

Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project

MICHAEL STRASSFELD

Interviewed by Jayne K. Guberman

June 27 & September 20, 2016

**A Project of the Jewish Studies Program
at the University of Pennsylvania**

Jayne Guberman (JG): My name is Jayne Guberman, and today is Monday, June 27, 2016. I'm here with Michael Strassfeld at his home in New York City and we're going to record an interview for the Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project. Michael, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Michael Strassfeld (MS): Yes, you do.

JG: Great. So, as you know, today we're going to explore your experiences during the early years of the *havurah* movement when you became involved with Havurat Shalom. And we're going to focus particularly on the first five years or so of the *havurah* and your involvement in it — and frame that with your experiences earlier, and then what happens afterwards in your life as well. I'd like to start by talking about your personal and family background a little bit to set the stage for your involvement in Havurat Shalom. So let's begin with your family when you were growing up. Can you tell me very briefly (00:01:00) about your family background — who they were and how your family actually first came to the United States?

MS: So my father was born in the Ukraine in a town called Stanislav, and actually, his immediate family moved to Germany, so he really grew up mostly in Germany, from the time he was seven or eight until he was fifteen. And they luckily left Germany in 1935. They managed to get a visa to come to the States. And it was an Orthodox family. My grandfather was a rabbi, but mostly a cantor and a *shochet*, a ritual slaughterer. My father went to rabbinical school, Torah Vodaas, a rabbinical school in Brooklyn, and became an Orthodox rabbi. (00:02:00) And his first pulpit was in Saratoga Springs, Upstate New York, where I was born. And he met my mother while he was in the yeshiva, and they got married, and she also came from an Orthodox family. But when I was three we moved to Boston, an old Jewish neighborhood in Boston — Mattapan/Dorchester, where my father was a rabbi. And that's really where I grew up, and I have an older sister and a younger brother, and I grew up, as I said, in Mattapan.

JG: Where did you live?

MS: We lived on Hazelton Street, the street off of Blue Hill Avenue, which was — I often tell New Yorkers it was kind of like the Grand Concourse. There was this big street, Blue Hill Avenue, which was the commercial street, and then there were residential streets (00:03:00) running off of that. We lived right across the street from the local branch of the Boston Public Library in Mattapan, so we were a family that read a lot. Shabbat afternoon there would often be all of us sitting around in the living room reading books, kind of separate and together.

JG: What was the Jewish community like in the 1950s and sixties in Mattapan/Dorchester? This was a period of tremendous change. People were — many Jews were moving out to the suburbs in that period, over the course of those years as well, so what was it like, as you remember it?

MS: The analogy to the Grand Concourse, I think, is appropriate. It was really a working class, lower middle-class neighborhood. And it was very Jewish. There was one non-Jew living on our street. (00:04:00) So it was a very Jewish neighborhood. But ethnically Jewish. I mean, there were a lot of synagogues, but most of the people didn't attend synagogues except maybe High Holidays. But it was a very ethnically Jewish neighborhood. The political boss was the guy who ran the funeral home, the Jewish funeral home. He was the political boss in the neighborhood. I remember him walking up and down Blue Hill Avenue with some candidate running for local office, introducing this guy to people, as a retail politicking, in the neighborhood. And what happened was, we left in 1965. And shortly after that the neighborhood really changed. It was actually an example (00:05:00) of kind of banks destroying a neighborhood. It became blacks moved into the neighborhood, Jews left the neighborhood. And you know, already Jews were moving to kind of suburban — Brookline, Newton, you know farther south, Randolph and Sharon. But the neighborhood really changed dramatically.

JG: What do you remember about your father's shul — and where was the shul in the neighborhood?

MS: It was on Woodrow Avenue. It was actually called the Woodrow Avenue Synagogue. There were two synagogues right across the street from each other on Woodrow Avenue, and it was a large synagogue. But there were something like two hundred people that would show up for Shabbat morning services, all of whom were over the age of sixty-five. (00:06:00) And when my father came actually, he — at first, there was an older rabbi, and they wanted to have like a younger American, even though he wasn't born in America. But my father spoke without — even though he came here when he was fifteen, he spoke without any accent. It was kind of interesting. At first he gave sermons in Yiddish like the old rabbi and then they probably said no, we want English sermons.

JG: And did you go regularly to shul when you were a child, and your family?

MS: Well it's interesting. When I was younger I would pretend I was sleeping when my father was leaving Saturday mornings, so he was like a nice guy, he didn't want to wake me up. But then at some point I got into going, even though there were — I wasn't the only child that was there, but there were a small number of kids that went. I was

attending a Hebrew day school (00:07:00), Maimonides School, in Boston, and I was into it in some way. So I would go with him pretty regularly as I got somewhat older.

JG: Did your siblings go also, and your mom?

MS: Hm, that's interesting — it was an Orthodox synagogue so my mother sat in the balcony. I would think she went — you know, she didn't come, typically she didn't go as early as — you know my father had to be there on time, and even if I was going myself I guess I would go pretty early. My brother is four and a half years younger so there may have been some times that she didn't come because she had to take care of my brother (00:08:00) at home or something.

JG: Tell me about the Jewish environment in your home when you were growing up. You said you grew up in a Modern Orthodox environment. What did that mean in the fifties and sixties as you were growing up?

MS: Well, I think it meant that my parents were very much engaged in the world. So they were really into, for instance, opera, so we would have all these records that would be playing, and they were involved in — I think it was a stock club, with other people, and they would get together with other people and they would have these, what we would today call potluck, maybe they did that then. I mostly remember my mother making jell-o, all these jell-os with pineapple — really horrible things. (00:09:00) The thing of those years. My father in particular, but both of them were very interested in the world, and my father was really interested in politics. And he was active politically. He marched in Selma; he was involved in the Civil Rights Movement which was, I think, an important influence on me in my life. And in other ways he was involved in kind of early anti-war — this was before the Vietnam War, really this was anti-nukes stuff.

JG: What do you mean when you say he was involved in the Civil Rights Movement? How, for instance?

MS: Well, he went down to Selma and marched with Dr. King in Selma.

JG: In '65, you mean. (00:10:00)

MS: Yeah. And he was also involved locally. At our Passover seder, we would have people over, guests for the seder. And one year there was a black minister from Roxbury, which was the next neighborhood over and the minister was thinking of doing the equivalent of a Haggadah for Civil Rights for blacks as a way to ritualize the experience. I don't think anything ever came of it, but he was kind of sitting at our seder to sort of see

what that was like. So it was unusual, somewhat — I mean, it wasn't unusual in that most of the Jewish community, even the Modern Orthodox community, was of the liberal-minded bent at the time (00:11:00). But it was still — to be that involved, in that neighborhood, it wasn't a suburban Jewish neighborhood where you might have expected a kind of liberal activism. He wasn't the only Orthodox rabbi to march in Selma but it was a — even with everything I said, it was a relatively smaller number of Orthodox rabbis who were that involved and willing to — you know, it was something to go down. My mother, who was a big worrier in her life — I was just talking with Joy, my wife, about this recently and she said, "How did she ever let him go?" And I don't know. I wish I could ask her. She must have been terrified, (00:12:00) those days that she was — he was down in the South. And I remember him coming back and talking about the training they got. What to do in case they were attacked by — which was not a fantasy, you know, not just a fantasy, a nightmare. That they were supposed to lie on the ground and cover the back of your neck with your hands like this to protect the vulnerable spot. It was very real. I think as a kid it didn't feel so real. It probably just felt heroic like some movie. But it was really something, to do that.

JG: Was there ever any thought about you or your sister, who was a little older, going with him or participating in any way?

MS: No. My sister went to the March on Washington. That was in '63, I think. So I was just thirteen. (00:13:00) So I think —

JG: She went, though?

MS: Yeah. She was three years older.

JG: Still, very young.

MS: Yeah.

JG: And was there any way in which your father was involved with the black community in Boston? Mattapan/Dorchester was —

MS: I think in some ways, as I mentioned this about the black minister. I think he had some contacts in that community. And just in general he was involved in kind of liberal politics. My first campaign was 1962. H. Stuart Hughes, who was a professor at Harvard was running for the United States Senate in Massachusetts as an independent candidate on a peace (00:14:00) — and peace at that time meant anti-nuclear — platform. And he was running against Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. the Republican, and Ted Kennedy, making

his first run for Senate. Needless to say, Hughes did not do very well up against two very famous Massachusetts names, Kennedy and Lodge. I went around collecting signatures because Hughes was an Independent, we needed signatures to get him on the ballot. And even though I was — it was actually, you had to be of voting age to collect them — I did it and someone else signed the document. I remember walking up and down the neighborhood getting signatures. And my father — there was a kind of Jewish kosher-style (00:15:00) restaurant, the G & G. I guess kind of like Katz's in New York or something. That was where political rallies were held the night before elections. So that year my father was — I remember him standing on top of a sound truck, giving a speech in favor of H. Stuart Hughes. I saw Hubert Humphrey speak there at a rally.

JG: So the neighborhood had a real political flavor to it, it sounds like also.

MS: Yeah I think it was just — Boston was a very ethnic, so this was the Jewish — I'm sure the candidates were making the rounds of the Italian, the North End, South Boston. So the G&G was very much still ethnic politics. There was the local representatives (00:16:00) were Jewish. Actually one guy ran for mayor and had no chance [*laughs*] in Boston. And lost badly, but he was — I remember that the politicians would make the rounds in the synagogues on High Holidays. They would go from one synagogue to another. They would walk in, just show themselves, stay for ten minutes, and go on to the next one. I think it was similar to politics in all those kind of ethnic neighborhoods, very sort of — in those days too, a very retail, low-key, press the flesh way of operating.

JG: Were your parents affiliated with any political party?

MS: Very much Democrats. (00:17:00) Lifelong Democrats. We ate in our — we had a dining room but we only used that on occasions, maybe Shabbat, I don't remember — we had a kind of large kitchen, that had a kitchen table and there was a TV. We would watch the news on TV at dinner every night. And dinner was — everybody was at dinner, it was the whole family, typical of that time period. My father would end up yelling at the TV [*laughs*]. He was a very mild person, a person I rarely remember being angry, particularly towards me or my siblings. Not never, but he was really not, as I said, kind of a mild and patient person. (00:18:00) But when people would say stupid things, in his opinion, or the opposite, the Republicans, he would have something to say.

JG: Tell me a little bit more though about Jewish life in your home. It was a Modern Orthodox family, so what was the rhythm of Jewish life, and what aspects of Jewish culture were important in your family, or to you personally?

MS: Part of the story for me certainly is that I went to Maimonides Day School which was a day school in the Boston area from kindergarten through twelfth grade. And it was really one of the best Modern Orthodox day schools of its time, and probably still is. And so it was both (00:19:00) a real secular education as well as a Jewish education. It was — because it was founded by Rabbi Soloveitchik, a leading Orthodox theologian and religious authority, it had kind of a broad Jewish education. That is, we didn't just study Talmud. We studied the Prophets and there was an emphasis on Hebrew. One of the blessings of my life is having that education which has served me very well — having a really deep and broad Jewish background. It's not actually that I liked the school [laughs]. I was bored a lot. I would say the school was geared to kind of the middle-range student (00:20:00) and I was smart so — kind of boring for me. And for the kids towards the bottom of the class, they were struggling with the double curriculum. It all depended on — some of the teachers were good, some of them were not, and you often had the same teacher for three or four years in high school, so if they weren't very good — [laughs]. But it was a really good Jewish education that I —

JG: And how was the education for girls in relation to the education for boys there?

MS: Actually, again, part of — Soloveitchik and his wife, Mrs. Soloveitchik, who was more active in the running of the school, which was different than other Orthodox day schools. (00:21:00) Girls and boys were basically the same. I think in high school we had advanced Talmud which was an extra session of Talmud and that may have only been for the guys. But the regular Talmud class, all the Jewish studies classes, and the classes were all co-ed. In more traditional day schools, the girls would be learning separately, particularly in high school, when they became girls and guys became guys. In that sense it was very reflective of the Modern Orthodoxy of our home, which was very much part of the world but also (00:22:00) very Jewish. The pattern of Shabbat and Jewish holidays was really there. And going to synagogue, partly because my father was the rabbi.

JG: What was Shabbat like in your home?

MS: The interesting thing, which I think had to do with — my mother didn't like to entertain or cook, so we rarely had guests for Shabbat, so it was really the family. And I think maybe some of that was also the challenge for rabbis. Well, do we want to invite congregants and is that, then, are we kind of working? (00:23:00) You know, it's the separation of family — but I think it's more that — you know, the family pattern was kind of family. We did lots of things as family. The Passover seder we did have guests, but regularly it was basically the family kind of eating together.

JG: Would you sing? Zemirot and things like that? Or not so much?

MS: Yeah, we would do some singing. There was one point, my father started reading this — I forget, if I concentrate I can remember the name — it was some kind of kids' book. But a chapter book, not a picture book. And he wanted (00:24:00) to read it and I remember being resistant to it, so he gave up on that. Also I think we would discuss things. Not in an organized, okay, let's have this topic, but whether it was politics or Jewish affairs, there would be conversations at the table that all of us would participate in freely. And as I said, we lived across the street from the library and we all liked to read. So often on Shabbat afternoon, we would be sitting around the living room, people just reading books. And it wasn't — not necessarily Jewish books.

JG: And your home, was it *shomer shabbes*?

MS: (00:25:00) Yes. In that sense it was Modern Orthodox. We kept kashrut and we kept Shabbat. When we travelled we would, whatever, have a tuna fish sandwich or salad at Howard Johnson's driving to New York. My mother's parents lived in New York and we would come and visit them sometimes. So we would do that, but we were basically observant. My mother — it was all of that period. My mother didn't cover her hair. I have no idea whether she went to the mikvah or not. I think they did what people who were (00:26:00) Modern Orthodox in that time did. And some things hadn't — caught on isn't the right language. First of all, they wouldn't have said it. I never would have known where she was going. Because they were very —

JG: Modest.

MG: Modest, right. It was all the things that people didn't talk about. I mean, I had an uncle who was divorced twice from the same woman, and didn't ever talk — it was kind of, like, we had some idea something was going on, but it was all those things that in the fifties and early sixties you didn't talk about. Cancer, etc. So there's a kind of, that world of — so at the same time, I'm sure my mother probably wore (00:27:00) a hat to synagogue, but that was the etiquette. It'd be no different than wearing — I guess probably if you went to parties in those days, she might have worn gloves or something. It was a certain style. She certainly wore pants. But I think it was, whenever people in America wore pants, or wore pants outside. That kind of changing style. It didn't really have to do with Orthodoxy. And there were — I think there were small things. We ate regular cheese, we didn't only eat kosher cheese. Because my father heard Rabbi Soloveitchik, who he was, you know, friendly with as an Orthodox rabbi in the Boston area, (00:28:00) say, "That's okay. All American cheeses are really kosher." So they would — it was an interesting phenomenon because when — skipping ahead in time

some, when I was going into my junior year, when I was fifteen, he took a Conservative congregation and Marblehead it on North Shore, North Shore Boston. And then when he retired from that, many years later, they retired down to Boca Raton, Florida, and they joined an Orthodox synagogue. And in some ways they went back to what they both grew up with, and the world they were comfortable with. And they were very happy there, actually, and it was a wonderful community. But it was also — the Orthodox world, from their point of view, and I think, accurately (00:29:00) had shifted more to the right. And my mother, who is more of a skeptic than my father, she enjoyed telling us, “You won’t believe, here’s the new *chumra*, the new stringency.” One crazier than the next, from her point of view. So it was kind of interesting how things had shifted, and the world had shifted.

JG: So obviously that move in 1965 to Marblehead, when your father took a Conservative shul, must have been a major change for everybody. So what drew your father to take a Conservative congregation?

MS: A lot of it was very practical. He looked at his membership, which now instead of being sixty-five was now seventy-five, and realized there wasn’t a real future here. (00:30:00) The truth was, the congregation itself wasn’t very challenging because of the nature of the membership, and the idea about it. And I think he felt he would be doing — whether it was this political work outside, he had become a chaplain at city hospital, a Jewish chaplain. Some of this was financial. And some of it, I think, was it didn’t fill his time and his energy. And he had applied to a number of Orthodox congregations. There weren’t so many that were big. I think he applied to — I think he really wanted this one when he applied — there’s a big Orthodox synagogue in Memphis, and he didn’t get the job. He always felt he didn’t get it because he was a northern (00:31:00) rabbi. And this was the mid-sixties and they were afraid of what he might say in Memphis, whatever. Who knows? And I think he was actually approached by the people from Temple Sinai, this congregation in Marblehead. And he was open enough to it and felt this was a good possibility. He insisted that they stop using an organ on Shabbat, but it was going to be mixed seating, and people were driving to synagogue, and parking in the parking lot. And I think it was somewhat of an adjustment, but I think they were (00:32:00) fine about it. My adolescent rebellion was to be more religious than my father. So I wouldn’t *daven* in his synagogue because it had mixed seating. So I would go, and there was a period of time I was actually reading Torah — I think I was being paid. I was okay about doing that; I thought it was a favor to him. We didn’t tell the people in the congregation that I wasn’t *davening* there. I would just come and sit there, I would sing, whatever.

JG: So what do you mean when you say you weren’t *davening*? If it looked like you were, it sounds like —

MS: (00:33:00) I don't remember this, but I'm sure what I did was I *davened* — Shabbat morning I would say prayers before I went to services. And that was my — you're supposed to *daven* three times a day, and I was still Orthodox, in the sense of feeling like it's an obligation to pray three times a day. I was praying three times a day, mostly not in synagogue. So I continued doing that, but I just wouldn't do it in his synagogue. Which I'm sure was both painful, and in a way he was sort of proud at the same time. It was a weird thing. So I was still going to Maimonides, I commuted from Marblehead (00:34:00) which was a long commute.

JG: How did you get there?

MS: By the Boston & Maine, the suburban railroad line. I think I would get up like 6:30 in the morning to catch the train at twenty [minutes] to 7:00, to get to North Station, take the subway to get to Brookline, walk ten minutes to Maimonides.

JG: Were your siblings still going to Maimonides?

MS: My sister was already in college; she went to Barnard. And my brother, he went to Marblehead High. I can't remember whether that was immediately, or he went to Maimonides one year, or something. But I was the only one commuting.

JG: What was the move (00:35:00) to this upper middle class suburban community like for you, coming from a working class Jewish urban environment your whole life?

MS: I think it was actually challenging for my parents, in the sense that they — there was somewhat jealousy of the — it's upper middle class to upperclass Marblehead, is really, you know, people living in nice homes who were members of the synagogue. And my parents had a house provided to them by the congregation, which was down the street from the synagogue. So it was easy to walk. I mean they didn't do it for that reason, but I think sometimes they found it — particularly my mother (00:36:00), you know, it's an interesting thing, class and values. Do you say, They may have the money, but they don't have the values. Somewhat envy. I think I didn't experience it so much because I wasn't going to Marblehead High so I didn't really have friends in Marblehead. I knew some kids, I guess, through USY, I was involved in a little bit. But I was actually involved in NCSY, which was the Orthodox youth group. So the conventions I went to were those, which weren't kids from Marblehead. They were kids I knew from Maimonides, and people all over New England — it was the New England region. So I think I (00:37:00) didn't really feel so part of Marblehead. I didn't feel the — I don't know if that class

thing was so clear to me, or I felt like — maybe it's because I wasn't going to people's houses, saying, Wow, look at this house, they have a swimming pool, or this or that.

JG: So your friendship group remained —

MS: Yeah the friendship group really remained at Maimonides, yes.

JG: What year did you graduate from high school?

MS: Sixty-seven.

JG: Sixty-seven. And then you started college. So how did you decide where to go to college?

MS: I can't even remember — I remember applying to Columbia. (00:38:00) I think I didn't get in. Maybe I was on the waiting list. I can't remember now. I really wanted to go to Yeshiva University. A good number of the kids in my class at Maimonides went to YU or Stern, the women's division. I didn't want to be — I didn't go because I wanted to be a rabbi, even though I was in — YU has these three different schools, one of which is kind of pre-rabbinic. So I went to that. It's called RIETS. I went to continue studying Torah, particularly Talmud. And I just felt that's what I wanted to do, and I could also have a secular education. So I was happy to (00:39:00) go to Yeshiva University my freshman year.

JG: Do you think you had any career goals or aspirations in mind at that point?

MS: I don't — I was interested in history. I really liked my history teacher at Maimonides. His name was Elbridge — no, Mr. Gerry. He's distantly related to Elbridge Gerry who signed the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution from Massachusetts, I think. So he was definitely not Jewish. I just liked history. Maybe I thought about being — getting a Ph.D. and teaching history. I could have thought that. But as I said, I went to YU to (00:40:00) do both — to continue Jewish education and to go to college. But it wasn't because I wanted to be a rabbi.

