

Though nothing can erase from our minds those chilling post-storm photos of Beth Israel's Torahs being carried through chest-deep water, the dedication of a 14-year-old girl from Los Angeles, combined with the dedication of Beth Israel's lay leadership, has resulted in images of hope and rebirth that will buoy the Jewish community in its recovery process.

On Sunday, August 27, 200 community members were privileged to see a new Torah carried lovingly down West Esplanade Avenue in Metairie from Chabad Center to Gates of Prayer Congregation (where Beth Israel is now holding services in its chapel) as the centerpiece of a parade of men, women and children dancing to joyous klezmer music.

They watched as the empty ark was opened and the Torah, a gift of Young Israel of Century City, Ca., and the Los Angeles Jewish community, was placed lovingly in its new home. They kissed the Torah as it was carried throughout the chapel. They listened to Eddie Gothard, past president of Beth Israel, read from the synagogue's new Torah for the first time, under a chuppah (canopy) and surrounded by children. And they heard how one impassioned teenager can make a difference.

Recalling that she was "horrified and consumed by the TV images" of Beth Israel under water, Haley Fields, then just 13 years old, felt compelled to act. She said, "It was incomprehensible to me how a synagogue could be without a Torah. It is a tree of life for the Jewish people."

Determined to raise money to buy Beth Israel a Torah, Haley created a charitable organization, Every Minute Counts, with the help of her family. She began to sell watches emblazoned with that phrase at her day school and synagogue and set up displays at kosher restaurants in the area. Soon her synagogue, Young Israel, took it on as a project as did several other congregations in Los Angeles.

In the space of a few months, Haley had sold 3,500 watches and raised \$18,000.

This money, supplemented with contributions from her synagogue and other donors in the Los Angeles area, was used to purchase a Torah, two Torah covers (one just for High Holiday use), and a silver breastplate and crowns.

When Haley was speaking, Jackie Gothard, Beth Israel's president and the driving force keeping it going this past year, welled up with tears.

Gothard recalled, "At first, after the storm we cried and cried. Then we got to work. Whenever we got discouraged, we remembered that it was only a flood; that we did not suffer through a pogrom or the Holocaust or the Inquisition or some act of anti-Semitism. It was only a flood."

The generosity of others—locally, nationally, and internationally--has strengthened the Beth Israel congregants as well. People came to clean up the synagogue; others provided prayerbooks and ritual objects.

And Haley provided a Torah.

Beth Israel Update

The floodwaters destroyed everything inside Beth Israel, including the seven Torahs and every prayerbook, which were all buried. However, the building is structurally sound and could be renovated.

While it is deciding its future, Beth Israel is holding services in the chapel at Gates of Prayer. Rabbi Loewy offered this home, for as long as Beth Israel wants it, saying, "A Jewish community is healthy, when all expressions of Jewish life are available and in positive relationships with one another. Gates of Prayer is pleased to help Beth Israel return to strength. Ultimately, we all benefit."

Beth Israel is relying primarily on visiting rabbis and knowledgeable lay people to lead services, which are held several times a month.

To facilitate a steady flow of visitors, Beth Israel has purchased a private home near Gates of Prayer where visiting clergy and lay people can stay for Shabbat. Because of zoning regulations, religious services cannot be held in this home.