it never arrived. So I had to go back and forth again. And they said, well, we sent it to your home address, and I said, look in my e-mail records. I told you I'm not there and I told you where to send it. So it was hard for some of the major companies around the country to understand how to deal with it. They didn't know how to deal with it. You know, it wasn't affecting them directly and some of them didn't know at first how to deal with their customers who were going through it. And this was just a minor issue.

RH: Well, it's not minor when you need your meds.

JL: Yeah, but it wasn't life threatening. It was, you know, it wasn't a life threatening kind of thing.

RH: What happened -- I mean, you're on the North Shore. And what was going on that --

JL: Yes.

RH: And so how long were you away?

JL: We were the first congregation in the New Orleans area to have services. Our synagogue had services, not the Friday after the storm but the Friday after that. I think it was September 9.

RH: OK.

JL: Less than two weeks after the storm, our synagogue got power after about a week-and-a-half. Our Torahs had been fine. Our building lost -- we lost the roof, but all of the damage that the -- the overwhelming majority of the damage that occurred was on the roof and between the roof and the ceiling but not in the building. So we were able to get back into our building once power went back on. My own house had a tree on the roof, but it didn't break through the roof and the damage that was caused was over the attic. So our living area was fine. I got power in my house after three weeks. I started commuting back in from Western Louisiana after about a week to start trying to see what we could do, start organizing, preparing for the re-opening of the building and just, you know, getting the phone service working. Things like that. I actually tried to spend one night at home thinking -- I had to be there one day and it was a three-hour drive each way, so with the extra traffic -- it's normally about a two-hour drive but I was driving about three hours each way and I said, you know, I'm just not driving six hours. I'm going to spend the night in my house. It was so hot that I probably got maybe two to three hours of sleep. And I said, I'm not doing this again until the power comes back on. For food,

there were no restaurants opened, but Domino's had opened with their little carts like they have at football games, so Domino's was the only food in town. You could actually get a pizza from one of their carts. So, you'd have to make sure when you go that you had enough gas. Your gas tank was filled because if you drove into town and you had a problem, the cell phones weren't working, the phone lines were down -- if you had a problem, you were stuck. I mean, the real risk -- so always when I got into Baton Rouge, I made sure my tank was full, and I made sure I had water and food just in case Domino's ran out of pizza or whatever. But, you know, if I had had a breakdown, I would have been in trouble. I wouldn't have been able to call anyone. But, so after three weeks, the power went on and we moved home after three weeks. You know, I have two young children, so we weren't going to move home before the power was on. We were in my in-laws who had full power and everything else. And my kids started going to school, there, just to keep them from going stir crazy every day. It's fun to go to your grandparent's house for a few days, but if you're going to be there for weeks on end with nothing to do -- so we started sending them to school for a few weeks. But my younger daughter's school opened after three weeks, also. She was in a private school. But we -- yeah.

RH: So when you were in -- when you first came in -- the synagogue is in Mandeville?

JL: Yes.

RH: OK. And your home is in Mandeville also?

JL: In Mandeville, right.

RH: And so it was the Mandeville area that had this one Domino's pizza, this guy with the cart? And so --

JL: I think all around.

RH: All around the North Shore?

JL: Yeah. I think the Domino's pretty much opened quickly because people really started coming back soon. They wanted to start getting into their homes and fix what they could and getting trees removed. I mean, we came back after a week just to survey, we came in for a day, my wife and I came back for a day after a week to see -- and we finally heard that enough of the roads were open that we could get into our neighborhood. They had cleared enough trees off of it. So we got home and we looked and that's -- we wanted to see our house. And that's when we saw that the damage to our own house was minimal. Which, we were lucky because there were a lot of houses around us with trees all the way into the homes. I mean, I had heard of houses that got split in two by trees that fell right down the middle. I mean, really tremendous amounts of damage. The damage we had on the North Shore was primarily from fallen trees, although there are people like the one person I mentioned to you, our religious school director, whose home flooded because she lived in Slidell and they had storm surge there. I had several congregants who lived on the lakefront in Mandeville and for the first half a mile north of the lake completely flooded. So I had several congregants whose homes flooded, but not from levee breaks. That was from storm surge. And the biggest challenge that we faced on the North Shore was the real economic disaster because the economy on the North Shore has been directly tied to the economy of New Orleans. Our people working in New Orleans. It's a bedroom community. You know, before the storm, 30,000 cars every day traveled across the bridge. Now it's 40,000 cars every day because so many people from New Orleans have moved out to the North Shore. But, you know, my president, his business, he has a law firm, and for six months he had no income. He couldn't even get into his office for months. And once he could, there was no work he could do because the courts were all closed so if you don't have your plaintiffs, and if you do have your plaintiffs you can't find your defendants, and then if you do have both the plaintiffs and defendants, then the courts are closed and nothing is happening. My first vice president last year lost his business. He was in a mortgage

business in New Orleans. My second vice president, a tree landed on her house. My treasurer lost his New Orleans business during Katrina. He had another business in Lafayette -- well, south of Lafayette -- and that business got destroyed in Rita. That was my treasurer. Now, my corresponding secretary went to her house a week after the storm to start cleaning up, tripped on a log and broke her leg. Another board member, her house was in Slidell and her house was severely damaged in the storm and her father-in-law's house was completely washed away. And this was my leadership. So it was a real disaster in terms of what our leadership was facing. A lot of congregants were displaced all over. A lot of people all over. A lot of people in Dallas. A lot of people in Houston. A lot of people were just away, you know, for the first several weeks, and when they came back, you still have people who are still trying to recover economically. We're clearly not in the same position we are now as we were a year ago. Our recovery has gone pretty well, and I think by and large, the overwhelming majority of our congregants are in post-recovery mode. I still have a couple of congregants who are trying to catch up from their losses from last year, but I really don't have anyone who is in the crisis that they were last year. Unlike here in New Orleans, where some of these crises are ongoing. I think we're past that. You know, we had a case where some of my biggest donors last year were taking tzedakah because last year they had no income. Their businesses were closed. They lost money. Their homes were damaged. And so we were really handing out money to people in desperate need last year. But, the overwhelming majority of the people who took tzedakah last year are once again making enough money to actually be making donations again and paying their dues. And we really don't have anyone anymore who is in that kind of -- it was really a one-year kind of problem for most of our people.

RH: Tell me about that first Sabbath on --

JL: Yeah. It was on September 9. It was -- you know, before -- when we announced it, we were going to have services in the parking lot because we didn't know if the building

was structurally sound.

RH: And how did you announce it? E-mail?