JG: So what was your experience like there? You only stayed —

MS: One year. So my experience was — I didn't like it as a school. I thought it was, it felt very high school-ish. We had an enormous number of courses, which — so basically you have the secular, regular courses that you would have at any university. But they're using — we had "Speech," which is like a one credit course — it was all these

(00:41:00), and music, music appreciation. It was all these, some of it was like, really? And then you also had Jewish Studies classes, Bible, Hebrew. And then since you were in the pre-rabbinic, the RIETS program, you spent most of the morning and early part of the afternoon doing Talmud. Preparing on your own, and then going to a *shiur*, class. So basically you were in classes until six o'clock at night. Because it was, except for Talmud, it was courses, so you could have a break. Which meant that you could have very little reading to do because it was just impossible. It wasn't like you're taking four courses or something at university and you're expected (00:42:00) to do all this work. So it felt kind of not great academically. In that sense, I guess, it felt like at Maimonides, I'm not being really challenged enough. I actually thought about taking — the hardest course at Yeshiva University was Greek, Ancient Greek. Two or three people would take this class because it was supposed to be really tough. I almost took it just because it was — but I didn't necessarily know that my freshman year. So that was some of it. Part of the experience was kind of encountering what I would call left-wing Orthodoxy, which is a term (00:43:00) that kind of really no longer exists. I think "open Orthodoxy" today is a somewhat different term. So in that, there was a kind of Modern Orthodoxy, liberal Orthodoxy, and then there was left-wing. And people like Yitz Greenberg and Shlomo Riskin and a few others, both of whom were at Yeshiva University, were kind of the leaders of that. And I was — I think I was attracted to that, coming out of my background where, in some sense, the commitment to liberal politics was also challenging, in a way, to Orthodoxy, Modern Orthodoxy. And I also began to meet people at YU who weren't necessarily liberal politically, and I think the Orthodox world was beginning (00:44:00) to shift then as well. Or just I was coming to a place on my own where I began to wonder about or challenge some of the orthodoxies of Orthodoxy.

JG: What was causing you to challenge it at that point?

MS: I don't know whether it's just part of college, and you start to, like, wait a minute? Really? Is this really true? I remember a talk that Yitz Greenberg gave, talking about being civilly disobedient within Orthodoxy. So that you could say, Look, I really — and I don't remember what the issue was. It could already have been the women's issue. It's kind of early, but it could have been. It just seemed so blatantly, like, what? Why should women be treated differently within Orthodoxy (00:45:00) in terms of the ability to do the things, lead services or whatever. So in a sense he was arguing, like civil disobedience, I'm opposed to this law. And I will be civilly disobedient of it. Which was a pretty radical statement. I don't know what Yitz and Blu, his wife, might have actually done. I think ultimately that was, I felt, both about that, and Yitz also was right then beginning to talk a lot about the Holocaust. I actually took — the first time he offered a course on the Holocaust at Yeshiva University was the year I was there. And even though it was an upper (00:46:00) class course I sort of talked my way into it, as it were, kind of

thing. And he would talk also theologically about how everything has to be different after the Holocaust. And I think for me one of the challenges, which is kind of skipping ahead in the story, was feeling like, yeah, but you have to do it. In the Orthodox world, unless it changed the practice, just changing how you think about it, it doesn't mean so much. So with the civil disobedience, to go back to that for a moment, the list kept on growing of the things I didn't agree with. And then it felt at some point, like, you can't be civilly disobedient to twenty laws. Then there's something wrong with the system. You know, the moral posture of (00:47:00) civil disobedience is: I'm going to take this one thing, maybe two things, and say I just can't live with it, but I'm not just being antinomian. I'm disobeying the law. So I think that was one of the — it was important in my own growth, Jewishly and theologically.

JG: Can you sum up in any way the kinds of issues and laws that you were struggling with? Is there any kind of common denominator to them?

MS: You know, it's a funny thing, I'm struggling to remember. I do think it was about the women's issue. I think it was also an increasing feeling of being out of step with the Orthodox world. So this was '67, '68. The Vietnam War. (00:48:00) There were a small group of us at Yeshiva University who were against, who had a club against the Vietnam War. I seriously considered applying for 4D, the divinity deferment, even though being at YU I had — there's another — a religious, a seminary deferment. I think — I'm not sure now. I'm trying to remember when they did the draft. I think I might have been at Brandeis when you got a lottery number. I think that was later. I got a decent lottery number so I was — when they eliminated the student deferments. (00:49:00) Maybe the 4D was the divinity — anyway. If you were a rabbinical student, you were not going to be eligible to the draft. But there was the conscientious objector deferment. And I had seriously considered doing that and applying for it. I just never did, in the end. So I was feeling like, wait a minute. Most of people here are just happy to have this deferment, or are in favor of the war. And there was — actually the other important turning point was, at least this is how I remember it — Shlomo Riskin gave a talk at Yeshiva University on the ethics of the Vietnam War. And he did a whole analysis of in the Jewish tradition of what's — there's two kinds of wars. (00:50:00) There's a war that you're supposed to fight, like in ancient times for defending Israel, maybe today. And then there's *milhemet rishut*, a war that's permissible; you don't have to do it, but it's allowed. And he was using those categories and he gave the whole analysis. And what I heard at the end was, he said, "Look, you know, whichever the Vietnam War is, whether it's unethical, permissible and" — I don't think he was arguing that it was a mitzvah, a mandatory one — "stay in YU and study." And I thought that was such an ethically bankrupt position to take. Which basically, I heard it as like, let non-Jews go and fight. (00:51:00) You're going to stay here and study Torah. It was just like, no. I think it was just this feeling that

this was not really my — the dissonance between the liberalism and — both political and religious — and Orthodoxy was just not working anymore. I think I decided to transfer because I was just so unhappy with the school. But I think towards the end, those things happened more. And if you want another — so the time of the Columbia riots.

JG: You mean the strike?

MS: It was '68. So that spring, not too far down the street from YU, the Columbia strike, riots, (00:52:00) whichever word, takeover, is happening. During finals at YU, they had — they didn't have a panty raid because there were no women up there. But they had this thing where people were throwing toilet paper rolls out of the windows, and they took the hose and they were — so it was, like, frat, except they didn't have frats. People just partying, mild version at Yeshiva University. This is going on here, and something very serious and complex is happening at Columbia. It just felt, again, one of these images of contrast between these worlds. And so I applied to a number of places to transfer, and I got into Brandeis, (00:53:00) and went to Brandeis. I was still Orthodox. Actually, the interesting thing, when I arrived at Brandeis I was the only student on campus who wore a *kippah* all the time.

JG: This was the fall of '68?

MS: Yes. All the time. I mean, there would be some people who, in a NEJS class, or in the dining room, would put on a *kippah* but it was actually — Orthodox kids were discouraged from going to Brandeis.

JG: Discouraged by whom?

MS: By the Orthodox world. I had, one of my teachers at Yeshiva University, Rabbi Lichtenstein who's the son-in-law of Rabbi Soloveitchik, so really a Modern Orthodox guy, Ph.D. from Harvard in English Literature. (00:54:00) He said, "I hear you're going to Brandeis. Don't go to Brandeis." Because they saw Brandeis as kind of Jewish, but the wrong kind of Jewish. And I think Sachar, who was the founder, Abe Sachar, had a reputation, I think accurately, as being anti-traditional. No one taught Talmud for many years at Brandeis. Because I think he didn't want — that was like, medievalism, that kind of Jewish. So I think kids were — Orthodox kids were discouraged from going to Brandeis because it was, you know — where, Columbia, oh, yeah go, kosher kitchen. The places where kids would be — that's a good place to go, because it's relatively easy to be Orthodox on the campus. So I think the (00:55:00) people who would wear a *kippah* sometimes were kind of traditional Conservative Jewish kids. And that changed —

Brandeis changed, even maybe when I was there. But I was still Orthodox in practice, at least. At Brandeis, you know, I began the gradual moving away from that.

JG: Can you describe that process a little bit?

MS: I think it was just growing, and the distance — I haven't thought about this in a while. I wonder when I stopped *davening* three times a day. Because nobody would know, like, I was doing it, you know. Just, you do Mincha, the afternoon prayer, you take five minutes. I remember in the old days, (00:56:00) I was once in North Station in Boston, went into a phone booth, you pretended you were on the phone and you *davened* Mincha. It was the time, certain set time, so you would just go into a phone booth. I remember that because Bill Russell walked by, and my sister told me that Bill Russell [*motions banging on the booth*], and I wasn't responding because I was in the middle of the Amidah. Never saw Bill Russell again so —

JG: That's a great image.

MS: — so that's why I left because I didn't see Bill Russell! [*laughs*] I sort of wonder, like, some things, when did those things go? And in certain ways the *kippah* was the last to go because (00:57:00) it was a very public statement. Even though there was a piece of me that hated wearing a *kippah* because it was such a public statement. When I was growing up riding the subways in Boston, nobody was wearing a *kippah*. That was very unusual in those days in Boston — never a terrible incident, but kind of comments and whatever. The last thing I wanted to do was stand out in that way.

JG: When did you actually decide not to and do you remember what that was like?

MS: Yeah, I think, there were some gradual things like traveling in the summer. I can't — I wonder whether it wasn't until I joined the (00:58:00) *havurah* that I actually — or whether it was junior, senior year at Brandeis. I don't remember. And I, I would still do it when I went to visit my parents. There was a long time I pretended I was Orthodox to them. That kind of thing. Which was its own issue and dynamic, as you can imagine.

JG: Were you part of a particular Jewish sort of religious community at Brandeis? Describe the Jewish scene there at the time and your involvement with Hillel.

MS: Yeah, I was very involved with Hillel.

JG: Al Axelrad was there?

MS: Al Axelrad was. And I was friendly with Al Axelrad, and I worked for Al as — I don't remember what — (00:59:00) program person. I think it might have been my —

JG: Seventy-two.

MS: I think the year I was a graduate student. I kind of was his program assistant or something. But even before that, even though — you know, Al was not traditional at all, and I think I met every single Israeli leftist in the world *[laughs]* passing through Brandeis. Probably because politically, and — I liked him. I've lost track of him but —

JG: I just saw him recently.

MS: Oh yeah? I was involved with Hillel, probably with the kind of traditional — I would still go to services on Shabbat. (01:00:00)

JG: To a Conservative service? What was there at Brandeis at that point?

MS: I would guess it was a Conservative service. That is, probably it had mixed seating — or maybe not. The chapel — there's the two sides. So maybe it was separate seating. It was like, I think this was the main service. There probably was also Reform services or something but I don't think I went to that. I can't remember now.

JG: And Al was a Reform rabbi, correct?

MS: Right. But he was supportive of — he wasn't — right, so the people I remember hanging out with were sort of the traditional (01:01:00), traditionalists. Some of whom were in — I majored in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, NEJS. They were Larry Schiffman, who came from a Conservative background and is now Orthodox and a professor. Teaches at YU. David Sarna, who's Jonathan Sarna's brother. And Nachum Sarna, their father, was a professor at the time, and I took a lot of courses with him. So I was taking a lot of courses — I majored in NEJS, I took a lot of courses in Jewish Studies, which continued to kind of expand my Jewish background. Somewhat, obviously academically different than Maimonides. And I was involved in Hillel, and ate in Sherman (01:02:00), which was the kosher cafeteria.

JG: Were there teachers who had a long-lasting impact on you? Or just an impact at the time, in particular?

MS: I took a lot of courses with Sarna and Glatzer and Altmann who were the big Jewish Studies teachers. And some of the other less — Ben Halperin, who was in history. I think

I took a course with Marshall Sklare and Ben Ravid, I think who came maybe when I was a graduate student. I learned a lot from them. I think I admired Glatzer the most of them. But they weren't (01:03:00) religious — I mean, they were academic. They, certainly Sarna had his own religious life, but the way that Yitz Greenberg and Steve Riskin and maybe some other people at YU were religious models, none of them were, and they were none of the — there wasn't anybody who was just academically, oh, he's a really great guy. Art Green was — I met Art, he was teaching a class for Hillel, you know, Hillel at Brandeis, and I took the class, and that's how I met Art.

JG: What was he doing at the time?

MS: I think he was a graduate student in NEJS, in Jewish Studies. (01:04:00) And the year I came to Brandeis is the year the *havurah*, Havurat Shalom started.

JG: Yes.

MS: So he was, right, he was both at Havurat Shalom and I think he'd already started graduate, his Ph.D. at Brandeis. And if not, he was starting it. So he was teaching a class and I'm pretty sure it was a class on Hasidut. Which actually was an area that I had never — I mean Maimonides they didn't teach that; it wasn't part of the classic curriculum. I knew of Hasidut. We did Jewish history. Excuse me. [*drinks water*]

JG: (01:05:00) So this was a different sort of introduction to Hasidut, a different way of thinking about it.

MS: I think that's what he taught. He might have been teaching prayer. I'm not sure. But I may have heard of him before. My father was friendly with Zalman. I met Zalman before this. He actually — Zalman spent a Shabbat in Marblehead doing a scholar-in-residence gig at Temple Sinai, an interesting thing. So he spent Shabbat and we kind of talked some. And I met Shlomo Carlebach (01:06:00). This was in high school, I think. He had started performing, and along with the opera records my parents had, they had Shlomo records. I just actually gave the records to Penn, but I ended up with those records, the early Shlomo records. So I knew something about — Shlomo was really in the Orthodox world, but I knew something about Zalman and that world. I was aware of Havurat Shalom.

JG: We'll come to that in a minute. I wanted to ask you, though, a little bit about — the general American counterculture was in full swing by this point. (01:07:00) Did you feel attracted to it, connected to it, involved in it — in any way?

MS: I think not so much in the sense of — I think in certain ways, the people I was hanging out with at Brandeis were the more traditional people at Brandeis. Brandeis was a hotbed of the counterculture and politics. Whether it's — what's the confluence of personality and outlook — I don't think I was so much involved in the counterculture (01:08:00) world of drugs, sex, and rock n' roll even! So that was not — though I was still involved politically, I was against the war in Vietnam, and a little bit — I think it was maybe '70, there was a huge demonstration in Boston against the war. I went. It was tons of busses, we marched from Cambridge, to Boston Garden — not Boston Garden, Boston Common. There was that and things like that (01:09:00) so, I guess, the political part I was most a part of, but not like SDS at Brandeis.

JG: Right. To what extent were you, say, aware of and involved in any aspects of the Jewish counterculture which were starting to emerge?

MS: As I said, I was aware of Havurat Shalom and that world.

JG: *Response Magazine* was going by then.

MS: Really? What — do you know what year was that?

JG: I'd have to look up the dates. But I think I read that it had a circulation in the tens of thousands by '68.

MS: Really? So it was started before Havurat Shalom? (01:10:00) So, I don't know when *Genesis II* started —

JG: In that area, exactly.

MS: So I might have been somewhat aware. I should tell you the story. So the first year that Havurat existed — Havurat Shalom asked a number of the local rabbis to sign on like an advisory committee to Havurat Shalom. Just to lend their name. So my father was part of that.

JG: In '68, when it was just getting formed.

MS: Yeah. So I think he had, again, I don't know if this is recreated memory. He had the prospectus — you know, thirty-page document, whatever, about what Havurat Shalom could be. It listed all the courses that were going to happen, most of which never happened.

JG: Who wrote that? Do you know? (01:11:00)

MS: I assume Art was involved. Al Axelrad was also involved in Havurat Shalom, which I didn't realize. And Zalman was at Boston that year. I actually have a copy of the prospectus, that's now at Penn also. Art would certainly be able to answer that question. I mean, you have to realize I didn't actually join the *havurah* until the fourth year. We'll get to that.

JG: So you're saying your father was asked to be on the advisory committee.

MS: So right, I remember reading the prospectus and saying, "I want to take every single one of these classes" [*laughs*]. So, this is like, great! I think I was aware of it. But, importantly, because I knew Zalman, I don't remember exactly how this happened, I was invited to spend (01:12:00) a Shabbat with Zalman.

JG: And what was he doing in Boston that year?

MS: I think he was teaching at BU [Boston University]. I don't remember the story. So I went for a Shabbat with Zalman. Thinking, I get to spend time with Zalman and go to the *havurah*; this'll be kind of neat. So this was the first year, when it was still in Cambridge. And it turns out that that Shabbat, Shlomo Riskin was coming for Shabbat because he's thinking about starting an Orthodox *havurah*. So it probably wasn't in the first month of the *havurah*. I don't remember the date. (01:13:00) So it was fabulous for me, because it was this bringing together my past and my present. Again, certainly, looking back on it, it was like, my future! How much I was aware at the time — I think I had some sense of this was what I was interested in. And there was — at *seudeh shlishit* — Riskin gave a talk about why Orthodoxy is good, kind of thing. And Art may have responded at the time — wrote a letter responding to Riskin about why I'm not Orthodox kind of thing. (01:14:00) This important dialogue for me in particular, which just confirmed that, like — no, I'm not on the Orthodox thing, I'm in the — it also shows in a way that the lines between the denominations were not as sharply drawn as they would become later. This was true — skipping ahead to the *Catalog* for a second. We got positive reviews in the Orthodox Jewish press, which would never happen today for a book like *The Catalog*. Because they saw it, it's positive about Judaism and it's mostly okay, and we don't have problems with most of what it's saying. So, okay, good, it's a good thing!

JG: Did you feel like you had, at the time, (01:15:00) peers who were grappling with the same kind of issues, coming from similar worlds and grappling? Did you have a *hevrah* in that sense?

MS: No, I don't think so much. I felt that when I got to the *havurah*, that my background wasn't unique. And people had my background, like by the time I met Joey Reimer, I felt he had — I keep on forgetting that he came from an Orthodox background. Later, Nehemia Polen, who came from an ultra-Orthodox background, and he was coming straight from Ner Yisrael so that was — I felt like I had an unusual background in the *havurah*. And I think (01:16:00) there was a small — to come back to your question about the Jewish counterculture — so this Riskin thing that never happened, but I think there were things — so I was friendly from Maimonides, and continued at YU, Gary Rubin, who was very involved in founding Project Ezra along with other people. He was part of my *hevrah's* social network so there was a small — it was a very small group. So I think people — so I was aware, if you said, I don't know when Ezra was founded, but it was kind of around that time. It was probably after he graduated YU, but it could have been that time. (01:17:00) There were — right, I was involved in Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry.

JG: Where was this? At Brandeis?

MS: I think that was a little bit at YU because Glen Richter and Birnbaum — what's his name. It'll come back to me — I'm surprised I can't remember. Glen I think certainly was — they were sort of involved, they're both, Glen certainly was Orthodox, I think Birnbaum was. I can't believe I can't remember his name. Anyways. I think I went to some demonstration while I was here at YU. When I was at Brandeis, I became the chair of New England (01:18:00) Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, so there was that, the Soviet Jewry thing was happening.

JG: You said at one point that your father had been involved with Soviet Jewry, sort of activism on behalf of Soviet Jewry, is that right?

MS: I'm sure he would have. Right, so there are those pieces that — Bob Goldman, who was the chair of New England Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry before me, he was the person who did a *Guide to Jewish Boston*. So there were these guides. When did those date from exactly? So there's kind of the various forms (01:19:00) of the Jewish counterculture, right. So when he started getting Judaica artists, when was that?

JG: Mae Rockland did the *Jewish Yellow Pages*.

MS: Right. That was later.

JG: A little later, I would say the seventies.

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MS: But she did a book before that.

JG: The *Work of Our Hands*.

MS: *Work of Our Hands*. Right. So there's these different pieces —

JG: A little later.

MS: There were also political pieces related to Israel. So '67 had happened. So, I mean, when I was at Brandeis we formed (01:20:00) — I forget how we got here exactly but bring me back. There was a small group called Concerned Jewish Students, Jewish activists at Brandeis, which Al Axelrad was really excited about. Like, great! There's a group of people who are actually involved in stuff that he's interested in. And so we did a small thing, we had a counterdemonstration to a Palestinian demonstration at the Israeli consulate, on Beacon Street or wherever it was. So that was a little thing we did. The big thing we did was the demonstration at the General Assembly in Boston.

JG: Sixty-nine.

MS: Sixty-nine. So I was the chair (01:21:00) of CJS, of that.

JG: CJS was not just Brandeis, it was regional?

MS: Right, so that's right. CJS, I made a mistake. What Brandeis had was the Jewish Activists League; that was the group that did the demonstration. Al actually arranged for us to meet with Ralph Nader for fifteen minutes when he was speaking at Brandeis, which was fine, it was a pointless, for him and us, kind of thing. But it was great to meet Ralph Nader. So that was the Jewish Activists League. We were the — I don't know if you want the whole story of the GA?

JG: Briefly.

MS: So, it came out of us, the Brandeis students, it was actually the suggestion of Leon Jick, who was a professor at Brandeis, who said, "Hey, the Federation — GA — is coming to Boston. You should do something about that!" So we said, basically, (01:22:00) "What's the Federation?" I probably knew something, knew CJP existed. So we did a little research, and there was a meeting that CJP [Combined Jewish Philanthropies] called, maybe it was at Harvard at Hillel, some place like that, to talk to all the students. And we sort of took over the meeting nicely arranged for us and said, "We should demonstrate against — "So there was a series of such meetings. If you want

to hear the whole story, I could tell you that. So then CJS was, of all the students, people from Harvard, MIT, BU, Simmons, Northeastern —

JG: Tufts.

MS: Yeah, Tufts, would have been — (01:23:00) I don't remember now. To organize this demonstration. They finally allowed us to have someone speak, so Hillel Levine was chosen. We were the young undergraduates. Then there were the graduates, some of the Havurat Shalom people like Hillel. Then there was a busload of people that came from New York, including Yitz, Steven M. Cohen, Steve Shaw, Robert Sacks, this was all part of this. I don't know that I knew Robert Sacks before. I met Steve Cohen at the GA. Did I know his name before from the Bayit? Maybe. It was just — like all such networks of people — (01:24:00) So it was like we were saying, more money for Jewish education, less for Jewish hospitals. It was oversimplified, but it was an interesting moment of the Jewish counterculture. And the thing that's actually interesting to point out is that the demonstration at the GA which was in November, that Saturday was also a big anti-Vietnam War rally in Washington, D.C. So a bunch of the people that came to the GA rally went to Washington, and some of us stayed at the GA. So you saw the kind of (01:25:00) politics, both things, and you have to choose. Both things are a piece of the thing. That was the time. And there was — I could talk more about that.

