

Wednesday, June 13, 2007

A new start in New Orleans

Wednesday, June 13, 2007

Local tapped to revive Katrina-decimated shul

by Richard Greenberg, Associate Editor

Rabbi Uri Topolosky set eyes on New Orleans for the first time in his life as the airliner he was aboard approached for a landing in February.

Although the flood waters from Hurricane Katrina had long since subsided, the landscape was still dominated by intimidatingly vast stretches of blue the Mississippi River, the Gulf of Mexico, Lake Pontchartrain and the Bayou.

"I remember thinking, 'Oh my God, look at all the water surrounding this place,' " he remembered. "And then it occurred to me that although water can be such a symbol of destruction, it can also provide a great opportunity for life to emerge."

Topolosky's goal is to transform that symbol of renewal into facts on the ground.

The 28-year-old, who grew up in Silver Spring, has been hired to rebuild and repopulate the only New Orleans-area synagogue that was destroyed by Katrina Congregation Beth Israel, a 103-year-old institution that gained national notoriety as the site of a heroic, but ultimately failed attempt to rescue a number of waterlogged Torah scrolls.

Under the terms of his two-year contract, Topolosky now an associate rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in the Bronx, N.Y. is set to start on Aug. 1. He and his wife and two small children plan to relocate to New Orleans on July 15.

"It's certainly a challenge, but from his perspective it's a mission," said Beth Israel congregation president Jackie Gothard.

"There is an opportunity here to spin a wonderful story out of absolute traumatic destructiveness," said Topolosky. "There is a lot of excitement in New Orleans, but most of that is negative. We thought that with so much buzz there, if it could be rechanneled positively through our little synagogue, it would be a real exciting opportunity to jump into."

That opportunity first presented itself in January when Topolosky spotted Beth Israel's notice for a rabbinic opening posted at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in New York, where he was ordained in June 2005. The congregation's former rabbi had left with his family after the hurricane.

"I was intrigued," said Topolosky, who had graduated from the current Melvin J. Berman Hebrew Academy in Rockville in 1996 before attending a yeshiva in Israel for two years. He later earned a bachelor of arts degree in communications from the University of Maryland at College Park.

He said he and his wife, Dahlia, had been looking to move to a smaller Jewish community "where we could team up and really make a difference" by "bringing a vision of what a Jewish community should look like and helping shape that vision."

Such a community, he explained, would be inclusive and ecumenical and largely devoid of political divisions and parochialism that sometimes plague larger Jewish centers. New Orleans seemed to fit the bill and in the aftermath of Katrina, it thirsted for energetic and idealistic young Jewish pioneers to help fix the place, he said.

"New Orleans had hit rock bottom, and it needs a lot of help," Topolosky added. "By settling there, we would have the opportunity to help rebuild not only the Jewish community, but the greater New Orleans community as well."

Early this year, he submitted a resume, becoming one of four candidates for the job. The new rabbi would be paid a salary that is competitive with those offered by urban northeastern synagogues, according to Topolosky, who declined to name a figure.

Moving expenses and free housing in a four-bedroom rabbinic residence were also part of the deal, a package that was financed entirely with shul funds.

Topolosky was selected, according to Gothard, because he was more experienced than the other candidates, as well as being "very energetic," "charismatic" and outreach-minded.

"With Rabbi Uri, everybody is welcome, even if they're not shomer Shabbos [Shabbat observant] or don't keep kosher," Gothard explained. "He's not judging anybody. He just wants them to come to services."

Beth Jacob, founded in 1904, is the oldest Orthodox congregation in the New Orleans area. Even before Katrina, the congregation one of two modern Orthodox shuls in the New Orleans area was aging and in decline, having dwindled from more than 500 families in the 1960s to fewer than 200 when the storm hit.

Katrina drove out at least 50 more families, and in the process, reduced the surrounding neighborhood, known as Lakeview, to a "ghost town," according to Topolosky, "which is what it remains today."

The post-Katrina remnant of the congregation first davened in a meeting room at a motel and then at an annex in a Reform temple, Congregation Gates of Prayer, in nearby Metairie, where it now pays a nominal rent.

Gothard said Beth Israel intends to build a new structure within a year or two, financed through grants, a building-fund drive, flood insurance money and proceeds from the sale of the old structure. A site has not yet been selected.

In the meantime, Topolosky, who has shuttled back and forth from New Orleans several times during the past few months, plans to expand the congregant base with young trailblazers he is hoping to attract with the help of financial incentives and other inducements.

The Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans, for example, is offering allowances for moving expenses and housing assistance totaling \$17,500 to outsiders who join the greater Jewish community. In addition, Beth Israel has earmarked a matching incentive for new congregants. Other sweeteners include free synagogue and Jewish community center memberships for one year and job-placement help. Topolosky even placed an ad in The Jewish Week in New York seeking recruits.

Thus far, there have been inquiries and nibbles, but no commitments. "It's still early; plus, it's very hard to bring somebody there before I actually get there myself," Topolosky said last week.

The new rabbi has a "mammoth task," according to Michael Weil, the New Orleans federation's executive director. "He can't be just a shul rabbi. He has to be a community builder and a leader. But Rabbi Uri is highly motivated and he has oodles of energy. I'm totally encouraged. I can't wait for him to arrive."