

Jewish Lenses on Katrina

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The hundreds of thousands of individual stories of displacement, despair, resilience, and survival left behind by Hurricane Katrina shine a rare spotlight on the communities and relationships in which we live and find meaning. Not surprisingly, it is the most desperate stories of abandonment experienced by the most impoverished populations of New Orleans and the massive governmental failure to respond effectively to the crisis that have become central to our collective understanding of the storm's impact and significance. These stories are so rightly demanding of our attention that it can be hard to justify a focus on the stories of those who may have faced challenging displacements, but who had more resources with which to respond to the storm and its aftermath.

It is very striking to me that as I set out to explore what we might learn from the Jewish experience of Katrina, I feel a strong need to offer an apologetic disclaimer, explaining why, in the face of a disaster that exposed America's failure in relation to its most vulnerable communities, we should also be concerned with the experience of those who belong to one of the nation's most prosperous demographic groups. Why, in short, should we pay any special attention to Jewish experiences of the storm? From a historical perspective, any suffering on the part of American Jews can seem almost trivial, overpowered by the long and extreme history of Jewish persecutions elsewhere, culminating in the Holocaust.¹ And when seen within the broader American context, American Jewry's unprecedented levels of acceptance and privilege have made many (including many Jews) wonder why Jews should see themselves as anything other than among the whitest and most privileged threads of America's multicultural tapestry. Why should we expect to find anything distinctive or enlightening in the narratives that emerged from this small Southern Jewish community, which before the storm numbered only about 10,000 individuals?

What follows is a brief exploration of some of the themes that shaped the Jewish experiences of Katrina, as reflected in the words of some of the 85 narrators who participated in the *Katrina's Jewish Voices* Oral History Project, conducted by the Jewish Women's Archive (where I worked from 2000 to 2008 as historian in residence) and the Institute for Southern Jewish Life.² The answer, perhaps, to the question of why we should preserve these stories comes in the stories themselves.

The Jews of New Orleans, of course, shared the experience of Katrina. The storm did not discriminate as it swept through the city, casting the richest and the poorest out of their homes into unmoored uncertainty. As New Orleanians and as Jews, these narrators speak powerfully to a moment when so many in the Jewish community and American society more generally bewail the loss of meaningful religious, communal, and ethnic identities. These Jewish voices of Katrina demonstrate the surprising ways in which so many New Orleans Jews experienced the storm and its aftermath from within the context of Jewish identity, community, and memory. Their narratives offer powerful testimony to the fragility of even *privileged* lives. They convey the impact and meaning

¹ Laura Levitt discusses this phenomenon in *American Jewish Loss After the Holocaust* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

² *Katrina's Jewish Voices* was created by the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. It is directed by Jayne Guberman and Stuart Rockoff. Oral Histories were conducted by Roz Hinton in 2006 and 2007. Videos and transcripts of these interviews are currently held by the Jewish Women's Archive and the Institute of Southern Jewish Life. On-line access will eventually be available on the Jewish Women's Archive website.

not just of loss, displacement, and devastation, but also of our most essential connections. Any similar collection of Katrina narratives would, like these, have much to teach us about New Orleans and the racial, economic, and cultural identities that define this distinctive city. These interviews illuminate the particular ways that Jews have defined and understood their place in New Orleans, even as they offer surprising insight into the nature of American Jewish community and identity at the beginning of the 21st century.

Home

The majority of the city's Jews found their way out of town before the storm hit, although many, for a variety of personal and professional reasons, remained behind and had to deal with the storm's terrible aftermath. Administrators and lay leaders describe their Herculean efforts, amidst the flooding and looting, to move hospital patients and senior housing residents safely out of the city: a mother and grandmother recall their desperate efforts over three days to locate a newborn who was transferred from a local hospital to an unknown destination; a son relates his despairing and weeks-long effort to recover his father's body, left behind when he died during the evacuation of an old-age home.

Like most of the city's inhabitants, the majority of New Orleans Jews watched the crisis grow on television, becoming aware of the loss of their own material possessions even as they watched the destruction of their city. Sandy Levy, head of the Jewish Endowment Fund of New Orleans, watched the storm coverage in a motel in Jackson, Mississippi, along with her brother and her 91-year-old mother, both of whose homes would be ruined:

It'd be hard to imagine that all of a sudden you could literally lose everything. And I think the reality of that, the tears, I think we were all very numb to it. I think and then the magnitude of the devastation, and then seeing what happened in the sea of humanity that was left here, and that this was really a place in the United States, and that people weren't being rescued . . . that Harry Connick could wind up at the foot of the Convention Center . . . but the Army couldn't get there. And no Navy helicopters, no nothing, to get to these people and give them food and water. So I think that our hearts were broken. And our hearts were broken for ourselves and for the people that were stranded here. And really I think for the soul of the city.