JG: Let's just sum up this period for a minute. Tell us how you understood the Jewish counterculture's critique of American Jewish life at that point, and what was most resonant for you at this moment, when you're at Brandeis and finishing up at Brandeis — your undergraduate career there.

MS: I'm hesitating because — we were just talking a little bit about the *Catalog*. In certain ways I think the critique there, (01:26:00) as I'm trying to think of it, it's a good expression of it. Or of Havurat Shalom. Which is, I think one major critique is feeling that American Judaism is too passive, too much, let's have the rabbi or the cantor or the Jewish professional do things; that it's really not people's own thing. And that for it to be — whatever word you want to use — of substance or of meaning — you really have to do it, you really have to be engaged in it. And at the same time saying, that's not at the price of being in the contemporary world. So the choice isn't only (01:27:00) being Orthodox or — I don't want to say nothing, that's not fair — let's say secular, whatever that means. But really it's a possibility to take from the richness of the Jewish tradition, have it influenced by contemporary ideas and values, and really engage in a passionate and meaningful Jewish life. And for me, coming from the Orthodox world, oh, I could see how that wasn't necessary to hold to that, which is problematic because of certain values. And also it felt, more broadly — (01:28:00) and by then, at Brandeis, critical

understanding of the Biblical text undercuts the Orthodox theology of Sinai and Torah, etc., certain theology. And just a broader attitude, I would say, of seeing value in the world. And so all that's possible. And we used to say — can I skip to the *havurah*?

JG: Go right ahead.

MS: We used to say — let's see if I can remember it now actually — it's kind of the passion of Hasidut, the critical study of Conservative Judaism, the commitment to social justice of Reform, (01:29:00) and — I'm not sure what we said about Orthodoxy, but it's the commitment to tradition and observance. Not in an Orthodox way, but to practice. So we took those values, put them together, and that's what Havurat Shalom was about.

JG: You graduated Brandeis in 1971, went on to graduate school, and also became involved with Havurat Shalom. So you mentioned earlier that you had become aware of it earlier when your father was asked to be on the advisory board, but how did you actually become involved yourself personally? What was that process?

MS: I was really aware of it the whole time I was at Brandeis. Probably I spent that Shabbat there, partly in the first year (01:30:00). Partly I had ongoing contact with Art Green through Brandeis Hillel. I can't remember now whether I'd spent another Shabbat in those years at Havurat Shalom. Very likely, I would think. Havurat Shalom wasn't accepting undergraduates. I think it may have changed that rule the year that I joined —

JG: Which was?

MS: Which was '71-'72. It was the first year — I and my then-wife Sharon joined. It was the first time both people in the couple had to be accepted (01:31:00) as individuals. It was the first time a single woman was accepted.

JG: Even though you weren't married?

MS: No, we were married.

JG: You were married at that point? I see.

MS: I said then-wife — she was my wife in those days. We're divorced. We got married early, 1970. We were still undergraduates.

JG: You were still undergraduates? Was she at Brandeis?

MS: No. I met her actually in high school through NCSY. She was at Stern, then she was at UMass in Boston. And we lived my senior year — we were married — we lived (01:32:00) in Brookline. And we went to the Young Israel Brookline. It was our last fling with Orthodoxy. And Saul Berman was our rabbi at the time. These interesting confluences. We said, Yeah, this isn't for us.

JG: Young Israel?

MS: Young Israel, and Orthodoxy. I don't think it was Young Israel per se. Saul Berman's a great person. So we had — I think the simple answer is, I said, "Let's join Havurat Shalom," and it could be — I think we probably spent some time with Art. I think Sharon knew Art before the interview process.

JG: And Havurat Shalom at that point was no longer a seminary (01:33:00), correct?

MS: It had the name. It had the paper, whatever. I don't think by then — I was not going because it was a seminary. I don't think anybody was joining because of the seminary, and I don't know where we were in the Vietnam War so the draft deferment thing was not important anymore.

JG: You said you had a low number anyway.

MS: Yeah, but someone could have — it could have been. But I think maybe the war was winding down so this was no longer that issue. I mean, it never really was, (01:34:00) but it sort of officially —

JG: So what you were saying — to go back — you were the first couple where both members of the couple had to be accepted as individuals?

MS: That's my memory of it. It could all be wrong. Before that in the beginning, the wives were there just as wives. And I think they gradually became real members, but they were already in. This was a decision point.

JG: What was the application process? Or the admissions process?

MS: It was — one of the real challenging pieces of Havurat Shalom was that it was a community, and therefore you had to apply. (01:35:00) And the process — I don't remember if we had to write anything, I don't remember actually, I have no recollection. Basically it was an interview process. You would come, spend a Shabbat, I think, and probably some other time, and people would, I think — actually it's hard to remember. I

think you were supposed to meet everybody and everybody tried to meet you and spend some time with you. I think there was a smaller group that did an interview and made a recommendation.

JG: What were they wanting to know? Can you remember at all?

MS: I think they wanted to know kind of the obvious questions. Why do you want to join the *havurah*? Tell us about your Jewish life — those kinds of things. I think the part that was most challenging (01:36:00) was they wanted people they felt could fit into the community. And that could be tricky. So that could be tricky: a person comes across a little too strong, a person comes across too weak, I guess. Ultimately there was a process where everybody would sit around — there was an admissions meeting where — again I don't think I made up this committee thing — people would say, "Look, we spoke with him, and we talked about this and that," give a full report. And then (01:37:00) people could comment and say, "When I met the person I really —" For instance, I remember being told that people were excited because I was involved with the GA demonstration and some other stuff at Brandeis and Jewish Activist League things. And some people wanted there to be more social justice happening at Havurat Shalom which was an ongoing issue, particularly in the beginning years. So someone told me, that gave you points. Obviously people didn't share the negatives! Like, "We really wanted you by a vote of fifteen-fourteen," kind of thing.

JG: It didn't have to be unanimous?

MS: It did have to — I think it had to be unanimous. Though I think they would — (01:38:00) if it was overwhelming — it was also, you could say "Look, I have some reservations, but if everybody else feels —" I guess it could be, "I really —" blackball kind of thing. I remember, I mean there were people rejected. Sometimes people felt, hmm, a little bit off, you might say.

JG: Oh, you meant felt "off" in terms of their fit within the community?

MS: Just, they're too — they're not — you know, nowadays some of this would be, hmm, they're on the spectrum. Mild, you know. (01:39:00) But then you say, they're kind of annoying. We didn't know what those things meant. It isn't just the person's annoying. But the one I remember was — I don't even remember their name, so it doesn't matter. The one I remember was someone was in Harvard Business School. And there were people who said, "Business school. They're not really part of our — you know, sixties counterculture." And there were some people who felt, "What, are you crazy? That's crazy!" But that was — I don't want to say that's typical, (01:40:00) but

there was that kind of thing, there was something about — that one was unusual, though obviously I don't know what was said in the years before me or the years after me. I think more often it was kind of personal. Not like, oh, I had a fight with them, but just, they're kind of annoying, or they're brash. I don't know what they would be, but just something that — the chemistry is not so great here.

JG: Would people — were people able to apply at any point during the year?

MS: No, it was pretty much a — as I'm saying that, I feel like someone joined in the middle of the year (01:41:00). But mostly it was a season. We'd do these — there'd be admissions. And often people would come because services Shabbat morning were open. They'd come and kind of hang around, and that was good because people then got to meet them in a more natural, less pressured situation than Freshmen Rush. Skipping ahead, I would say, even though it was tricky and can sound [*grimaces*] to have this admissions process, the New York Havurah also had an admissions process. I don't know if it was the same, and I don't know that Fabrangen did (01:42:00) — and certainly other *havurot* did not. The positive piece is it did really create a community that — in some ways, the *havurah's* most ambitious, I would say, is not the Jewish stuff which I would say is ambitious, but trying to create a community where you encourage people to get along and to confront issues between them. You know, it was — because it's trying to — it's like socialism in the Soviet Union was really trying to change the nature of people and how they (01:43:00) were in the world. It wasn't as ambitious as that, but it was ambitious. And because it was people's lives and personalities, it was hard to do. And in certain ways, you could say the *havurah* overall failed to do that. But the extent it tried is both impressive, and I think it affected how people interacted in the group.

JG: Yeah.

MS: And there was a way the group could make demands on people. There wasn't — partly just being admitted and because it was a small-ish group, twenty-five to thirty-five, forty people — there weren't people on the periphery. You just (01:44:00) couldn't be. There were people who did more and people who did less, people who taught and people who didn't teach, but —

JG: What did you understand yourselves to be committing yourselves to upon admission to Havurat Shalom at that point?

MS: I would say being an engaged participant in the life of Havurat Shalom. So I think it would have been weird if someone said, "I don't want to be a part of services. I'm going to do all the other stuff, but I'm not going to come to services." It would be like, huh,

right? So there were expectations that you were going to take a class. I think everybody took a class. Some people took more than one class.

JG: So there wasn't — we're going to come back to all of these things in a lot more detail — but there wasn't a set curriculum?

MS: I don't know if there was a set — no, no you have to take two courses, or if you miss two Friday nights then you're on probation. There was no — it was interesting. There was this whole admission process, but once you were in, there was kind of a broad expectation that you would participate. And I would say for most of the people this was the thing that was remarkable about it — this was the most important thing they were doing in their lives. You know, everybody was doing something else, either graduate school or earning some money. But I think — and maybe someone would say no — but I think most people, if not everybody, would say this was the center of their life. Not to say that their spouse or whatever (01:46:00), relationships I think were obviously also important, but this was — and therefore it would be weird if you didn't — we'd have once a week a communal meal — if you didn't come. And if you didn't come it was because of something important. It wasn't like, oh, I wanted to go to the movies that night, no. That wouldn't have — someone would have said something, probably. But I don't think it really happened.

JG: What would you say was the *havurah's* ideal notion of community at that point, that you were striving for?

MS: Well, to be this kind of active engagement and participation. So there was Shabbat Friday night, and Shabbat morning, and meals. (01:47:00) It was this once a week communal meal followed by a program or a meeting. There were the classes. There were a couple times a year retreats that we'd go away for. And there might at different times be other kinds of activities.

JG: So, engaged community, and also, it sounds in a relatively small group, an intentional community.

MS: Yeah, it's intentional. That was the word we used, an intentional community. Right. And the truth was that people — I think not so much right at the beginning, the first year, but by the time I joined — people were really encouraged to live close by. Not because you weren't allowed to drive on Shabbat, or whatever. That was up to people's personal practice. (01:48:00) No one cared if someone parked right in front of the *havurah* or in the driveway on Shabbat. It was just that community. One of the things that people, we thought was great, someone had this idea of putting a washer and dryer in the basement

of the building. So all these people, most of them didn't have washers and dryers in the apartments they were renting, would come over to do their laundry, and they would hang out. So it was just like this very natural community, which is the best of we're just hanging out together. So that was the importance of people being close by.

JG: Let's back up for one sec because you want to say that in 19 — I think — '68, the *havurah* actually purchased a building, a house, in Somerville.

MS: Yeah, well, I don't know (01:49:00) if it was in — the first year was '68-'69, summer of '69 they bought the building and moved from Cambridge to Somerville.

JG: Where had it been in Cambridge? Was it an apartment or a house, or what was it, do you remember?

MS: I was there just that Shabbat. I remember there were met on the first floor. I don't know, many people will be able to answer that question. I can almost remember the street but it has to come to me.

JG: Can you describe the physical space of the house? How it was configured and how it was used?

MS: It still is, the house is still there, College Avenue, close to Tufts. It's in Somerville which is kind of working-class neighborhood around Boston, (01:50:00) though the part near Tufts is a little more upscale homes, partly I guess Tufts faculty or whatever. It's a three-story house. You walk up. It kind of looks like millions of such houses in the Boston area and other places. You walk up the outside stairs, you come into a hallway. To the right there's a living room. What's kind of unusual is there's three rooms, in a kind of L-shape, flowing into each other on that first floor. I'm not sure exactly; there's an extra room there. Like there's a living room and a dining room and (01:51:00) another room. But on the joint of the L where the two lines meet is where the prayer room was. Which allowed, if there was overflow of people, people to sit in the other two rooms and still be able to — there were little walls but basically they were able to open — the spaces were pretty open and flowed into each other. So that's the prayer room. That's the L. The room off that hallway, if you went to the right was the living room, and that's where we'd have meetings. And the room straight ahead which had a big, long wooden table was the dining room where we'd have meals. And if you walked straight through that there was the kitchen. And then (01:52:00) upstairs was mostly bedrooms. I think there were two on the third floor and a couple on the second floor. There the number of bedrooms changed over time. Sometimes there were more bedrooms, sometimes one room was used kind of

a library, lots of books. So that room might be used — the biggest room there was often used as a classroom.

JG: Wait, so I'm a little confused. Were the bedrooms used as bedrooms or were they used in these other ways?

MS: No, the bedrooms were bedrooms.

JG: Who lived there?

MS: So, there were a number of members of the Havurat Shalom who lived in the house, and other people lived — so the two rooms upstairs were bedrooms, (01:53:00) I think, as I said, I think sometimes there were two bedrooms on the second floor. I don't know if there was another room. I can't remember. Sometimes it depended whether people really wanted to live in the house, and the usage got changed over time. There was a little office that I don't think was ever used, storage. Luckily there's all these old papers that ended up there.

JG: Where would classes take place?

MS: So there was this big room, the library room, which was kind of a corner room on the second floor, so it had windows on both sides. It was above the living room. It was a kind of big room. Sometimes classes would take place in the dining room on that wooden table. That would be a nice table for class. You could sit around (01:54:00) a table rather than — and you could use the living room. I remember those two rooms, the second-floor library room and the dining room, as the most likely to have classes.

JG: Would you say the **aesthetics** of the place reflected in any way the core values of the community and how would you describe it aesthetically, anyway?

MS: Well I guess the most noticeable thing about the prayer room was the cushions on the floor. It didn't have chairs, so people would sit on the cushions. And someone who was there at the time could say — I thought they got the cushions from couches that were thrown out in the street, which nobody would do today. That was like, pre-bed bugs or something, as it were. They may have been some donation or whatever. (01:55:00) There were couches and some other chairs around the living room, and the big wooden table with some chairs in the dining room. It was kind of student-y. And the cushions were very kind of counterculture, right. It could have been a meditation space, though people weren't doing it that much. Richie Siegel should probably tell you about the ark, which

was, I think, originally a dog basket and his mother, if I remember this right, but you could ask him, I don't know if it's crocheted or wove some hanging —

JG: The curtain. Is that what you mean? (01:56:00)

MS: Was it a curtain? Somehow I remember she made something.

JG: You mean a *parochet* type thing?

MS: Yeah, but it was macramé or something. But there was also macramé hanging. I'd have to go look at the picture which is in the first pages of the *Jewish Catalog*, I should remember. Anyways, so little bits that seemed very much counterculture, we — gee, I'm forgetting all this. For Friday night, we lit candles. I think the Friday night service was mood-setting candles. Shabbat morning was lights and just natural light from — yeah, so there wasn't very much concern about that kind of aesthetic. It was its own aesthetic. (01:57:00) Though one of the things that owning a house meant is that it had to be kept up. So that was one of the ways that everybody participated. And there was a *toranut*, just taking turns basically randomly, whether it's sweeping the floor or doing the dishes in the kitchen after the communal meal, that would just rotate among people.

JG: Were those posted somewhere?

MS: Yes, there was a little board, a wooden board, with slots to put index cards. It's known as the "Swirsky board" after Michael Swirsky, so there would be these labels and the cards would be changed, saying that you're doing this or that. Or it was also a way of announcing, oh, the program this Wednesday night (01:58:00) — I think it was Wednesday night, whatever night it was, it rotated — so and so is coming to speak. That often happened, that people would invite someone — Harvey Cox — to come to speak.

JG: That would coexist with cleaning the bathroom?

MS: There would be the task things, and then it would be the programming. There was only one board. I think that was all in one board. I have — well, I gave them to Penn — I saved some of those cards, particularly ones — there was the "Farewell to Nixon" dinner — that was the name of the potluck. And the menu, which I think I saved the menu for that, was all these puns on food, like Crabapple pie, sour apple pie, maybe —

JG: Sour grapes. (01:59:00)

MS: Right, sour grapes. Something like that. So that was part of the — and then there'd be once or twice a year there'd be a big cleanup thing, and we would do the outside. And once in a — before I was there, and more recently, they had to paint the outside of the house. They have diagrams.

JG: Who would make that decision — that it was time to have the house painted, for instance?

MS: There was a — gee, I haven't thought about some of these things in a long time. There was probably a name for it — coordinators that were in charge of running things. Making sure that things were running.

JG: From among the members.

MS: Yeah, and that would (02:00:00) rotate as well. I don't know that you had to be a coordinator. I don't remember. But there were certainly, and I don't remember, if there were three coordinators — I may have this confused with one of the later minyanim that had — I mean Minyan M'at had this coordinator thing — but I'm pretty sure there had to be some kind of like a building committee that would look at the — they'd say, there's a larger problem than the sweeping, once a year maintenance kind of thing. Yeah, that's interesting. (02:01:00) I think they would say, "Look, we have to do something." Or "Should we do something?" Or "Can we get this done? Do we have enough money to pay for this?" Which was always a not unimportant question.

JG: I meant to ask you, in terms of one's commitment on becoming a member, was there a financial obligation coming with that?

MS: Yes. I think it was \$600 dollars.

JG: For what — the year?

MS: The year. Which was substantial for people who were graduate students. And even if not, people were teaching Hebrew school.

JG: Were there other sources of funds for the *havurah*? (02:02:00)

MS: They originally had gotten a Danforth grant to, I think, put the down payment on the house. People in the first year would be able to answer that question. I think it basically came from the membership. And obviously some of that money went for just the general cost upkeep, which were relatively inexpensive other than, I guess, heating. You know,

there wasn't — and probably occasional repairs. And it could have been times where there would be additional assessments to pay for something specific, like (02:03:00) a boiler or something.

JG: Or plumbing, or plumbing costs, anything like that.

MS: Yeah.

JG: Maintenance costs of some kind.

MS: And I could be wrong, maybe there was someone who paid attention to those, the bigger — you know, or just, well, plumbing, let's check it out, rather than — Or it could have been more on a voluntary basis — look, we need to find a plumber, so someone said, "I'll do that." I somehow didn't do that, so I don't remember. I don't specifically remember being kind of the coordinator, but I must have been. There would be no reason I wouldn't have, if that was a general — it's even just, there was someone to chair the meeting. (02:04:00) I think there was, and it might have been, maybe just for a month. Maybe it was a trimester. I have no idea.

JG: We'll get the details from someone who was there. There wasn't, you're saying, a formal rule that you needed to live within walking distance of the *havurah*?

MS: Correct. It was not a formal — it was encouraged.

JG: And?

MS: And most people tried to do it, because why not.

JG: Did that apply in any way to faculty?

MS: Well, the faculty, I think, basically were members. (02:05:00) And I was just talking with somebody, and I can't remember who, about an issue about someone who was not — could someone who was not a member teach at the *havurah*? I think the decision was that basically, part of the whole thing is that you're a member, so you're part of the community, so you're not just an outside teacher coming in.

JG: Okay, we'll talk about that in some detail soon. I wanted to talk a little more about the role of communal meals, because they were fairly central in terms of bringing the community together. Can you describe again what the kinds of meals were that people

took together, and also what communal standards there were, or decisions around issues of kashrut?

MS: Yeah, I think I've been saying communal meals, but (02:06:00) they, for the most part, were not. That is, one of the tasks was, whether it's Wednesday night or whatever night it was, two people would be assigned to make that meal. And if it was a couple, it wouldn't be the couple. It would be two individuals. And they would make the meal. So people didn't have to bring things for — I just actually remembered another — while I was an undergrad at Brandeis, I was involved in the Jewish Activist League, another project that had to do with bar or bat mitzvahs. I don't need to go into it. I think Art invited me to (02:07:00) speak about it at the dinner, the weekly dinner. And whoever was making the meal decided that they were going to, they wanted to do it to honor the memory of the people who died, the civilians who died in Vietnam. So all that was going to be served was plain rice. And the meal was going to be in silence. So, I think there were — I'm like sitting there, does this happen every week? What's going on in this place? Here I am to do this thing. So I think some people probably thought that this was wonderful, (02:08:00) and there were some people, I remember some, but it doesn't really matter, who were outraged and felt put upon. And some people felt embarrassed that they had invited somebody. Well, I sort of — at the end just before people were going to leave — somebody ended it and said, "I guess we're done. Michael can talk." I was like, really, does anyone want to hear this at this point? Because I'd forgotten about that until this moment. So you could do something like that. You could just make it a meal. You could do the "Farewell to Nixon" dinner. I don't think it was a program. It was just kind of the meal. And, as I said, (02:09:00) the meals usually weren't silent. And that was a prelude to, there was always — so one night a week, and it was usually fixed for the year so everybody knew, Wednesday nights, that's what you did. So there'd be the meal, and afterwards there'd either be a speaker, an outside speaker, which happened a lot, or a meeting, if there was something we needed to talk about. Or we had these things called agenda-less meetings, which meant that it was open to anybody who wanted to raise an issue. So that was sometimes a place where this issue of community and tensions and conflicts would be addressed. Someone could say, "Look I'm really —" —it could be specific to a person, but often it would be like, "I'm unhappy, it feels like (02:10:00) people on the Swirsky board, they're not doing their things. I came in and the place was —" or, "I feel like we're just not paying enough attention to this kind of issue, to social justice." Or, "I wonder how we can have this kind of food if we're paying attention to issues related to —" Or, someone could have said, "I'm really pissed off because last week there was a silent meal," that would have been. Or, this week. So there were really kind of, we were kind of Quaker style, we would just wait until someone had something to say, and most often they did. So it can be a whole variety of kinds of things that would

happen at that time. But it was once a week. And you asked me about the food.
(02:11:00)

JG: Can I just ask you one other thing before we go to that, because it applies to all of it. In terms of the rhythm, there was a communal meal in the middle of the week like this, and then what other meal occasions were there that happened on a regular basis?

