Jayne Guberman (JG): My name is Jayne Guberman, and today is Thursday, April 27, 2017. I’m here with Phyllis Sperling at her home in New York City and we’re going to record an interview for the Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project. Phyllis, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Phyllis Sperling (PS): Yes.

JG: I’d like to start talking about your personal and family background and to flesh out a little bit of who you were at the time that you first got involved with the New York Havurah. So, you were born in 1944, in Brooklyn?

PS: Yes.

JG: And you described your family as a Jewish version of *Father Knows Best*. What did you mean by that?

PS: I thought I grew up in a very typical American-Jewish family. I didn’t think about it much but as I heard peoples’ histories throughout my life, and their family situations, and tough fathers and mothers that were either distant or too clingy or alcoholic, I realized that my family was way better than a typical American family, that I was very, very lucky to have two parents who loved each other, really loved each other, who cared about their children, and that were very, very American in terms of their values and their dreams and very, very much Jewish in terms of their values and their dreams.

JG: Tell me about your parents a little bit.

PS: My father was a dentist. He actually was — he grew up in Borough — first, born on the Lower East Side, and then grew up in Borough Park. And he went to — my father had an interesting life, because he went to Columbia College and then when he applied to medical school, there were the quotas. And I think it was the beginning of the Jewish quotas, I think he was the first year of the Jewish quotas and he didn’t get into medical school. And so, he went and got a Master’s in chemistry at Columbia and then reapplied and again was rejected.

JG: What years are you talking about?

PS: Well, my father was born in ’13, so ‘23, ‘33, ‘35, ‘36, I would think. So, it was the beginning of the Jewish quota. I did some research on this at one point. And then he says he called his parents up and he said, “Dad, I’m going to be a dentist,” because he got into the dental school and he became a dentist rather than a doctor. And ironically, my first year of graduating high school was the year that the quotas were successfully challenged in the courts, and that’s when — half of the males in my graduating class at Columbia were from Yeshivah in Flatbush. Half of the males were accepted at Columbia College (00:03:00), which was huge at that time.

JG: What year are we talking about?
PS: Let me see, '44, '54, '64, no, '62. 1962. So it was ironic that my father got stuck in the beginning, and the men in — my classmates, were at the end of it.

JG: Did your father enjoy dentistry in the end?

PS: My father was a happy man, and he was a content man, and yes, he enjoyed his patients, he enjoyed his family, he enjoyed his work, et cetera. If he ever bemoaned the fact that he didn’t, that he wasn’t a doctor, I never heard it.

JG: What did your mother do?

PS: My mother grew up on the Lower East Side as one of five, in a family of shopkeepers, on the Lower East Side, and she had a ten-year courtship with my father before she married him. And I think she wanted him to be established before she married him, and he was in practice at that time. Also, my mother grew up very Orthodox and my father didn’t, and I think my mother wanted somebody who was more — more religious, for her comfort level. And my father became the first shomer shabbos dentist in Brooklyn, probably. He was the first — the first not to work on Saturday.

JG: Did your mother — was your mother a homemaker, basically?

PS: My mother was a homemaker, but my mother was always an organizational lady. She was always very, very active in raising money for various Israel causes, and she also used to be the book-report person in Brooklyn, so various organizations used to, you know, send a car for her to give a book report to their — you know, she was a volunteer, mostly a volunteer. But very active, a very active volunteer. As a matter of fact, when I was in school for architecture and was going to be a professional woman, my mother would take me shopping and she would point at a particular suit, and I said, “Er, Ma…” You know, this was the late sixties, we wore jeans to school, and she would say, “That’s a perfect luncheon suit,” and I said, “Mom, I don’t go to luncheons, I’m never going to go to luncheons!” [laughs] But perfect luncheon suit, perfect luncheon hat. You know, she finally got it, but in the beginning, she really didn’t.

JG: You have siblings?

PS: I have two brothers. Yes. Both younger, one’s an orthodontist in Los Angeles and the other is a radiation oncologist in Massachusetts. (00:06:00)

JG: So you grew up Borough Park, which today we think of as a very “black-hat” area. What was it like when you were growing up?

PS: It was always a Jewish neighborhood, most of the people around me were Jewish, but it certainly wasn’t black-hat. There were a few hasidim in the neighborhood; the Chenobyler rebbe lived across the street but he had barely a congregation, and my brother would tell me, when the reactor broke, he said, “You know what town that is? That’s
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Chernobyl! That’s the Chenobyler rebbe!” and we laughed because we never associated that name with geography, an actual place.

JG: How would you describe the Jewish environment in your home? Was your family basically Modern Orthodox?

PS: My family was Modern Orthodox, but I think Modern Orthodox now means something else.

JG: What did it mean then?

PS: Well, we were certainly shomer shabbes and certainly very kosher at home. But my father didn’t work with his head covered and after Shabbos was over — so he and my brothers went to shul Friday night, we all went to shul on Saturday, our house was always open to friends so there were girlfriends first and then my brothers’ friends. We always had masses of kids over at our house. They said that the refreshments were better at our house, I don’t know. [laughs] And then after Shabbos was over my parents would get dressed, change their clothes or maybe wear the same clothes, and go to — well, Carnegie Hall before Lincoln Center, to a concert or the theater or a show or dinner with friends, or even dancing. So that was — we always had one foot in each world, in my house. The secular world, the New York world, and the New York cultural world. My parents were very concerned about education, they were very concerned about profession, they didn’t think that their children would be tainted if they were exposed to the New York public library. I mean I’m shocked when I hear that in Borough Park now, the children are not allowed to go to the local branch of the library. [rolls eyes] What are they going to find there?

JG: You were born during the war.

PS: I was born during the very end of the war.

JG: World War II?

PS: Yes.

JG: You probably don’t have any memories of the actual war.

PS: I absolutely have no memories of it. It was over within my first year.

JG: How did it affect your family, and knowledge of the Holocaust as it was coming more into the forefront (00:09:00) of American Jewish consciousness?

PS: My parents were certainly aware of the Holocaust, and they became aware — most of my father and my mother’s family were in the United States. Part of my mother’s family was still in Europe and were lost in Europe, but they were second cousins for the most part, third cousins for the most part. And I don’t remember the Holocaust haunting my
household. It was not haunting my household. Our parents protected us to a certain extent. I went to Jewish day school and my first conscious introduction to the Holocaust was reading a book about Hannah Senesh when I was in the fourth grade and I think I had to read it in Hebrew. Maybe the fifth grade. And I was shocked, I was devastated, it was a big, huge shock, and then I — whether I knew about the Holocaust before, but that was when it really hit home, and it didn’t come from inside my family, it came from school.

JG: Did you talk to your parents about it?

PS: I don’t remember.

JG: Do you have any memories at all about the founding of the State of Israel and your parents’ attitudes or relationship to it?

PS: Well, my parents were very Zionist, so it was — I have some vague black and white memories.

JG: Was that typical in your community in that way, to be pro-Zionist?

PS: Oh, I think so, yes. I think so. Certainly my school was pro-Zionist. I went to Shulamith School for Girls. I think it was the first Hebrew day school that adopted Sephardit (00:10:54). So when I learned Hebrew, I learned Sephardit and I didn’t learn Ashkenazes. And that’s where I learned to speak Hebrew, because it was a very, very pro-Zionist school. So of course, all my friends and their parents must’ve gone along with it, because they could have sent us to Bais Yaakov if they didn’t go along with it.

JG: So what kind of Jewish education did you have? As you said, you went to day school all the way through.

PS: I went to Shulamith from kindergarten through the eighth grade and then I went to Flatbush Yeshivah for four years and then I went to Brooklyn College, which was the local commuter college, because my parents said there was too much sex going on in out-of-town schools, and they didn’t want me to take part in that.

JG: I’d like to go back to your earlier years a little bit though, first. What kind of education did you get as a girl?