When Levy herself was able to return, she found that the damage to her home was pretty light. For those of us from outside New Orleans, it is important to realize that "getting off easy" in this case meant arriving home to find a refrigerator full of maggots and rugs that had been eaten by rats. As Irving Lachoff describes his scouting expedition to his own home, many people returned to homes that were simply destroyed:

and the house -- everything -- the dining room table had collapsed. Somehow, the piano had fallen over, and the sofa was at an angle on top of the piano. How it -- sticking up in the air -- everything else had fallen down. You couldn't walk on the floor -- all the floors were just covered with junk and stuff. And the floors themselves had buckled, and they were coming up in many places.

Many Jews lived in the neighborhoods that were hit worst by the levee flooding. Unlike those who lived in places like the Lower Ninth Ward, however, most of them had insurance coverage and access to greater resources. This meant that many had the ability to restore their homes, although some have chosen not to undertake this massive task. The post-storm Jewish population estimates hovered around 6,500, with an incentive-driven recruitment program now bringing those numbers to just over 7000, about 70% of the pre-storm population.

Torah

For Jews as a community, the most evocative losses were contained in their most symbolic emblems. Amidst so much general destruction, widely circulated images of Torahs being “rescued” from the storm, carried through the flood, and removed in a motor boat, offered Jews around the country a searing evocation of Katrina’s destruction. In fact, the seven Torah scrolls from the Orthodox Beth Israel congregation that were seen in these images were completely waterlogged and damaged beyond repair. Becky Heggelund, the congregation’s non-Jewish, African-American former secretary, to whom the scrolls were brought, fully understood the importance of these items, even as she broke the news of their condition to synagogue leaders who hoped that they could be dried out. She accepted responsibility for burying the scrolls temporarily in her backyard. As the synagogue president Jackie Gothard related,

So, the Rabbi asked her to just wrap them as best she could, like make a shroud if she could. She had, I think, a white tablecloth or a plastic covering. She put them in a white covering, and then put them in a plastic cover of her barbecue pit, to protect them from further water. And she dug a hole and buried them. And the Rabbi said, “Becky, please remember where you put them,” and she said, “Rabbi, there’s no way (laughter) I’m going to forget, you know, where these are.”

The Torah scrolls were later buried in the congregation’s cemetery, eliciting the thought from Gothard that few Jews ever have to see a Torah buried, not to mention seven at one time.

For the New Orleans Jewish community, Torah scrolls came to embody both destruction and resilience. Rabbi Martha Bergadine, who oversaw the incredible relief effort that was coordinated by the Baton Rouge Jewish community, described what it was like to go into a vacated New Orleans to find more than a score of Torah scrolls from other community synagogues that had been safeguarded on a high floor of a Jewish communal agency building:

you know, it was like they were a little bit of hope. They were just waiting patiently. And just it was, sort of, a contrast between, you know, sort of the devastation -- which, the worst of it, we weren’t seeing. We were in Metairie and Uptown. But just the absence of people, you know. And to see them there. And the Torah’s such a powerful symbol to Jews. It was almost like -- almost -- like, you know, rescuing people. Obviously, people come first.

History

More telling perhaps than even the loss or survival of Jewish ritual items and synagogue buildings was the way that people attempted to understand the storm and its destruction within a Jewish framework. In the days after the storm, people were faced with the sudden realization that they were stranded with no knowledge of what might be left of the physical possessions that defined their lives, uncertainty over their future prospects, missing information about many of the central people in their lives, and no access to their financial resources. Still, most New Orleans Jews were well aware that they did have the resources of community, financial stability, and education, which meant that their immediate crisis would not last long. In the main, these resources were concrete -- a place to go, familial and communal support networks, transferable professional skills, and money that would eventually become available -- but many were also sustained by a more abstract sense of Jewish community, identity, and history.

What made Katrina a remarkable event for Jews in New Orleans was not its disastrousness, but the way it threw a whole community into the unfamiliar, even un-American situation of displacement, insecurity, and not knowing what was left of their lives. Carol Wise, an older woman

who has worked tirelessly to benefit both New Orleans and its Jewish community, identified her Jewishness as a key element in her resilience: *somehow or other I was always going to be protected, Jewishly, or personally. I think the protection that I felt, the shield that I felt of being a Jew, gave me both the courage, perhaps, and the determination to come back and rebuild.*

For many Jewish New Orleanians, Jewishness turned out to offer not only communal support and personal strength, but also a lens through which to process an otherwise alien experience. Unlike Europeans, with their experience of war, or Israelis, with their intimacy with uncertainty, most middle-class Americans have no first-hand experience with massive loss and displacement. Most American Jews, reinforced by affluence and numerous supportive institutions, have taken their security in America for granted.