MS: So, the other part of meal things happened on Shabbat. Friday night and Shabbat lunch.

JG: In the *havurah*?

MS: No. There it was in people's homes, and the expectation — again, there was no rule — that people would invite each other over. So that was an important part of the informal community building, was that you would spend — Shabbat wasn't just services together, or chatting over kiddush. (02:12:00) It was really spending some real time at a meal. And it doesn't mean that people sometimes didn't have other guests, or said, let's just have a Friday night alone. Again, nobody was checking.

JG: So this was both Friday evening and Shabbat lunch?

MS: Yeah. I mean, it was a smaller group Friday night. Partly the Friday night was really for members only.

JG: What was?

MS: The service. And Shabbat morning was open to the community. So there would be people for whom Havurat Shalom was their synagogue. And they could come, and they were welcome, and they were mostly welcome. I mean, there were some issues with that, you can imagine. (02:13:00) Services were led by members. A non-member couldn't lead a service. And obviously, the idea was that services would be — different people would lead different parts, and if somebody wanted to do the discussion —

JG: We're going to get to all that.

MS: But obviously that wasn't mandated, you had to. So there could be some people — members — who didn't come Friday night, but there'd be, you know, the expectation would be that you would be invited or that you'd invite people Friday night.

JG: Were there people who were more typically the inviters than the invitees? (02:14:00)

MS: Yeah.

JG: Was there any pattern to that that you can discern?

MS: You know, if I had been single, I probably would have been more the invitee. Cooking isn't my thing particularly. It was a challenge when I had to do those meals. But it was not impossible. So I would guess that kind of thing. And there were people who liked to entertain. But I think there was — I'm sure there was some imbalance.

JG: In terms of couples being more inviters.

MS: Yeah, I would guess that. There could have been some single people who liked to entertain.

JG: Okay, so to go back to the issue of kashrut. (02:15:00)

MS: Right, so the — you know, it's interesting. It was dairy. Should I wait [*noise in background*]? I mean, I think the simple thing was that the communal stuff was all dairy. So there was no question about the meat. I don't think there was any issue of — that's an interesting question — I don't know whether, if you didn't have a kosher home, then you had to make the communal meal in the *havurah*'s kitchen, which was available. And some people did that anyway, just because it was more convenient than bringing food over. (02:16:00) I actually don't remember. I mean, we had a kosher kitchen. And I wonder whether there was a high percentage of people with kosher kitchens.

JG: What about vegetarianism?

MS: Well, there were some vegetarians. So I don't know whether — people didn't have fish, or you could have fish, but you had to have something else as well. When you're inviting people to your home, just like anybody inviting anybody to your home, you sort of ask — what can you eat? And there were people who, we certainly would have served chicken in our house, and other people certainly would have. It wasn't like everybody in the community was vegetarian (02:17:00) or not.

JG: Do you have any memories of the particular kind of food, or particular cookbooks that people used at that time?

MS: It was *Moosewood* [*laughing*]. I'm not a cooker, but I think it was — it was definitely influenced by the world we lived in. And whatever, I guess *Moosewood* that

kind of thing would have been — and still there were plenty of people who — there were some vegetarians, but I think there were plenty of people who were not. And it's still early for certain kinds (02:18:00) of — locavore, I don't think anybody had heard of that kind of thing then. But there were people like Everett Gendler who were very into natural foods and growing your own food. So it was somewhere there, but — we were deeply reflective of our time, right, kind of in every way. The length of my hair, it was all that, all that stuff. And there was this Jewish piece. That was the unusual — part of the charm of the *Catalog* is the picture of the younger people. They look like every other (02:19:00) American kid that age. You couldn't, you wouldn't know that they were Jewish. And that was part of the charm, and the importance, as I said earlier — you could be completely contemporary. It wasn't like you had to give up living in America, 1970, to be part of the Jewish thing.

JG: So, as you were just saying, this vision for community was grounded in, basically an ideal of egalitarianism and democratic sort of community. So how did that apply to decision-making? You're talking about the role of communal meetings, and how people, for instance, would bring up issues that were of concern. (02:20:00) And how would those then be dealt with?

MS: It was really a consensus model. That was what we strived for. I don't think we just, okay, we can't make any decisions because four people want this and twenty people want that. I think we tried to — the classic consensus model, you try and talk it through. And then some people say, "Look, I disagree, but I can see that most people feel otherwise, so okay." And I mean, it was — basically, it did work on this broadly egalitarian. It doesn't mean that some people didn't carry more weight (02:21:00) just because of their personalities, and they would carry more weight, probably, in any group. And the opposite. That's just kind of the way it is. But it wasn't — in that sense, whatever kind of coordinating, it wasn't like they got to make more decisions or — anything of some significance would go to the whole group.

JS: And, in general, you're saying you could arrive at some kind of consensus through talking?

MS: Yeah, I think so.

JS: Can you think of any examples of the kinds of issues that would be discussed?

MS: (02:22:00) Before my time, in the second year, there was a big conflict and people — ask someone who was there, I can't say anything more than that. It was with the group called Dorton that, some who left and, it was a kind of — I mean, there were frequent

discussions of, “What’s our vision?” and “Are we living up to our vision?” or, “We’re disappointed that we’re not.” So that was kind of a constant thing that would take — I mean that was, I think, the larger issue the second year. There’d be constant reiterations of that question.

JS: What’s our vision and are we living up to it?

MS: Isn’t it, (02:23:00) our vision, bla bla — and yet, everybody isn’t friendly enough. Or: we’re not doing this enough. And there’d be things like, gee, maybe we should move — I remember — maybe we should move out to the country and live all together in a commune, kind of thing. And then we could have a real community. Or, what kind of community do we have when people keep on leaving? Nobody — it was a very transient group of people because of where they were in their stage of life. Despite the fact that Havurat Shalom was so important, people had to leave because of career, or —

JS: How frequently were people leaving, would you say, just in terms of the feel of it? (02:24:00)

MS: You know, I think — it’s very hard, someone could do an analysis and find that out. There were some people that stayed — I can think, I don’t remember, Art was there five or six years. Something like that was a long time.

JS: And a typical amount of time?

MS: Two, three, four years, I think was more typical. I think that’s — just thinking of —

JS: Right. So what did all of that mean in terms of the question of leadership in the community? Here you’ve got this very egalitarian, democratic ethos but (02:25:00) — were there leaders within the community and how did that sort of interface with this notion of democratic, small-d democratic life within the community?

MS: Well I think one of the interesting things I’m sure you’ll talk about is the transition in terms of women’s roles, really being egalitarian in terms of women having — look, I think eventually that — I think, that it was egalitarian in that way in terms of men and women, and I said I think broadly, everybody had an equal say. (02:26:00) The people who had more Jewish knowledge — but maybe that counted in the conversations where that was important, but not so much in, should we have another retreat, or not. That’s not Jewish knowledge; that’s a communal decision. You know, this person knows more about community kind of thing — I think the only question is, kind of, Art Green’s role. And I don’t know whether that was different in the first year when Zalman was also

there. I think Art had kind of a larger role, but not in a way (02:27:00) that it was — you know, it was just his show — on anything he cared about, we did what he wanted, and things he didn't care so much about, there could be a real debate and discussion. That was not my experience. I think he was kind of a presence in the room, and carried weight, and I think he had — no one else had the same position.

JS: Stature, you're saying, in the community.

MS: Yeah — and just a center, central. But I don't think it effected it in a deleterious way (02:28:00) that it felt like — really most people want to do this and Art wants to do that, and we sort of gotta — [*shaking head*] or he just persuades people to do it — I didn't experience that. He was — you know.

JS: What role did retreats play in the community?

MS: There were retreats three times in the year. One at Sukkot, one New Year's/Christmas, and I think for Shavuot. There were opportunities to be away for a long weekend or whatever number of days. And so that was the opportunity of any retreat where you get to spend more time and — (02:29:00) I mean, the *havurah* experience was pretty intense, if you think of seeing people often three times a week, maybe more. How many friends do you have that you do that with in life? But the retreat was kind of — a more intense version of that.

JS: Where would the retreats take place?

MS: We went to different places. We went to Ramah in Palmer, because they had winterized their space. So that was good for the winter. We once went — we did different places. I think it probably depended what we could find where. There was this place (02:30:00) Craigville on Cape Cod, I remember. So there were opportunities for different people to lead and to teach and to discuss.

JG: What was Weiss's Farm?

MS: Ah. [*laughs*] Weiss's Farm was not really a farm. Maybe at one point it was. But it was this large, rambling, old house in New Jersey — I think Somerville, New Jersey or near Somerville, New Jersey — no, I'm thinking of Somerville, Massachusetts. It was near Somerville, New Jersey. It was owned by the Weisses. And it became a gathering point for (02:31:00) the early *havurot*. So that Havurat Shalom, New York Havurah, Fabringen, as well as other people who belonged to other such groups that were not part of that, including I think some people from the Midwest might have come, and other

people who were fellow travelers, let's say, of the *havurah* movement, to call it that. It was open to anybody who could come. It also happened three times a year. Sukkot, or fall — Presidents' weekend, and July fourth. So some people from, like, the (02:32:00) Havurat Shalom would go. Lots of people didn't go. It was a kind of retreat format. There could be — I want to say there could be seventy, eighty, more people. Maybe a hundred even. So it was a lot more people, a lot more sessions therefore. People could volunteer to teach. There was a committee that planned it. Certainly initially it was I think it rotated between three *havurot*. At one time — one time it was Fabrangen planning it. There was a cost, mostly the cost of room and board, which was relatively inexpensive, (02:33:00) but it was still money. And it was an opportunity to bring this *havurah* movement, or this group of people who knew each other maybe together which, otherwise they didn't. That was the opportunity.

JG: To meet other people within the *havurah* movement?

MS: To meet other people and to have a conversation with Max and Esther Ticktin, who maybe I heard of, maybe I met once, but this was an opportunity to spend time, to learn from, discuss. Again, broadly, the kinds of issues would be the same kinds of issues. Is this a movement, what are we trying to, what's the future, how do we do this, can we change that, where's this all going? (02:34:00) All those questions with a broader, somewhat different group of people.

JG: What about the retreats with outside groups altogether? Were there ones that were just with Havurat Shalom and an outside group that was very different?

MS: You mean like —

JG: I was reading about a group, I think from somewhere in Massachusetts, where it was an alternative community, but the people who were in it were very interested — they tended to be couples with young children — they came. They didn't have strong backgrounds in general, and there was a retreat that put them together in the early seventies. That kind of a meet-up. Very intensive —

MS: Was this the (02:35:00) group in Marblehead/Swampscott?

JG: It might have been.

MS: Linda somebody —

JG: Some of the issues that tended to arise, it sounded like, were around kinds of exclusions that people might have felt based on their background and knowledge and ability to participate.

MS: I don't remember. If it's that group, Everett Gendler was sort of involved with them and kind of an advisor to. I mean, I vaguely remember. I forgot about them. I don't remember. It could have been. It's a question worth asking because it could have been either before or after my time, or even in my time and I don't remember (02:36:00). Because it — the people in the *havurah* were very interested in what was going on in the world. So the outside speakers, someone like having Harvey Cox come and speak, or Adin Steinsaltz came and spoke. But I can imagine, there was a group of Buddhist monks who would come. I don't know that that happened, but let's talk about spirituality and the spiritual life, and religion, and religion and modernity. All these things — and certain people, like Zalman and Art, but not just them, were very interested in those worlds.

JG: And relationships with them.

MS: Right, I think Art knew Harvey Cox. It wasn't just someone (02:37:00) called him up and said, gee, would you be willing to talk to this group of people, kind of thing. So there was real interest in seeing commonalities with the Berrigans. I don't know that they were ever —

JG: Or Buddhism.

MS: Right, or Buddhism. There's an incident — I wasn't there — where some Chabad guys showed up at the *havurah* and they thought it was just a bunch of hippie Jews. And then they look at the bookshelf, and there's all these hasidic *s'forim*. It would be one thing for it to be Talmud or something, okay whatever. But who reads — the way I heard the story was, Who's reading this? This was like — (02:38:00) you could go to most Orthodox rabbi's bookshelves, back then at least, and they wouldn't have had a single one of those books in Hebrew. They might have had Heschel or something, talking about them, Wiesel, but not the original *s'forim* — it wasn't part of the — So they couldn't figure out who this group was. Anyway.

JG: I wanted to bring up another issue just so we can put it out on the table, and that is that in all my reading about the early *havurot*, I saw scant mention of some key characteristics of the counterculture, one being the use of drugs and hallucinogenics, particularly in relation to some kind of spiritual quest. So that was one thing I wanted to ask about. Was there any role, (02:39:00) would you say, for drugs in that kind of experimentation within the *havurah*?

MS: Yeah, well, as I said earlier, I think broadly we were part of the world that we lived in. So — I mean, you're talking to someone who was not — I smoked twice, I think. Once with people from the *havurah*, I won't say their names just in case, I don't want them to go to jail in case I'm — but for me, it just wasn't — but I think I was very much the exception. Now, I think for some people it wasn't just like, hey, people taking drugs, but that it was related to spirituality and religion and just fun. (02:40:00) But that it could also be part of the spiritual life. And I think that was certainly true of some of the people in Havurat Shalom. I'm the exception, I think.

JG: I saw a comment where Art Green called the environment “post-drugs”. And that there was a rule that there was no use of drugs on communal property. So I'm wondering if that's actually the way you remember it.

MS: I think there wasn't like public smoking dope. So whether people went upstairs to the bedrooms (02:41:00) before they came down to the service — I think that's probably correct. So, I mean, I said I'm the exception, but I have a feeling there were some other people who kind of on principle were not, didn't want to do drugs, and felt like there was some social — everybody's passing a joint around and now you sort of have to [*gestures passing it on*], whatever. Yeah, so in that sense I think that's correct.

JG: Was there any incorporation of passing a joint around or anything like that as part of a communal experience, either of prayer or some other aspect of (02:42:00) life?

MS: I think it certainly didn't happen on Shabbat morning, when it was open to the public, for obvious reasons. I can't swear that it never happened, and I have a feeling it probably didn't happen during prayer. I think people wanted to do it before. But as I said, there's probably better people to talk about this. If you haven't you should read the article in *New Jews* by Itzik Lodzer. I can tell you off-camera who that is. Which, if I remember correctly, I haven't read that in many decades, talks somewhere about drugs (02:43:00). I mean, for Zalman, certainly, drugs — and he was friendly with Timothy Leary — he certainly saw the possibility that it could open you to a different level of consciousness. And, I think, that would be the spiritual practice related to it. And certainly in Hasidism it talks about there's a kind of common, everyday consciousness, and there's a higher consciousness. So, if you thought that's a way to access that, I think that's — that's the way. And as I was saying, some people were just doing it because it was the sixties, you know, drugs, sex, and rock n' roll, that was really part of the time. (02:44:00)

JG: Right so, the sexual revolution and women's lib were also a profound aspect of societal change during that period, so would you say that these new attitudes towards

sexuality, particularly as they applied to women, affected relationships within the *havurah* generally speaking?

MS: Yes, well the thing is [*smiling*] — I don't know particularly, if we're talking about people — people fooling around who were in committed relationships with other people — I'm sure it probably happened just because of the times, and because, even before the times, it happened. You have enough of a group of people, you know (02:45:00) — I don't think I'm hiding the big secrets. There was someone in the Boston Jewish community who accused the *havurah* of just having free sex. If it was, I missed it, that's all I can say! [*laughs*] Maybe if I'd smoked the dope, it was in that same room! So I think in terms of people sleeping together before marriage, people were reflective of society, again with a few exceptions of the people who didn't. I think it's neither here nor there in terms of the Havurat Shalom story. I think the piece of it that is important is kind of the role of women (02:46:00). And there, there was really a kind of gradual change. Some of it was — sometimes the markers are clear, so the first time that a woman led a service at the *havurah*, that's a clear marker that everybody saw and noticed. The other times it's this kind of — people who came as the spouses of the guys who were members who take more and more of a role. And I don't know, you'll ask them, but I don't know if there's a moment where, "I'm really a member!" versus — over time it's just, so and so was a full participant. (02:47:00) And only looking back can you say, oh, wow, gee, that wasn't always true. And sometimes the change can be surprisingly rapid, in the sense of — I think it was the first time a woman led a service —

JG: Which was when since you mention it?

MS: I think it was the third year, so it was before I was there.

JG: Seventy, seventy-one, that year?

MS: Yeah. Dina Roskies, who was then married to David Roskies, led that service. But you have to check that out, because — and then (02:48:00) Barry Holtz mentioned that Janet Wolf, then together, married, that she led at some point. And I also know that Sharon Strassfeld was an early leader of services. I think Dina was the first, but whichever. And I think it's the third, the fourth year. And then after that, I think — I think people just, who led services today, if you weren't there, oh, it was so and so. It wasn't noticeable anymore, if it was a woman or if it was a man. Maybe the first time someone led a service, but that was for a guy as well: "Oh, it was the first time Michael led a service," right. "How was it?" But those were the (02:49:00) obvious ones. And then the ones that were more subtle. At some point we noticed that the gabbai, the person calling people up for the Torah, was always a guy. And we realized that had to do with a

sense of traditional knowledge. This was the mysterious stuff you have to know, for the aliyah you do this, so you feel like you have to have a traditional background. It's actually easier to learn than how to lead a service, because there's a lot more to learn, right, the service is just longer. But it just — sort of, not esoteric, but in a sense seen as esoteric. But that kind of lingered on until someone said, "This is crazy, let's make this happen!" It was a kind of a subtle remainder (02:50:00) of patriarchy. And I don't know, it'd be interesting to know when the first woman led a Torah discussion; it would not be exactly a sermon, but someone would lead a discussion. Because that's obviously more accessible than leading the service, in terms of, you don't have to have the same level of Hebrew skills, and you don't have to know the structure of the service even if you're changing it. So, when did that happen? Was that already in the first year? I don't know.

JG: We'll ask.

MS: Right, it's like, Hilary. The first woman president! It's not a surprise, but if it happens, it's the first. And it has that significance of (02:51:00), well, now it's not significant anymore. Now it's just the way it is.

JG: Right.

MS: I don't think there was — and again, certainly, more of the women should speak to this. I don't know that there was any opposition. It was just this kind of unconscious of the way things were and the way things are, and — I just don't imagine that anybody said, Oh no, women can't lead services because halachically — [*shakes head*]. I just don't — and I don't even think it was the subtle other way of, Oh, it's fine when women do it. She's just not that good at leading services, so we wouldn't want her to lead services even if she was a man. (02:52:00) Really? Like? And what about that guy? Like, everything else, there were some people who were great service-leaders, and other people were fine, some people never — both guys and women, men and women, never led services, just because they didn't know the — they didn't want to do it. Etcetera, etcetera. All these different kinds of things. So it'd be interesting to hear how that story gets played out.

JG: So we're back after a little lunch break.

MS: I don't have tomato sauce on my face?

JG: No, you don't — so I want to dig in a little bit more into the issue of prayer and ritual and liturgy within the *havurah*. (02:53:00). The creation of a spiritual community was clearly a paramount value. How would you describe the attitude towards prayer, *tefilah*,

within the *havurah*, and how did that relate, do you think, to most people's prior experience growing up of what prayer was?

MS: I think that people's prior experience — it's important to stress that people were from all over the spectrum Jewishly, in terms of — from people with very little background — and I think I was on the more background end of the spectrum, but there were people who came with really, basically, nothing. So (02:54:00) And I'm sure people hadn't been in synagogues, or just had very forgettable experience, and the three times they went to their cousins' bar mitzvah — I think it's not just my own interest in prayer, but I think prayer was very central to Havurat Shalom. It may be — I mean it certainly was less true at the New York Havurah which didn't have a regular service for many years at the beginning. I think Fabrangen did have a regular — I think probably that's, in part, the influence of Zalman (02:55:00) and Zalman through Art as well. And it's also part of the influence of Hasidism. That is, for Hasidism, the central Jewish experience is not study, which it was before Hasidism, but really it's prayer. And again, in the context of the sixties and the counterculture, and the Jewish counterculture, this was a turning back to that which I think, if somehow Havurat Shalom had started ten or fifteen years before, that wouldn't have been the emphasis. Because that just wasn't what was in the world at that time. It doesn't mean it didn't exist someplace, but this was (02:56:00) really picking up off of American Buddhism, of the East — and what was interesting and different about the Jewish counterculture was it was really trying to recapture a Jewish past that they thought was more authentic. I don't know if that was true of the regular counterculture. I think they wanted to overthrow the oppressors, but not go back to colonial America when things were simpler and maybe agrarian — maybe peace, but not really. This was — it's kind of a larger, interesting conversation, not necessarily for now, that made the Jewish counterculture more traditional (02:57:00) in certain ways than the general counterculture. And, to a certain extent, Jewish life had been organized around prayer and services.