PS: I went to an all-girls school, so I got — we didn’t have to compete with boys, (00:12:00) there weren’t any boys there. You know, they weren’t raising us to be professionals, between zero and eighth grade, but I think that they were giving us very strong identities as Jews and as Americans. Both were really stressed. We celebrated patriotically all the American holidays, and we celebrated — our music program, I know every single American folk song because that’s what they taught us in music, was all the folk songs. And I’m amazed that kids that I knew, that grew up at the same time, from public school, don’t know any of them. You know, “I’ve Got an Old Mule and Her Name is Sal?” You don’t know that? That’s what I was raised on, so we were raised very
patriotically, for Israel and for — and I had a very strong Jewish education in elementary school, and then again in high school.

JG: What was your high school education like? At that point was it an all-girls school?

PS: High school? High school was co-ed. So that would have been the ninth grade, starting from the ninth to the twelfth grade. It was a co-ed education — the first year, the ninth grade, the girls and the boys took Talmud, took Gemara. We took Gemara in the ninth grade, but after that, they split us. The boys took Gemara and the girls got Mishnah (00:13:41). So we had one year of Gemara, and then we switched to Mishnah. And that was the only splitting. Oh! Nope, nope — the boys, I don’t know what the boys did, but the girls did typing. We all had typing during junior year. The afterschool program was typing, which I never regretted! [laughs]

JG: This is 1961 you’re talking about?

PS: Nineteen sixty-one. The girls had typing. But we were all college-bound. Men and women were all college-bound, men and women went to the best schools around. And not everybody at Yeshivah Flatbush was Orthodox. There was probably more Orthodox, a lot of them were Conservative. So I had a very good education in elementary school and in high school.

JG: Were you involved in any youth groups when you were in high school?

PS: No, I don’t think so. I don’t remember. No, it wasn’t — I belonged to the Y youth group — as a matter of fact, (00:15:00) when I was in the eighth or ninth grade, my youth leader was a boy, an older boy, named Avi Dershowitz, who turned out to be, later in life, Alan Dershowitz! [laughs] So he was my youth leader, he was in high school, I guess, when I was in the eighth or ninth grade — no, maybe he might have been a little older than that, I might have been a little younger. I think there were eight years between us. But anyway, Alan Dershowitz was my youth leader.

JG: What was the youth —?

PS: It was the Y. Yeah, it was the Y — so we played a little basketball and we talked about things, I don’t remember what we talked about, but I do remember Avi Dershowitz!

JG: What about Jewish camps? Did you go to any Jewish camps?

PS: Yes. I went to — the first time I went to camp was Morasha which was a religious Zionist camp and we slept in tents and I was too young and I was scared, and that wasn’t very successful. Then I went to Massad, which was a Hebrew-speaking camp, which was better. And then after that —

JG: What was the religious orientation of Massad?
PS: Orthodox, I believe. Orthodox, Zionist, Hebrew-speaking. And then I went to a camp called Maple Lake for a few years, which was non-Hebrew-speaking, Orthodox Jewishly (00:16:33) But it was like a camp like all others, but the boys had to go to daven in the morning, not the girls. Just Shabbos. Orthodox! Orthodox, Modern Orthodox — then I went to a camp for two years called Columbia, where I was fifteen, sixteen, and then the year I graduated high school, I went to Ramah, Camp Ramah. So I spent four years in Camp Ramah staff [see addendum].

JG: The last year, when you went to Ramah, were you already a staff person at that point?

PS: I was a staff person from the first year. It was the year I graduated high school.

JG: How did you come to go to Ramah, after having attended Modern Orthodox camps all those years?

PS: You know something, I don’t remember! I seriously don’t remember. But I think it came from my mother, and I don’t remember how that connection was.

JG: Which Ramah were you at?

PS: It was Ramah Connecticut, when there was still Ramah Connecticut, and before they moved to Massachusetts. And then I was in Ramah Berkshires for the last two years. And I met my first husband, David Sperling, in that summer, the first summer at Ramah Connecticut. (00:18:00)

JG: When you look back on these camp experiences, what impact would you say they had on you and on your sense of yourself Jewishly? Those were very different experiences. There’s clearly similarities, but Zionistically oriented, non-Zionistically oriented, and then Ramah, which was so formative for so many people.

PS: All my Orthodox experiences were Zionist-oriented. There was nothing that was not Zionist. My parents wouldn’t have exposed me to that. It was all Zionist. Orthodox-Zionist, but Zionist. Very strongly Zionist.

JG: Did you think about making aliyah ever?

PS: Always. Always. Every time I went to Israel I said, “I could live here. Why am I not living here?” Then I go back to my regular life, but every time I went to Israel I felt I should move there and live there.

JG: When was the first time you went to Israel?

PS: First time I went to Israel was — late. It was the first time I was really abroad. It was sixty — no, it wasn’t ’67, I was there in ’69.
JG: And that was after college, etc.

PS: Yes.

JG: Okay. Ramah, was Ramah a difference experience for you? What kind of impact did Ramah have on you? It’s Conservative, among other things.

PS: Ramah was Conservative, but you know, I shifted easily into it. It wasn’t — it still had davening on Shabbos and it was still kosher and it was still very Jewish, so I didn’t have any problem in shifting into it. It wasn’t particularly more worldly than my experience at Yeshivah Flatbush. I think Yeshivah Flatbush was more of an exposure to people that were less Orthodox, that went shopping on Shabbos and did all those other things. So it wasn’t a difficult step, to make that transition. It had a huge impact on me but not religiously! It had a huge impact on me because it was the first time I was really in a position of responsibility and leadership. So for some reason or other, they gave me positions that I wouldn’t ordinarily have. When I was twenty, I don’t think I was older than twenty [see addendum], I was head of omanut, which was the arts and crafts. I had thirteen people working for me! I had to schedule thirteen people. I was twenty years old. I had no idea what I was doing. So that was a huge impact on me, giving me that responsibility so early in life. That was a huge growth.

JG: What was your background in the arts that got you that position, so to speak?

PS: I was an art major in college. That was about it. So when I was at Camp Columbia in my last years, I was an assistant in the arts and crafts. There were two of us (00:21:00), the boss and the assistant, and then when I went to Ramah Connecticut, Roz Artz, who was Ray Artz’s wife, was head of arts and crafts and I was one of the staff, and then the second year I was staff, and then I think it was the last year, in the Berkshires, I was head of the arts and crafts departments for two years, I believe. So it was — I had experience, but not that kind of experience.

JG: How do you think that changed you?

PS: When you’re sometimes thrown into a situation and you have to sink or swim and you end up swimming, even if you end up swallowing a lot of water, it’s growth! It’s definitely growth. And now that I think of it, the fact that they offered me the job and I stepped up to the plate is amazing to me! That I was so young and so inexperienced and then I come there and I have thirteen people, except for two of them, all of them older than me. All of them older than me, all of them adults, and I still saw myself as a kid, and they’re looking at me for guidance.

JG: Was there anything Judaic about the kinds of arts you were doing?

PS: Everything was Judaic. It was — my first year in — well, yes, everything was Judaic. We did scenery for the plays, so that was part of our responsibility. There were Jewish
projects. We had a lot of Israelis, exchange people and visitors who they brought in who taught carpentry, who taught various things.

JG: Was there a difference in the role of women or girls there that felt at all significant to you in relation to your experiences in other Jewish worlds?

PS: If it did, it didn’t impact on me at that point, it didn’t impact on me there. The fact that they gave me the job as a woman, Roz Artz had it when I was eighteen, she was head of arts and crafts; at the camp, a lot of the heads of divisions were women, in Ramah. It didn’t faze me.

JG: So you finished high school and then you went to Brooklyn College.

PS: Right.

JG: You also took classes at JTS, you said.

PS: I took classes at JTS for two years, right. So I did continue my Jewish education there.

JG: What were you interested in studying at that point?

PS: Um, what they gave me! I had really, really good teachers, I had Shalom Paul and I had Yochanan Muffs (00:24:00), I had the best teachers there. They were fabulous teachers. And we studied philosophy, of course, we studied Tillich (00:24:09), which was a whole new look at everything for me. That was a very important part of my education, the JTS college.

JG: Was that an unusual thing for someone of your background to be doing?

PS: Well, what was unusual about it was it was critical method. So when they taught Bible, they taught critical method, and that I had not been exposed to. I had been exposed to a text with Rashi (00:24:39), I had been exposed to Tosafos and the Talmud, but here they were bringing in other sources and old sources, so that was very different and very new and every exciting. Very exciting. So that was, I would say, a good turning point, and the difference between what I had before and what I was getting.