JL: E-mail. That was it. Just e-mail. There was no other way. You know, you didn't know who was there. I didn't have a membership list with me. I mean, you know, like I said, I had gone out of town. I thought I was going out of town and coming back. I didn't know I was going out of town and then coming back to a hurricane. So, really through e-mail and then I guess some people knew who was around and some word of mouth and I came in shorts because I couldn't get -- I think my clothes were still at the dry cleaners or something. I don't remember what the -- my suits were all at the dry cleaners because I -- I don't remember what it was but I came in shorts. I called it refugee Shabbat. And we all sat around and I pulled a chair down and I was sitting in my shorts and I said, tonight, it's not that I'm your Rabbi and you're my congregants, we're all refugees. It's refugee Shabbat. So, it was a very cathartic experience where we came together and prayed together and began healing together and coming together and it was a real nice sense of community. We only had about 20, 25 people there. But still so many people were away and so many people didn't know we were having services because it was still hard to communicate with a lot of people. But it was definitely a very --

RH: Did you have your prayer books?

JL: Oh yes. Really, the inside of our synagogue was not damaged that much. The roof was, but the contents were fine. You know, the books were fine. We had to do some clean up. The Torahs, of course, were fine. The Ark was fine. The bimah was fine. The sanctuary was fine. You know, we had one hallway that got a lot of water damage and we had to clean that out, but we had the air conditioning people came in and started sucking out all of the water and used these big machines to suck out the water that had gotten in the walls and these big dehumidifying machines to suck it out of the carpets and all that. So, you know, we just had a lost roof, but again, we had the ceiling. So it was

not that you would look up and see sky because there was -- the ceiling was intact. So the ceiling was damaged but, you know, there was that space in between the ceiling and the roof.

RH: So did the congregants -- did any of them say anything about this first service? Did they comment on anything within the service that you remember that --

JL: I don't remember it very well.

RH: It's a blur.

JL: I remember us being together and having a community. I remember the power that we felt and the sense of community that this was an assertion by our community in recovery and it -- I remember it absolutely felt wonderful for all of us to be there. But I don't remember comments at this point. You know, I don't remember anybody saying anything specifically.

RH: Tell me what it's like to serve a community that's been economically displaced, physically displaced, emotionally --

JL: I spent a lot of my time, especially because we're a synagogue that -- last year, we don't have an administrator. We're a real small operation. It was a near full-time Rabbi and a part-time secretary and then everything else is run by volunteers. So, you know, the good thing is we were getting a lot of donations in last year. We got a lot of money that came in. We got a lot of gift cards that came in. And I spent a tremendous amount of my time distributing it. I mean, literally, taking the money, making deposits, writing checks, distributing checks, writing thank you notes to the donors, I mean, I spent a huge amount of my time doing that. I mean, you get a few checks in during the day and you really want to get that money out to people immediately because when people are in crisis they need money. That's what people needed last year. They didn't need the shelter. Most people -- I would say probably 90 percent of our congregants did not have

home damage. Of the people who did, their homes were livable. I only had maybe a handful of families who couldn't live in their homes, but the economic crisis was devastating. So people needed money. So I spent a lot of my time making deposits, writing thank you notes, and writing checks to people and getting those checks to people and sometimes I would go around and just drive to people's homes getting -- knowing who the people were in crisis, I drove to their homes. I didn't even want to wait a day to even try to mail it. Forget the mail. Mails were taking two weeks. I certainly wasn't going to mail it. But sometimes I would just go around and drive and I would bring checks to people's homes so they could have some money. I know some people who really had no reserves and lost business, so they were in real economic crisis. And, you know, sometimes that's what I did and sometimes, depending on -- I spent a lot of my time on that.

RH: And did you, intentionally, try to fundraise or was this just things that started to flow in?

JL: It was both. At first money started to flow and then most of it was communicated. Like, I didn't have the relationship that some of my colleagues did because I had just been admitted to the Reform movement, so I -- it's not -- I hadn't graduated with a lot of my colleagues in the Reform movement so I didn't know them. So, some of my colleagues here were able to contact their classmates and say we need some help. So some were able to go out and fundraise in synagogues. I didn't have that ability. So most of my fundraising was more lobbying. Contacting some of the organizations, contacting URJ, telling them what our needs were. I had spoken to Macy at the ISJL and he linked us up with a couple of congregations in particular. We got some random -- I sent out a lot of e-mails -- I sent out a lot of e-mails to everyone I could think of saying we need help and then those people forward on -- every so often the right person would get it and we would get some money. We pulled in, I know, I was not involved in fundraising for the synagogue. Our leadership was. And I know they pulled in a lot of money for

that. But I have been out of the loop. I don't know what -- I couldn't tell you dollar amounts on that. I can tell you that I probably distributed about $50,000 last year in financial help to people. Between gift cards which came in and donations, you know, when I got, you know, if I got a check for $10,000, it was gone within two days. I had written checks for $200, $500 -- some people I knew were real desperate. I would write them a check for $1,000. Other people I knew needed a little bit to tide them over, $200. And so I was just writing -- that was what I was spending my time doing.

RH: How did you get people who were so used to giving to take? What was that --

JL: Yeah, it was interesting. I'll tell you how it happened. Because, I would call someone and say, how are you. I'm fine. I'm having a little trouble. I'm fine. Don't need anything. But I need you to call this person because they're in real trouble. They really need the money and here's what they need and why. So I would find out that someone would really be in real economic crisis from that phone call. So then when I'd call them and tell them, is this what is going on, they'd say, yes, Rabbi, that's what is going on. And they'd say, by the way, have you heard about this other person. It was like -- but I didn't tell them, that's the one that I just got off the phone with who said they were fine, but they weren't. So the way I found out who needed money, it's not that people were coming forward, but that people were telling me about others. And people were finking on each other. They need money. They need money. And so that's how I knew who was having real trouble. And eventually, after giving some money, sometimes people would then open up and say what they really needed. Once I've already given them a check, then they would come out and say -- well, I did have a couple of people who were direct enough to say, you know, Rabbi, if you've got any money I could use some. I did have a few people in that situation. And it was hard for them. I could see they were embarrassed. And they only had to ask once. Once they asked, they were on my list. Once someone said they needed money, I put them on my list and then they'd be a regular recipient until they said I'm doing fine.

RH: OK, so a regular recipient is --

JL: Someone who I knew needed money. So anytime I would get money, they would be on my -- I created a distribution list of people who I knew needed help. And then, you know, when I got money in, I would give it out. And every so often I would hear of a new person so when I would hear of a new person who needed money, they would go on the top of my distribution list to make sure they got something and then I prioritized by need. You know, I had some people who I knew had reserves. They needed a little bit of help to make payments here and there, but they weren't in crisis. I had other people who had no reserves and who were really -- I had one person in particular who was running the risk of being homeless with her 12-year-old daughter. So she was one of my top people and I gave her several $1,000 checks. Just so that she could pay her rent and not be thrown out on the street.

