

Disaster and Dedication: The Story of Meyerland's Jewish Community

By Anna Mayzenberg

"The synagogue where I was bar mitzvahed [in the 1960s] was basically destroyed by [Harvey]. They've torn it down now ... I visited Europe where my father was bar mitzvahed in 1920-something. That synagogue still stands, though it's a wreck after going through the war. ... The one where I studied is gone. And the elementary school that I went to is gone."¹
— David Lowy

In the mid-1950s, the 1,200-acre Meyerland subdivision promised to be a new suburban haven for middle- and upper-class Houstonians. The popular ranch-style houses and neighborhood amenities quickly attracted residents from other parts of Houston, and they started buying homes before construction even began. Houston's Jewish community, which dates to the 1840s, had previously relocated multiple times before settling down in Meyerland, with synagogues migrating to the new neighborhood along with their congregants, creating a place to call home.²

Meyerland was not a disaster-prone area when buyers first purchased houses there in 1955. When the flooding began, many residents had been there for nearly thirty years. Hydrologists and engineers told them that, because Houston expanded so quickly and without regulation in the 1970s and 1980s, the consequences, namely water runoff and constant flooding, were theirs to bear. While some neighbors left over time, the Jewish community — now approximately 14 percent of Meyerland's population — had firmly established itself in the area.³

Meyerland grew rapidly from its beginnings in 1955. Homes, such as this one on Valkeith Drive (1960), frequently sold before construction was completed.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006-2585.

Since the 1980s, flooding in the Greater Meyerland area has gotten progressively worse, with the Memorial Day flood in 2015, the Tax Day flood in 2016, and Hurricane Harvey in 2017 leaving residents anxious and dismayed at the loss of community landmarks. Nevertheless, much of the Jewish community remains unwilling or unable to pick up and relocate. Not only is Meyerland a source of culture and purpose for Jews, but they have proven themselves to be valuable members of the community. Whether it be through synagogues or the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center (JCC), the Jewish community has brought people together to provide service in an amazing and consistent way. Because their neighborhood became incredibly disaster-prone, multiple community organizations learned to provide help to everyone in times of need, as their faith and culture taught them to do and necessity demanded.

For many Jews, the kinship and shared culture that



Even as water receded, the Houston Fire Department conducted rescue operations in Meyerland.

Photo courtesy of Nomi Solomon.



permeates much of their community makes the thought of moving out of Meyerland unbearable. Community member Nirayl Cororve described observant Orthodox Jews, as required by their faith, to be “really traditional ... [O]n the Sabbath they walk — they don’t drive; their community’s very geared towards living with [their] neighbors and walking to people’s houses ... [and] being close knit, so being far away ... is not an option.”⁴ This necessity of being in close proximity to the Jewish community makes moving away challenging, even in response to a natural disaster.

The difficulties arise not only from physical distance but emotional as well. Renee Cohen, who is an Orthodox Jew, explained that, for her, Judaism is not simply a religion. “We do so much Jewishly,” she added, “like every minute of our lives ... I don’t think of the Jewish community as a place to do Jewish stuff. ... It is part of the structure of our day, from the time we wake up to the time we go to sleep.” She wants her children to grow up in an environment where they feel “like they’re part of something” because, at some point, they will become the “other.” She knows from experience that being the only Jewish person in a group or having to constantly be the lone representative for Jews in other communities can be overwhelming. In addition, some parents want their children to grow up seeing the diversity of the Jewish community or to have the same rabbi walk them through all of their different stages of life.⁵ Whatever it may be that brings the Jewish community together in Meyerland, it is not going away.

Those who do leave their place of comfort risk regretting it later. Eyal Enav, who immigrated from Israel to Houston, spoke about his experiences: “We heard stories of other people that decided to move away ... They were basically

disconnected ... they were sorry that they made the move.” Barbara Marcus, who chose to move, returns for things she cannot replace: “I’ve been trying to find a place to get my hair done. ... I never have found any place that I like as much as the little place [in Meyerland]. ... I go back to the [JCC] for different events. I miss those, too.”⁶ The personality and richness of culture in Meyerland are distinct and irreplaceable, even when one feels they cannot stay.