JG: How did you decide on Brooklyn College?

PS: [laughs] Did I decide on Brooklyn College?

JG: Did you?

PS: No! I never applied to another school! At that time, Brooklyn College, you needed a very high-grade point average to get in, I got in. Public education.
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JG: Where did you live?

PS: At home, in Borough Park.

JG: So you commuted?

PS: I commuted for four years, and from Brooklyn College I would take the subway for an hour and fifteen minutes up to JTS a couple of times a week. I ended up taking eighteen credits at Brooklyn and another six at JTS. I was busy! I was busy.

JG: At what point did you decide to study architecture? At what point did that come into your life, and why/how?

PS: It’s a little embarrassing when I — I think, when I was a kid and we had dominoes, instead of playing dominoes I used to use them as building blocks, I used to do floor plans with them. I would always do floor plans, I was always doing planning. And somebody might have mentioned architecture, I didn’t know anything about it, there were no role models in the neighborhood, there was nobody that I knew, I had no idea. We didn’t have much architecture in Borough Park or Flatbush. So I didn’t think much about it and then somebody said, “You should be an architect.” And I remember when I was in high school, talking to my — I had a friend whose mother was a public-school guidance counselor, and she said, “Any idea what you want to do? You want to go to college?” And I said, “Yeah, yeah, sure, of course,” and she said, “Well, what are you going to study?” I said, “Architecture?” And she said, “Girls can’t be architects.” (00:27:00) She actually said that, girls can’t be architects. And I also heard that from another source, girls can’t be architects. So, dummy that I was, I bought it. Girls can’t be architects. And I went to Brooklyn College and I studied art with a minor in education, I was going to be an art teacher. And in my third year, I took two courses: one in architecture, as part of the art major, and the other one in planning. And both my teachers pulled me aside —

JG: What kind of planning?

PS: Urban planning. City planning, it was called. And both of my teachers pulled me aside and said, “You’re really good at this. Why don’t you —” And my architecture teacher’s name was Papadaki, and he had worked with Le Corbusier, “Corbu,” in Brasilia, on the design of Brasilia. And he said, “You know, you’re really good at this. You should really pursue it.” And I said, “But girls can’t be architects.” He looked at me like I was nuts, he was like, “Who said?!” He said, “I know a lot of women who have successful practices.” Of course they were all foreign-born. So I started thinking seriously of it and Professor James, who taught city planning, said I should go into planning. So I looked at both of those and decided that I might pursue architecture, but I didn’t have much money to do that. My brothers were coming up, they were going to be going to college, and I felt that — it’s really embarrassing. I felt as a girl, that, you know, my education had already been paid for through elementary school and private high school.

JG: It was the times.
PS: It was the times. And I was definitely a product of my time.

JG: And where were your parents on the education of their daughter and careers?

PS: Well, when I mentioned to my parents that — so what happened was that Papadaki sent me to Yale and he sent me to Harvard and he sent me to Columbia, etc. And I looked into those places — I didn’t go to Harvard but I did go to Yale [see addendum]. And I couldn’t begin to afford the tuition at those places.

JG: For architecture school.

PS: Yes. I also got married at the end of my junior year in college, so here I was, a married woman, my husband was studying New York, I wasn’t going to leave, I had to do it in New York.

JG: What was he studying?

PS: He was at JTS.

JG: In the rabbinical program?

PS: In the rabbinical school, by that time. I wasn’t going to leave town. We didn’t have much money. I declared independence from my parents, at that point (00:30:00), under my father’s protests. He protested, he said, “I will pay your tuition,” but I said, “No Daddy, I’m doing this myself.” I think I felt insecure. I didn’t want to start something and then quit, and then have him pay for it. So I figured if I was paying for it on my own, on loans or whatever, then I would — you know, it’s my head. It’s my burden. So I declared independence from my parents and I applied to Pratt, which had the lowest tuition, and they gave me a fifty-percent reduction in tuition, and I paid $800 a semester to go to architecture school. Now, even at that time, that was nothing. Even at that time, it was nothing. And my parents just thought it was funny, that I was studying architecture, they just thought it was a gas. So my mother said to me, “Look, take it one year at a time, see how it goes, and if it works the first year, you’ll go to the second year!” My father, I think, was very proud, but my father died in my second year there. He had a long illness and he died. So that was a big trauma. But I persevered, and you know, it didn’t hold me back, through that year.

JG: So what was the year that you got married, actually?


JG: So your parents, it sounds, were actually quite supportive of your goals.

PS: Yes, my parents were — I’ll give you an interesting story. Many, many, many years later, after the women’s movement had taken over and feminism had taken over, my
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mother sat down with me one time, and you know, my father was a dentist and my brother became a dentist and then an orthodontist. And my mother said, “You know, I've been pondering, I've been wondering — how come we didn’t encourage you to go into dental school?” And I started laughing. I said, “Ma, remember the woman that sat in front of us in shul?” She said yes, I said, “We made fun of her because she was a dentist! Whoever heard of a woman dentist!” [laughs] And it was a different world, I grew up in a different world. And there were very few women in my class in architecture. And almost all of them, with the exception of two, were foreign-born — were coming to New York to study architecture from some other country, for the most part. Which was interesting. (00:33:00) We think of ourselves as so advanced in that area and we’re so far behind in some other places.

JG: This was a very tumultuous time, the sixties, in general, in America, American society. With the counterculture, the anti-war movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the assassinations — very tumultuous times. And also the beginnings of second-wave feminism. To what extent were you aware of all of these movements, and involved?

PS: Very aware. When I was at Brooklyn College our history teachers would rail against us for being complacent. They said, “When I was in college, we were communists, we were socialists, we were railing against pro-union, anti-union, whatever it was, and you people just sit like logs!” and we all looked at them with, you know, whatever. [laughs] And then I went to Pratt, and all hell broke loose. First year was fine, but after that, it was just — there were always demonstrations on campus. As a matter of fact I think for the last two years of my three and a half there, we never took spring finals, because we were on the picket line of something or other.

JG: The late sixties by then, you’re talking about.

PS: Yes, yes — very late sixties. I graduated, I think, January of ’70, so we’re talking about ’69, ’68, maybe ’67, when all hell broke loose on my campus at Pratt, but also I think my husband at that point was either out of JTS or at Columbia so all hell — we knew a lot of people from Columbia, at graduate school at Columbia, and you know what happened there at that time.

JG: Say briefly what happened there.

PS: Oh, well, you know, the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] movement and the sitting in on the office, the big strike. And we were very sympathetic to it and we had a friend who was over quite frequently who was one of the major, major, major activists in SDS at the time. I think he was arrested eventually. So we were very much, certainly on the Columbia campus, I wasn’t on the Columbia campus, but we very much knew about it and were sympathetic to that cause.

JG: So here you are, a woman in architect school. To what extent were you aware personally of second-wave feminism and consciousness-raising groups (00:36:00) that were starting to form?
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PS: Consciousness-raising groups started after, a little bit after. Or maybe they had started at the same time, but I wasn’t so much aware of them. We were aware of — I went to Pratt as an undergrad, I finished college and I went to Pratt because I could afford it, but it was a five-year undergraduate degree. There’s two ways of pursuing an architectural degree. One of them is a five-year undergraduate degree, and you get a professional degree at the end of it, which is called a Bachelor of Architecture. Or you can go four years to a regular college and another three years to a graduate school in architecture and you get a M.Arch., or a Master of Architecture degree.

JG: That’s what you were doing.

PS: Nope. I couldn’t afford that. So I went to an undergraduate — I was an undergraduate again. I did three and a half years, they accelerated me, I did three and a half years and I got a Bachelor of Architecture. Later on, I went to Columbia and got a master’s, but I had another bachelor’s degree. Once you had the Bachelor of Architecture or the Masters of Architecture, they were equivalent, they were both entrees into — they were first degrees into the profession. So it didn’t much hold me back, not having a master’s at that point. I was able to work with that.

JG: Were you ever part of a consciousness-raising group?

