

The New Orleans Project
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On Wednesday January 4 I had an idea. I was sitting alone, eating dinner between a meeting with a 6:00 Bar Mitzvah family and an 8:00 *shiva minyan*, and I stumbled upon a magazine article. The article was titled, simply enough: New Orleans Rising. It explained that the Mardi Gras Marathon and Half Marathon, held annually for forty one years, would take place on February 5, in spite of the damage Hurricane Katrina had wreaked upon the city and its residents some five months earlier. This race, a symbol of vibrancy in the face of destruction, a sign of hope in the wake of so much despair, would show the world that renewal is more than an idea, that new beginnings are very much a possibility. By the time I finished my dinner I decided I would be there, somehow, at the starting line on February 5.

By the time I was in the car, heading home from the *shiva minyan*, I was stretching the New Orleans Project, which is what I had named it then, into more than a run, but a more expansive endeavor, an endeavor wrapped in social action, in giving, in community involvement. I told Lisa to clear that weekend and was scrambling by the time I made it home, reading about the race and the city and other charity projects already in the works. This would be about more than a run. This would be about our going down to New Orleans on behalf of all of us. We would go as ambassadors, New York to New Orleans, reminding the people there that we care, that we're here and we care. We were interested. I wasn't sure yet where all of this was going, but we were interested.

The following week I spoke with Rabbi White and our Social Action Committee here at the synagogue. They were interested. What could I bring to New Orleans? What could I do? We've done a lot, sending an entire truck's worth of supplies just after the hurricane struck, but perhaps we can do more still. Perhaps we can not only give, but continue to teach our children and families the importance of giving, of doing, of not just writing a check, but giving with your feet, praying with your feet, getting up and working at making the world a better place. We decided that we wouldn't ask for money, but Target gift cards, only in \$10 allotments. There were multiple Target stores already open in the New Orleans area and this was a place people could go for food, clothing, and household items large and small. Anyone could contribute the \$10 cards. Young and old. Families could go together, explaining in the car what they were doing and why, where these cards would be going and why. People could mail them to me, drop them off, order them on-line, send them in with friends, send them in with their kids, their neighbors' kids... I'd take the cards with me when I go and give them to community leaders, who'd in turn distribute them to those congregants or students or colleagues or friends most in need. Ambassadors, all of us. Doing.

Within days I drafted a letter. This letter was sent to the members of the congregation as well as forwarded by e-mail to many of my own colleagues, friends, and family members, who then forwarded it to their own friends and family members. Then, if I recall, there was a day or two, when I sat, waiting. This New Orleans Project had

been conceived of with such haste. Such is the nature of Social Action I suppose. I wondered if we should've given it more thought. I waited. And I waited. And then the first few cards arrived. Six cards. Six cards arrived on that first day. I was thrilled. These cards would help a family buy groceries or new socks or light bulbs. If nothing else, I'd take those six cards with me. Glowing, I wrote my first six thank you notes.

The next day one hundred and nineteen cards arrived. The day after that one hundred and thirty cards arrived. I couldn't walk into the hallway without a religious school student or brotherhood member or mahjong player handing me a card or two. My mail was filled with cards and notes, and not only from Roslyn, or even New York for that matter, but New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Texas, California, Minnesota, Connecticut, and Florida. I received letters, hand-written, from people who had heard about this project from friends' of friends' of friends and wanted to contribute. I received cards from eight year-olds and ninety-eight year-olds. I received sixty cards from one of our Bat Mitzvah students, Harli Kozak, who decided that after learning so much about sacrifice, she wanted to sacrifice some of her own funds and ask her friends to do the same. She and her mother, after collecting the money from friends and family members, purchased the cards and presented them to me, beaming. They were beaming. I was beaming. It was a beam I never could have anticipated, while eating dinner on the night of January 2. It was a perfect beam.