Not surprisingly, many Jewish survivors of Katrina turned to Jewish historical frameworks to help give meaning to their experience. For instance, Sandy Levy thought of *Fiddler on the Roof* when she had to say goodbye to friends with whom she'd weathered the storm, not knowing when or where she'd see them again. In the terrible experience of displacement and uncertainty about where loved ones might have gone, many found a resonance with past historical experience, but one that could, in this case, be bridged by modern technologies. With their community suddenly scattered across the country, many described the importance of knowing where people were. The first work of the organized Jewish community, in fact, was to gather information and create a data bank simply of locations, contacts, and e-mail addresses. As Carol Wise remembered,

knowing how to keep in touch with people--so I guess I would say that a cell phone became very important, telephone numbers, the connection being able to keep people together. I kept thinking about the Holocaust, not that it's the same, but losing people, and not knowing where they've gone is very upsetting.

The disorientation of not knowing where people were, and gratitude for the connections made possible by technology, were recurring themes in these narratives. There may be no other oral history project where the phrase "God bless computers" appears as often.

Although narrators were always careful to differentiate their own experience from the Holocaust as the most extreme Jewish experience ultimate Jewish experience of destruction and devastation, the Holocaust nevertheless provided a meaningful framework for these generally affluent and otherwise secure American Jews who sought to describe their own experience of displacement and loss in 21st century America. As the director of New Orleans' Jewish Family Service, Dina Gerber, recalls:

I remember this feeling really sorry for myself, I said "People who are not so genetically different from me went through the Holocaust, and they survived. They didn't get insurance, (laughter) the government wasn't on their side, and they couldn't watch it on television." In the comfort that I watched this whole thing unfold -- I mean, I had an apartment, with air conditioning, and, you know -- I was roughing it, I didn't have a microwave. And, that people have been through much worse, so there is really no reason that I'm not going to get through this. I'd often think of my grandmother's experience, of being an immigrant with a five-month old baby, not speaking a word of English, you know, coming to some -- and she survived it.

A number of Holocaust survivors were among the Katrina Jewish Voices narrators. Some described feeling that their earlier experience enabled them to take this latest challenge in stride. Others, like Judge Miriam Waltzer, who survived as a girl in Nazi Germany, felt too overwhelmed by the similarities of the two experiences to feel strengthened by her survival of the first:

what you learn is that it's a really equal opportunity shocker for everybody. The phones don't work, the radios don't work, you don't have money, you don't have identification, you don't have anything to wear, you don't have a house, your doctors are gone, your friends are gone, the city is in chaos, and you've gone through it once before, because when the war was over my hometown looked like the city now does. And people would leave little notes "we have gone here." Then you would go there. And that would be destroyed. You looked for people all over. I still remember that. Bridges destroyed. Things just sticking out, things smoldering. When I was a child. How often do you have to do this? How often do you have to see this?

As it did for so many in New Orleans, Katrina's destructiveness attuned many of the narrators to the preciousness of community and survival. They described the unique but frequently repeated experience of running into people from New Orleans in otherwise strange abodes. Jackie Gotthard's description -- *when you saw people from New Orleans that you hadn't seen since before Katrina, you just hugged them and kissed them and you were so glad to see them. And it was like a reunion, almost like a family reunion* -- was echoed by numerous others. As Dina Gerber put it, *I remember thinking at the time, "Now I know what the saying 'a sight for sore eyes' is." Because it was so good to see people, and hug people. And it wasn't this peck on the cheek, it was like these hugs that you gave people.*

Response of the Jewish Community

The Jewish lens that helped shape the meaning of Katrina for many individuals was not limited to the way they thought about their experience. There was also a very practical Jewish component to the way that many New Orleans Jews navigated the storm's aftermath. American Orthodox Jews customarily expect that wherever they travel, they will find a welcoming embrace from other Orthodox communities. What was so striking after Katrina was that whatever one's level of identification or affiliation and whatever the location or nature of the receiving community, Jews found that if they sought assistance as Jews (and often even if they didn't), there was a Jewish community there eager, ready, and prepared to assist them. Moreover, the local and national Jewish communities responded to the challenges they confronted not just in an immediate, reactive way, but with strategic and thoughtful planning that enabled them to draw upon the strengths they had been building over a century of philanthropic communal effort.