PS: Oh, yeah. Let me finish the school experience. So when I started Pratt, they skipped me from the freshman year into the second year, because I was an art major so I had a lot of foundation work, and I had to double up on my studies because I had to catch up on the calculus and the strength of materials courses, etc., that I had missed. But I did it, and a very young girl approached me, who became a lifelong friend, and she said, “Would you be my partner in this project?” In architecture you do a lot of partnership and group work, because that’s the way architecture develops. You know, the whole Ayn Rand thing about the independent architect is not quite true. So I said, “Okay,” and she said, “Let me tell you why. When you work with a group that includes three boys and you,” she said, “the professors just assume that the boys do all the work and you did nothing and they address all their questions to the young men and nothing to you.” But she said, “If two women are working, I don’t see how they can avoid it.” So my friend Lupé and I — she’s Cuban-born — my friend Lupé and I worked on that first project, and we worked on every single subsequent project that was a group or a partnership project. Including the thesis! And our thesis project was quite a production, it was an extraordinary project. And when we presented our thesis at the end of the year, it collected a very large group of faculty as critics. So sometimes you only get two people, but we got ten faculty members who heard our presentation. And the two of us gave our presentation. We got some criticism, we expected some criticism, and we got a lot of praise. And at the end, one of our — one of the very respected professors, and I’ll mention his name, Hanford Yang, who was a very important architect, he said, “Well, you know, gentlemen, this is not my style and this is not my direction in architecture, but we have to admit that, considering it’s two young ladies who did this project, this is excellent work.” And I held my breath, but Lupé, who was four years younger than me,
Lupé, who was very small, her back was stiff, and she said, “I have never been so insulted in my life.” And she walks out of the room! [laughs] So I was left holding the bag there. And then since he was an important architect and since I wanted to learn from him, I elected to take his course the next semester, as my last semester there. And at the very beginning, he said to me, “Miss Sperling, please, please, I don’t mean to offend you, but can you tell me why Miss Esposito was so upset at what I had said?” And I said, “Professor Yang,” and I repeated his remark, and I said, “You just implied that there was something inferior about women, that they could not achieve the level of a man in this project.” And he said, “A-buh-buh-buh-buh-buh!” Which means, “Of course not! Of course that’s —” But he said, “But I don’t understand!” And I said, oh, I gotta hit him hard. So I said, “Professor Yang, who do you respect most?” And he mentioned a number of architects that he respected. And I said, “What would happen if they juryed your work and said, ‘But, gentlemen, considering it was done by a Chinese man, it’s an excellent project.’” And he just went into sputter-mode, “BUH-BUH-BUH-BUH-BUH!” So you know, that was — I sort of nailed it. I think he got it down. I don’t think he changed his opinion but I think he got it.

JG: So you were just going to tell me briefly about your involvement with second-wave feminism at that point.

PS: So I had no involvement in anything. I mean architecture consumed me, it consumed me. And I actually was working one day a week, for JASA, at the time.

JG: What is JASA?

PS: Jewish Agency for Service to the Aged. No, I worked with JASA later. I don’t think I was working at all except during the summers. I was working summer jobs, which filled the coffers so that I could survive, my husband and I could survive. We were two students, and we hadn’t—by this time, we were involved with the havurah. We were very involved with the havurah.

JG: Which we’re going to come to in one minute. How would you describe your Jewish identity during this period of your involvement, starting at Pratt and your early marriage?

PS: My Jewish identity was Orthodox. I was shomer shabbes and I was kosher, to such an extent that it was problematic. We had one professor who assigned a big jury, a big end-of-semester project, on Shavuot. And I went over to him and I said, “Professor Rieger, I can’t do this. I can’t be there on that day, I’ll be there on the second day rather than the first day of presentation.” So he said, “Nope.” He was a Jewish teacher. He said, “Nope, you fail if you’re not there with that project.” I said, “How about if I bring the project in the week before and you see it, that it’s complete, and it’s done?” He said, “Nope, you have to be there.” So, I lived about four and a half, maybe five miles from the campus, maybe six. I delivered my project to my friend Ronnie, who lived close to campus, and he brought the project to school on that day, and I walked. There and back. And he didn’t call on me to present. Bastard! He just died. [laughs] I just heard that he
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died a couple weeks ago. So, how did that impact on it? [00:45:00] My Jewish identity — remember, I was very involved with the havurah.

JG: So let’s get to that.

PS: So my Jewish identity was very, very strong, I was doing both.

JG: So the New York Havurah was founded in the fall of ‘69, and you and David were involved from the beginning, correct?

PS: Yes. Yes, we were involved from the beginning.

JG: How did you first learn about this new havurah, or was it really even in the planning stages? At what point did you become aware of it and get involved at any level?

PS: By that time my husband David had a reputation. I think he was at Columbia at that point, he had graduated JTS. He had been anti-war, he had refused to go into the military, there were very few — I think he and Art Green were the only ones in his class, he was in Art Green’s class, I think they were the only two in that class at the seminary that refused to go in. So that caused a bit of a hubbub. And I first heard about the havurah, I think, at the point where my father — I think it was about when my father had died in ’69. It was the formative year, towards the end. I don’t remember exactly if — I think it was Alan, Alan Mintz, who came to talk to David about the havurah, because they were looking for teachers at that point, and they asked him if he would be a teacher.

JG: Teacher of what? What was his field?

PS: He was doing Bible. He was doing ancient Near Eastern Semitic (00:46:51) languages under Moshe Held, at Columbia, and he was very busy. He basically said no.

JG: He said no?

PS: He said no. But I was mad for the idea! I loved the idea of what they were talking about. I mean they were talking about — you know the spiel already, close to being a commune kind of organization that would pray together as Jews, that would go to demonstrations together as Jews, that would study together as Jews, and I loved that concept. I really resonated to it, and I said, “Please, please!” And he said, “Okay,” and he called them back and said, “I’ll do it.” And that’s how I got involved with the havurah.

JG: Let’s dig into some of the aspects of the havurah at this point. There was a brochure that was written in the very first year (00:48:00), in that formative year. I think John Ruskay was involved in it, probably Alan and Peter Geffen, probably those two were involved, with Eugene Weiner.

PS: Who was another teacher.
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JG: He was a teacher?

PS: Yes, he was asked to be a teacher.

JG: So the havurah in this brochure envisioned the creation of what they called a new kind of religious leadership for the Jewish community, and saw itself as a model for a new form of Jewish life. Did that vision speak to you?

PS: I never saw myself in a position of Jewish leadership. I mean I knew I wasn’t going that way. I was in architecture school, I was going to be an architect. So no, the leadership part certainly didn’t appeal to me. The rest of it did.

JG: Did it appeal to David other than concerns about the time commitment?

PS: I don’t know if he actually saw himself — he saw himself as being an academic, a scholar, and a professor. Those were his aims. I don’t think that he was looking to change the Jewish world and the Jewish leadership. Not like John and Peter — I don’t even know if Alan was so gung-ho on that.

JG: Was he friends, and were you friends, with Art Green, and aware of what was happening in Boston with Havurat Shalom?

PS: Yes, yes. I knew Art from the seminary years, when David was in the seminary and Art Green was a friend. So we knew Art Green quite well.

JG: And were you aware of Havurat Shalom as it was being started?

PS: Of course! I was aware of Havurat Shalom, but not as aware of it as I became after the interest in — and I’m trying to remember exactly when David was asked to be — I pretty much know, because it was around my father’s death and that’s why I remember it so clearly. So it would have been around Passover. It would have been the Passover before — my father died in ’69, it would have been the Passover of ’69.

JG: And the havurah started that fall, basically, right?

PS: And the havurah started that fall. So we were already invested — David was into the formative, you know, making it happen. So let me see, it was March, April, May, June, July, August, September, so six months before, actually.

JG: So let’s delve into some specific aspects of the havurah, both in terms of the expressed ideal but also the lived experience for people who were involved. So the first being community, since many people felt that community — and feel — that community was the very heart of what the havurah (00:51:00) experience was about.

PS: Yes, it’s true.
JG: You’d grown up in an intensely Jewish community. What do you think distinguished the havurah’s vision of community from what you had always known, since your childhood?