RH: How did you -- you know, that's a very different story than any type of a means test that often came to people.

JL: Right.

RH: And how do you work that out intellectually, about what you were going to give to people?

JL: I didn't. If they were in need, you know, I didn't do any -- look. I referred them to all of the proper agencies. But, you know, I was their Rabbi. I wasn't about to give them a means test. I wasn't about to tell them to document their income to me and document this and document that. If I knew that someone, you know, when I heard about the story of this woman that I was telling you about a few minutes ago and you know her house flooded and she went back to try to reclaim some possessions and it was a rented house and she couldn't get into her house because when she pulled up there, the looters were in there. So she couldn't get into her house because they were looting it. And she knew

it was dangerous. So she waited until they were finished and then she reclaimed what she could and then she stayed with a friend and another friend. Not only had she had no money to begin with, she had no reserves. She couldn't -- she was not wealthy to begin with. She lost her job, so she had no income. So that was means test. You know, if people said they needed help, and I knew. And there were other people who I called who I had heard they were having trouble and when I called them, they just never said I need money, so I didn't give it to them. Because I wasn't -- they said, we're fine, Rabbi. Now, most people, once I heard they were having trouble and I said, are you really having trouble, and they said, yes, I am facing those things. Then I would give them money. Another woman in our community, she had gone through most of her retirement savings a couple of years ago while her daughter was dying of cancer. And she had lived out in west -- in Colorado or something -- and lived in a hotel for two years and went through. So she had no money left. OK. Then, while she's in her house, four trees had fallen on her house and four more trees were threatening to fall. And the insurance company would not pay for the trees that were threatening to fall until they actually fell. But, if she didn't take down trees that were threatening to fall, the insurance companies wouldn't pay for damage from trees that she could have had taken down. So she ended up paying $8,000 to remove four trees because the insurance company wouldn't pay it. And if she didn't take them down, then they wouldn't pay for the damage that they caused because she hadn't mitigated, prevented that problem. So that was money she didn't have. So she became someone who, based on her situation, you know, I kind of had to do that kind of assessment. Certainly I referred people to the agencies, to the Jewish Family Service, and they went through their own processes. But when I'm only looking at a congregation of about only 120 families, you know, and I know the people and I know every name on my congregant list and I know every single person and people are telling me about what's going on, I decided that -- and, on top of it, the money that was given was made as a donation to my discretionary fund and legally I have a free hand in my discretionary fund as long as it's for the right purpose. So all I did was document in my

files who I was giving money to and for what purpose and the fact that I -- look, is there someone who might have had $100,000 in the bank that was just poor-mouthing and I didn't know it? Yeah, it's possible. But, I just wasn't in a position to tell my congregants who were telling me that they were in need: prove it. That wasn't my role as a Rabbi. So, I just gave to people using my best judgment.

RH: How else was your role as a Rabbi? How did it change from your normal --

JL: Well, we certainly didn't do the kinds of the regular programming that we used to do last year. Partly is that I was so exhausted with worrying about the well-being of my congregants, as well as spending extra time in communication and wrapped up in things that I didn't normally do, plus we didn't have the money for it. So we didn't have any of the kinds of -- we had Friday night services, we had our religious school, but we didn't have any of the kind of creative programming last year that we've done in previous years and that we have again this year. That's probably where the toll of the hurricane demonstrated itself on myself. Not only did we not have the money, and not only, I think, would it have been hard to do regular programming during a crisis year, I don't think people would have felt comfortable with it, but I just didn't have the energy in me to be able to create it. I was really exhausted from the stress of worrying about, are people going to -- is this person going to be on the street? I need more money to help this person. You know, that kind of thing. Plus, people would call me and tell me what was going on. People would tell me. And one woman was already in a custody battle before the hurricane. Her house was destroyed. She was ended up living in a houseboat and the father was able to get sole custody of the kids because the mom couldn't provide a stable living environment because her house was destroyed in the hurricane and she had to go live in a houseboat. And so he was able to get sole custody from that. And I knew that he was kind of a rotten person. So, here, how someone could use the hurricane against a victim and then use it against the victim a second time, you know, it was just outrageous. But you know there was nothing I could do about that. That's the legal

system.  You know -- so, and people would tell me these stories and there's nothing they can do.  And, you know, the congregant whose, you know, they had to sleep on their -- their house was flooded so they had to sleep on the floor in their store, including with the kid for a couple of nights, and then eventually they got the kid into a relative's house but the house was too small so the kid was sleeping with her brother but not -- but she and her husband were not with the kid because there was not enough room.  So here you had a separated family because they had nowhere -- you know, when you have these kinds of stories, it's a challenge.  And then you have another family where the house was destroyed -- severely damaged -- and the father-in-law's house was destroyed.  So they all started living in another house in Baton Rouge, but then the family wasn't going along so then you had like a divorce situation happening because the woman couldn't live with her father-in-law and so she moved out and fortunately that situation reconciled and that ended up working out OK but I'm saying that the stress and strain that it put on people.  Plus, I did more funerals last year than I had ever done before.

RH:  Really?

JL:  That was very common.  Every Rabbi will tell you that.  And every clergy will tell you that.  Not only are we talking about suicides, which has been way up in the New Orleans area, but old people just dying.  And even people who aren't old, people who are in their 50s and 60s just having heart attacks from the stress.

RH:  What was -- do you know the numbers on that?

JL:  No.

RH:  In your own congregation?

JL:  No.  I only had one death in my congregation, but I did funerals for people who are more on the periphery of the congregation.

RH: Oh.

JL: I did six funerals last year, which was -- you know, I've never done six funerals in a year because my congregation is so small, but every Rabbi will tell you that they did far more funerals last year than they ever did before and every other clergy will tell you the same thing. I mean, the death rate was just very high. A lot of old people that were dying and breaking down from it, suicides, all those kinds of -- ask anybody -- I don't have statistics. But I saw some articles on statistics in the newspaper a few months back, and I didn't save them about the death rate. The post-Katrina death rate is much higher than normal.

RH: What -- let me think here. Spiritually, how did you -- how did you -- how did you support your community?