Although I focus here upon Jewish efforts to support other Jews, much of the Jewish communal response was directed toward rescue and relief efforts for non-Jewish residents and communities of the Gulf Coast. These included the direct rescue of stranded individuals, the distribution of thousands of Wal-Mart gift cards for the purchase of basic necessities, millions of dollars in financial assistance to smaller Gulf Coast communities and to targeted projects throughout the area, and myriad relief projects staffed by thousands of volunteers from around the country.

The locus of immediate Jewish relief work was the nearby Baton Rouge Jewish community, which threw all its energy and resources into bringing Jews and others safely out of New Orleans. A coordinated effort between the city's Jewish community and the sheriff of East Baton Rouge resulted in a series of increasingly dangerous rescue missions. The rescuers were able to gain entry into New Orleans because they came with a list of names and addresses of missing people identified by the Jewish community. People of all backgrounds were brought out, cared for, sheltered, helped to find new homes for the short or long term, and provided with transportation by the Jewish community. Hundreds were assisted in various ways. Rabbi Martha Bergadine who coordinated this effort recalled what she saw as the unquestioning responsiveness of the Jews in her community -- many of whom set off on repeated rescue trips to New Orleans donning bulletproof vests.

Bergadine described one less solemn demonstration of the way in which her community stepped forward to do whatever was asked of them. She'd learned of one couple who had been hesitant to leave the city because of their six dogs, and had found a family that was willing to take

them in, dogs and all. When she found out that the dogs were not as small as had been reported, she called her colleague who was preparing for their arrival:

And I was on the phone with Richard, saying, "They won't all fit in these dog carriers. We need big dog carriers," and Richard saying, "OK. I went to Wal-Mart, and I bought out what they had, and now I'm going to Target (laughs) to buy dog carriers." And crazy, crazy, craziness. And we finally got everybody kind of calmed down. And 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, you know, they're rather large, and a big parrot." And I got on the phone, and I called Frank, and I told him. And 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." And 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.

In the midst of so many governmental and organizational failures, the Jewish community leadership quickly identified short, medium, and long-term goals and set out to reach them. First to be addressed were the immediate needs presented by Katrina. It was quickly decided that every Jewish individual affected by Katrina should receive a \$700 cash payment. This proved to be a crucial help to people who for the most part had packed shorts, underwear and t-shirts for three days, and had absolutely no access to credit. As Dina Gerber of Jewish Family Service of New Orleans described it:

I really saw it almost as an entitlement. That if you went through this . . . so, we had \$700 to give out, and the word spread fast, and we were busy here . . . unbelievable. And people who didn't know where to turn . . . and what I think I'm the most proud of in our reaction, is that we really just didn't give out the money. When someone would come to apply, they would really have a session, and could talk about what happened.

Again, at the immediate level, as the dispossessed of New Orleans found themselves cast ashore in cities around the United States, many of them were astonished not only at the warmth of welcome they received from Jewish communities throughout the country, but also by the communal and individual efforts of so many to address needs that ranged from clothes, day school educations, and synagogue memberships to places to live, complete with needed furniture. Rabbi Andy Busch was being assisted so that he could serve his congregation from Houston; his description of what was provided by members of the Houston Jewish community is typical of what many evacuees from New Orleans experienced:

They said we're sorry it's only a two-bedroom. I said fine, I need five beds and a bridge table. They said, "no, no, no, you're going to be here for a few months." These people owned a furniture store. They said, "we're pulling, there's no rental furniture left in Houston, we're pulling floor models for you to be able to sleep," and I said, "no please." They said, "no, no, if you're going to live there as a Rabbi you need to be able to -- your family needs to be comfortable." The great line was the wife that said to me, "and do you like colonial or contemporary?"

One of the challenging dynamics for so many from this generally prosperous community came in the discomfort of being turned from the agents into the recipients of charity. As Rabbi Bob Loewy reported trying to teach his congregants, New Orleans Jews had to learn that the full meaning of *tzedakah* (translated both as righteousness and charity) entailed not just a willingness to give charity but the ability, when needed, to accept it.