PS: People use the word “community” to mean “neighborhood” too. I grew up in a very Jewish neighborhood, the community we were forming was much more of a hevrah than it was a neighborhood. You’re using the words interchangeably but there was no comparison. I mean I had friends from school, from both elementary school and high school that I hung around with, these were important friends in my life, but it was different from the havurah, and very different from the havurah.

JG: As someone who was recruited to teach, did David or you have to go through any kind of an admissions process?

PS: No. I mean obviously they had discussed him and decided to ask him, and so all he had to do was say yes or no.

JG: And how about you?

PS: I was not asked one way or the other. I came along as his suitcase. [laughs]

JG: What do you mean by suitcase? You were something he brought along?

PS: Yes, I was baggage.

JG: What about other wives or partners of people who were involved and being recruited?

PS: That was one of the interesting things about it, is they did not say — part of the idea was that this would be an alternate rabbinical school, I think. I think that was the original intent — you must have learned that by now — that it would be an alternate rabbinical school. And when one woman applied, they had a huge debate about whether they were going to take a woman as a primary member. A huge debate. I’m not privy to that debate so I’m not going to talk about that debate. Did anybody talk about that?

JG: Only that there were discussions.

PS: Okay. So there were tremendous discussions about it and finally she was admitted as the only woman member, primary member. And she was a single woman so she didn’t bring a husband along with her. So there were — I can’t remember how many we were in the beginning, I really don’t. Twelve primary members, a number of wives, number of girlfriends. (00:54:00) But she was the only member.

JG: The only member who was a woman who was admitted in her own right.
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PS: That’s right. David was admitted as a teacher, he was a teacher.

JG: What was your sense of what the admission process was at that early stage?

PS: I had no sense of — I had no knowledge of the admission process at that point, for the first year. I didn’t even know there was an admission process.

JG: Was David at all involved, or you don’t know?

PS: I don’t think so.

JG: What's your sense of what kind of person they were looking for? Or any sense of the criteria by which someone would be admitted or not? And can you imagine what the issues were around whether or not to admit women? Was it the issue of the seminary, that it was a rabbinical training ground? Or was it something larger than that?

PS: Since I wasn’t part of that, I’m not going to talk about that. I wasn’t part of it, they didn’t share with me, I don’t know.

JG: How would you describe the people who were involved early on, generally speaking? What kinds of people were involved in those early years, in that very early year?

PS: I think that a lot of the people that were involved in those early years were people who had thought about going to rabbinical school — men — had thought about going to rabbinical school or had been in rabbinical school and were dropouts. So when I look back on it, and I didn’t know it at the time because people were more or less in the closet, there were two gay men that were part of the first year. But I didn’t know it at the time.

JG: No one knew it, you’re saying at the time.

PS: I think everybody knew it except for me, I was very naïve. I came from Borough Park, what did I know? What did I know to look for? They — I’ll tell this story later. Okay, I’ll tell it now! We were driving back from a retreat early on, I was sitting in the back of the car with this guy who was only in the havurah for one year, and he said, “How would you vote if a gay man, a homosexual” — I don’t even know if he used the word “gay” at the time — “How would you vote if a homosexual person wanted to join?”

Now I told you that — I told you but I didn’t say it here, but I’m not an intellectual. I was the non-intellectual in a sea of intellectuals. I was — I think I was their comic relief (00:57:00). And I kept on stressing that I didn’t deal in hypothetical debate, I dealt with realities, I was really — not so much the anti-intellectual, because I’m not anti-intellectual, I was just the non-intellectual in this group, who debated — I once spoke to John and he said, “Don’t you love process?” And I said, “I hate process! I’m a result-oriented person! I want to skip process and go to result!” But he used to tease me and I used to tease him. And I used to tease Alan Mintz for being too verbose. I said, “You know, college boards are over, you don’t need to use those words anymore!” I was the comic relief. So this young man asked me what I would do, hypothetically, and I said,
“You know me well enough, I don’t deal with hypotheticals. If and when a gay person wants to become part of the havurah, I’ll think about it!” That was my answer. Little did I know that he was already in the havurah — but I didn’t know at that time. It wasn’t like I was hostile, it was like I was naïve.

JG: Were you aware of any changes around policy or feelings about admitting women? When did that happen?

PS: Yeah! And I was very instrumental — somewhat instrumental — in that change. It was about halfway through.

JG: Halfway through what?

PS: The first year, halfway through the first year. What happened was that the havurah had an apartment at that time, a beautiful apartment. The first apartment was right over here on 102nd. We had a beautiful apartment. God knows that the landlord let us have this apartment, which now is about three million dollars, let us have this apartment as a group of young hippies, graduate students. But he did! So we rented an apartment and we used to have dinners in that apartment once a week, which we cooked ourselves. Somebody was responsible for cooking. And then we would go on retreats once a month and all the food was brought up and that was a lot of cooking. And the guys cooked, some of them, but for the most part, the wives and the girlfriends did the cooking. The wives and the girlfriends did the cooking, and the wives and girlfriends did the cleaning. And yet we were part of almost everything on the retreats and we were certainly welcome at all those dinners. Basically. We were doing the cooking! And we saw ourselves as part of the havurah (1:00:00), a very important part of the havurah. And one of the women whose husband was a member of the havurah, and actually only in that first year, called me up and she was working. She was out of school and she was working, and she said, “You know, Phyllis, something happened to me and I’m very upset about it and I wanted to talk to you about it.” And I said, “What happened?” And she said, “Well you know, I had a week off from work. And the classes were in my house, in my apartment. The classes were in my apartment.”

JG: The classes for the havurah?

PS: Havurah had three, four classes running every week, and her husband was in one of them, and she sat in on the class, and was told she couldn’t, because she wasn’t a member of the havurah. And I was appalled. In fact, I went through the roof, I was totally appalled. I said, “What? You couldn’t sit in on the class because you’re not a member of havurah?” So the next meeting, I brought it up. And I said, “This is what happened, and we’re doing your cooking and we’re doing your cleaning, and we’re doing your schlepping and we’re doing the planning for these retreats.” I said, “We’re not members of the havurah?” And there was a lot of fumfering, and there was a lot of “Whatever,” and I think it was decided just at that meeting, that when a couple came in, they were both members of havurah. So it was decided that night.
JG: By a group of male members?

PS: By everyone who was sitting there, I think it was decided. Because there were women there too! The wives and girlfriends were there as well, whoever was there. So I think that they realized that that was — sometimes you just need someone to point you in the right direction. It was in the air.

JG: It sounds like it had been ambiguous. That you were sort of members.

PS: It was ambiguous. Sometimes you have to — sometimes something’s in the air, and people don’t change so fast, but when somebody points you in the right direction, and I just think that I brought it to a head. It wasn’t a big debate, it was just, let’s reconsider our policy and let’s do it this way now.” So I felt very good about that.

JG: Absolutely. To push that envelope a little bit, did that mean that both people had to be accepted, or if the group were interested in, let’s say, the male member of a couple —

PS: Okay, I said that in the very beginning, during the formative times and maybe in the beginning of the first year, I was not aware of admissions policy. There might have been, I wasn’t aware, (1:03:00) I wasn’t a full-fledged member at the time. But after that I became aware of the policy, and the policy I believe for the New York Havurah was that one person applied, usually a man, and then he was accepted, etc. But after that, both people needed — they applied as a couple, and they were accepted as a couple. I think that they needed a majority vote, I’m not sure. I was never part of any kind of admission vote. Thank God, I was never part of any of that! But I think if they had one blackball, or two blackballs, then they — if somebody really, really, really had a hesitation, then maybe they wouldn’t get in. We took mostly everybody, not everybody, but mostly everybody, I think.

JG: This is one of the critiques that’s leveled often towards havurah in those early years, that as a small, intentional community, that it was elitist in its —

PS: It is elitist, it was elitist. But now I’m running a much bigger organization as a volunteer, and we have sixty groups of eight to fifteen people. Sixty of them now. And when we form a new group, and now we know personalities, when we form a new group, there are some people we just need to exclude, because they're disruptive, they're highly political, they’re crazy — I mean we work with old people, so — [laughs] So there are some people we say, they’re just not going to work in harmony with others. But we take everybody! But some people that have a track record already, we shy away from putting them in that group because they can be very disruptive. And I think that that was the idea. It’s not like, “I don’t like you,” but I think that they are known to be disruptive, they have a reputation for being that way. So again, I have never been part of any kind of vetting interview, I was never part of that process. That’s what I’m aware of.