On the evening of Friday February 3, after Shabbat services, when I went home to pack for the trip down to New Orleans, I took 530 cards with me. That's how many cards we collected. In just over two weeks we collected 530 cards. My suitcase consisted of running shoes and Target cards. My carry-on consisted of books and Target cards. I filled Lisa's cosmetic bag with cards. I stuffed my pockets with cards. I felt the weight of the cards and the weight of the hurricane and the weight of the response from our community.

After the *minyan* on Saturday morning Lisa and I rushed to Lagueardia Aiport. We flew 1175 miles on Saturday and 1175 miles back on Sunday, so that I could run 13.1 miles, we could distribute the 530 cards, show our brothers and sisters in New Orleans that we care, and try to demonstrate the importance of social action. The flight down, via Atlanta, was long, and tiring, as was our experience as a whole, but invigorating, as was our experience as a whole. At 7:00pm local time we landed in New Orleans, Louisiana. By 7:45 we'd checked into our hotel. By 8:00 we were out on the streets, in the midst of the city, ready, hungry, tired, unsure, excited, and a bit disoriented.

The French Quarter was alive, but not nearly as crowded as it might have been on a Saturday night, say, six months ago. Restaurants were darkened. "Re-Opening Soon" signs abounded. Tourist t-shirts once promoting the New Orleans of debauchery now took a back seat to t-shirts now promoting the New Orleans (temporarily) ruined by a) Katrina b) incapable leadership. All of that being said, we saw no shortage of dining and drinking. There was jazz and costumes and the beads of course. Everywhere we looked, both that night, and the following day, renewal seemed to be on everyone's mind,

whether they knew it or not. People seemed determined to move forward, move on, rebuild, start again. And we wanted to help.

We awoke the following morning at 5:00 for what would be one of the longest days I've ever known. By the time we were out the door fifteen minutes later I already had the pre-race jitters. My stomach was turning and I was freezing. Outside, on our way to the car, we passed dozens who hadn't made their way to bed yet, wandering around with their margaritas and beer. The city smelled of dirt and alcohol. The site of the start and finish was just outside of the Super Dome, which I had last seen on CNN as its roof was being torn to pieces by gusting winds, its parking lot was flooding, and thousands of refugees, shocked and abandoned, were attempting to find shelter inside. It was fitting that it was still dark when we arrived. Seeing it sit, scarred, in this quiet cold, now seemed fitting in a way. Officials were just setting up the starting area. A few runners were congregating, but there was a calm otherwise. I wondered where the screaming mothers were, what had become of them and their children who I'd seen in rafts or on cots, in lines at decimated hospitals, waiting for doctors who'd never come.

Within an hour the starting area was teeming with runners from all fifty states, eighteen different countries, and countless media vans. I saw ABC, NBC, CNN, the Washington Post, and others. We saw stations we had never heard of, reporters on every corner. We saw helicopters overhead, flatbed trucks loaded with equipment. It wasn't the Super Bowl, but it was close. Like the temperature, now rising from the forties into the high fifties, the energy level was also on the rise. People were upbeat, chatty, proud. There was an air of togetherness, rebuilding. Yes, I had flown the nearly 1200 miles from New York, but the fellow next to me had flown in from Oregon, another from Southern California, another from Maine, another from Montreal. We were together, strong, here. 3000 people in all were participating, either in the marathon, the half marathon, or the 5k. Everyone there for another reason, with another story, from another community, different heights and body types and ages and running regiments, suddenly together. Together. Video cameras rolled as the Star Spangled Banner blared through speakers, echoing off buildings with missing windows, down avenues still littered with debris, branches piled high, abandoned cars. And then, in an instant, before I knew it, we were off.