JG: In the old country?

MS: In the old country, but also in the American Jewish world. Whoever grew up in that community, and was going to a suburban synagogue, it was about prayer, right? You came to services, whether you like the services or not, whatever. So it wasn't like the suburban synagogues were playing basketball, and then we came along and said, basketball, that's a waste of time. Let's do services. So the challenge was to do services that really worked. And some of it was the energy, the commitment. And for some people, knowing what the service was about, (02:58:00) and for others, learning, being taught what it's about. And using — I think the hasidic model.

JG: What do you mean by that? Can you say some more about that?

MS: In a summary, for Hasidism, prayer is not about the words, it's about the experience. And in fact, Art Green and Barry Holtz's book, *Your Word Is Fire*, they quote a hasidic teaching, that you're supposed to enter into the letters, not just the letters — not only the word, you enter into the letters. When you think about that, it's saying, the words are meaningless. It's the experience behind that. For them it was a sense of being connected to the divine, the Holy One. And even if that wasn't, though that was (02:59:00) certainly for some people, a kind of spiritual quality, the experience was to have — we were talking about drugs, to have a feeling of an open consciousness, an expansiveness. And that's what we wanted. And here was an authentic Jewish form to do that, if done in the right way. That is, the way that opens things up, rather than makes you feel just — you have to turn the next page because you've got to say all this stuff.

JG: Well by the same token, many members of the early *havurot* had grown up in the Conservative movement. Many of them had been campers and counselors at Camp Ramah. How, if at all, would you say that their Ramah experiences and perspectives influenced (03:00:00) the approach to prayer and liturgy within the *havurah*, more broadly.

MS: I'm not a — I was only at Ramah for one summer. I think that people in general at Ramah had a positive prayer experience. And what Ramah conveyed was both a sense of community, but mostly spirit. It was done with spirit, really, singing. *Ruach* was really the key thing. And that was in contrast to the very often sterile, singing Conservative synagogues that emphasized decorum. It wasn't like Ramah was anti-decorum; it just had a different notion of — it could include exuberant (03:01:00) singing. So in that sense I think — I hadn't thought of this before exactly — people were prepared for Havurat Shalom, which was also exuberant, the hasidic *niggun*, you know, and the wordlessness opened up for people who didn't know Hebrew; it's also more spiritual — it's all those things. I think probably Zalman was important in making — and I don't know how conscious any of this was — saying, it's not just exuberant, it's exuberant with meaning, with purpose, with *kavanah*, with direction. I really love singing, I love Hasidic *niggunim* — since I was in high school. But it's (03:02:00) a sense of the specialness of it. Otherwise it's just like partying, which is fine when it's a party. But it can be a spiritual experience.

JG: Was there a shared commitment around any aspects of observance and practice within communal life — within the *havurah*?

MS: I mean, I think there was a sense of what was appropriate public behavior. So I don't think — I don't know how many people were smoking cigarettes, but I don't think people would have been in the house on Shabbat morning smoking. It just would have been tacky (03:03:00). Whatever you did in your private space — I think that was really — the difference between private space and public space. What you did in private space, no one was going to be judgmental. Someone was eating lobster someplace? That was their business. I don't know that someone was or not, but I think it's perfectly plausible. It didn't feel like there was — then again, that's probably American, libertarian, you do what you want, you're an adult, make your own decisions. But being in community, which was an important value, means you have to perhaps temper what you might do.

JG: So what consensus actually existed about how Shabbat was observed? Can you sort of describe Shabbat observance within the *havurah*? (03:04:00)

MS: I think in the space, it was fairly traditional-looking. I was just thinking about — people were carrying things into the building. No one said you can't carry. There was no *eruv*. That's why I'm thinking — maybe that's a good term. Once you're in the building, it looked — so, I think the first person came and turned on the lights. But no one was, I don't know why anyone would stand there turning them on and off.

JG: So for instance, it wasn't a *shomer shabbos* environment in that sense, that there was consensus that there would be no use of electricity on Shabbat.

MS: I don't remember (03:05:00) but I assume like — someone had turned on, they didn't leave the lights on for twenty-four hours. So for instance, I didn't mention, but there was another thing that happened on Shabbat which only some people went to — there was the *seudah shlishit*, the third meal, which — I don't even know if there was anything meal-wise, but we'd sit around singing for the last hour of Shabbat. And there was no light. This was kind of in the dining room. We'd sit around the table. There was no light, so as it got dark, it got dark. And then we made Havdalah at the end. In that sense, in some ways it's kind of — overall, to use a term — “*Minhag America*.”

(03:06:00) The kind of practice, that's how particularly, I would say, somewhat observant Conservative Jews practice. No one would say, let's *daven* Ma'ariv at the end of Shabbat, they said — at least I remember it that way, but, Let's have Havdalah. So why Havdalah and not —? Because we liked it, and we wanted to mark the end of Shabbat. So it wasn't, I don't want to make it sound casual or trivial, but this is how we practice. And we're not answering to Halachah, but we take things into consideration. We don't feel completely bound by it, but we have a fairly traditional practice. So if someone, not knowing very much, would come in and say, Look, this is so traditional. And someone who was very Orthodox would say, “What are these people doing? That's weird!”

JG: And they're not doing this, and they're not doing that —

MS: Right. They seem so traditional, but they're not (03:07:00), I can't figure this out. Like the Chabad guys, Who are these people? They don't fit the box! We know this box, we know that box, they don't fit. Yeah, so — what I'm trying to say, the way I think, until maybe recently, it's the way a lot of sort of liberal Jews observed Judaism. They did certain things, and that's how they practiced. Did they wash their hands every time before they said a *b'rachah* over bread? No. Did they do *Birkat Hamazon* after every meal? No. But on Shabbat? Yes. So it was kind of — I think Ramah, though there they're more influenced by the rabbis of Ramah, there was also a sense of, this is kind of the Judaism we practice. (03:08:00) We don't have to do all that, but we certainly want to do this. And that's what we do. And we don't do these things.

JG: And the criterion would be?

MS: I think the things that feel meaningful, and that — we're not going to do something just because it says we should do it. Again, the hasidic — they don't, in the sense of the *kavanah*, intention is critical. Rather than you have to do it because it's on the list of 613 you've got to do it. Whether you want to or not, whether it has meaning or not, do it because you're supposed to do it. It could lead to meaning. You'll say, "Oh, that was actually meaningful. I always hated doing Havdalah but now I really like it." This wasn't it. We weren't Orthodox, and there was (03:09:00) a spectrum of observance, a wide spectrum of observance in the *havurah*. But I don't think there was anybody who — they didn't do it because, "I'm Orthodox," or because it says to do it. They could because, I find the practice of washing my hands before making *Hamotzi* very spiritual. And I'm going to do it.

JG: In that sense do you think of, let's say, getting together for *seudah shlishit*, and the main thing that's going on is singing together as the light fades. Is that, in some sense, also prayer?

MS: Well, or, it's spiritual. And that's a classic thing — they take a forum that exists in traditional Judaism, that almost no Conservative (03:10:00) congregation in the world has, and they say, this is a great thing. We should do it. But when I got done with Mincha before, which is what the Orthodox in America would do, we would have some food, or we wouldn't have some food, but we're going to do the part — and I think that's a lot of what this whole thing's about, and certainly, people like Art and Zalman — Zalman was pulling from that tradition and translating it and — today might say reconstructing it for a contemporary American medium. And — why *daven* Mincha? Let's just do the singing.

JG: Let's focus a little bit on Shabbat morning, on the service itself. (03:11:00) So can you just sort of walk through the — basic components of the service at Havurat Shalom and how they sort of came together.

MS: It was structured around the traditional service in the sense that — this is hard, it's interesting, trying to remember how things were! And maybe that was how I did things twenty-five years later in this setting, not that setting — but basically it was structured around the key components of the traditional service: *Birchot Hashachar*, *Pesukei Dezimra*, the *Shema*, and the *Amidah*. So there was a couple of things. One, there was no *Musaf* service.

JG: And where did that decision come from?

MS: That was actually — that's really, I think helps better (03:12:00) explain what I was just trying to say a minute ago. Because it was — on the surface, it felt like, why are we going to do *Musaf*? It's praying for the return of the sacrifices and the Temple that we don't actually want, so why do that? But the deeper reason had to do with the fact that prayer is a challenging thing to engage in. And the whole reason — part of the reason that the traditional service is so long is you have to build up, you have to warm up. You can't just walk in and start singing the opera. So you do this whole thing, and then you have the Torah service, which is a different kind of thing, and then you go to *Musaf*. And I've had traditionalists say to me, "*Musaf* takes only five minutes" (03:13:00), and that's actually the problem. You can't really do it. You can't get into it in a short period of time. So it's actually looking at the flow of the service rather than what's traditional and what's not traditional. We get the flow of the service, we build up to the *Shema* and the *Amidah*, and then we go to an intellectual discussion experience, and then we sing a few things just to finish up at the end. But to go back to prayer, and to try to do it in a short period of time doesn't make any sense. So we're not going to do it for that reason. Not because it's traditional, not because it's not traditional —

JG: Or even you're saying the content — what's quote-unquote "being prayed for" —

MS: It's not even so much that that was an issue, you know. But it was like — so that, I think is, again — that's really the legacy of Zalman who paid attention (03:14:00) to the ebb and flow of the service. And that's really influenced my own approach to services. And I've moved in more radical directions than the service I was just describing. But it's really that sense of what's the experience, how do we move to do that, right. Think of this as like a symphony. It's not random music — it's not, let's put some fast music in here. The whole thing is planned. And it's the same thing — like, when there's music to this

section, let's sing that, but maybe that's the wrong mood and mode. So that was the thing. So we didn't — within the traditional pieces, we didn't do every piece of liturgy like in *pesukei dezimra*. (03:15:00) And one of the key things, which is a strength and a challenge, or a weakness of the *havurah* style service is it depends so much on the person leading it. In an Orthodox synagogue, the person leading the service is really just pacing, telling you, we finished this paragraph, let's move on to the next one. Some places have cantors and stuff like that, but mostly it's just [*hand motion — moving forward*]. In a classic Conservative, Reform, synagogue or temple, the rabbi and cantor are kind of leading the service, there are a lot of passive — The *havurah* service, the person leading the service was supposed to help engage you, inspire you to participate in the service. So they might do a *kavanah*. Here's a theme, or here's a spiritual teaching on this paragraph we're about to say. (03:16:00) So you say, "Wow, I never thought of that that way before. Now I can say it with some meaning instead of just mumbling my way through." So that put a lot of responsibility — where in Orthodox, do I really care whether the other person up there is into it or not? Not much, because I'm saying what I need to say. They're not inspiring me. They're just leading, just pacing. But here it was more. So when it worked, it enabled this week's service to be different from last week's service, which is a challenge of weekly prayer, because each person gave their own —

JG: Sort of inflection —

MS: — inflection, yeah, that's a great word. Inflection to it. And sometimes it was, like, oh, I never saw that in that before. Wow, that's interesting. But sometimes it was just (03:17:00) style inflection. And obviously, if it didn't work for you — [*laughs*]

JG: What about the use of language? Hebrew, English, any other language in the course of the service?

MS: Again, someone walking in, particularly someone with less knowledge, would have said. "Wow, this is a traditional service." There — I think, in fact, in the first year of the *havurah*, there was more experimentation.

JG: The first year?

MS: Yeah. So — maybe it was the Riskin Shabbat, or maybe I was there for another Shabbat — maybe it was the first or second year. Instead of the Torah portion, they read a poem by D.H. Lawrence. I mean, that was it! There was no, we read that, and then we read the D.H. Lawrence." (03:18:00) I don't know if it was D.H. Lawrence — it wasn't sexy, it was just completely "other." I think — my understanding is that there — like

often, in the beginning, let's try all these things. Let's plan. They had people planning the service each week apparently, in the first year, members.

JG: Who? A group or an individual leader would make his own —?

MS: I think different groups, if it was a group. And again, you should ask the first-year people. And that becomes a lot of work. So I think it moved much more to the person leading the service still had responsibility, not just to get up and pace, the service would just start here page three and we'll finish one-seventy-three, I know I have two hours, that's it, bla bla bla, but — still to conceive — (03:19:00) That's what I think was the really important thing about the service, was still to conceive of it as a symphony, as a whole, as a thing that's moving, rather than, it just starts here, it ends here. What happens in between, we're just following what happens in between.

JG: We were talking about English, so —

MS: Right, so I think, the time I was there, I don't remember English readings. If someone wanted to, nobody would say, how would you put an English reading in here. But I think it was basically in Hebrew. Obviously the discussion —

JG: Before we get into the discussion: was there ever an occasion when you were there that an English translation of a text or a prayer was being read but was being chanted to a traditional *niggun* or — (03:20:00)

MS: I don't specifically remember but that sounds very plausible. Zalman started this chanting in English. There were times we did the Torah reading simultaneously in Hebrew and English.

JG: How would that happen?

MS: Two different people. That is, someone's reading from the Torah, and someone is saying English. Some people felt —

JG: Saying or chanting in English?

MS: Saying. It probably was to make the distinction, so you could listen to one or the other rather than just ahh! — overload. Some people experienced an overload, but for other people it was really great, and enabled them to either understand the Hebrew or have English at the same time as the people wanted to have the Hebrew. You needed —

the English reader had to know the Hebrew (03:21:00) in order to keep it paced, right. So we would do that occasionally.

JG: Was there any difference in the volume?

MS: Yeah. I think the English was a little quieter, I think. So there could have been other — I'm certain there were times were — I remember once at Weiss's Farm, Arthur Waskow chanted the Declaration of Independence to trope. Or to the haftorah. I don't remember which. But that was definitely the kind of thing that people would say, yeah. Or, I mean, (03:22:00) no one would say, You can't do that. Someone might have said, "That really didn't work," or, "That was fabulous." And two different people could have said the opposite.

JG: Exactly. So there was clearly this tension between sort of tradition and innovation, in regard both to, it sounds like, the liturgy and also Torah reading and interpretation.

MS: Right, but some of it had to do with just the pattern that people got — It was partly the person leading the service had complete control, so if they theoretically, if they said, "I don't want to do the *Amidah* today. We're not doing the *Amidah*." They had the right to do that. They didn't have to take it to a committee for a discussion. You know, they had to be sensitive, and people afterwards could say, What'd you do? (03:23:00) And there might have been someone who would get up and sort of walk out of the room, not exactly in protest, but I don't really want to be a part of this.

JG: It's not working for me.

MS: Right, it's not working for me, so I'm going to go into the other room and take out a book and I'll study to myself. That also happened. Or people would say afterwards, or people didn't say afterwards.

JG: Can you describe any of the innovative approaches to — you've mentioned a few things, but, anything stand out to you over the years in terms of things that people tried that either worked or didn't work?

MS: I'm going to say one other thing that I think was part — which was the use of Hasidic *niggunim* music. Which, in some ways, I also would argue, is (03:24:00) different than Camp Ramah. Where Camp Ramah was, Let's take the songster and sing every song we know in the songster; we'll sing everything once or twice and then we'll go on to the next one, so at Havurat Shalom there was a sense that singing *niggunim*, that *niggunim* were spiritual music, that was the purpose for which they were written, and that

repeating them over and over again was a kind of spiritual practice, again, talking about opening up into a different kind of consciousness. So the way things were sung, it didn't matter if they were slow or fast, was an important piece of Havurat Shalom, which I think has — and maybe other sources as well, has influenced the kind of, the Jewish world but particularly (03:25:00) Renewal and spirituality. We weren't the only ones singing Shlomo Carlebach but I think —

JG: Where did the *niggunim* come from? Where were people bringing them from? Where did they know them? How did they learn them?

MS: Well, sometimes there were people like me who had a connection to that world, bringing a bunch of things and continued to learn new things, and continued to bring that — So I think, Zalman was also — and then there was, I think some people would kind of try — would get a recording of Shlomo Carlebach and say, Oh, that's a nice thing. And the other thing which is kind of the technique piece of it is — taking music that was written for this verse and putting it to someplace else. (03:26:00) Because I would say — I'll tell you about this experiment in a second. I want to do a service on the theme of light. So I really like this melody, but it's written about some other thing, but here's a phrase, a verse, a line in the liturgy that talks about light. I don't know any melody to it — oh, this melody, try it out, works. The ones that don't work, that's not so good, but you figure out one that kind of works. I think that's also a kind of innovation of this world. Of this understanding that you can move stuff, move these tunes around. And so the innovation — I did an innovation which is one I remember, which some people really didn't like [*laughs*]. It was (03:27:00) the Shabbat of Hanukkah, so I thought it would be interesting to do a theme of light and darkness. I think this could have been the first time that I led a service at Havurat Shalom. I had a good background but I was waiting until — So I decided I wanted to begin in darkness and move towards light. So I covered all the windows in the space, and there were candles. So first of all, obviously, lit candles on Shabbat, so I think some people were not thrilled with that kind of thing. I did a service built around the theme of light and darkness and sometime we opened the windows and the light came in. I don't know — I'm not sure it worked, but (03:28:00), you know, there was an idea there. I don't remember exactly how I did it, but I would still do a service around the theme of light and darkness, and Hanukkah is an obvious place, so — we should talk about the Torah discussion at some point.

JG: Yeah, was there any sense though of limitation on what was outside the bounds of what was acceptable?

MS: I think it was really pretty broad. I think the limitation was a sense that I'm part of this group. I have some commitment to the group, so I don't want to do things that I

know are going to be offensive to the group, whatever that would be. I don't know what it would be, but — So I didn't do any of that with the intention of annoying anybody, or that kind of thing. (03:29:00) So I think that's the real limitation, whatever it would be. If someone said, Look, today — this could have happened, maybe it did happen, even it might have — “I want to do the whole service in English, just so we have the experience of doing this — instead of just saying the Hebrew. Maybe it'll help us next time to focus.” Like I can see Art making that argument, “Let's do this once and see what it's like.” And then maybe we'll say, “We shouldn't say this anymore, now that I realize —” Whatever the response would be. That's what I'm saying. That's not — in most synagogues, there's some tradition that they're answering to. Either it's Orthodox Halachah; in the Conservative movement it's *matbeyah*, you know we have to — it's kind of halachic, or they think they're halachic, or they are halachic depending on whatever. (03:30:00) Reform, it's just the tradition of how they do things. So it isn't as though every week it was really different, but if someone wanted to make it different, they could. And the expectation is that people might say afterwards, “Well, that didn't really work for me. I couldn't do the whole thing in English; halfway through I started doing Hebrew.” Or, “You wanted to sing this thing for half an hour. I thought it was fabulous,” or “I was ready to shoot myself after ten minutes. I like *niggunim*, but enough, you know.”

JG: What about bringing in contemporary readings, music, song, non-Jewish?

MS: That would have — “Morning has broken like the first morning.” (03:31:00) So that would often be sung in the first paragraph before the *Shema* because that felt appropriate. All right — often, more than once in a blue moon.

JG: Were there other things like that that you did?

MS: That's the one that kind of jumps to mind. There could have been other things that were sung occasionally or felt like there was a — I shouldn't say often in the sense that, most weeks we sang that. But no one — it wouldn't have been surprising if someone said, “Let's sing that this week.” Or handed out a sheet with — what's his name, Cohen's “Hallelujah”. There would be singing. With those words, with different words. (03:32:00)

JG: What about Torah reading? The approach to Torah reading and interpretation?

MS: Here's another interesting question. We read part of the Torah reading. I don't think it was the triennial, but I could be wrong. I want to say we read three aliyot but it might have been one aliyah — I can't, it's astonishing — I can't remember this. Now I have to ask some people. Some things I don't care if I don't remember, but — occasionally it

would be this simultaneous reading, but mostly it would be a reading of — we definitely didn't read the whole Torah portion, so we read some.

JG: Using the traditional —?

MS: We had a Torah scroll (03:33:00), there was an aliyah or aliyot kind of thing. Otherwise, why need a *gabbai*? So I think — I would guess it was three aliyot. I'm not sure we followed the triennial. I don't remember. I read Torah sometimes but I don't — And then there would be Torah discussion. So instead of a *d'var torah* sermon or whatever you want to label it, it was a discussion where someone would introduce, take a few minutes to introduce a topic and then open it up for comments. And needless to say, sometimes that was great and sometimes it was not. And there was sometimes a problem with the people who were coming for services who were not members. It was someone who always made the first (03:34:00) comment, and it wasn't very good [*laughing*]. So, you know, it's okay if they're like the smartest person in the room, and most of the time they aren't. I think there were occasional conversations about whether we should cut that out, and — whenever there's discussion — most Reconstructionist synagogues have discussion, SAJ [Society for the Advancement of Judaism] does — there are people who love it, think it's the best thing, and there are people who hate it and think we should cut it out, so —

JG: Was there any overall approach you could point to in how people chose what to focus on and what not to focus on? And let me just add one more piece to that, which is, how important were contemporary issues and concerns relative to the traditional issues that were being discussed?

MS: I would say they were very important. (03:35:00)

JG: The contemporary issues?