JL: I think we tried to just maintain the community. I think we tried to create a sense of normalcy as best as we could. We had services every Friday night. Sometimes frequently addressing Katrina in the course of the service. Sometimes not. Having our religious school and creating stability in welcoming displaced congregants -- you know, people from New Orleans, some of them resettled on the North Shore at least temporarily. We welcomed families into our congregation without charging them dues, giving them full membership benefits without charging them dues. Some of those families have since decided to settle permanently on the North Shore and have now joined. One family in particular, I just did a baby-naming for them, for their children, yesterday. But they -- they moved up there and we gave them full membership and full -- you know, full religious school, and just welcomed them for nothing. And then they both got new jobs. They're both attorneys but they had trouble last year, but they just bought a house. And they're now members making donations to the synagogue. So that was a case where we were able to help them. In fact, they didn't want any money. I offered them money and they were a family that -- that, that -- they said, no, we don't need any

money. When we did get some gift cards, they took a few gift cards. Sometimes it was easier for people to take Wal-Mart gift cards than to take a check. So, but, you know, we tried to create an absolute sense of normalcy for our children. We were able to use, you know, in the religious use -- we were able to use some of the donations that came in to make like that Hanukkah party last year. So --

RH: Can you tell me a little about the Hanukkah party?

JL: Yeah, we just -- we had all these toys donated from out of town and we got, I think it was $1,000. We hired a band. The Panorama Jazz Band, they play Klezmer music. So we hired a Klezmer band and we paid for all of the food and we had the whole thing. All of the food was paid for. And we could have a free Hanukkah party and gift distribution for our children, which is something that we couldn't have done -- we didn't have the finances to support that because very few people were paying dues last year. So many people had so many other economic challenges, whether their business was down or they lost their business or they lost their job or they lost their house or their house was damaged -- there were a lot of people who didn't pay dues last year. So, our economics were strained. We did get a lot of support from around the country. A lot of donations. In addition to the $50,000 I told you I distributed, that was probably in both cash and gift cards, but we also got donations right into the congregational's operational budget. And that helped us pay our bills. That -- we didn't make money off of that. We couldn't do our fundraiser last year, so between lost dues and no fundraiser, we broke even without doing the kinds of special programs that we would have done in the past. And I'll bet we got -- I think we got four months of salaries from URJ and I think we got two months from UJC and then we got, like that Hanukkah party that we did. And then we got a donation that let us do a back-to-school party in the fall, where we had havdalah -- and all of these kinds of things just weren't in our budget anymore. We were a congregation that had a very bare bones budget to begin with. Pay the Rabbi. Pay the secretary. And pay the utilities. That's it. No -- no -- all of our teachers are volunteers. Our religious school

teachers are volunteers.  Our religious school director is a volunteer.  Our cantors are volunteers.  So we didn't have anywhere to cut.  So it's not like we could say, all right, we're going to cut some programs out of our budget this year.  We didn't have any programs to cut.  Everything is volunteer-run.  So those donations from around the country made a big difference and then, you know, we just tried to be the community for them.  We did -- actually, last year, we did our first ever adult b'not mitzvah class.  We had four women who wanted to do an adult bat mitzvah and we actually went through -- we had that program.

RH:  Really?

JL:  Yeah.  That was a first ever in our congregation.  And that was the year of the hurricane.  So that was something normal and new that we did that didn't cost anything. You know, for the Rabbi to teach some women how to chant from the Torah, that didn't cost anything.

RH:  So they met regularly?

JL:  Yeah, we met monthly.  It was a monthly -- and we had our confirmation.  We only had one bat mitzvah last year.  That was just the demographics.  That had nothing to do with the hurricane.  Hurricane or no, we were only going to have one last year.  This year we're up to five again.  Next year I think we have four.  But we're a small congregation. We've never going to have twenty or thirty bar or bat mitzvahs in our synagogue in any year.  We usually have about six and last year we had one.  But that was very nice having that bat mitzvah.  But that was also not at the end of the year. That was in May.

RH:  Let's take a break for a minute.

JL:  OK.

**END OF PART ONE**

RH: I am with Rabbi Jeffrey Kurtz-Lendner. Lendner. Right? I was saying that I had done another interview with one of your congregants, Frank Levy, and he was very grateful to you for a number of things. One was connecting him to work and another was some supplies that came in. And if you want to talk a little about that.

JL: Yeah. One of our congregants, who spent half of his time in Boston anyway was up in Boston during the hurricane and he arranged with a lot of his business contacts to get some serious donations. And they sent down some generators and chainsaws and then just a whole truck-full of other supplies. And it was -- you know, it was remarkable that sense of giving from around the country. And you know, between that and every so often I'd get an envelope filled with some gift cards and people were just -- whether it be $100 in gift cards or $200 -- I had a congregation up in Washington that sent us $10,000 in cash and $5,000 in gift cards all in one package. You know, it was a very large wealthy congregation. I had another couple congregations send us anywhere from two to five thousand dollars and tens of thousands from URJ, both in terms of money for our operation and money to help our congregants and gift cards that they collected. And, you know, it was nice to be able to know that the community around the country really came through for us. If it hadn't been for that kind of support, the congregation wouldn't be open now.

RH: The -- Frank said, and his wife commented too, that just being relieved of the sense of isolation was very important.

JL: Well, I think that's one of the main things we were able to do by providing a sense of community, a place to go to, a place to be with other people, who first of all understood because everybody was in a sense of crisis. But, it didn't feel like crisis when we came to

the synagogue. It felt like comfort. It felt like, OK. Life is normal. You know, there are points of normalcy. And this may not be a normal year and our lives may not be normal but we can come back together and be in our synagogue and be with the familiar comfort of the prayers that we chant with our community and the Oneg Shabbat every week when we have a chance to eat and relax. And I think that that's really what the congregation provided, that sense of community and normalcy during a time of crisis. Once we got through the initial shock and the initial devastation, which lasted a while. I mean, the -- you know, probably by the end of September I was back. But it was well until January before we felt any sense of maybe relief from the devastation. And even the rest of the year was still a difficult year.

RH: What did you do for the High Holidays?

JL: Well, we were the only congregation in the New Orleans area that had our complete, full set of High Holiday services. We had every service. Our Rosh Hashanah Eve. Our Rosh Hashanah morning. Our second day Rosh Hashanah. Our Tashlich. Our Erev Yom Kippur. The whole set. And it was interesting because we had, in our congregation, not only our own congregants. We had evacuees, who, by this point it was a month later, so they knew they couldn't get back into New Orleans so a lot of people were moved into temporary places on the North Shore since it was a stable environment where -- you know, other than the people whose homes were damaged, it was a very livable area. We didn't have the kind of devastation that they had here in the city. And so we had a lot of evacuees among us. We had Red Cross volunteers. We had FEMA workers. We had National Guard people. We had several people. They came from -- they were stationed in New Orleans, and since we were the only synagogue with a full set of services they came to us. So, it was great having people in uniform and not only the National -- the Jewish people from the National Guard, but when they came they had to be accompanied by their -- someone from the chaplaincy and commanding officer -- you had people who were just coming with them who weren't even Jewish. And it was

really a great sense of community. It was a wonderful feeling where, you know, at that point I announced, we are not -- right now we are not evacuees and volunteers and victims and, you know, we're all just Jews. Right now, we are all just Jews having Rosh Hashanah together. A lot of you have come down to help us and now right now we are helping you by providing you a spiritual home during Rosh Hashanah. Because otherwise they would have been down just doing their jobs without the opportunity to have Rosh Hashanah. So we had a real full house for the High Holidays last year. And we had our MREs, so we made jokes about -- during Yom Kippur saying how much we -- on Yom Kippur, we would even like an MRE right now. Before that, no one had ever heard the term MRE, no one knew what it was.