At a national level, Jewish communal *tzedakah* meant supporting individual Jews, working strategically to leverage funds in support of non-Jewish communities and projects, and supporting the Jewish institutions and leaders of New Orleans. Support of communal organizations meant providing needed funding for two years so that they could spend their resources serving the community, not struggling to stay in business. As Dina Gerber related, *I think the national Jewish community put their arms around us and gave us a big hug. And it was a very warm feeling. Financially -- we are existing today, we are a resource, because of United Jewish Communities. Plain and simple. I was able to keep the staff together, keep going.*

At a moment in American Jewish communal life when much of the focus has been on the attenuation of meaningful Jewish community and identity, many of those touched by Katrina were surprised to realize just how essential the Jewish connection proved to be for many of those in the dire circumstances posed by the storm. Furthermore, the Jewish response demonstrated the powerful difference that could be made by a well organized community with good outreach ability and an effective network of institutions. The National Disaster Committee of United Jewish Communities, which ended up coordinating the collection and distribution of \$28 million in aid to Jewish and non-Jewish communities, was chaired by Carol Smokler of Florida. Even she was surprised by the effectiveness of Jewish outreach:

You know, as someone who was about to cut their pledge in half when this happened, I think that the national infrastructure is necessary and this is a good example of why you have a national community and why you have case management all over the country and why all of the Jewish Family Services talk to each other, because we could do what no one else could do in short order.

This was a crisis that brought forth from a large number of people unceasing devotion to sustaining the community. For many, it changed the way that they *defined* community. Jewish New Orleans has long been known for its strong Reform Jewish community, known in turn for its distance from the much smaller Orthodox community. In the wake of the storm, however, many Reform Jews realized that a modern Orthodox synagogue is a necessary element in sustaining a viable Jewish community. Roselle Unger, who worked tirelessly in the aftermath of the storm as interim executive director of the city's Jewish Federation, observed,

And when you sit around a table now, with people that are members of Touro and Temple Sinai [the major Reform synagogues], and you hear them talk about how important it is for our community to have a modern Orthodox shul, I'm blown away. Because I think, maybe before Katrina -- and not that they wouldn't have cared, but they wouldn't have cared.

I do not want to suggest that this crisis has suddenly created an idyllic Jewish world in New Orleans. Individuals and institutions continue to face daunting challenges, and not all contributions have received the appreciation they might merit. But if weaknesses have inevitably come into view, so has the meaning of community come to be felt more fully, even for those who decided they could not continue to live in New Orleans.

Diaspora

One last hugely important Jewish historical framework for thinking about what happened to the Jews of New Orleans before and after Katrina is that of diaspora. This concept captures the sense of exile experienced by the thousands who were driven from their homes and scattered far from New Orleans. But for some, the idea of diaspora, of the evanescent temporality of home that was reinforced by the effects of Katrina, also speaks to the special quality of New Orleans itself. As

we all know, Katrina revealed much about the ugliness of racial and class inequalities in our cities. But the distinctive appeal of New Orleans, revealed in the commitment of so many of the narrators in Katrina's Jewish Voices to rebuild their city, speaks to the power of what can happen when truly different folks can come together to create an unparalleled cultural mix.

Rebecca Mark, who teaches literature at Tulane, finds in the irreplaceable ethnic/religious/racial mixture of New Orleans's extraordinary culture a paradigmatic exemplar of what Jewish existence within diaspora has meant for centuries. She suggests, intriguingly, that the essence of Jewish diaspora may have in fact reached its apotheosis in that strange corner of America known as New Orleans:

I may not live here my whole life. I don't know if I can or not. But if I don't live here, I will always grieve it. That I have fallen in love with New Orleans, in a way that I always was, but not to this degree. It's just a passion for -- I don't even know if we should live here. I mean, who knows. But I know what New Orleans is and I love what New Orleans is . . . I think it's there in the lines of the poem about the -- just the mixtures and the unexpected, the mysteriousness of it, the cultural gumbo, the whole sense that it's -- you could never like -- you could never say this is New Orleans. I'm going to rebuild it back. You could never do that because it's history upon layers of history upon layers of history on layers of history. Languages and languages and all put together and people who wouldn't meet who are best friends and cultures that don't go together that are together and that -- and music comes out of that. That's what jazz is. That's what, you know, zydeco is. And you can't reproduce it. That's what our dancing is. It's hundreds of cultures mixing together and it's -- it is the feeling of being marginal and maybe fleeting. The sense that we're in a place that may not be around. That you have to just enjoy it as it comes and then not -- there's not a stability here and there never was.

In a strange way for Rebecca Mark and for others, Katrina has helped make them see this most distinctive of American cities as a perfect kind of home for Jews: an exile that jumbles together all the pain, richness, loss, and possibility inherent in life in diaspora.

And Katrina showed the rest of us that this strange American Jewish community, with its scandalous taste for shellfish and its full investment in a city from whose central rituals (like Mardi Gras) it has long been excluded, may indeed have a logic of its own. The Katrina's Jewish Voices oral history and collecting project will do more than preserve the story of this extraordinary moment when American Jews realized that they needed to be and could be there for each other. It should also remind us that we cannot understand the richness of New Orleans or its broader American context without acknowledging and giving voice to the many different experiences of those who made the Crescent City their home.