While residents find it difficult to leave the Jewish community behind, Hurricane Harvey also made it difficult to stay. The JCC and synagogues, the anchors of the community, were drastically affected in unprecedented ways. Rabbi Jill Levy, the director of Jewish Living and Learning at the JCC at the time, indicated that Harvey’s flooding reached a new high point with ten feet of water in the building’s lower level, leaving its detached tennis center as the only accessible building. Congregation Brith Shalom’s Rabbi Ranon Teller pointed out that his synagogue’s “closest synagogue partner, [Congregation] Beth Yeshurun ... flooded badly. Most of their rabbis’ homes flooded ... and the ... United Orthodox Synagogue flooded badly again, for the fourth time.” Yet, neither rabbi’s tale ended there.⁷

The Jewish community aimed to recover at full speed, stepping up to ensure that Greater Meyerland had the most efficient possible response to flooding. With only the tennis center available, the JCC still managed to aid Greater Meyerland and Southwest Houston. Immediately, the staff held phone meetings and divided up all the tasks they could do to help. The tennis center became a base for distributing supplies and, later, a preschool. Rabbi Levy even “worked on the national gift card drive to ... give that cash in hand to people as they needed it.”⁸

Rabbi Shlomo Litvin of Kentucky with Chabad-Lubavitch surveys the damage at United Orthodox Synagogue after helping remove damaged holy items. The synagogue, where David Lowy was bar mitzvahed, was torn down and is being rebuilt.

Photo courtesy of Chabad of Texas Archive.



Brith Shalom similarly refused to quit when faced with tragedy, offering Beth Yeshurun a place to worship, although Teller admits “it was a challenge to match up the two [synagogue] cultures.” Both are Conservative congregations, but Beth Yeshurun’s membership is more than double Brith Shalom’s, which alters how congregants interact with their peers and their rabbi. Nevertheless, Brith Shalom was up and running within a week and immediately willing to extend that generosity. Beyond that, the synagogue’s leadership “asked people to show up in the morning and then [organized] them into teams and [sent] them out to a home.” Although Rabbi Teller described the situation as “horrifying, devastating, and tragic,” it was also “inspiring to see people’s willingness to get in there, sometimes at their own detriment, because there was toxic water and manual labor.”⁹



Rabbi Avrohom Litvin of Kentucky (left) and Rabbi Yossi Serebryanski of Colorado examine Torah scrolls rescued from the chapel of Seven Acres, a local Jewish assisted living facility. They are two of fifty Chabad rabbis who volunteered to assist with the relief effort in Houston after Hurricane Harvey. Photo courtesy of Chabad of Texas Archive.

The recovery process went beyond simply handing out money and mucking out people’s homes. University of Houston professor Irving Rothman, z”l, mentioned the need to recover scrolls of the Torah with the Five Books of Moses, “Members of our congregation went in waist deep and carried them out in plastic bags and took them to their houses.” Not everything could be saved, of course. “But there are thousands of thousands of books,” he continued. “You’re not allowed to burn Jewish books, so there’s a large, large ... grave, dug outside of the synagogue in an earthen work. All the books that were flooded were ... buried [there]. Because a book is a live thing. You don’t burn it, you bury it.”¹⁰ The commitment to Judaism and the community stands out in these stories; Jews will risk their lives to tread through murky waters and salvage the texts that guide them, and they will respect those left behind.



In need of boxes to pack up things that survived the flood, Meyerland resident Renee Cohen visited the operations center for Chabad Harvey Relief. Her van survived because Torah Day School opened its elevated parking area to prevent cars from flooding.

Photo courtesy of Chabad of Texas Archive.

“Someone packed snacks for my kids when school started up. Someone was in charge of their lunches. They had new backpacks and new lunch bags.” These acts of kindness minimized the loss that Cohen’s children had to endure after the storm.¹¹

Doris Yudelevich, a Chilean Jewish immigrant said, “[I] didn’t leave home for ten days to have to buy something; boxes and crates of water would arrive.” On Thursdays, people brought her Jewish braided bread, called challah, so that she could have it on the Sabbath Friday and not lose that custom.¹² Jewish community members were picking up the slack where residents simply could not, emotionally and physically, allowing them to process and recover as best as they could.