RH: So did you have a break fast of MREs or you were able to move beyond that--

JL: That was a joke. That was one of the jokes. We said, OK, we're having our community break fast. Everyone bring your extra MREs. At one point I asked one of the National Guard's people, you know, we've had this problem because we had Katrina this year. The year before we missed Rosh Hashanah because of Ivan, because we had to evacuate, so Ivan ended up not hitting but we'd all evacuated and no one in New Orleans had Rosh Hashanah in New Orleans the year before. So I said, I understand it is hurricane season, but is there any way -- I asked one of the people in the National Guard -- is there any way we can adjust hurricane season so it doesn't conflict with Rosh Hashanah every year? And he goes, that one's out of my chain of command. So that was some welcome relief during the service. That was just a light moment that I can remember during the service.

RH: Did anybody ask you about prayer? How to talk to God? How to ask --

JL: People did ask how could God let this happen and my response was that if we come into the synagogue asking the question, how can God let this happen, I don't think we're going to get a satisfying answer. I said, rather what we need to do when we come into

the synagogue is how can God help us get us through this. And I think that's -- the answer -- the power of prayer and the power of the relationship with God was not about trying to figure out why this devastation happened but how can it help -- how can God help us through this during this time of crisis. We -- in fact, that very first Shabbat service on September 9, on my way in, one of my Conservative colleagues called me thinking about me and commented on one of the Psalms in the Friday night service talks. About -- in the regular Friday night service, the Kabbalat Shabbat service talks about the wind blowing and the trees breaking and the floods. And it talks about all of this. I think it's Psalm 19 or 29. I always forget. I always get it wrong. It's either -- I think it's -- maybe Psalm 29. But it's part of the regular Friday night service. And he said, I'm having real trouble with that Psalm this week. Interesting in a Conservative synagogue they do it every week. We never do it. But it got me to think about it. And so I decided during services that night, we read that Psalm and we read it twice. The first time I read it through and it was emotionally upsetting because it was talking about God breaking the trees and the trees falling and the winds blowing and the floods and God was there at the flood. But I re-read it where I said, let's re-read this. It's not that God caused these. It's that during all these activities, during all these events, during all these tragedies, God was there to help us through. God was not absent. It's not a question of being abandoned by God. It's that God is there to help us through this. And I think that that was a good experience for us, to help look at that Psalm that way and think about the fact that that's what the power of the community is. It's not about coming to this synagogue and blaming God. It's about coming to this synagogue to find God to help us through it.

RH: What has being Jewish meant to you during this experience?

JL: I think, by far, more than anything it represented the power of the Jewish community to come together. You know, there was a mission. The Union for Reform Judaism and the Central Conference of American Rabbis put a mission together last April to visit and tour the New Orleans community. And the year before, I had been on a mission with the

United Jewish Communities of Rabbis visiting Ukraine. You know, American Jews don't receive missions. We go on missions. We go on missions to Israel and missions to Ukraine and missions to the former Soviet Union and missions to Ethiopia to visit Jewish communities in need. And all of a sudden here we were, an American Jewish community on the receiving end of a mission of people coming to visit us in need. And at that, I said, you know, the difference between these kinds of missions -- this is when I spoke to that mission because we were on a bus and I had a chance to speak to them -- I said, you know -- and several of the people on the mission I had known. They were colleagues who I had known from other -- it's not like they were meeting some stranger for the first time. We'd been together as colleagues at conferences together. And so I said the difference between this kind of a mission and those other kinds of missions that so many of us have been on -- you know, I shared my experience of going to Ukraine. I related to them the missions that they'd been on to Israel. The difference is that we are you. There is no difference because one day you might be in California and have a devastating earthquake or you might be in Texas or Kansas and have a devastating tornado come through your community. You could be in the Northeast and have an absolutely horrendous blizzard come through your community and devastate. Any one of these American Jewish communities could have a natural disaster. It could happen. And the difference is that we are just you. And I said, you know, and if that happens to you, I'll be there. You know, I'll be there to visit your community. And that really -- that's what it meant to me. Really knowing all of the Jewish community taking care of us and the Jewish Federation really being at the forefront. I got up at services and one of -- it was during Rosh Hashanah that I helped some people come to me and asked for money because I got up there and I said, if you are in need, don't be afraid to ask for your money. That's what it's here for. And I announced, I said, I got my money from FEMA. I got my $2,000 check from FEMA and I cashed it. I got my money from the Red Cross and I cashed it. You know, I got my money from the Jewish Federation. Every Jewish adult was entitled to $700 from the Jewish Federation of New Orleans through the Jewish

Family Services. I said, I took that money and I told them -- and I told you, I said, look, you know I have this job here as your Rabbi but do you know how much damage I had at my house that was not covered by insurance? I said, do you know that I used to -- I was teaching at the New Orleans Jewish Day School and I lost that job this year because it's closed. I need that money. You need the money. And I said that because I wanted to model for them that it's OK to ask for money if you need it. It's OK to receive the tzedakah to help you get through this year. You know? And I only needed it one year. That's what tzedakah is supposed to be. Tzedakah is hopefully, in an ideal world, tzedakah is to help someone in need to bridge the gap between when they're OK and when they'll be OK again. And, you know, if it hadn't been for all of this support, if it hadn't been for the FEMA money, if it hadn't been for the Red Cross money, if it hadn't been for the Jewish Federation money, I would have had a real economic problem last year because, you know, that's thousands and thousands of dollars that I lost. And I don't know what I would have done. I would have had some unpaid -- I would have had more debt is what I'd have. I probably would have had all this money in credit card debt that I would be owing the credit card companies. And this money helped me get through that. And I encouraged every single person in that room who has had any kind of economic loss to go ask for the money that's being provided to help you through this time. Don't be embarrassed. That's what it's there for. Don't be shy. That's what it's there for. And, you know, being Jewish helped us, you know, the Jewish money came in that helped every one of us. The money from the Jewish Federation the Jewish Family Services distributed. The money that came into my account from the Jewish communities around the country that I was able to write checks to people. All of that made a difference for people to be able to help them get through that time of crisis. And that's what being Jewish was. It's about all the help that came to us from around the country that helped us survive that crisis.

