



Everything New Orleans

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ORTHODOX MISSION

A young rabbi tries to revitalize a congregation hurt by Katrina

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By Bruce Nolan

Staff writer

To the list of those young newcomers attracted to post-Katrina New Orleans precisely because of its challenges, add the names Uri and Dahlia Topolosky.

Topolosky, 29, is the new rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel, freshly arrived from the Bronx with his 30-year-old wife, Dahlia, and two young sons. His task: to revitalize the wounded Orthodox congregation whose Canal Boulevard synagogue flooded several blocks from the 17th Street Canal.

With other rabbis around the world Wednesday night, Topolosky ushered in Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of Judaism's solemn High Holy Days -- his first in New Orleans, and Beth Israel's first with its own rabbi since Hurricane Katrina.

Members of Beth Israel were to meet, as usual, in the rented chapel at Congregation Gates of Prayer, a Reform congregation in Metairie whose physical repairs are complete, while the fewer, grayer Beth Israel members are still early on the long journey to full recovery.

Although it is the region's prominent Orthodox congregation, Beth Israel even before Hurricane Katrina was one of the city's smallest. It has long faced the twin problems of older congregants and dwindling numbers of young couples among its 200 or so families.

Katrina permanently dispersed more than a third of those, said congregation president Jackie Gothard, making a chronic problem acute.

A "For Sale" sign seeks a future for what once was the congregation's Lakeview synagogue. With many of its older members permanently gone from New Orleans, the congregation knows it must rescue itself, and now.

That was the message that lay just below the surface of the advertisement for the New Orleans job opening Topolosky saw in February in the Bronx, where he was one of five Jewish clergy serving a thriving synagogue of 800 families.

The Topoloskys, whose sons are 1 and 3 years old, were looking for a mission, someplace where they could have an impact, he said.

New Orleans seemed to be the place.

"This is an old shul that wants to be revived," said Topolosky, using the Yiddish word for synagogue. "That's rare. Usually an old shul wants to stay the same."

Topolosky's manner is quick, outgoing. His greeting on the phone is, "Hey, man, how ya doin'?" He plays guitar with his wife, a school psychologist, who soon will release a CD of Jewish children's songs.

The Topoloskys arrived in July, settling in a house in Metairie within walking distance of Gates of Prayer, a necessity because Orthodox Jews observe the prohibition against driving on the Sabbath.

"Within a month he knew most of the people in the congregation by name," Gothard said. "He reached out to them, encouraged them to come to synagogue. He's light-hearted. He makes services enjoyable."

Topolosky grew up in Massachusetts and Maryland. He earned an undergraduate degree from the University of Maryland, spent two or three years in Israel, and spent four years of religious study in New York at YCT Rabbinical School.

"We were instilled with a passion to get out into the community and show the beauty of traditional Jewish ways, but to be open to new things as well, like greater roles for women, more interdenominational work," he said.

New Orleans may be that place, they hope: big enough to be full of energy, small enough, especially its Jewish community of only about 7,000 post-Katrina, to see the effects of one's labor.

"We have a sense of mission here," he said. "That's a key piece. Every moment is part of a mission. Not a job, but a mission."

"I have a vision. I have ideas. I'm looking for a congregation looking to embrace some of them."

Topolosky knows his congregation still is in a delicate place, looking to invest the energy and take the risks necessary to rebuild, but not yet finished grieving over its loss.

On the second anniversary of the storm a few weeks ago, Topolosky said he gathered a few members in a shaded alcove outside their ruined Lakeview synagogue. They prayed together. Myron Goldberg, a former congregation president, read the Kaddish, the Jewish mourner's prayer.

He wept, Topolosky said.

But last weekend, just a few days short of Rosh Hashanah, traditionally known as the birthday of the world, Topolosky arrived at their temporary worship space bearing festive balloons.

"He said, 'Why not? It's a birthday party,'" Gothard said.

Short term, Topolosky sees two complementary jobs: rebuilding Beth Israel's congregation and connecting it to other Jewish institutions, as well as the larger city, and aggressively promoting the city, as well as the congregation, as a destination for Jews in other cities looking for a challenge.

"This city is ripe to attract young, idealistic people," he said.

Early on, Topolosky tackled one of the easier jobs before him: redesigning the congregation's Web site at www.bethisraelnola.com. He stuck an image in the upper left corner, a stylized dove carrying an olive branch.

The dove is sometimes the symbol of Israel, he said. But it has extra meaning for New Orleans.

The ancient Bible story reports that after being adrift for months on his ark, Noah lofted a dove into the air.

It returned to the ark bearing an olive leaf -- a sign that the worst of the trial was ending.

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