MS: Yeah. But I mean — and again, I may be reading back how I think about it now. I think it's always reading the Torah to talk about issues in our lives that could be, like, our inner lives, for a lot of people, or sometimes it could be issues in the world, rather than... "What was Abraham thinking when he was taking Isaac for three days?" which would be a more classic — it could be people did talk about that, but I would guess — again, as I said, the mixture of the contemporary, that there was going to be a lot of, "this seems to be really related to the issue today, or (03:36:00) the political world," or, "this is an issue of people on a spiritual quest, and how you can get lost, and in this story that's what that's about."

JG: So another critique of mainstream Jewish worship is obviously the emphasis on a certain kind of decorum, maybe more reminiscent of Protestant services and all of that. So how did the issue of decorum feature in the *havurah*'s approach to worship?

MS: In that sense it was part of the counterculture, informal style. People could dress however they wanted, sitting on cushions. I think there wasn't much issue of people talking during the service because people felt like they were participating. And I didn't think anybody would (03:37:00) go "shh," but —

JG: What about ritual objects. Where did they come from?

MS: There was this ark hanging on the wall, and then we had a little table, kind of low-ish so you had to kneel to read the Torah that would be brought in for the Torah service, then taken away, whatever. We had a *yad*.

JG: That was a *yad* that someone had acquired for this purpose or made for this purpose, or?

MS: I don't remember that. Right, so there was some making of stuff, whether it was the ark cover or maybe a Torah cover later — part of the crafts world of the counterculture. But we might have had just a silver *yad* (03:38:00) that we had. I don't remember.

JG: So by the time you were involved, and over the period you were involved, those four years —

MS: Three. Four, five, and six.

JG: I want to go back to the issue of women's involvement in the services, whether leading services or even just participating in services. Do you have any memory of women wearing tallit or *kippah* in the early years?

MS: Well, I think there certainly were some women who wore tallit, particularly the women who were leading services. But I think that became the practice — some people wore a regular tallit, (03:39:00) and other people had more feminist tallit, that is it didn't look like the standard tallit. Might've even just changed colors but it looked very different. I don't remember how many — I think some people wore them every service. I don't remember anybody wearing *kippah*.

JG: No? How about women using *tefillin*?

MS: Well, we didn't have a daily minyan. So there wouldn't be so many opportunities. Maybe if there was a retreat. I don't even remember if when we were on a retreat whether we had a minyan.

JG: Do you remember women (03:40:00) leading discussions, leading parts of the service?

MS: Yeah, I mean — yes. In terms — that's why, at some point it was completely egalitarian. It could still be. There were sort of more male teachers, just because, again, of background. And people were particularly interested in — there was a lot of like teaching traditional texts or using traditional texts and themes. So there was a skill gap that took a while to catch up on. Just like there were — women going into Jewish Studies at that time were all doing American Jewish history, so you didn't have to do rabbinics. That's changed. (03:41:00) But it was hard to catch up if you didn't — if you were a woman and didn't go to Maimonides, etcetera, etcetera.

JG: To go back to the language of prayer, do you remember any sensitivities around issues having to do with the gendered language of prayer — or gendered nature of Hebrew — at that point?

MS: I don't think — I think Hebrew was kind of untouched, which is interesting because later it became a big — I would guess there was already sensitivity in English.

JG: But nothing about adding an *imahot* or something like that?

MS: Yeah, I'm sure we did. It may have already, I don't remember.

JG: I'll ask women. (03:42:00) And other men too.

MS: Yeah, it feels like we've been doing that forever, but no, that's a good question. I don't think in terms of changing the Hebrew to the feminine kind of thing but see if someone says differently.

JG: And as far as you can remember, were women counted in a minyan or not when you first started?

MS: I'm sure they were counted but I don't —

JG: They were?

MS: I don't know that it was ever an issue, but most of the time there were enough people; it was just a room full of people. Whatever, a dozen.

JG: Okay, so let's sort of move to another area. And that is the role of study and learning within the *havurah*. (03:43:00) What would you say was the *havurah*'s vision for the role of learning within the community? Where did learning fit?

MS: I think it was a central activity. Were Shabbat and prayer more important? Maybe. But, I mean, there might have been someone who wasn't studying. Some of them might be taking classes at Brandeis. They didn't have to. I think it was an important piece — just like the community, it was an important part. Those are the three pillars, I would say. I think the thing about study is that, well, certainly for some people, there were some people who were studying Hebrew, and they would get a certain level of skill (03:44:00), a certain level of basic knowledge. I think I taught a class about the prayer book, kind of the structure of the prayer book, I think I did. Or maybe not — it's the kind of thing I could have taught. Or maybe I taught a course on *Humash* and *Rashi*, just to sort of get things going, but most of the courses were related to themes, issues, whatever word you want to use. Let's see what Judaism has to say — Jewish tradition — or other traditions. I don't think it was only Jewish Jewish. I would say that study was (03:45:00) seen as a spiritual experience. So besides, okay, I want to learn this skill kind of thing, most of the study was about engaging spiritual questions. That the purpose wasn't to gain knowledge per se, but to kind of grapple with issues. I don't know that studying — I don't know if there was such a class — but studying a Jewish text on the environment. But in the context of creating a Jewish life, the study was seen as particularly - and that's why I think there was a lot of study of hasidic texts because these texts are talking about the spiritual life, spiritual issues, issues of consciousness. So it was (03:46:00) different than yeshiva learning which is either mastering or figuring out what the Talmud is trying to say, unpacking it. Those were elements, but it had a different purpose. And I think that's an important legacy of the *havurah*.

JG: By the time you were involved, was there a curriculum, a sense of a curriculum or there was mainly classes you could take if you wanted to?

MS: No, we had a meeting — one year at least it was at the Shavuot retreat. People went around the room and said, "What would you like to study this year?" and you could say one or two things, not twelve things, and people then could say, "I'm willing to teach that." (03:47:00) And that's how the — I have distinct memories of that. Because I was actually sitting there, it was on *yom tov* so we couldn't write it down, I was like memorizing — so then we had a meeting, and made a list, and then people kind of got matched up.

JG: Was there a sense of some people being faculty in any sense, or more teachers than learners? Can you talk about that?

MS: Well, I think there was a kind of reality of, you know, someone like Michael “Buzzy” Fishbane who’s getting a Ph.D. in Bible, he knows a lot more than the rest of us. But overall, I do think it was really egalitarian. Someone might say, (03:48:00) “I don’t want to take a bible course with Joe Shmo, because —” but it would be just, on that level. But I don’t think there was a sense of, oh, these people are faculty.

JG: So this was a change from the very, very early period where it was a seminary conception and there was faculty recruited.

MS: Well, as I was saying, someone just spoke to me about — someone wanted to be admitted, just to teach, and they said “No, you can’t.” Now, whether there were other issues, whatever. And that may have — it’s an interesting point, maybe that’s a sign that this seminary thing is really a dead idea. (03:49:00) And the question is how quickly that happens. Was the other in the first year, in the second year? So those are good questions to ask other people.

JG: Were there some people who were more teacher-types or student-types than others? Or did everybody sort of participate one way or another both in teaching and in learning?

MS: I think everybody participated. Because even if you were a Ph.D., there was another class that you wanted — there were a lot of interesting people and good teachers. And not just Jewish teachers, but people who had things to teach, other kinds — I don’t remember specifically, but people who just from their life background, or they had — Barry Holtz’s (03:50:00) Ph.D. is in literature. So if he was going to teach the poems of Dunne.

JG: That was done? So you’re saying the classes weren’t all on Jewish —?

MS: I think most of them were Jewish, but it could be like comparing love poetry of Yehudah Ha-Levi and Dunne or Herbert or whoever. And people would have said, “That’s great. I can learn a lot from Barry. He knows a lot about this. Or, you know — I’m going to use my literary critical skills to look at the Book of Jonah. Okay, so he’s not a Bible scholar, but that’s kind of interesting how you as — that kind of, taking what you know and (03:51:00) applying it to a Jewish text. I don’t know if someone was just teaching quantum physics that wouldn’t have happened.

JG: How long was a class that someone was teaching? Are you talking about over a course of several sessions, or a semester, or could it be one or two sessions? How did that work?

MS: It was usually a semester or a year.

JG: So it was a big commitment to be a teacher, actually.

MS: Yeah. Yeah. That's how I remember it. And did they meet every week? Did they meet every other week? That I don't remember. It wasn't like once a month. It was a commitment both by the teacher and the student. (03:52:00)

JG: How big did these classes tend to be?

MS: They could have been three to six to eight. It depended. I mean sometimes — there was some talk of making something a theme for the year. There was going to be this food theme. I think that actually happened, I don't remember how many people took that class.

JG: Were there classes for people who wanted to enhance their basic Jewish skills or Jewish literacy?

MS: Yeah, I mentioned that.

JG: Was there a *beit midrash* at some point?

MS: A literal *beit midrash*?

JG: You know, for students. (03:52:48)

MS: A literal *beit midrash*? No.

JG: Something for students who wanted to...

MS: I mean, there might have been a program — at some point there were adult education classes being done for the community (03:53:00), which might have been called *beit midrash*.

JG: While you were there?

MS: I think so. I think also the year before. I can sort of picture the brochure.

JG: Is there anything else you want to add about the role of the classes in the community?

MS: No. I think that — no.

JG: So let's turn to social activism for a minute, and also how social activism in the *havurah* related to the general Jewish counterculture and their aims. How had people who'd been involved in the early years of the first *havurot* participated in more general activism in the general society and in the Jewish world?

MS: I think they were involved. Certainly, I mentioned a couple of the big anti-Vietnam (03:54:00) War demonstrations. I think a lot of people would go.

JG: Someone said, "Everybody participated in protests against the war." That was kind of a common denominator. Does that feel right?

MS: Right. Yeah, I think so. Now, I think — as I kind of alluded to earlier, there were various attempts, some earlier on before my time, to do kind of social justice — to have a drop-in center or something. And whether the spiritual emphasis that we've just been talking a lot about in terms of the learning took up the — even if the *havurah* was the most important thing in your life, there were still other things in your life that you had to do. (03:55:00) As a graduate student, you're probably spending more time doing that even if the *havurah* was more important. So I don't know if there were people actively involved in the student mobilization — whatever, something they were going and doing lots of volunteering. I don't remember that but it'd be a good question to ask people. So I think people were aware of, were concerned about these issues. It wasn't like we were living in a whatever you want to call it, monastery, we're just spiritual. It's all part of the contemporariness of it.

JG: That being said, how important was social activism within the *havurah* itself? (03:56:00) As a form of activity, of —

MS: See, it's not in the big three.

JG: Not in the big three in Havurat Shalom. It was different in the New York Havurah, for instance.

MS: It could be — in New York. I don't know that. In the stereotyping, it's Fabrangen that's very political. When you think about Arthur, you can see — and living in Washington, D.C., you're either working for the government or you're working against

the government. That's a one-industry town. And it's also the personalities and the leadership. So however egalitarian all these groups were, there was — in some more than others, I think — there is a kind of leadership that helps set the tone. In good ways and maybe bad ways. (03:57:00) So it feels like it's more sporadic, the social action piece. Either something big like this mass rally, which everybody in the world's invited to, or there might have been a small thing, like we should do this, that someone had some connection to, or wanted to connect us to. But it — yeah, I think it was of lesser significance.

JG: Israel had just fought and won the Six Day War, shortly before the you joined and the year before the founding (03:58:00) of Havurat Shalom. How would you describe the feeling in the *havurah* about Israel and Zionism and its relevance in people's lives?

MS: I think it was — hard to remember — I think it was there. I think it was positive. I remember the Yom Kippur War, when we were *davening* Yom Kippur, and someone came and said something kind of thing. There was that awareness.

JG: Had many people within the *havurah* actually spent time in Israel? And did you?

MS: Yes, I had. I think a good number did, and probably some hadn't, partly depending on the Jewish background they had. (03:59:00) I mean, some people probably spent junior year in Israel.

JG: When had you been in Israel?

MS: I went when I was — I went to like a camp, an American camp in Israel, when I was fifteen. And then my brother — right after the Six Day War my parents, we did a trip — my brother's bar mitzvah was there. Not at the Kotel, didn't know that existed yet. It wasn't possible. Then I think that was the two times before. I didn't do the junior year abroad, partly because (04:00:00) of the transfer to Brandeis. I mean, subsequent to that, I've been to Israel many times, but I think I was already in the *havurah* or post the *havurah*. There was — it was a kind of interesting — in '73 was the Yom Kippur war. So the first Weiss's Farm was right after that.

JG: The first retreat at Weiss's Farm?

MS: Or, if it wasn't the first, there was a Weiss's Farm retreat. I'm not sure about the date, but there was a retreat after that. A number of us went to the retreat. And we — oh. (04:01:00) The *havurah* postponed its retreat to allow us to go, so maybe it was going to be Columbus Day Weekend or some other holiday like that. We came back and there was

this whole big, I mean, there was a number of us — I don't remember how many — half a dozen or less, at Weiss's Farm. And we said, Oh, great, so now we're going to retreat next weekend. And some people said, No, we shouldn't go on retreat. We should stay in Somerville and organize pro-Israel stuff. So it became this whole debate, I think in the — I have a feeling we cancelled the retreat. But everybody was unhappy with each other on the two sides of that argument. It became this issue of like, (04:02:00) gee, don't you care enough about Israel? And it was a fight. It was a significant — it wasn't just a momentary blip.

JG: So you said there was a fight, meaning a more serious level of disagreement. How was it dealt with is one question, and the other is, what were the repercussions of that, if any? It's a serious issue.

MS: I think — well, I'll tell you the repercussions. We had a meeting about — part of it was, in retrospect, it was like two groups of people having very different experiences and having no understanding of the other people's experiences, and sort of puzzled by (04:03:00) like — we went to Weiss's Farm, we had a great time. We come back, ready to go on retreat. And they're saying, "No, no, we shouldn't go on retreat." Why shouldn't we go to this? Dadadada, so we said okay, but okay what? And they couldn't say, like, How could you think of going on a retreat? Israel's future is at stake and dadadada. Don't you care about Israel? So it was one of those places where it just gets off on the wrong foot because — only later did I realize, oh, that's why they were acting like that. I'd thought, why are you being so crazy? And angry? It's just a disagreement. I don't get it, okay, we disagree. Like why?

JG: What did you get later? I don't understand.

MS: Somehow it was — what happens when you have two important experiences. You kind of assume everybody else had that experience and understands your experience, but — (04:04:00) I didn't go through the car crash, so I just don't — I understand why you're upset because of the car crash, but why are you *so* upset? Well, because you're an idiot! I was almost killed! Like, why are you telling me, why are you upset? So it's that kind of thing — so I think that was some of it. You know, the repercussions were that — I think for some people it never healed. So Bill Novak, who was on the — I'll call it the "pro-Israel" side — not that the rest of us — you know, never felt right about it. Wrote about it and kind of said, "I'm leaving. I'm going to leave the *havurah* over this issue." I can't remember. I think he left at the end of the year. But I think there was a piece he published in *Response*, kind of thing. So that's (04:05:00) the repercussion. That was the ultimate. People could say, "I'm unhappy, I'm going to leave." And of course they can leave — you know, and I think he misunderstood. I still think he misunderstood. I don't think we

were against — this was long before Israel was a controversial issue. So this was — it doesn't mean that we all felt the same in terms of — I think for some, George and Bella went to live in Israel.

JG: When was that, more or less?

MS: I think around that time. (04:06:00) I think they went from the *havurah* to Israel, but I'm not one hundred percent sure.

JG: Were there others who were thinking about aliyah?

MS: That's what I'm saying. Swirsky also went, so there were a few people who moved to Israel, but mostly not. So does that show — what? That we're "Diasporists?" Maybe. The argument could be made, I wrote some article about that at some point. Maybe we see creating Jewish lives here. This is where we need to do that. And it's not like we don't care about Israel — just we care more about this, here. This life. The Jewish counterculture — and some people didn't go because it's hard to go. For all the reasons (04:07:00) many people don't go. I don't think it's all ideological, by any means.

JG: I want to talk for a minute about the role of self-reflection in the *havurah*. Because even while many people were living in it, it seems like there was a great deal of reflection going on, both personally, and by outsiders who were reflecting on the meaning of the *havurah*. I wanted to ask you why you thought that was so, and what role you think various publications played in promoting that kind of self-reflection and getting it out there to a broader audience. (04:08:00)

MS: I think the self-reflection was in part because that was also the tenor of the time — of, you know, psychology and just now, pop psychology, and everybody thinking about themselves, in good ways and stupid ways, all the things. I think a piece of this about the — I don't know if you're referring to specific publications, but I think it was, oh, here there's something new in Jewish life, and the Jewish community then and today was, what's the future of Jewish life? And here's these young people who actually look just like our kids — they're not like the (04:09:00) hasidim-looking guys — who were interested in Jewish life. So what's the story here? What could we learn from it? Let's write about something positive. People took that and said, let's start *havurot* in synagogues. Right, that was part of the response. But I think that's why — that was why it was of interest. I mean, there were other things happening, and they wrote about those too. But in some ways this — it might be interesting to think about whether this is the biggest, most important piece of it. And unlike the later political stuff — like Breira is controversial — this is not controversial.

JG: This, meaning the *havurah* stuff.

MS: (04:10:00) The *havurah* stuff is not, I mean, you could make — and there were people who wrote negative pieces about the *havurah*. Not just the wife-swapping, but the real kind of stuff. But I think that's — I would think that's really what it is.

JG: Let's move from that for just a minute to at least a brief discussion of the *Jewish Catalog*. Obviously I don't think we can finish this without focusing on the *Jewish Catalog* for a bit. Tell us where the idea for publishing the *Jewish Catalog* came from and how it actually came to be?

MS: Yeah, so there's two stories. Two origin stories. It's like the Spiderman origin story. One is that a bunch of people in the *havurah* were sitting around before Sukkot. Besides going on a retreat, we'd build a *sukkah* in the backyard. So trying to remember how to build it (04:11:00) and someone said, "Gee, wouldn't it be good if there was a book that told you how to do this?" The other is that Richie Siegel and George Savran were in CJS [Contemporary Jewish Studies] at Brandeis, the Master's program, and they had — for the Master's thesis — they had to describe a project. They didn't have to do the project. They just had to describe a project. It's pretty easy! So they came up with this idea of the "Jewish Whole Earth Catalog." The *Whole Earth Catalog* was a pretty big deal at the time. So they just wrote up this thing, they got their Master's, M.A. from that, and you know — Richie decided to try and do it. George didn't want to do it. Sharon said, oh, she'd help out. Then I joined, so it was the three of us, and that's kind of how it happened. (04:12:00) And we sort of — we wrote all our friends asking them to write chapters.

JG: How did you decide what the chapters should be about?

MS: We just sat down and made a list of things that we thought would be important to cover, and some of them didn't get covered because the friend we asked didn't come through —

JG: For instance?

MS: I don't remember exactly — but some of it was also — someone said, after the first *Catalog* came out, said, "None of you probably have children; there isn't anything about children in this." and so, Of course not. Actually they're right. So we never planned to do the second and third. It was when we realized what was missing from the first. And we rewrote a lot. Some of the chapters were great that came in; some we had to rewrite.

Some we really wrote the whole chapter; I won't (04:13:00) say who! But — right, I thought there was another question in there.

JG: We were talking about content, and you decided to — what you felt was left out and how you decided what to put in.

MS: Well, a lot of it was obvious. Like oh, Shabbat! We have to talk about Shabbat. We have to talk about kashrut. One of the things we realized was that we — the *Whole Earth Catalog* was really a reference. Like, you want to build a geodesic dome? Buy this book by Buckminster Fuller. We couldn't do that. There was no reference we could give, and if there was a reference, it was in Hebrew, in the *Shulchan Aruch*, which would be completely inaccessible to anybody who would want to find it. So that was one reason we decided to change it from the original title, from "Jewish Whole Earth Catalog" to *Jewish Catalog*.

JG: It was originally meant to be the "Jewish Whole Earth Catalog?"

MS: Yeah. And the other reason, it just sounded derivative. (04:14:00) But with — there was really, it was — in substance it was a different book.

JG: Who was your intended audience? Who did you have in mind as you were writing it?

MS: Part of the charm and, I think, the success of the book was that we didn't think of ourselves as authors, like, we're writing this book; this is going to be an important book. We just thought, this would be useful; let's take down all this stuff that we and our friends are involved in, and we'll put it out there in the world. And it's one of those examples of the right moment kind of giving expression to — it was to what we were doing, the Jewish life we were leading, which deeply resonated with lots of people, (04:15:00) because they said, Wow! We could do this, or, These seem like normal people; this seems contemporary. They look happy doing this Jewish stuff! So besides everybody giving the book to their kids, to make the kids do it, I think people themselves found it, and it was accessible, non-judgmental, told you how to do stuff. The *Catalog* name was important because it's not — *Catalog* means, you want to do Shabbat? Here's the chapter. You don't want to do Shabbat? You don't have to do Shabbat. Where everything else up to then would be like — a book that came out just at the same time, *To Be A Good Jew* by Chaim Donen. He was an Orthodox rabbi. It was straightforward. It didn't look at all like the *Catalog*, partly the look was — but he was basically, you know, (04:16:00) to be a good Jew, you have to do the following things. There's no choice here. In the nicest way, saying that, this was — we're just trying to be helpful. We're trying to make this possible for you. And I think it was a moment that the Jewish world was

looking, oh, we actually want to do this thing. Here's this book that tells us how to do it. That's great. Now I can do it. Rather than being embarrassed, going to a class, a rabbi — it was —

JG: It was in fact a runaway success.

MS: You know, I'm not trying to be overly modest. I do think it was the right — and I think we might have known that unconsciously, that this is the right message. (04:17:00) But more it was just, this is what we're doing. And people said, yeah, we like that. That's it.