JG: So it was kind of a necessary evil, in a sense.
PS: I’m not saying it was or it isn’t. I’m not saying it was — was the *havurah* elitist? We thought we were terrific! We thought we were the elite of the elite! The crème de la crème! And maybe we were.

JG: You mentioned communal meals that happened every Thursday evening, often followed by a community meeting —

PS: Always followed, always.

JG: Or a program, sometimes, like a speaker, someone who was invited to come and talk with the group. (1:06:00)

PS: Right.

JG: There were these kinds of regular occasions, the communal meals, the meetings, monthly Shabbat retreats, that sound like the cornerstones of the community.

PS: Our community. Not using community as neighborhood. Yes, and also there was *davening*, there was prayer. There were services, weekly services. Now I — one of the things I should explain, was that first year, David and I were living in Brooklyn. So we came to all the retreats, we got ourselves to every monthly retreat, and we also came to every Thursday meeting. But because I was *shomer shabbos* at that time, we didn’t participate in the services on Shabbos. Because I couldn’t get there. The next year, by the middle of the next year, so after a year and a half of the *havurah*, February of the next year —

JG: You’re talking about ’71 at this point?

PS: Well, Sharon was born in September ’70, I’m talking about ’71. In February of ’71, David had a job in Stonybrook, so we moved out there. So we were very much members of the *havurah*, we knew what was going on, etc. But we were physically two hours away from all of this. So we did not participate in the weekly meetings, but we went to almost all of the retreats. And they started to make the retreats out on Shelter Island, most of the retreats were on Shelter Island so that we could get there.

JG: Where is Shelter Island?

PS: It’s between the north and south fork of Long Island. Far east, eastern Long Island.

JG: So that made that possible —

PS: Yes, most of the retreats were there so we could get there. And we went to what we called the “anchor retreats,” which was the long retreats on Shavuot and Sukkot. So those were the three-day retreats, rather than the one-and-a-half, two-day retreats.

JG: Tell us about the retreats, because they were clearly very central in the community.
PS: Very central. So the typical retreat went on — and I remember, we would rent a space, cheap space in some state park, usually some unheated cabin in the middle of the winter in some state park, and the only heat was from a fireplace that had to be kept going all night long in the central space. And I remember we all had sleeping bags and we all slept end to end, in this big space. All of us were in this big space, on the floor, in our sleeping bags. It might have been the only space, but it certainly was the only warm space. (1:09:00) And at some point, later on, we became adults and finally graduated to bunk beds. [laughs] You know, four or six to a room, but in the beginning, we all slept on the floor, and then the tables would be brought out. And we had all this food prepared, all we had to do was heat it up or eat it cold.

JG: How did the food get out there?

PS: We brought it. And part of the hard part was it had to be there before Shabbos.

JG: Was that a given?

PS: It was a rule. It was a rule, the food had to arrive before Shabbos, because sometimes we had an Orthodox member who was strict about it, and that was the hard part, was arranging to get the food to the retreat before Shabbos, especially in the winter, when Shabbos started at 4:30! So some people were like, How are we going do this? There’s a lot of organization, a lot of work on this. So you say, “I’ll cook it Thursday night and I’ll bring it to your house, because you have the car.” So some people could not get there, some of the cooks could not get there until after the workday was over, until later. But the food had to get there first, so a lot of us ended up bringing the food to somebody who we knew was going to get there before Shabbos and he would bring the food up.

JG: Did the food have to be prepared, ready to be served?

PS: Except for salads, tuna fish. I mean, we were — it was a lot, and it was every month!

JG: Who made the — what were the arrangements for making these arrangements? And I’m curious, throughout — the extent to which there was gender differentiation over who was in charge of what.

PS: You know, I’m not sure and I don’t remember that. I do remember that, you know, we knew who had cars and we knew who was free to leave. So after a while, it wasn’t — after a while it was, “Listen, I’m not going to get there until after Shabbos, so I’m going to cook on Thursday and I’m going to bring it over in a shopping cart to you and you’ll get it up there.” And after a while it was just easier because we knew the cars that were going up early and the cars that were going up late. And I don’t remember who did the driving, who made the transportation arrangements, but somebody was always — I remember Gerry Serotta always did the heshbon (1:11:32) at the end. So the way we worked it this way, and it was always Gerry: we would say how much we spent, each of us would — we wouldn’t submit receipts, but we would say, “I spent $28, I spent $35, I
spent $12, I brought the wine, many dollars,” and we would all give him the chits with our name on it and how much we spent. (1:12:00) And some people didn’t spend anything so their names went into it, etc. And we would add onto that the rent for the space, probably nothing else, and he would add those things up and he would divide by the number of people, and then he would hand you the chit with whether you got money back, or whether you had to contribute more, and everybody did that, put in the money, and he was able to give back to people, and it was all done in less than half an hour after Shabbos. Nobody went home until Gerry did the heshbon. It was saddled up in half an hour.

JG: So it didn’t go into a communal pool per se. It was settled up. If you were owed $11, you got it before you left.

PS: Yeah. And there also were havurah dues because we also had an apartment rent to pay. I don’t remember what the havurah dues were. It wasn’t onerous. It was a couple hundred dollars a year; it was very little. But there were havurah dues because we were paying for the apartment. And that’s all we were paying for. Maybe insurance.

JG: So anything that was an ongoing one-time expense, like the retreats, you paid for basically on the spot at the time.

PS: Yeah, I don’t remember how we did dinner. I don’t remember whether — you know, we alternated the weekly dinner, so maybe we just bought all the ingredients and then served it, and then somebody else did it the next week, maybe we didn’t get reimbursed. I don’t remember.

JG: Was there a community position of someone who recruited people or set the schedule? How did that happen? No one has actually described that.

PS: I don’t remember. I don’t remember — probably just a sign-up list at the dinners, for the dinners. I remember cooking a dinner with Alan Mintz, who was really a cook, and he taught me a lot!

JG: What did you cook with him?

PS: It was — I don’t know, I don’t remember. I think it was chicken, though I can’t remember why we had fleishiks (1:14:08), it might have been fish. I don’t remember but I remember learning a lot because he was a really good cook.

JG: The New York Havurah was known for having the really good food!

PS: The foodies! We were — you know, I think that the Boston havurah was way more spiritual than we were, and we considered ourselves way more intellectual than the Boston havurah.

JG: And some people would say more political as well.
PS: Probably. We were very political. That was another big thing, was going on those Washington marches. That was a very big thing.

JG: Before we leave the subject of food —

PS: Important!

JG: It is important, because it bound the community.

PS: It bound the community.

JG: Did people invite each other to their homes? Was it an inviting, like Shabbat, an inviting community? (1:15:00)

PS: You know it might have been for the people who lived in Manhattan. Remember I lived in Brooklyn and then I lived in Stonybrook. So we used to have people over to our house but we used to laugh that very few people would make the trip to Brooklyn. Martha Ackelsberg was one of the few people who came, and Dina Rosenfeld was one of the few people who came. But — I think the Shevitzes came once too, but it was — people didn’t come, especially not on Shabbos. It was far! Brooklyn was considered like Oklahoma! [laughs] Not anymore!

JG: So as you said earlier, these meals, the Thursday evening meals, were usually followed by a meeting.

PS: Yes, always. Always followed by something. That was the important part, the meeting was the important part, not necessarily the dinners.

JG: What was so important about the meetings?

PS: I don’t remember! [laughs]

JG: What kinds of topics or issues would get discussed at the meetings? Were there issues in the function of the community or policy?

PS: I think obviously there was the war in Vietnam. We talked about that. Or somebody would talk about something Jewish. It was a while ago, I don’t remember! I was pregnant.

JG: You were pregnant. So we were talking about ’70? ’69, ’70? When was Sharon born?

PS: Sharon was born in September of ’70. I was pregnant — no, I think, wait a second.

JG: The havurah started in the fall of ’69.
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PS: Yes. So the havurah started in the fall of ’69, and she was born in the fall of ’70, so I was pregnant for nine months.

JG: Of that first year?

