

URBAN PLANNING

Like many of you, I've been thinking a lot about the city of New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina. Obviously, I mourn the loss of life there, I'm angered that the needs of the most vulnerable residents of the city were largely ignored, and I'm heartened by the compassionate response given to many of those who fled. I'm also struggling mightily to put my arms around the reality of a city with a character so ingrained in our popular imagination left so devastated.

The book of Ecclesiastes teaches: "There is nothing new under the sun!" Jewish tradition is filled with rituals and teachings focused on the near destruction of another famous city. In fact, when the Hebrew Bible ends, the majority of Jews are living in exile with only a remnant left to reside amid the ruins of a decimated Jerusalem.

But it's an inspiring thing about the human spirit: there is, among so many of us, an ever-present urge to find a hint of sunshine through the clouds. The Israelite prophet Jeremiah actually preached that hidden alongside the horrible destruction of Jerusalem and the resulting exile was a holy opportunity. Jeremiah cast his lot with the Jews left behind, those deemed by the Babylonians too 'insignificant' to be forced out of their ruined homes. Jeremiah turned down the offer to live a privileged existence with the Jewish elite in Babylon, excited by the possibility that formerly voiceless Jews would actually be the ones to begin re-imagining and rebuilding Israel. For centuries, Israelite prophets had bemoaned the disappearance of values such as equity and compassion from the Jewish kingdom. Now, out of the rubble, Jeremiah dared to dream that the exiled population would one day return to find that the grounding for a new and better society had already been laid. Then they would learn, he prayed, to listen to all.

Part of what has made New Orleans so wonderful is that its 'easy' atmosphere has given birth to the most unique and inspiring cultural hybrids. The Cajun lifestyle emerged from a blending of the French and the American south. 'Mardi Gras Indians' are the descendants of former African-American slaves who were rescued by, and then lived among, various Native American tribes. These groups and others like them, however, were also among the most marginalized before Katrina. Will the voices of these 'outcasts', voices of passion and valuable experience, now be included as New Orleans plans its own renewal?

Thank goodness, St. Louis has been spared those types of disasters. But we do seem to be in a period of rebuilding and we too are struggling as a city to include all voices as we make important decisions. Since we began, our Holy Ground Collaborative (six diverse congregations dedicated to involvement in our neighborhood) has discussed the changes in the Central West End. While much about the recent developments (such as high-rise condos and the revitalization of Gaslight Square) in our backyard are healthy for the neighborhood and exciting, there are negative consequences as well, including the displacement of long-

term residents and the loss of diversity that makes city living so meaningful. Unlike the situation in Jerusalem, here the 'haves' can stay, while the 'have-nots' may be forced into an exile.

Most of all, we are concerned that all of this is going ahead without everybody being heard and included in the plans. How do we, as residents of the city, or as members of a city congregation, feel about the changes in our neighborhood? Do we have neighbors that are being hurt by them? What is the most socially responsible way for these inevitable changes to move forward? Holy Ground is in the midst of planning a neighborhood-wide forum that we hope will amplify many and diverse voices. In the meantime, we have set aside our November Social Responsibility Shabbat (**Friday, November 11 at 7:30**) to hear from you. **Reverend Rick Edwards of Cornerstone Institutional Baptist Church** will get us started with a talk on the responsibility congregations have to their neighborhoods. Then we hope to hear from you: city residents, developers, activists and concerned citizens. Our goal is to listen carefully to all of the voices so that our congregational response will help the rebuilding of our cities bring not isolation and despair, but repair and renewal.

B' Ahavah (With love),

Rabbi Randy