JG: And within the *havurah*, did people feel it reflected well the practices of the *havurah* pretty much?

MS: Yeah, I don't think anybody felt like, oh, that's not the real — missing the real *havurah*. No. I think people felt, I think, good, because a lot of them were in it, or their pictures were in it, or their friends were in it. And it was — the worst is, a couple people said, Oh, I had that idea. I wanted to say, You have to do the idea! Even if you had the idea, which I doubt it! [*laughing*] (04:18:00)

JG: So, wanted to sort of begin just to conclude here. The main focus of the interview today has largely been on this period that we're talking about, '68 to '73. And for many people that period, the period of their involvement with the *havurah*, was somewhat contained. And for you it continued to shape your life in many ways ever since. For one thing I just want to establish: what was the period when you were actually an active member of Havurat Shalom — '71 to '74, was that what it was?

MS: Seventy-one, seventy two — seventy-four, yeah, so it was three years. The fourth, fifth, and sixth years of the *havurah*.

JG: Fourth, fifth, and sixth. And when you look back on that, do you have anything you could (04:19:00) call the strongest single reflection of your experience within the *havurah*?

MS: Well, I do feel, as you kind of said, it really shaped my Jewish life.

JG: Can you give us a snapshot of that?

MS: Here's a picture of me at the beach! [*laughs*] What I mean by that, I talked a lot earlier about my journey from beginning in Orthodoxy to Havurat Shalom, and when I —

I mean those, some of these broad ways of thinking about Judaism and approaching Judaism, it still remains central to the way I live Judaism and the way I (04:20:00) think about Judaism. So the contemporary and the traditional. The spirituality, having a sense that there's something beyond myself. And, I would say, a lot about Hasidism — something that we didn't get a chance to talk about today, but this notion of intention, of being connected to something beyond. All these are really essential pieces, even though my Jewish life has continued to develop. So let me say a word about that.

JG: Please.

MS: (04:21:00) So in a way, the emphasis on spirituality has — I don't know that it's more than it was, but I think it's taken on some new forms. Whether it's meditation, or the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. So, a number of years ago I decided to kind of rewrite the *Jewish Catalog*. Some of it's really outdated. I mean, just, I don't mean the facts, but more in terms of the style. It's like watching an old movie. It was a good movie, but hmm, that part's — So the challenge was, now that I — I was innocent before — but now I know, I'm going to do this consciously. How do I consciously want to shape Judaism for now? And I did the (04:22:00) book called *A Book of Life: Embracing Judaism as a Spiritual Practice*. So I felt that language of a spiritual practice was different than I would have used all those years ago, and therefore the book itself was more about the kind of the why, than the how. All that stuff that made the *Catalog* so powerful — making Judaism accessible by telling people how to do something: if you want to build a *sukkah*, here's how to do it, etc., etc. Now I think the question people are asking is, like, why bother being Jewish? I'm not ashamed. I'm not embarrassed. It's not bad. I'm Jewish. But why do all this stuff? That kind of thing. (04:23:00) So it was an attempt, successful or not, to kind of answer that question from that perspective. Trying to think about what — how to think about Judaism now. But to take — I've always been very interested in prayer and leading services. I'm now in a — a place where I feel that we really have to — I use Reconstructionist language, having in the meantime having gone to rabbinical school, a whole part of the biography that's not part of this, but that's okay. Sometimes things need not just to be tampered around the edges — tampered with around the edges. (04:24:00) Made a little bit better, but they need to be radically reconstructed, and I think that's what prayer — that is prayer services have to be done. To take — it was interesting for me to talk today about the *havurah* and how it thought about services, but to take that notion of like what are we trying to construct here? Again, using that language of symphony, experience. Rather than how much or how little of the traditional liturgy do we want to say. And I think that's the contemporary challenge. I think the Jewish world is very much under challenge today in a way I didn't feel in the past. I'm not in the doom and gloom (04:25:00), the end is near school. But I think there are really serious challenges. And the other thing I want to say is I do feel that the *havurah*, Havurat

Shalom and the *havurah* movement, to call it that, really did impact in a serious way on American Jewish life, starting in the late '60s and the '70s, and for some decades. Again, a lot of the things we talked about, in terms of — an informality, an openness to contemporary world, egalitarian inclusiveness.

JG: Participatory.

MS: Participatory. Taking study seriously, but as a spiritual practice. (04:26:00) All those things, I think — and the subtitle of the *Jewish Catalog*, the “Do It Yourself Kit.” You have to kind of do it. You can't send money to Jews overseas to have them do it for you. That's not a vibrant form of Jewish life.

JG: Nor can you pay your rabbi to do it for you. So one question I have —

MS: Can I go back and just — so I think part of the challenge is, I'm wondering whether that is enough — *havurah* Judaism's themes, writ large, is enough to carry us in this next period of challenge. I think it did well for the American Jewish community for all those decades — and it wasn't the only thing, (04:27:00) by far, but I think it actually really broadly helped shape much of American Jewish life in a kind of broad — the informality, and let's make it participatory, not rabbi-led, etc. So the question now is — which is a question I'm still asking and struggling with — what of that still carries us forward? What of that needs to be rethought, reframed, challenged, in the decades ahead? And you were going to ask a question.

JG: So I wanted to just build on what you just said to ask you about your decision to become a rabbi, ultimately. The son of a rabbi, came of age in this period and in this community where there was a lot of pushback against the role of the rabbi and (04:28:00) deep criticism of it. And you didn't immediately decide to become a rabbi. So can you just talk about that, yourself and how you decided that, and what being a rabbi means, what you're trying to —

MS: Some of it is personal, of course. I think for a long time — after I was writing books, I became a program director at a synagogue here in Manhattan, putting together educational and cultural programs. And it had to do — at some point I said, you know what, I actually want to do those programs. I don't want to facilitate other people. So it was coming to a point where I felt I had something to say. Which, despite the *Catalog*, etc, and other things in my life, (04:29:00) at some place I wondered whether I really had something really important to say. And to some extent I felt like, yeah, I want to do that. I would say, it's an interesting question about leadership and rabbinic leadership and the *havurah* movement. I think the argument could be made that the *havurah* movement

suffered from the fact that it was so anti-rabbi, anti-clergy. And therefore, many of its best and brightest, to use that term, decided to become academics. Which is a kind of — it's a way of being a rabbi but not being a rabbi. It's a kind of different path. And I think that was in some ways too bad for the rabbinate (04:30:00) in a certain way. But it also — I wonder whether the *havurah* movement could have created more things, established more institutions, if it had — if it wasn't so anti-leadership. And whether rabbis or others could have — there were some things like the Havurah Institute. But without leadership — I think not having leadership hampers the ability to create things. Leadership can also be overbearing. Leadership can be destructive. All those things are also true. There's no magic formula here. So that's the bigger thing about (04:31:00) leadership. And the smaller, the personal thing, is feeling like I wanted to be a leader in the Jewish spiritual realm, and that is called a rabbi until there's a different name or a different idea. And I'm glad I made that choice, and it always remains a challenge. For the flipside of what I just said about leadership is, how do you continue to make things participatory and make people feel invited and encouraged to participate rather than subtly encouraged to stand back and just let the rabbi do it? But, yeah, that's my story and I'm sticking to it! (04:32:00)

JG: Well, I think we'll end there. Thank you so much. It's been wonderful.

MS: it's been very interesting, actually. Thanks.

JG: Take care. And thank you for being our first one for this project. Thanks!

SESSION 2: SEPTEMBER 20, 2016 (04:32:03)

JG: My name is Jayne Guberman. Today is Tuesday, September 20, 2016. I'm here with Michael Strassfeld at his home in New York City, and we're going to record another, final part of his interview for the Jewish Countercultural Oral History project. Michael, do we have your permission to record this interview?

MS: Yes, you do.

JG: When we did the main part of the interview, we concluded with some observations you had about the impact of your experiences in Havurat Shalom in the early Seventies on the evolution of your own Jewish sensibility and sense of self and experiences, (04:33:00) as well as some of the impact of the early *havurot* on the larger Jewish world over the ensuing decades. So we want to take the opportunity today to expand on some of those observations and go into them with a little bit more depth. So you were involved with Havurat Shalom actively from 1971 to 1974.

MS: Yes, that's right.

JG: Okay. And it was in the last year or so, 1973, that the *Jewish Catalog* was published with you and Sharon Strassfeld and Rich Siegal as editors. And we wanted to spend a few minutes talking about the impact of the *Jewish Catalog*. Why was it — why did it become such a widely popular and impactful book on a generation? (04:34:00)

MS: I think that the thing about the *Jewish Catalog* is that it came out at just the right moment. What I mean by that is that it responded to a need in the American Jewish community, and in a way, articulated a form of Judaism that could be attractive to lots of people. And what I mean by the right moment — I think if it had come out a couple of years before, it might have been ignored. And a few years later, it might have been — yeah, we know that already.

JG: What made it the right moment?

MS: I think — just as in a certain way (04:35:00) the Jewish counterculture broadly represented an interesting phenomenon of people who wanted to rediscover Judaism — they weren't looking to reject Judaism, but they weren't happy with the Judaism that seemed to exist, the established Judaism of their time. And yet, the response to that wasn't to say, let's just leave it aside. In that way, I think the relationship of the Jewish counterculture to Judaism was different than the relationship of the counterculture to American society, where it was mostly, in general, it was mostly a critique of what was wrong with the current society. And the Jewish counterculture in some ways wanted to go back, or recapture (04:36:00) parts of the Jewish past which felt more authentic and more meaningful and more responsive to what people were looking for, or the values they were bringing to it. And I don't think people said, Why don't we go back to revolutionary times when society was simpler? I guess, I never thought of it before, but agrarian — there was a back to the earth movement, some of that. But I don't think it was this idea that there used to be this great American society and culture that had disappeared.

JG: Interestingly, if I can interject for a minute, this is in the few years following the Six Day War. Israel was emerging in a different place in American Jewish consciousness, and sort of the hearts and minds of many people in the Jewish community. (04:37:00) And yet you're referring to — not back, not necessarily to antiquity of Jewish history, but a more recent past, and Eastern European, or that kind of Old Country past, correct?

MS: Right. Eastern European.

JG: Why that, at that time?

MS: Well, I think in a funny way it was related to the Six Day War. Related to a broader phenomenon in American society as well, which is a sense of ethnic pride, so the “roots phenomenon” in the Afro-American community. And the Six Day War in the sense of — Jews felt first worried and then a great deal of pride about Israel’s victory and what had happened. And I think that reflected the shift of people no longer broadly feeling (04:38:00) ambivalent about their Judaism, or that that was a past. Initially, that past, the Eastern European past, specifically and more broadly Judaism, was “let’s leave that as we become integrated into America.” And now there was a feeling that we could be both Jewish *and* American. And in certain ways I think that was a fundamental message of the *Jewish Catalog*. Part of the message of the *Jewish Catalog* was how it looked. It looked completely contemporary. And when you looked at the pictures in the *Catalog*, instead of most Jewish books at the time were, oh, we want to show Jews. Let’s show hasidim, who, everybody looks at and says, oh, those are Jews. Instead we had people like ourselves, with really long hair, and beards, etcetera, etcetera, and we look like every other (04:39:00) hippie-ish person in their twenties and thirties living in America. And that was part of the power of the *Catalog*. People said, wait a minute, I don’t have to give up the things I like about America in order to be Jewish. I could be both — and that there’s a way to blend the traditional with the contemporary in a way that is an improvement. Everybody didn’t hear that message or feel that message, but I think that was part of the *Catalog*’s message, as well as some of the other messages, which were: We’re making this accessible to you. We don’t have judgment. We don’t say, “To be a good Jew, you have to keep kosher, or observe the Sabbath. We’re just laying out all these things, and we find them meaningful, and we’re engaged (04:40:00) in them, and you’ll —” and that’s why the name *Catalog*, I think, was important. Take from this what you wish. And I think of those kinds of things — it was really the right moment, where people were looking for an access. And that’s the other piece. The *Catalog* said, We’ll tell you how to do it. You want to observe this ritual, you want to build a *sukkah* for the holiday? Well, we’ll give you instructions on how to make that happen and make that possible, if you’re interested to actually do it. And that was really unique. There wasn’t a book before that. There was the *Shulchan Aruch* — the code of Jewish law would tell you the rules about building a *sukkah*, but it wouldn’t actually tell you, here’s a plan, hammer nails, etc.

JG: (04:41:00) Right. And there were two more *Catalogs* that followed, is that right?

MS: Yes. Part of the charm of the *Catalog* was that we were young and naïve, and we didn’t think, we are writing an important book, and everybody should read our important book. We just thought we were talking about our lives, and we contacted all our friends

to help us write the book. Then the book came out, it had this success — probably there was a story in the *New York Times*. I think that really helped promote the success. But I think the things I talked about were ways that it was appealing to American Jews who had never been in a *havurah* and were never going to be in a *havurah* but felt this was a Judaism they were looking for, that they could respond to, that would work for them. Then, so with the success, we decided — (04:42:00) oh, then we got all these letters, because we put our address in, which we thought afterwards was foolish, but actually it wasn't. It wasn't like we got nasty letters, mostly. And one person said, "Obviously none of you have kids because there's nothing about children in this." And we said, "No, that's not true." Then we looked — no, it was true that we didn't have kids, but we didn't think it was true of the *Catalog*. And we looked, and yeah, that was true, so we started, and then we realized, we thought it would be one more additional, and then we realized — now we were looking to be complete. In a way, in the first, there were a lot of chapters that never happened, because we had friends who just never came through. But now we wanted to complete. So the second and third were additional material; it wasn't a revision of the first. And brought that kind of *Catalog* treatment to (04:43:00) other areas of Jewish life, American Jewish life.

JG: Was the *Catalog* mainly of tremendous import to the generation of young Jews who were in their twenties, let's say, and thirties, in that period during the '70s and '80s? Or has it continued, do you think, to be a resource?

MS: I think for a period of time it was an important resource. It sold a lot of copies. And there were people giving it to their children, and for a while it was a big bar or bat mitzvah gift, so people at least had it on their shelves. And it became, I think, an important resource for people, and for many years people would say to me, Oh, you're Michael Strassfeld from the *Jewish Catalog*? I have it on my shelf. (04:44:00) Oh, it was an important book, etc. I think it's faded, you know — I don't think people in their twenties today necessarily read it or buy it or are given it. But for a remarkably long time in the life of books in America it was an important, as I say, important resource book.

JG: So I'd like to ask you to talk about subsequent developments that were coming directly out of the *havurah* in the *havurah* community. What was happening throughout the '70s to the '80s, both nationally and as other *havurot* were forming around the country?

MS: I think one of the interesting questions as we — and part of the success of the *Catalog* (04:45:00) is partly because we were a number of what became called the "independent *havurot*." There was some sense of it being a movement, like the other movements of the time, both in American society and somewhat in Jewish society. We

became more self-conscious of how do we promote this, and we also realized that there was this other phenomenon happening, in part because of the *havurot*, which was the *havurah* in synagogues — unlike the independent, which didn't see themselves as synagogues and were literally independent.

JG: And unaffiliated.

MS: Right, and yes, unaffiliated. The synagogue *havurot* existed (04:46:00) within, let's call it, mainstream synagogues and particularly within the Conservative and Reform movements. Harold Schulweis in the Conservative movement was the leading proponent, and Larry Kushner in the Reform movement was a leading component. And some synagogues, like Harold Schulweis's — they had fifty *havurot* and they divided the congregation up — not everybody but many people, and others, there was one or two. And they influenced — there were proponents within their denominations, so there were a lot of synagogues that had *havurot*, and they were usually less encompassing than, I would say — Havurat Shalom was really a community (04:47:00) that involved prayer and study and social activities. It was very central, I talked about, to people's lives. The synagogue *havurot* were less ambitious and usually focused on one activity. It could be study, it could be prayer, it could be families joining together to celebrate holidays. And the truth is that sometimes they took something that was existing, and instead of calling it the "Rabbi's class" we'll call it "the *havurah*." But there was something to the sense of people doing it together that wasn't necessarily rabbi-led, and it was more empowering to people, which was reflected in the *Catalog* and *havurot*. And also a sense of, gee, let's be more engaged in Jewish life than maybe had been true in (04:48:00) the synagogues — kind of very passive, large, formal settings that they had been.

JG: Was there a sense that Jewish life flourished in a smaller, more intimate group, as a place in which to celebrate and to —?

MS: It was both smaller and more intimate, and that sense of — which was the subtitle of the *Jewish Catalog* — the "Do It Yourself Kit" — that Judaism really had to be, you had to do it yourself. And that was a broad critique of the Jewish establishment that you couldn't just have the rabbi do Judaism for you. You couldn't just send money to Israel to support or help Soviet Jews. You had to somehow be in your own life engaged in aspects of Judaism. And I think that's why the *Catalog* was popular, and I think that was part of the tenor of the time (04:49:00) and people were open to that and looking for that. And that's what I think — that's why I think it did flourish at least for a while in synagogues, it wasn't just —

JG: When was that period? Or would you say it continues into —?

MS: No, I think it's — it was a, probably, I don't know exactly, like for perhaps about a decade or somewhat more. Kind of late Sixties, particularly I would say early Seventies when the *Catalog* came out, and continuing through that decade. Maybe the beginning of the Eighties. And one of the things I wanted to talk about is an attempt to bring together the independent *havurot* with the synagogue *havurot* which led to the formation of the national Havurah Committee. (04:50:00)

JG: So please talk about that.

MS: So I can't remember whether we talked about Weiss's Farm —

JG: Somewhat.

MS: In certain ways, this came out of the Weiss's Farm gatherings which were of people from Havurat Shalom, the New York Havurah, Fabrangen, and people from groups in Philadelphia, open to anybody who wanted to come. It happened three times a year. It was not really a farm, but a big, old rambling house with lots of bedrooms in New Jersey — Somerville, New Jersey, if I remember correctly. And it was an opportunity for people from different *havurot* who — some people knew each other just from the world — but to really get together and talk about these issues of the movement. (04:51:00) Should we be a movement? Should we have rules? All kinds of things like that you might imagine. At some point, I and some other people thought it might be interesting to reach out to the synagogue *havurot* and kind of bring these two worlds together and see what we had in common and what was different. And so a couple people that were interested in doing this began a planning committee, and eventually they got a little money. Yitz Greenberg's Klal — it was called something else at that point, the National Jewish Retreat Center first — they changed the name many times. It's hard to remember exactly where it was in its name. They gave us some support, and (04:52:00) some others, and we kind of, somewhat amazingly, looking back, put together the first national *havurah* conference which took place at Rutgers in New Jersey in 1979. And, you know, we sort of publicized it — I think there were probably — I want to say maybe 300 people. Some significant turnout. And it was those two worlds, people really from synagogue *havurot*, some rabbis, a fair number of rabbis, but also just laypeople from synagogue *havurot*, people from independent *havurot*. And it was a conference with sessions. And out of that, I can't remember exactly which followed which, but at some point (04:53:00) it was actually originally called the National Havurah Coordinating Committee, and then at some point it was changed to the National Havurah Committee. And again it went through periods of conversations of, What are we? Should *havurot* belong as members? Are there individual members? Are there no members? What's our purpose? And the

“coordinating” was dropped at some point. But I think one of the — besides bringing these worlds together — one of the important outcomes was the Havurah Summer Study Institute. And that began the following year. We had a second conference that year, but we also formed the Study Institute. And basically the idea was to create a week, an opportunity for people to do serious adult Jewish education. And in the *havurah* ideology, someone who taught in one session (04:54:00) would be a student in another session. In certain ways, it was really a long time — they were a forerunner of *Limud*, which is broadly similar, sort of came out — I don’t think came out of the Havurah Summer Institute but came from the same desire of really providing an opportunity for people to study Jewishly in a serious way. And bringing together a diverse community, across denominations, etc., etc. It’s even more true in *Limud*, and it’s had bigger successes around the world. The Havurah Summer Institute, the first couple of years we tried, we did one on the West Coast. We did one in the Midwest. But in the end, and it still continues (04:55:00) to this day; a week in the summer on a college campus, this week of study. And it’s kind of amazing that this organization has continued all this time with really, I mean — money being raised to provide, to hire a minimal staff to help run it, and it’s had its ups and downs financially but it’s managed to continue all these years. I haven’t been in a fair number of years, but I know it’s still going on, and I’m not sure what the turnout is, but for many years it was around 200 people each summer, give or take. And it’s kind of an ongoing — an ongoing institution of the *havurah* movement that often isn’t acknowledged, but it’s not (04:56:00) unimportant.

JG: I have a sense that it not only was an opportunity for study, but people came over time with their families. There are children that talk about having grown up in the *havurah* movement through the Havurah Institute and know people from all across the country who came. They’re marrying each other, they’re having their own families now, so it’s had a real community-building impact as well, I think.

MS: Yes, it did have a community. And it may have been even more true for people who were living in communities where they didn’t have a *havurah*, and this summer community became kind of an important community. And there were — one of the successes of the Havurah Institute was that it has managed to attract a younger generation. Which isn’t true of all the *havurot*, or the similar groups (04:57:00) where it’s an aging cohort. But they’ve successfully — some of them are children who’ve come back and are now teaching, and are part of the board and the leadership, and others who are just of a younger age and who have found the experience and the community and an ability to become a part of — needless to say, the Havurah Institute is always looking for people to serve on its board and do the work; it’s all volunteer, so you know, to find a place where they can really participate and have a stake and an ownership in it. And, as I

say, it's not necessarily typical of all the institutions and groups that were formed in this period of time.