I was anxious through the first few miles. I was still somewhat cold and worried about starting too fast, as has happened to me more than once. My plan was to stay totally relaxed through the first eight miles, come through mile eight in about 1:15:00, then evaluate how I feel and take it from there. I wanted to run with my eyes. I wanted to talk to people as I went. In those first few miles, as I settled into my pace, running through the French Quarter, I chatted with a fellow from Santa Cruz and a few girls from Florida. I realized early on, based on these conversations, that this was very much a runners' race. That is, everyone around me seemed to be a fairly serious runner. This was the runner's way of giving back perhaps. By mile four I was running amongst a group of a dozen people and had surmised that every one of us had run a marathon in the last six months: the New York City Marathon, the Houston Marathon, the Disney

Marathon, the Richmond Marathon, the Chicago Marathon... Some had run a marathon just two weeks earlier and were planning on running an entire marathon again, now.

We ran along Decatur Street, onto Esplanade Avenue, away from the Mississippi River. Toward mile five I began to see some of the more serious damage from Hurricane Katrina. Houses entirely boarded up. Fallen roofs. Uprooted trees on almost every block. I dodged potholes almost knee deep. Heading north, I left the heart of the city, entering into City Park. There, over the course of miles six through nine, I ran along an utter contradiction. On the one hand, color all around: trees in full bloom, wild grasses, rolling hills. On the other hand, the realization that these greens have been partially facilitated by an inordinate amount of rainfall. I thought of Noah, in Genesis 8, after the flood, sending out the dove, the dove returning with a green olive leaf. I thought of Bono's line in *A Beautiful Day*: After the flood all the colors came out. I also was reminded of the silences Noah might have known. There was no one, or next to no one, out there to cheer, especially in City Park, which borders Lakeview and the Fairgrounds. There was no one. No one's left. That's how it seemed at times. There were miles when I ran along in complete silence, listening to nothing but the sound of my own footsteps.

I passed mile eight in 1:15:11, eleven seconds off my goal pace, but was feeling strong. I picked it up some and ran with a woman from Atlanta for the next two miles. I'm not sure if I was carrying her or vice versa but we proved good companions. We passed a sign around mile nine that indicated that the water had risen to eight and a half feet there during the hurricane. This silenced us, again.

Making my way toward the finish, I remembered that I was under trained. I also realized that I didn't care. I decided that I was going to push it for the last three miles, no matter what. I came through mile ten in 1:33:18. The trek back to the Super Dome seemed long and I was tired, but determined. I thought about family. I thought about my extended synagogue family. I also thought about the Target cards, the notes, the Bono quote, the devastation, I thought about the Super Dome, and all of the terrible silences this city has known since Katrina. I crossed the finish line in 1:58:13. I had apparently finished 452nd out of 1,426.

The next hour or so went like this: After I finished, I all but collapsed into Lisa's arms. I collected myself, drank a bottle of water, a Gatorade, ate two bananas, and stretched out a bit. After taking some pictures, we decided we'd stick around the finish area for another few minutes because they'd just made an announcement that the marathon leader was on his way back to the Super Dome and would be there soon. At this point a lot of the half marathon runners were coming in and the silence we'd experienced earlier in the day was giving way to an almost tangible energy. We assumed a spot, as did hundreds of others, on an overpass above the finish line. We waited. First we saw the police escort, no less than a dozen motorcycles and two cars. Then came the media truck, a flatbed laden with cameras and photographers. We waited. And behind them, a minute later, glowing, flying, came little Brendan Minihan, a New Orleans native. He crossed the finish in 2:36:44, averaging 5:59 per mile for 26.2 miles of fight.

He carried the entire city on his back, the entire stadium. I thought of Noah emerging after the flood. I thought of new beginnings.