PS: For most of it. From January. I know exactly when I got pregnant, I know exactly when I got pregnant. It was in John Ruskay’s father’s house. [laughs]

JG: Was it a havurah function?

PS: It was a havurah New Year’s Eve function in his father’s house, I don’t remember. But I — he said, “How can you be sure of that?” And I said, “Pretty sure!” And she was born nine months later, in the end of September. So I would say from the first — from September, October, November, December, and then I didn’t know I was pregnant for a while, but then I was pregnant. (1:18:10)

JG: So it’s important to note, I think, that havurah was originally composed of individuals and couples, but there were no children.

PS: Yes.

JG: In the very beginning. In fact you were the first mother.

PS: Yes, I was the first mother.

JG: You broke that mold. So what was it like to become the first mother in the group, and for Sharon to be the first child? Tell us about that.

PS: Well, one of the Thursday meetings I remember quite well, it was when — I don’t think she was two weeks old, and I brought — of course, this is important! — I brought my baby to the meeting, the Thursday night meeting, and everybody oohed and aahed, etc. And actually they ended up — we were all sitting on the floor — they actually passed this baby around, and I hope I don’t embarrass John this way, but John held her and he went like this and he went, [softly cooing] “Ah, ah, ah,” and he said, “This is so boring.” [laughs] I’ll never forget that! “So give me my baby!” The fact that he could say that and I could laugh, showed you the closeness of the group and the comfortable level that we had in it. So Sharon was the first baby and there were a lot of women, some of them — I mean, I wasn’t very old at the time, I was 26, 25, 26 — the women that were 23, 24, a little bit younger than me, they would just — I would go to a retreat, I didn’t see her. They just took over. One would-be mother to another would-be mother, she was handed out. Somebody would knock on the door when I was sleeping and say, “Is she up yet?” And I would say, “Yeah, I think so,” and she would go, “Okay,” and they would come in and take her out of the crib and change her and get her out of there and I got another two hours sleep. So it was wonderful, it was wonderful. She was adored; my child was adored.
JG: Were the men as mesmerized by her as the women?

PS: Of course not.

JG: Of course not?

PS: Of course not! [laughs] But she had a number of mothers in that first group. Three, I think.

JG: How did that feel to you, to be the first?

PS: Great! Oh no, it was fine. I didn’t have any problem with it. You know, sometimes — but I was a very conscientious mother. In places where there were groups, and she made a whimper, she was taken out. I didn’t wait for someone to say, “Take that baby out!” I took that baby out. Or David took that baby out or one of the mothers took the baby out. (1:21:00) We never let her interfere with what was going on. As a matter of fact, we went on a retreat once, at Shelter Island, and she was a toddler at the time. And we were sitting around having — it was a Friday night dinner and we were sitting around having, whatever we were talking about, lessons, whatever. And I would make sure that all the doors were closed so that wherever she went, she was in the same room. I wasn’t watching her, and at some point, I turned around to look for her and she was walking around the table, reaching up for the little cups of wine! [laughs] A toddler, drinking all the wine around the table! Sweet wine, she liked it. So you know — she was the baby that was around.

JG: When was the next baby born, do you think? Or when did other couples begin to bring in babies?

PS: Ilana Ruskay was the second baby, who was a couple of years younger. And then Paula’s two came. So there were the four girls that were raised together. And they were very — I mean there was a difference of two years or three years in their ages, but they were very tight. Those four little girls were very tight. Right, and then David Ellenson (1:22:45) came in with a baby? The baby was born — no, they came in from Israel, Ruthie was born in Israel.

JG: You’re talking about later?

PS: I’m talking about the seventies, yes. So basically those four girls were the first babies in the havurah. And formed — I don’t know how far you want me to go on that. The children were very important to the havurah. The children in the New York Havurah were very important.

JG: How did it change the havurah?

PS: It’s hard to say because the havurah was changing already. Remember, everyone there was in graduate school and many of them were academics, and they got jobs. The
Hundurts went to Montreal, and Bob and Judith went to Kansas, and David Ellenson first went to Boston and then to Los Angeles. People went to Israel.

JG: So this was over the course of the seventies?

PS: Very soon, I mean very, very soon. People were graduate students, so how long are you a graduate student? Two years, three years? (1:24:00) And then you get a job on some campus somewhere else and you’re gone. Or you continue somewhere else. So a lot of people left and new people came in. New people came in and had more children, but the original people — some of them stayed very close, and in very close contact, and were always part of the havurah. Even if they were only there for the first three years, or the second — the interesting thing about the havurah was the real formative year was not the first year. The real formative year was the second and third years. Because the people who came in there, that second and third year, were the ones that stuck. And a lot of people in the first year — I can think of three or four or five — about half of them were gone by the second year or the third year. Because for one reason or another. The two gay guys were gone that second year. Peter Geffen I think left after one year or two years, for all different reasons, and somebody else went to Israel with his wife. So I would say only half of the first year survived. The formative years in the New York Havurah were definitely the second, third, and fourth.

JG: Who were some of the people who came in during those years?

PS: Well Zev and Leslie didn’t come in the first year. Misha and Jackie came in the year after that.

JG: Say last names. The Shankens —

PS: The Shankens, the Gottworth-Avramoffs were second or third year, Flora and Aryeh Davidson were third and fourth year, the Hundurts were second or third year — most of the people that — Bob and Judith Goldenberg came in — they were in Kansas, I believe.

JG: So they came in ’74.

PS: So that’s fourth year. So it was the real havurah — the first year havurah was the experimental, the “Where are we going, how are we going to do this? etc.” Gerry Serotta was out after what, four years, five years? He moved too. So the real formative havurah was the second year, third year, fourth year, fifth year. That was the strongest period, and that was the year when babies were made, and people came in with babies. So the children were very important to the havurah.

JG: How did the introduction of more and more children affect the havurah? Both in terms of its weekly activities (1:27:00) and also the monthly retreats and the larger retreats that took place around the chaggim?
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PS: Again, we moved out of the city when Sharon was four months old, so that the February of — so we were very involved in the havurah for the first year and a half, and sometime in February of that second year we moved out, and we were out of the city for three and a half years before we moved back, and that time we moved to the Upper West Side, so we were very much involved again. But we never really left the havurah because, as I told you, we went to the monthly retreats and we went to the big holiday retreats. So how the addition of children — other people’s children — changed the mix, or changed the dynamic, I couldn’t really answer that on a week-to-week basis. Almost all the women in the havurah were career women, so they were working jobs, they were being mothers, they had nannies at home with the babies or daycare. Fathers were hopefully liberated and they were doing their burden of childcare. So I don’t know how it affected the day-to-day. But it didn’t change things on the retreats that much either. We didn’t program for children.

JG: You did not?

PS: We did not program for children; they hung out. And they hung out with each other and they ran around with each other. Of course the little ones stayed with their parents, but as soon as you were four, you were running with the crowd. And I know you’re not interested in the later years of the havurah, but I think that those early years of the havurah were very impactful on the later years, because the kids would program for themselves, and one of the things they did was write plays. They were constantly writing plays. And they would huddle in one of the bedrooms and I think my daughter, who was the oldest, Sharon, and Ilana and Judith, were doing the scripts. Judith Rosenbaum and Ilana Ruskay, and they were doing the scripts and they were writing the scripts and they would announce that they were doing a production and we would schedule the production for Saturday afternoon or whatever and everybody was there for the production, and the kids were fabulous! And funny, and great. They did a play every retreat. And that’s what they were busy doing, aside from running around. And they involved the very smallest kids, every single child in the havurah was given a part, not just the oldest ones.

(1:30:00)

JG: Did the plays have specific kinds of themes, or — what were the plays about?

PS: Usually they were making fun of us. [laughs] So we had a — I think it was a bar mitzvah retreat?

JG: What do you mean by the bar mitzvah retreat?