RH: If you were going to explain, to teach a class, teach the kids that you teach about giving, what would be some of the lessons that you've learned as a receiver about

giving?

JL: Let's come back to that. I'm having trouble with that one right now.

RH: OK.

JL: So let's come back to that.

RH: All right. OK. Has any -- your relationship with the Jewish community changed in any way? Has your Jewish identity changed in any way in this past year?

JL: No. No. I mean -- no. My role as a Rabbi changed, but certainly not my identity in the Jewish community. It was interesting because, you know, in Rabbinical school, among all of the practical rabbinics classes we had -- one was on serving. One was like a pastoral counseling class. And one two-hour session during my five years of Rabbinical school was on managing catastrophes. And I remember when I took that class, I, and I think everyone else, we all felt like, you know, it's good to have this class but what kind of catastrophe are we ever going to go through. Catastrophe was defined as a crisis in which the needs of the community outstrip the ability of the infrastructure to be able to address it. That was the definition. There was a clinical definition of catastrophe. I guess 9/11 would be a catastrophe. The hurricane here in New Orleans, where the needs have overwhelmed the ability to keep up. You know, a house fire is not a catastrophe. It may be a tragedy if there is death or injury, but it's not a catastrophe. That's what the fire department is for. But a catastrophe is when -- that's when you have to pull in the Red Cross and all these people to help. And I was thinking to myself, this -- and I remember thinking back in that class how I'm sure I'm never going to go through a catastrophe, and yet, here it was. And unfortunately I couldn't remember most of what was taught during that class. I just remember that session. But I think that, you know, it was hard for me to, at first, to get into that role as community leader during the catastrophe because I also was overwhelmed and in shock. The first few days I was

probably in need of help as much as anyone else and I wasn't in a position to offer that kind of help. I remember my president called me like two days after the hurricane. It was the one time for weeks that we were able to connect and I remember neither one of us had a clue of what was going to be happening. And I think he was looking to me for some leadership and I was in shock and I'm like, I don't know what we are going to do. And we didn't get anywhere in that conversation. And then, you know, then I couldn't talk to him. As days went on, I started communicating with people and started talking to URJ. I couldn't get a hold of him so we couldn't develop a plan together, you know, until he was able -- he came back, I guess, about three or four weeks later and then we could actually talk again. But I remember we had no plan on how to address the future and I started operating independently without able to connect to my leadership. And I used URJ as a guide at that point for how to try to help manage that. But I was absolutely unprepared to how to address these kinds of needs.

RH: What type of help did URJ give particularly to you -- ?

JL: They assigned people to us. They assigned staff people, you know, to call in and check regularly. And then I would call people to talk about issues with them. Or they would call me to see how we're doing.

RH: So were they -- were they crisis managers? Were they psychiatrists?

JL: I don't think -- no, no, they were all staff.

RH: Staff.

JL: They were all staff, you know, Rabbis. You know, they had several Rabbis who were assigned to oversee different aspects of the Katrina needs. The -- Rabbi Hirsch is the director of -- I think Rabbi Hirsch is the director of regions at URJ. And then Rabbi Hornsten is the director of, like social action at URJ [sic]. And so these people would call me. They have someone who's like a director of Rabbinic services. No, that's from the

CCAR. And so she was -- several people were assigned to check in on me from time to time.

RH: Was that helpful?

JL: Yeah, it was, absolutely. Knowing that we really felt that we weren't alone. You know, felt like there were people out there to give us the support we need to help us get through it. The conference calls among the Rabbis were definitely helpful, where we all would talk together. And then the Rabbis, we all came together on a regular basis. The New Orleans Rabbis came together on a regular basis to, you know, to talk about how things were going.

RH: Was that all the Rabbis or the Reform Rabbis --

JL: Both.

RH: Both. And, so, what kind of information was shared at those kinds of meetings, if you can remember.

JL: I don't think it was really a sharing of information as much as almost a support group, of how we're getting through it and how we're serving and discussing what's happening in some of our congregants lives and how we're dealing with it. And that kind of -- it wasn't really a sharing of information per se.

RH: What -- have there been any rituals or observances that have become particularly meaningful to you over the past year?

JL: Well, the story of Noah becomes good fodder for good sermons now, with the flood.

RH: And how have you used that?

JL: Well, just as metaphors for Katrina recovery. I mean, I think I've used it twice now. And actually, the first time I used it was not actually -- not during the weekly reading of Noah but I just decided to use it for Rosh Hashanah evening the year right after Katrina. I used it as a metaphor.

RH: Just this past year?

JL: No, no, the year before.

RH: Oh.

JL: Like the first --

RH: The first.

JL: -- Rosh Hashanah, like a month after the storm, I used the story of Noah as a metaphor. I don't think that any rituals have changed in meaning since the storm. I don't think so.

RH: Any kind of other teachings or concepts or frameworks that you've used with your congregants or used for yourself?

JL: I don't think so. I mean, I really see Katrina not as a defining factor but as an aberration, something that's been -- it will always be now a part of something I've gone through but not defining. I don't see Katrina as being defining. Certainly, when I talk to people nowadays, we still use before and after Katrina. When someone is like, oh yeah, you moved about two months before Katrina right or you were here or just got here -- so we use Katrina almost as a defining, you know, you got here before the storm or right after the storm or you've been here two years. You came here about six months before the storm, right? And that's just part of everyday conversation now. So it's still defining in that sense, but it hasn't changed the definition of who I am. I think I've grown from it in

terms of being able to understand -- you know, if there ever is something devastating again, I think I'll be in a better position to deal with it with leadership from an immediate point of view, from an immediate standpoint. I think I'll probably be more prepared should something like this come through again, to be prepared in advance and have a plan on what's going to be the immediate steps taken after the hurricane. Now that I've lived through it, I know. I mean, I already have a hurricane contact list, which, we've asked our congregants to give us voluntarily a phone number of where they will probably be after a hurricane, and if that's not something they can give us, then give us the phone number of a family member who will know where you are. So that if you're going to end up in a hotel or with friends and you don't know where, give us a cousin or an aunt or an uncle or a parent who will -- who we can call them and find out where you are. That's something -- and some people have given us that information because there were people we couldn't track down last year because we didn't know where they were and they weren't responding to e-mails and they weren't home and we just didn't know how to find them. So we've now provided -- that's something, so we can track down people sooner. So those are some steps that, you know, that we've taken to be prepared. I wouldn't say it's changed who I am. I mean, it wasn't that. Especially living out on the North Shore, where, the way I tell people -- if you want to compare the North Shore to New Orleans, New Orleans was destroyed. The North Shore was merely devastated. But we recovered pretty quickly because the devastation we had was localized, but then it also was much more economic than physical. The majority of people, their homes were not destroyed, those people whose homes were damaged, most of that's been repaired. You aren't -- you don't have that many displaced people who are continuously displaced from the North Shore and the biggest problems were economic, from people who lost businesses in New Orleans and lost jobs in New Orleans. And the overwhelming majority of people who are still in the area have recovered from that. And the people who haven't recovered have mostly moved already for other jobs somewhere else. So we don't have that kind of ongoing issues in the North Shore like they do on the South