Lisa and I returned to the hotel, quickly checked out, and made our way to Touro Synagogue for the next phase of our day. There, religious school was just letting out. Cars were strewn about Saint Charles Avenue. Mothers fetching daughters. Fathers running after sons. With a bag full of Target cards, we found Eileen Hamilton, the education director there, and Cantor Seth Warner, as well as a couple of congregants, such as the ever courageous Julie Grant Meyer, who was in the building for a class on Stress Relief. They were eager to show us the building and talk to us about life after Katrina. “The fact that we offer classes on Stress Relief is not so different than many congregations,” Julie explained. “It’s what happens in those classes. People discuss delayed insurance checks, mail we haven’t received in months, defunct hospitals, our prescriptions, and unemployment.” The cantor had lost his home and all of his wedding presents and yet he found a way to laugh about these losses in discussing them with me and Lisa. I wondered if it was the children racing through the religious school hallways again, returning to the school only recently, or if it was the comfort of standing in a synagogue that was founded in 1828. I marveled at the fact that the stained glass in the sanctuary survived Katrina. We learned that a lot of it was away at the time, being cleaned, something of a minor miracle. Then, an ultra-orthodox gentleman zipped past and I did something of a double take before the group explained to that desperate times call for desperate measures. Chabad of New Orleans has periodically been using Touro’s space for weddings and other miscellaneous events since its own building was decimated during the storm, a notion that the most stringent of Talmudic rabbis speak to once and again in allowing pregnant women to occasionally eat *treife*, for instance, or allowing women to occasionally *daven* with men, to name just a couple of examples. Before we had to go I left the gift cards with the cantor and explained that these are not from me alone or even Temple Sinai alone, but all of us in a way, as a sign that you have not been forgotten. We wanted to remind you that you have not been forgotten.

A few blocks over, at Temple Sinai, we had another fascinating encounter, this time with Rabbi Ed Cohn. He spoke to us of the questions kids bring to us these days, about God, about family, about helping others. He spoke of significant declines in membership, holding High Holiday services in Baton Rouge, and what leadership now means in New Orleans. We discussed perspective and loss and rebirth. We were, again, all too pleased to be able to present him with a large bag of Target cards, which he vowed to pass along to congregants and members of the community still very much in need. I handed the bag to him and he opened a drawer, noting that they were almost out of their stock of “gifts” to distribute to congregants. “Actually,” he said, “all that I have left are a couple of gift certificates from a Rabbi Jerry David in Cherry Hill, New Jersey.” He held up two cards with my father’s distinctive handwriting on them. There was another silence. A different silence. A silence of irony or togetherness or miracles. A silence related to the smallness of the world.

From Temple Sinai we drove a few blocks further to the Tulane University Hillel house, hoping to distribute our few remaining cards. There we met with one of the

associate directors and her boyfriend, who had also run the half marathon that morning. We played Jewish Geography and asked about the students, some of whom would be coming by for a Super Bowl Party that evening. We were relieved to see students milling about outside, around the house, returning to campus. It was the collegiate version of kids running through the religious school hallways. Jodi, the associate director, assured us that the cards would go to faculty members, students, alumni, and board members in need. She loved the weight of the bag. All of us did.

At this point, we had only a few hours before our flight left. We made a decision to venture into the Ninth Ward, an area devastated by Katrina. A great deal of the media gravitated toward this area due to the sheer fragility of it beforehand and the total destruction of it as a result. One bedroom houses suddenly stood beneath six, seven, eight feet of water. Single mothers clung to their children. And vice versa. We passed playgrounds and churches, schools, restaurants, laundromats, furniture stores, and groceries without a sign of life. For twenty minutes we heard nothing but the sound of our own car engine. We saw the world after the flood and it was terrible.

By the time we made it to the airport both of us were exhausted, though I didn't sleep on the plane. I read and I thought and I looked again and again at the pictures on our digital camera. I also started to write and I suppose I haven't stopped since, putting down paragraphs between meetings and teachings and meals and everything else. A day that began at a Holiday Inn in New Orleans at 5am ended in our Queens apartment at 1am. Now, I keep thinking about all of the images and ideas and stories, all of the sermons I gathered in just thirty-six hours, a lifetime's worth of images and stories and sermons perhaps. It's fitting, I suppose, in that these people lost a lifetime's worth of stories and sermons, as it were, in some thirty-six hours.

Maybe we can help them re-gain, re-gain some of the stories, write new stories, re-build, work toward renewal. Work away from the silences. We can run to renew. ReNew Orleans. So it goes.

Thanks for reading.