JG: (04:58:00) You mentioned that the phenomenon of *havurot* within synagogues was somewhat timely, in the sense that those really flourished during the period you mentioned through maybe the early '80s when they were getting off the ground, and then not so much since. But also in the years since, there's been the development of independent minyanim. Can you talk about what you see as the relationship — if any — between the *havurah* movement and the development of independent minyanim.

MS: Sure. It's interesting that there was really a shift from *havurot* to independent minyanim. There are still *havurot*, like Havurat Shalom that, I know, continue to exist. But there was a phenomenon of people who left Havurat Shalom or the other groups and decided when they went someplace (04:59:00) else to create a minyan instead of a *havurah*. And that was part of my story when I left Havurat Shalom and came here to New York City. There was the New York Havurah that existed at that time, but which would have, in my recollection — though someone recently said to me, "No, no, I think you're not remembering it correctly" — it didn't have regular Shabbat services, and so some of us came and said, who had just moved to New York, said, Gee, we'd like to have services. Why don't we start a minyan? and that's how the West Side Minyan — in brief, that's how the West Side Minyan was formed.

JG: When was that, approximately?

MS: Seventy-four, nineteen-seventy-four. (05:00:00) Yeah, it was the year I left.

JG: Right when you left.

MS: Yeah, I moved to New York, we decided to have a Simchat Torah celebration, service/celebration, and after that — we just told people about it, and people came. It was Simchat Torah. It was fun, whatever. And we said, why don't see if we can continue and have an ongoing Shabbat service? And that's really the genesis of the West Side Minyan.

JG: Did you see real distinctions between what you were trying to do in creating this independent minyan and what Havurat Shalom had been in your lives?

MS: I think — I don't know if we were conscious at the beginning that we'd made some decision. And what's interesting is that it was a particular story, in part because there was a New York Havurah and (05:01:00) another group called Derech Re'ut, which was a *havurah*. So there were these *havurah* choices on the Upper West Side, but neither of

those, again in my recollection, were having ongoing services. So we thought, let's do that — that need. But the truth is that in other places as well, there were — instead of having a *havurah* there were minyanim formed. And I think that had to do with the really ambitious nature of — certainly Havurat Shalom, but I think it's true of the other early *havurot* — that they were really trying to be communities. They were really trying to be, very much, all-encompassing. I think I said this previously that, you know, Havurat Shalom's greatest ambition was to be a community where we all cared for each other, and that was its greatest (05:02:00) failure. We strove to do that, sometimes intentionally, and it's really hard to do. And people were hurt — all kinds of outcomes from that. So I think there were some people who felt, I don't want that intensity. I don't want to feel like this is the center of my life. And it could also be, by this time, many of these people had a partner, spouse, etcetera, and not only that, but had children, and not only that, were now no longer graduate students. Graduate students don't feel this way, but, wow, I have a lot of time, etcetera. And they were — in the midst of careers, paying attention to that. So I just don't have enough time. It's just too much (05:03:00) of a demand. And yet, I have Jewish needs that I want, and one of those is having a place to *daven* on Shabbat. That's kind of what Jews do around the world. And it wasn't as though those minyanim — it's complex because it wasn't as though those minyanim were just coming for services — you know, after kiddush, don't call me! So for instance, after a while I was involved in starting another minyan, called Minyan M'at, here on the Upper West Side. And M'at would have, in the early days, I don't think it does this anymore, we would have retreats a couple of times a year, along the lines of Havurat Shalom and of Weiss's Farm. So there'd be (05:04:00) some sense of community. And the other thing that happened, of course, is over time, if you're in a group for ten or fifteen years, the community happens. And part of the reason that Havurat Shalom's attempt at community was so difficult is because there wasn't anybody who was there for ten years.

JG: From the early years —

MS: Probably because maybe, partly because of the pressure of being — when it was good it was great, but other times it was challenging. But also because people were moving. People got, well, I got my Ph.D. and my job is in Philadelphia, so I'm leaving. So there was a lot of transience, and the natural community didn't happen. But it happens, just as it happens in synagogues for the people who are active. (05:05:00) They see kids growing up, life cycle celebrations and tragedies, and community happens in a very natural way. So it wasn't as though they were just like, in traditional synagogues in Israel, you go to services, that's it; they don't do anything else. You just go, and you leave. Doesn't mean you don't say hello to people, but there's nothing else that's happening. You're not having retreats. They're not going to demonstrations together. That's all it is. So what I'm saying — as I'm thinking about it, I think it's more

complicated than I thought, but I think the minyanim — a minyan was reflective of that narrower ambition, but it didn't actually give up on the notion of community. (05:06:00) I think it became a natural community, rather than an intentional community. It was also less of a scope. There might have been classes taught, but not so much. Was it once a week a potluck dinner? No, in the minyanim. Kiddush, you know, but it was mostly a Shabbat —

JG: Not a lot of group processing about what kind of a community are we.

MS: Yeah — but because the nature of the people and life, whatever, there'd be lots of discussions about services, and about governance, and about, you know, we're pissed at these people — and then there would always be new people coming in, and how do the old-timers, as it were, deal with change. It was all the issues that would be in any group, with the Jewish (05:07:00) veneer, which would be questions about ritual and do we do this? And questions about leadership — but the leadership of those — SDS had the same kind of issues and the bowling league had the same kind of issues.

JG: Some people who were involved in the early years of the *havurot* that we're focusing on talk about themselves as having continued to feel themselves what they call "*havurah* Jews." How do you relate to that idea, and how does it relate to this proliferation of other kind of Jewish community through minyanim?

MS: I think for a long time I would say that my Judaism was shaped by being in Havurat Shalom, and that's the Judaism I've carried forward in my life. I think in a lot of ways that's still true. It's not that I think those labels are not particularly useful. I mean, the denominational labels are not, so I don't know if I'd say it in exactly the same way. Some of these minyanim — there is no rabbi, even though some people may be rabbis in it, but there's no person who's the official rabbi, right. Different people take turns leading the services, or giving the d'var torah, teaching the sermon, whatever. So those are all kind of, I would say, intrinsic values of the *havurah* movement, of those early days. Being rooted in the tradition — and that means different things in different of these groups. And over time, some (05:09:00) groups became more rooted in the tradition, but, I think still, very much feeling contemporary. That they were — in conversation, whatever word you want to use, with the contemporary world, that it wasn't a retreat from that world.

JG: Beyond minyanim and the *havurot* as you described just now, are there other aspects of Jewish life that you feel are either direct outgrowths in some way of the *havurah* movement or of some aspect of the values that really took hold there?

MS: I want to say two things about that. One is that the *havurah* movement isn't — should be seen in the context of the larger (05:10:00) Jewish counterculture. And we focused a lot on that, and that's our task, whatever the right word would be. But there were other pieces of it, whether it was kind of political pieces, political pieces related to Israel like Breira or the New Jewish Agenda, which was both about Israel and the larger — there was, kind of, Jewish student networks, the independent newspapers like *Genesis II* and magazines like *Response*. So there were a variety of pieces of this counterculture, or you might say Jewish cultural revival. They were reflected in the *Catalog* — there was this craft stuff to do, but there were also around the same time, not all of them were part of this, (05:11:00) but people who were Jewish craftspeople and Jewish artists who were bringing back arts like calligraphy and scribal arts, papercutting and ceramics. So I don't think necessarily the *havurah* movement was the genesis of those other — but it was all part of a larger frame of — and even something like CAJE, originally the Coalition for Alternatives in Jewish Education, was started as a real critique to the existing Jewish organizations dealing with Jewish education and seeing them as problematic. So it began as the Coalition of Alternatives, and something that no longer exists. So there were a variety of phenomena, some of them continued, some of them (05:12:00) just like lots of the synagogue *havurot*, lasted for a while and then faded as people changed, times changed. So one thing is there's very much a broader piece there. Enough said about that, I think. And then I would say, let's just focus on the kind of religious-spiritual piece of it, which for me and I think for Havurat Shalom — though I think Fabrangen, which was more political —

JG: Even other *havurah* —

MS: Even those have different pieces, and it's too simplistic to say, well the political is someplace else, whatever. But since I have the mike, I'm going to talk about what I would say (05:13:00) — the religious-spiritual pieces. So I think there's kind of an ongoing phenomenon that I would say flows, in part, from the *havurah*. Not in a necessarily direct way, but sometimes it's people that were involved in that who continued that, or it feels like, well, here's a different form of it, here's the '80s expression or the '90s expression of some of the same impulses or interests that helped shape the early time period. So there was — the Jewish healing movement which took place, and I think, again it's probably in the context of things happening in American society, some sense that people were looking for — (05:14:00) somewhat related to liturgy, which I want to come back to, still unhappy with the liturgy that they encountered in synagogues. And I think the basic question we'll come back to is, How does this liturgy relate to me? So one of the things that happened was I met Debbie Friedman, the singer, and she moved to — after I met her, a number of years later, she moved to

Manhattan, and together we started doing a Jewish healing service, once a month, that we did together for something like nine years.

JG: Where was the service?

MS: It began — I was then at Ansche Chesed, and, so we began there. Then for a while we were doing it at the JCC. (05:15:00) No, SAJ, when I moved there, the JCC, and then I said, enough, and it continued for a while, and it stopped before Debbie's untimely death, but in that sense, the healing movement had its own trajectory; for a while it was important, happening lots of places, but for reasons I can't actually fully explain, it was kind of — not so prominent anymore. But I think for people coming to that service, where actually illness was never mentioned, we would focus on themes of brokenness and wholeness, and the only time when we did the *Mi Shebeirach*, Debbie Friedman's *Mi Shebeirach* at the end, would there be actual articulation (05:16:00). Everybody who was at that service, whether they themselves were ill, or if they were there for someone they cared about, knew why they were saying what they were saying. There was no question of, what does this have to do with me or what I care about? The link between the two was absolutely clear. So I think that's part of that ongoing story of liturgy and spirituality. Another step in this is what became the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, which, I mean, a number of people were involved in starting —

JG: Give us a timeframe of what you're talking about.

MS: Yeah —

JG: Even approximate.

JG: I should know this, and maybe it's on my resume, I'm not sure. I would say the '90s or the early, the first decade, something like that. And again, without doing a whole history, what it was was a feeling that there really needs to be a focus in Jewish life on this idea of Jewish spirituality — not to see spirituality as [*holds hands up*]. I mean for some people it was and is like, "Ooh!" But for people who felt there was something missing — which again, I think, is how it relates to *havurah*, etc, and healing, in a different way, is, there's something really missing in what we want (05:18:00) in our Judaism, and so what it was about was really to provide people with language and teaching and texts, from the Jewish tradition as well as from outside of the Jewish tradition, with a focus on meditation, that would enable people to bring aspects of spirituality within their Jewish lives. And one of the things that the Institute did and still does is it has a two-year program for rabbis and clergy, for people who feel that they would like to make that a part of their rabbinate, whether personally or within the context

of their institutions, and let's study some Jewish texts and, not surprisingly, one of the first teachers of the text is Art Green. (05:19:00) Takes us back to the *havurah*, but also because it's the hasidic texts that were so important in Havurat Shalom, and to Zalman Schachter, and to Renewal, that are the basically the texts that the Institute for Jewish Spirituality is going to recover and reinterpret and gives Jewish language to contemporary spiritual notions. So again it's one these phenomena in American society — spirituality, American Buddhism, meditation — is very present. And is there, rather than just — we'll just take it and we'll call it Jewish, it was an attempt, and I think successful, to say, well, actually there is within the Jewish tradition texts that actually talk about the same things that the American Buddhist (05:20:00) teachers are talking about. And what they're doing is taking them from Eastern, Buddhist traditions, and translating them into English. And, translating them, I would say, into the American setting, which isn't the same as India. So here we have these texts that, when you read them, you say, wow, that's really talking about awareness. That's not some foreign concept. That's actually within Hasidism. That's a completely Jewish concept. And so I think the Institute for Jewish Spirituality is part of this story, and part of this phenomenon. And I think some of this is people like Art Green and myself are — a link in terms of people, but even for some of the people who are involved that weren't part of that — I think it's all (05:21:00) part of this ongoing reinterpretation of Judaism within the currents of American society and what's happening in the world.

JG: So, you went to rabbinical school in the '90s, is that correct?

MS: Yes.

JG: So to what extent do you think the phenomena that you're talking about, in the creation and ongoing life of the Institute of Jewish Spirituality, are reflective of the issues and concerns that you yourself were trying to deal with in your own rabbinate and your own spiritual development?

MS: That's a great question. I mean, I think — for me, central to my (05:22:00) own Judaism and my own quest is the role of prayer. And that's why Havurat Shalom was really very important in shaping my own ideas on prayer. I grew up, as I said, in an Orthodox world, so I knew prayer from that. But Havurat Shalom was very much shaping that kind of spiritual orientation, drawing again from hasidic texts, as well as for me particularly, hasidic music, the *niggun*, became really essential to my own spiritual life, and the way I led services. And if I had to summarize now, I think the last couple of years, (05:23:00) what I was trying to do would be to create a service that works for people, not just for people with very strong Jewish backgrounds, which is part of the reason I left the world of minyanim, which is, that's who belongs to those groups, and

decided to become a congregational rabbi, and be engaged with *amcha*, that's "regular Jews," to use all these stereotypical, not-so-nice terms. And so I've struggled in being a congregational rabbi, how to do that in the context of the limitations of what you can do within a congregation where other people have opinions about what they want, and people who (05:24:00) want to be more traditional. And I've become less traditional about these things over the years. And maybe this is a good place to come towards an end here, is where I am today is — I really feel, and here I feel I became a Reconstructionist rabbi so some of the Reconstructionist language is useful — my interpretation or misinterpretation of Kaplan is that Reconstructionism means that we're challenged to reconstruct Judaism in our generation to respond to needs of our time. And sometimes — Kaplan said this about "chosenness" — he said some things can't be reconstructed. They just have to be rejected. I think we're at that place about (05:25:00) prayer, the *sidur*, in traditional liturgy. I think it's no longer a place of, let's make it more accessible, better translations, more Hebrew, less Hebrew, God language — all of which are challenges. But I don't think it's meeting those challenges. I think we need to kind of begin from scratch, as it were. So I've been kind of experimenting with services that begin with a question of, what do we want to have happen here? Rather than how much of the traditional liturgy do we say or not? For this High Holidays, for the first time — I've never done this before — I'm leading a service where there's no prayer book, and I said, what it's about is, what's the High Holidays about? Well, it's about (05:26:00) celebrating the new, reflecting on the past, engaging in *teshuvah*, in the process of change. So how do we get people who are coming to the service to do that? To feel that, whether it's with music, whether it's with readings, whether it's with *kavanot* — with spiritual intentions, that will help people, inspire people, encourage people to engage in what I think is ultimately a difficult task, which is *teshuvah*, of engaging in change. So that's what I'm doing; it's going to be a service that's an hour and half.

JG: This is going to be a service in an independent context, or in a synagogue context?

MS: Well, SAJ — I approached the new rabbi of SAJ and she was excited about this idea, and so it's going to be under the auspices of SAJ, but (05:27:00) it's really — we're trying to reach out to people because I think it's a service that can be attractive to people who feel completely lost, and not engaged by services, even in a synagogue like SAJ which is a liberal synagogue, but where most of the liturgy is still in Hebrew, and you know — services are lengthy, four hours, more, whatever. And where I think most people don't feel that question I mentioned early, "What does this have to do with me and the issues I'm struggling with?" So I'm hoping that will be apparent in this service — Oh, I get it. I need to come to some place (05:28:00) of self-acceptance about myself, and here's some of the truth about myself, and that might lead me to be able to say, look, it's true that I could be more generous, and I could be less this, and now let me think about

how I'm going to be able to do that. And this reading has really inspired me, or this thing that got said I'm going to carry with me as a kind of teaching that will help me remember; actually I don't want to remain this angry person that I am; I actually hate being that way, and maybe I can ameliorate it somewhat and move into the possibilities that the New Year are about. It's complicated. (05:29:00) I'm just giving a piece of it.

JG: So my final question — the early years of Havurat Shalom were services, worship, were characterized by an intense amount of experimentation with sources, Jewish and non-Jewish. And there were issues around that, and struggles, over whether that felt right. And my understanding is that, as a community, you came to a sense that there was something about a so-called “traditional sensibility” that needed to be at the center, at the heart, of how services happened, how Jews engaged in meaningful *tefilah*, as you're talking about it. And I'm wondering how that (05:30:00) issue, and that sense of traditional sensibility relates to what you're talking about in this latest incarnation?

MS: Right, I think that's the challenge. That is, yes, in the beginning — and it was really mostly the first year that was very — let's not read from the Torah scroll, let's read from a poem by D.H. Lawrence. So already — and it's an interesting story, which is — a quick aside — the story of Hasidism which began as in some ways a kind of radical break from traditional Judaism and overtime became ultra-traditionalist, the way they are today. So there is something about the pull of tradition. But I think that's (05:31:00) the real question. In other words, if I do this service, and there's no *Shema*, and there's no *Unetanneh Tokef*, to take a High Holiday central prayer, does it feel like — what is this?

JG: Is it Jewish?

MS: I'm less — I must say personally, that question gets often asked, like, about spirituality. Personally, it's not an issue for me. I think because I come from such a deeply Jewish place, I never think that what I'm doing is not Jewish. I think everything I'm doing is Jewish. For other people it clearly is a question. I think it's more the thing of — well, there's a power to ritual, there's a power to the music of *Kol Nidre*, you know. (05:32:00) Because it's been done, and it's been done for a thousand — if all the time you're making it up, do you lose that power, on the one hand? On the other hand, if you're not being innovative, if you're not responding to the moment, then it's too easy to become rote ritual. Judaism, probably every religion's been trying to balance those things for a long time. I don't know that what I'm suggesting is just throw the whole thing out. There's certain ways that Jewish Renewal has done some of that, not completely, different in different places. (05:33:00) I just think without starting again, we're going to be stuck in something that's no longer — it'd be like, if someone came today and said, let's have sacrifices. At some point, yes, the Temple was destroyed so there are exterior

reasons. But at some point I think, they, the rabbis, said, this isn't going to work anymore. We have to think of a different way. I'm not trying to claim I'm one of the rabbis in the Talmudic tradition, but I actually do think that the larger challenge that Judaism, and Judaism, I think, is struggling with today, more than I would have said forty years or fifty years ago in the *havurah*, is: how do we create a Judaism that responds to the modern world? (05:34:00) And we've been trying to do that since the Enlightenment, and I don't think we've succeeded. I think we've been trying too much to re-juggle the pieces that we have. And the question for me is — just as there was a fairly radical break from biblical Judaism to rabbinic Judaism, whether we need to not, to find the place we need to be by kind of starting again and asking those biggest questions and trying to see what it would be like to do the kind of thing I'm talking about. And it's potentially among the stupidest ideas that have ever been proposed, (05:35:00). I'm sure, even if it's successful, that it will change and develop and improve over time, probably long after I'm gone kind of thing. But I think, for me, it's more than just — I don't think what's happening now is working, except for the people it's working for, which I think is and will remain a minority. So it's not just a practical thing, though that's something I care deeply about. It's a sense that it's really broken. And you can't just put new paint on it.

JG: So what do you see as the greatest hope for Judaism, Jewish life as we move into the (05:26:00) twenty-first century?

MS: Look, I believe fundamentally — like the *Catalog*, like the *havurah*, that there is a great wisdom within Judaism. And that wisdom is about how to live life. Like, how to deal with the tragedies and the challenges and the great celebrations of life. It's not "how to keep kosher." That's not what it's about. It's not — I like to say, it's not about how you do the Jewishly Jewish things that only Jews do. It's really how to engage in a life that gives you meaning, that provides hope and says, we actually believe you can change. We don't agree with Freud exactly. And I think we need to find — I think we have failed to find ways (05:37:00) — despite the *Catalog*, which tried to make Judaism accessible, despite other things that people have done in a variety of ways, I think we have failed, unrelated to prayer, I think we have failed to make the connection, for most people, between what Judaism has to teach and its wisdom. It doesn't have answers, but it has wisdom about the things they care about deeply in their life — whether it's happiness, relationships, all the most human things. And if we do that, then I think people will want to engage in Judaism, because it will make absolute sense to them. And if they don't, we'll be like the Samaritans. (05:38:00) You know, there are still 400 Samaritans after all these centuries. That's great for them.

JG: Would you like to end with a word — on a more optimistic note — before we close here?

MS: Well I — I used to be — for most of my life, I was in the optimistic school, rather than, it's going to be over, this is the worst time for the Jewish people. I think — I'm no longer like simply optimistic. I think there's a serious challenge. I think most of the institutions that carried Judaism in the twentieth century will not carry us through the twenty-first century. So I think there's a great challenge to us, to kind of think about how to do this. I'm surprised, in some ways, that the Jewish community — they see the crisis, but they don't seem to (05:39:00) engage in the — even if it's doing things that I don't think are the answer, it doesn't seem to me there's a kind of response, and certainly not a creative response to the challenges that we face. I do believe, and I do have faith, in Judaism. And therefore I remain guardedly optimistic that if we take on this challenge — and I think there'll be answers that I can't possibly imagine. But I feel that, you know, in that sense, my life has been the same, kind of from, I would say, from Havurat Shalom to this moment, of that challenge. What is the Torah for our time? And how do we make it accessible to as many people as who might be interested in it.