Shore. Now last year was, for sure, a bad year for us. I did get irritated sometimes with people from the South Shore -- oh, you live on the North Shore, things are great up there. And it's like, no. I don't think so. You know, we're in an economic crisis up there. We've got people out of homes, and I think people on the South Shore knew how stable the North Shore was so in comparison the North Shore was better off than the South Shore but we were in pretty bad shape, too. But we're not anymore. I really don't see that. I saw a real turning point over the summer. Really, I think maybe with -- as people settled in with the New Year, with schools opening and who's doing what, I think people who were going to leave have left now and I think we've seen a lot more stability. I don't think we're in hurricane recovery mode anymore at this point.

RH: What is your congregation looking like now? Have you lost a number of members?

JL: We had lost at first -- we were, before the storm we were at 119 members. And at our low point last year we were at 98. We are back over 120 members. We gained just about eight people. Over the summer, we gained eight congregants. Now, these people were not South Shore transplants. These are people who moved into the New Orleans area and moved to our neighborhoods. We've got -- to the best of my knowledge, we've got two maybe three families from the South Shore who moved out there and decided to join. And one of which in particular had not even been a member on the South Shore. So this is like a new membership as it were. But, just this month, we've also -- like all of a sudden, we're starting to lose people again. This month, we've had three people. Well, one moved suddenly a month ago. Another one is moving in three weeks. And I just heard, yesterday, that another family is moving to Connecticut at the end of the academic year. So just within the last month, now we've lost three again. So I think we're going to have some flux. Last year, like I said, we lost over 20, but then we gained some back and then we gained a few more. I think we're going to have some -- the other thing is that, like the three people who've left now, we've always been a very transitory community. Not just as a Jewish Community, but St. Tammany Parish in general is a

place where a lot of people move in and out a lot. So whether you can say that these three people who are leaving, that I've just discovered in the past few weeks, whether that's related to Katrina or not is real questionable and probably not. You know, one was a beer distributor and beer distribution is actually going great. People are drinking a lot more beer, now, since the hurricane so that wasn't for economic reasons. And the other one is a doctor and has decided he wanted a change in career path so these three are probably not related to Katrina. But they could be and it's not that clear. I just can't put a finger on that. So I'm not sure if we're growing or stable right now. But I think we're certainly not dwindling in a way that it's been happening here on the South Shore.

RH: What is your hope for the future, for your congregation?

JL: Well, I hope that in many ways, the economy is growing in our area. I know that some people have moved to our area from the South Shore, but more than that, a lot of people who are moving to the New Orleans area are more and more choosing St. Tammany Parish because of the public schools, because of the housing. I'm hoping that we continue to attract people into St. Tammany Parish and that the Jewish community grows from that. Certainly, it's not my hope to grow from a diminishing of the South Shore. The South Shore -- I hope that the South Shore will continue to be revitalized, that the economy will grow, that people will settle in and people will move in for new economic opportunities that the hurricane -- I know plenty of people have left, but there are also economic opportunities in the city that have been caused by Katrina, and I hope there are people who take advantage of that, and I want the South Shore to grow as well. But I hope that people will continue to choose the North Shore as a viable option so that our community will continue to grow.

RH: Are you doing anything specifically to attract people to the North Shore?

JL: No. No. I mean, that's -- those are issues beyond the Jewish community. Those are economic issues. Those are not -- those are not issues within the --

RH: Do you have a role within the master plan of the Federation? You know, their long-range plan?

JL: Do they have a long-range plan? I don't know what -- I know they just hired a brand new -- they hired a brand new executive director who just started, I guess, about a month ago. Maybe two months ago.

RH: Right.

JL: And I know that their incoming Federation president has asked to speak to our board. But, I'm not sure that right now the Federation has a long-range plan. I think it's probably too soon for that, unless they do have one that I'm not aware of. But I think it's probably too soon to be working on a --

RH: They've been working on a strategic plan.

JL: Yeah. Yeah. I think they're working on one but it's hard. You're still only a year-and-a-half from -- and the dust still hasn't fallen. It's hard to have a strategic plan when you don't know what the realities are going to be to affect that plan. So I think -- you know -- but, if they are working on one, I hope that they will contact us about it because they haven't contacted us about it and I hope they're going to be thinking in those terms because I think in the long run, St. Tammany Parish is going to have a strong future. I think more and more people are going to choose St. Tammany Parish when they choose New Orleans because of the geographical stability. We are not within a levee system. When a hurricane comes through, we have no risk of levee breaks. And we're not below sea level. And there is much more land up where we are. You already have some businesses that have chosen not to pull out of New Orleans, but to relocate to the North Shore. I think Chevron is moving its headquarters to Covington. Well, I know it's disappointing for New Orleans to lose Chevron but better they should move to St. Tammany Parish than Houston. And I'm hoping that St. Tammany Parish will continue to

attract -- 30,000 cars were crossing the bridge every day before the hurricane. Now it's up to 40,000. So I'm hoping that people will continue to consider St. Tammany Parish as a viable option, but, at the same time, St. Tammany Parish is only going to be as strong as New Orleans is. So, that St. Tammany Parish cannot survive economically in an independent fashion from New Orleans. We are directly tied in to the success of New Orleans. So I think it's a partnership. Not a competition but a partnership.

RH: Are you engaged in any way more with the Baton Rouge --

JL: No.

RH: I mean, do you see that corridor as being important?

JL: No.

RH: No. Ok.

JL: No. Looking at it strategically, I don't think people who normally would have been in New Orleans or move to New Orleans are going to move to Baton Rouge. I think that the -- I don't think that Katrina is going to have a long-term impact on the future demographics of Baton Rouge. I know there's been some. You have maybe 500 Jewish families or 500 Jews or something who moved to Baton Rouge, which is a good influx. And I think it will help to create some demographic stability for Baton Rouge, but I don't see -- I think New Orleans has been -- the primary source of Louisiana's economy, between the, you know, the tourism industry and the gaming industry and the oil industry -- I think -- I don't think, in a strategic sense, long-term, that Baton Rouge would ever be -- let me put it this way. If New Orleans doesn't come back as the economic leader that it was, I don't think Baton Rouge's status will be enhanced because of it. Baton Rouge could become the economic leader of the state but not from -- not from gains -- not from gains from New Orleans but from the fact that New Orleans hasn't recovered. And I think that that will affect the Jewish community as well. I don't think the Baton Rouge Jewish

community is going to, in the long run, be enhanced because of what's happened to New Orleans Jewish community.