What is it that propels both the Jewish flood survivors and volunteers to provide aid during these crises? Religion has a great deal of influence. Rabbi Teller and Brian Cororve, a Jewish Meyerland resident and estate attorney, discussed the way that their faith impacted their responses to the flood. “At some point I felt assured that I had done as much as I could,” Rabbi Teller said, adding, “I think that was a key to my religious philosophy, which is that humans have agency. That we are empowered to work this world in God’s image, and not rely on God to do everything. ... After you have done all that you can do, then the rest is in God’s hands. But not before.” Rabbi Teller’s faith pushed him forward to exhaust every option he had in terms of helping people and helping himself. Brian Cororve, who is Nirayl’s husband, was encouraged by his faith as well, indicating how Judaism helped his mental state more than anything else. “Because of tradition and ritual,” he said, “there are certain things that made you realize that life goes on and things just keep moving forward, and that’s what you have to do too.”¹³ Judaism’s impact ranged from encouraging



Rabbi Ranon Teller.

Photo courtesy of Congregation Brith Shalom.

Jewish community members to aid those in need to being a source of stability for its members; their faith never failed to support the recovery of Meyerland.

After all was said and done, as hefty as recovery efforts were, Harvey still damaged Meyerland's Jewish community. Synagogues grew smaller, and some Jews could not handle experiencing this type of heartbreak and disaster again. Doris Yudelevich explained that when she talks to people from outside Houston, they tell her, "You have a community that doesn't exist elsewhere." Doris agrees that the Jewish community is "very concentrated in the zone of Bellaire and Meyerland," but "a consequence of Harvey is that people have spread out, which is the sad part because [before], you felt that you had support, that you lived within something important."¹⁴



In stark contrast to the beautiful neighborhood, streets were lined with the remnants of flooded homes after Harvey.

Photo courtesy of Revolution Messaging, Flickr.*

For some residents, three floods in three years was enough, but for others it strengthened their community ties. After Harvey, Renee Cohen observed that her synagogue, Meyerland Minyan, shrunk more than it had in 2015 and 2016, explaining, "With those first floods, there were really only a few families affected. So, it didn't really shake the shul in the same way. This time ... it was so many [people] ... It is really small now, and it is sad to see because it is such a special place and there is so much learning going on there, and growth, and it is just so small now." Nevertheless, Harvey managed to bring the community together emotionally as much as it spread them apart physically. Nirayl Cororve pointed out that the Jewish community's strength was boosted by this experience, forcing them to fight for what they had. She asserted that "the coming together of the community and really saying, 'these are important things to us ... we're going to preserve them,'" was "a positive ... People have realized the value in all of these [community] places, and they're not going anywhere."¹⁵

Brith Shalom and Beth Yeshurun synagogues similarly found hope and community within one another, with Brith



Meyerland resident Nirayl Cororve walks through the flood waters by her home. In the midst of disaster, she found strength in her community.

Photo courtesy of the Cororve family.

Shalom holding a bat mitzvah for a Beth Yeshurun family. Rabbi Teller described it as honoring "a sweet young woman with a beautiful voice [chokes up] — that hits an emotional button. We invited them to have their bat mitzvah with us, in our sanctuary. ... It couldn't have been more beautiful. They had friends and family from out of town come in with all this gratitude, energy, and love. I was deeply grateful to be a part of that experience."¹⁶ This bat mitzvah was the light at the end of a long, grueling tunnel of recovery, and it solidified the Jewish bond between the two synagogues more than ever before.

The Greater Meyerland Jewish community is as committed to its neighborhood today as it was when it first put down roots there in 1955. Some people are hopeful that large-scale flooding will not happen again; others, like Nomi Solomon, are skeptical, despite "a big movement within the community just about the safety and security and the future." Regardless, the neighborhood is filled with loyal mom-and-pop businesses, such as Three Brother's Bakery, which, the *Houston Chronicle* reported, "has now flooded three times too, and they're still staying put ... There is a commitment to the area." A new H-E-B has opened with a 95,000-square-foot building and a massive kosher section, filling the place of Belden's, a Jewish grocery store that closed its doors after Harvey.¹⁷ No matter what comes, it seems, the Jewish community of Meyerland refuses to quit on its neighborhood.

*We come with our community. We stay with our community.
We seek our community.*¹⁸

— Nomi Solomon

Anna Mayzenberg is pursuing a bachelor's degree in management information systems with a minor in phronêsis from the Honors College at the University of Houston. She is a *Houston History* intern and aspires to have a writing career.