RH: What are your fears or concerns for the -- your congregation and for the greater New Orleans?

JL: Well, I think we're all concerned that the economy is not going to recover. And that right now you're certainly seeing a significant attrition from New Orleans. You don't really see people moving in, but you do see, every month, more and more people moving out. And I'm concerned about the long-term stability of the New Orleans Jewish community as a result of that economic instability of the area. And, ultimately, if the economic stability of New Orleans is in jeopardy and therefore, the stability of the Jewish community in New Orleans is in jeopardy, then that's going to affect us as well. If New Orleans Jewish community doesn't succeed, then the St. Tammany Jewish community won't either.

RH: Won't succeed. So you see -- you still see the parishes linked economically?

JL: Oh absolutely. Without question. I mean, we are -- you know, it's not that St. Tammany's Parish is gaining -- you know, New Orleans' loss is St. Tammany Parish's gain in a strategic sense. I mean, in order for St. Tammany Parish to succeed, New Orleans has to succeed. Now, there may be specific sectors where St. Tammany Parish will increase from the demise, economic demise of portions of New Orleans. You know, they're building new shopping plazas up on the North Shore, more restaurants, more -- you know, the housing industry is doing well up there. Some other banking industries and mortgages, they're doing well. So some of those areas are going to be short-term, but in a master -- in a global sense, in the long run, the success of St. Tammany Parish can't survive independently from the economic base of New Orleans. If New Orleans as a community continues to disintegrate, then St. Tammany Parish isn't going to be able to offer the support for an economy that doesn't exist. And then, people whose jobs are either tied directly or indirectly to the success of the economy in New Orleans are going

to have to go to other places like Houston and Atlanta and Florida. You know, places like that.

RH: I guess the one lesson the storm seemed to show in St. Tammany was how inter-dependent the economy is.

JL: Yeah. I don't think -- I think anyone who understood the economic factors of St. Tammany Parish would have known that even before the storm. I don't think -- at least in my mind that was never a question. St. Tammany Parish wasn't a rival to New Orleans but a complement, just like suburbs around the country operate. You know. St. Tammany Parish is never going to be a metropolitan center. We are the suburb of New Orleans and some people in St. Tammany Parish wouldn't like to hear that. Oh, we're separate from New Orleans. We are -- we are not the -- what's the word I've heard some people use -- we are not the cesspool that New Orleans is or something. There's this real attitude in St. Tammany Parish that they are the moral center adjacent to the cesspool of New Orleans. Yeah. But, if you look, from a sociological point of view, we are a suburb of New Orleans. And from an economic point of view, we are a suburb of New Orleans.

RH: And morally?

JL: That's for -- I don't make those kinds of comments. That's not my -- I'm not going to judge the moral fabric of one region or another. I'd rather look at individuals rather than a region.

RH: OK. Are any of your priorities now different than they were prior to the storm?

JL: My priorities now have returned to what they were before the storm -- the future programmatic growth of our congregation. You know, last year, again, was -- I'm hoping in the long run it will be seen as an aberration and a period of recovery, but you know, I've gone back to strategic, community-based programming to enhance the quality of the

programming of the New Orleans Jewish community from, I mean, the North Shore Jewish community from musical enhancements to our Shabbat programming, increased adult education opportunities. Attempting to build relationships with other faith-based communities on the North Shore. And providing the educational and cultural opportunities that a stable, healthy community can provide to its congregants. And that's what my goals have returned to this year as opposed to last year where we were clearly in recovery mode.

RH: Has there been things you've learned about yourself this past year that you'd like to share?

JL: I don't know if I've thought about it. I don't know if I've been -- I don't think that I've -- I haven't given it enough analysis to be able to share anything. I'd have to think about that so I couldn't answer that right now.

RH: OK. Is there anything you're doing differently after the storm?

JL: Well, again, I was last year but I've tried to return back to, you know -- and that's all -- I'm trying to return to the normal kind of community-building programs again. So, I think my answer would be similar to the previous one.

RH: OK. So, why don't you tell me if there is anything else you feel we like need to cover here in this conversation that you'd like to say.

JL: You know, I think Katrina was really a traumatic event, not just for the South Shore but for the North Shore. I think it really -- although we knew of the possibility of a major storm, I think living through the reality of the storm made us see both the best and worst in what could happen. I think people certainly appreciated all of the support that came in from around the country and that really made us feel connected to the community around the country in recognizing the hearts of the American people and the Jewish community and really was very, very, very enheartening. Very -- I don't know what the word is but it

really gave us a sense of faith in our community and in people to come through, but, very disappointing in seeing major institutions fail us. The insurance companies have helped a lot of people, and a lot of people have done fine, but not, not universally so and not consistently so. There are plenty of people battling with their insurance companies and insurance companies who are making arguments based on the interpretations of vague statements in their own contracts. And then when you complain about it, they say, you signed the contract. You know, who reads every word of a contract and what are you going to do, tell your agent, well, I don't like the vagueness of this word? I mean, you know, the insurance company is supposed to be there to back you up in need. The failures of government on every level, on the local level, on the state level, on the national level, not party-based, it had nothing to do with which party, it was just universal failure on some of these issues. It's just very disappointing to see, to have a faith in a system that you believe you had faith in, you pay your insurance premiums, you pay every insurance, you buy your homeowner's, you buy your flood insurance, and, and, and you pay your taxes. Then when it comes times to need, you have one person who was devastated and lost their job and had damage to their home and called FEMA and they had been denied for who knows why their FEMA assistance and they called and the clerk on the other end said, well just put your boots on and get out there and take care of yourself. Don't rely on the government to help you. It's like, well, thanks for nothing. Everybody around you is getting support to get through this and you get denied for some random reason and then you get some clerk who's living in who knows where in some other part of the country not going through this, so you know, it's both the faith and confidence in the people of individuals and communities out there to really offer the support, but the disappointment in the big bureaucracies that are supposed to be there to help. And then, when you really need them, ultimately they were only in it to make a buck and not really to provide the help that they said they were going to provide.

RH: Thank you.

JL: All right.

RH: This has been a great interview.

JL: Well, thank you.

RH: Thanks.

[END OF INTERVIEW]