PS: We had a thirteen-year — we had a big celebration, thirteen years [see addendum], might have been twenty, whatever it was, but the kids did another play. Now this meant they had to prepare for this, it was a big retreat and we invited all the old members, etc. And the kids did a retreat. And of course a lot of them were extrapolating about what we did in that first year. So they dressed like hippies in bandanas, etc. And of course they were all smoking weed! [laughs] That’s what they thought we were doing that first year! And one of them was me and another one was somebody else; they just got us! They
were devastating. These are smart kids, and they knew us well. They grew up as a family, and that was the interesting thing, and I think I want to mention that as important. Growing up in the havurah was very important to my daughter, and very important to the Rosenbaum kids, and very important to all of them. And they still see each other, and they still talk to each other, and they still meet when they’re all in the city and they go out to dinner. We even tried to put some of the grandchildren together, etc. And that, of course, they have less of a bond. But these kids, they know each other and they’re cousins. They really bonded in those first years. And almost all of them have bemoaned the fact that they don’t have anything like that now. They miss that, that bond of community that they made with these other kids on a monthly basis, pretty much, and certainly on the retreat holidays. They knew each other well!

JG: Do you remember any of the kids becoming old enough that they became interested and wanted to take part in the tefilah or any of the more formalized aspects of what happened at a retreat?

PS: Good question. I don’t think so. I don’t remember that happening. I don’t remember that happening [see addendum]. I don’t think they cooked or cleaned either. [laughs] After a while, of course, when the children became part of it and when people were working, and we had a little more money in our pockets, we would go to retreat centers that cooked for us, vegetarian food. So they weren’t always Jewish places. Some of them were Protestant places, some of them were vegan retreat places, and we always had vegetarian food cooked for us, so we didn’t have to bring food anymore. And that was after many years of the havurah.

JG: So let’s turn now to the question of prayer, which was a central activity for some of the earlier havurot, although somewhat less so for the New York Havurah.

PS: Not really, no. Prayer was very important.

JG: Many people say that it was very sporadic in the first year or so, other than on the monthly retreats, Shabbat retreats.

PS: Yes, and as I said before I wasn’t around during the weekends, so I can’t talk about that first year. I can only talk about the monthly retreats and the holiday retreats because those are the ones I was a part of.

JG: So let’s focus on those.

PS: Okay.

JG: How would you describe — what place did prayer have? What was the role of prayer within the priorities of the havurah?

PS: It was definitely a high priority. It was organized before we went on a retreat or before any other big event. We definitely had our own services for maybe twenty years,
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for the High Holidays, for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It was very hard to transition to a regular synagogue after being with the havurah for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and it was very hard to transition to a regular synagogue period after the experience of a havurah, or during the experience of a havurah.

JG: But let’s mainly focus on these early years.

PS: So people took the assignments, “I’ll do Shacharit,” somebody else would read the Torah, somebody else would do the Haftarah, somebody else would do Mussaf, so the assignments were done, somebody else gave a d’var torah, the services got done. The first couple of years, the davening was all done sitting on the floor, in a circle.

JG: Cushions, or just on the floor?

PS: Straight on the floor. Afterwards, people got a little older, we moved to chairs. But mostly, the first couple of years, we had some chairs, we had some sofas, but most of it was on the floor.

JG: Did you have a Sefer Torah?

PS: Of course, we always had a Sefer Torah. And that Sefer Torah always came on retreats.

JG: So someone would drive it up?

PS: Yes, with the food. [laughs] Before Shabbat and after Shabbat. Yes, there was always — yes, the Sefer Torah, it was always there. The siddurim were always there. Before Sukkot, somebody was responsible for buying all the stuff to build the sukkah. Two or three or four people volunteered to go up the morning of the retreat (1:36:00) to build the sukkah; it was a big deal building the sukkah. And once my second husband became involved, the architect, he was always recruited to head the building of the sukkah committee.

JG: How would you characterize the attitude towards, and the practice, regarding women’s role in public worship, in the beginning?

PS: You know, feminism was sort of very new at that point, and I said to you that most of the members except for one were all men, so all the davening was done basically by men, but quite quickly afterwards, you know, we had Paula Hyman, Martha, women started taking more of a role in tefilah, and in d’var torah, and in everything. So I would say that — and it was the inspiration of these particular women that got to me to learn, when I was forty years old, my birthday present to myself was learning how to read Torah, because it was about time that I did that.

JG: How did you learn?
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PS: I hired a bar mitzvah teacher. I hired a student at the seminary who taught bar mitzvah and he taught me how to read Torah. So I read Torah, and I read Torah for the havurah retreats, for the holiday retreats, not the regular, because I never got really good at it. And I still read Torah from time to time, for big events, somebody will say, “It’s the aufruf for my daughter. Will you take a piece?” Certainly for my granddaughter’s bat mitzvah and every one of my grandsons’ bar mitzvahs, I read Torah for those events, and so did my daughter. And she really had to memorize it, because she never really learned — we both had to memorize it, because by this point I don’t know to know to read trope by sight anymore.

JG: But you did learn earlier.

PS: I did, I did, I learned how to do it. And I learned a whole sidrah — parashah, right.

JG: Many people have pointed to the creative tension between tradition and innovation as being a hallmark of services in the early havurot. Does that feel true for the New York Havurah?

PS: Yeah. It was the — I didn’t come from a hasidic background. I came from a Misnagdishe (1:38:49) background, and the spiritualism that was brought into the service, you know, (1:39:00) I was one of the eye-rollers, the roller of eyes, at the outset.

JG: You said you were somewhat cynical about sitting on the floor and humming?

PS: Yes, I was somewhat cynical about sitting on the floor and humming. And you know, I got into it. I definitely, definitely got into it. So I was transformed, I came over to the light side. [laughs] I came to the light side. Yes, I decided I liked it.

JG: What did you like about it? What brought you over?

PS: The relaxation of it, the oneness of the kahal, the oneness of the group. The feeling that there might be some listening entity — everything that it’s supposed — I guess if you really look at how that kind of thing is supposed to move you and bring you to a different place, eventually it brought me to a different place. So I bought it, I drank the Kool-Aid.

JG: Reb Zalman, Shlomo Carlebach, and others were important influences in the experience of davening and also music, in Jewish prayer at Havurat Shalom and Fabrangen. Was that true at the New York Havurah?

PS: No. I knew Zalman early on, before any of the havurah. I met him when I first went to Ramah. It was Ramah Connecticut, so it was basically very early. And he came into arts and crafts when I was the only one there, and I look at this Hasid, who walks into this Conservative camp.

JG: What did he look like?
PS: Well, he looked like a sloppy Hasid! [laughs]

JG: What does that mean?

PS: Well he wasn’t wearing his bekishe, he wasn’t wearing the coat, but he had the full beard and the tallis hanging out, you know, the tsitsis completely revealed, and long pants and black shoes. He looked like a Hasid! He looked terribly out of place. And he walks into my arts and crafts and I was the only one there and he said, “Um,” and I said, “Can I help you?” And he said, “I’m looking to find the place for the tallisarium.” And I said, “The WHAT?” And he said, “The tallisarium.” And I said, “What’s a tallisarium?” And he said, “Oh, everybody in this camp is going to make a tallis.” And I said, “Okay…” And he found a space, an outdoor space, under the arts and crafts shack (1:42:00), which he decorated as a tallisarium.

JG: What do you mean, under?

PS: Well it was elevated on poles, the arts and crafts shack, was elevated, and he found this thing with a six-foot ceiling on the undersides. Completely open, and that was his space and he loved it and it was the tallisarium and everybody made a tallis that summer! It was — and he was very charismatic.

JG: Girls too?

PS: I believe so. I think girls did, or maybe the next year girls did. His daughter was in camp that year, and I bunked with her, and we became friends for that summer. His daughter, Miriam. Never saw her again.

JG: So did Zalman ever come to the New York Havurah?

PS: I don’t remember him ever coming to the New York Havurah. He might have when I wasn’t there. So no, I don’t remember him being there.

JG: Do you recall any other kinds of experimentation or innovations from other religious traditions or secular traditions that people brought in? Like poetry, secular music, etc.?

PS: Oh yes, we would try very hard to bring other things in. We brought poetry, we brought music, we brought in — and not me, because I wasn’t into those things. We brought in — especially when Richie Siegal came, a lot of sitting on the floor and humming.

JG: Do you recall a service that he did like that?

PS: [laughs] All of them! Yes, of course!

JG: Can you describe one? What would happen?
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PS: We all got into the **niggun**. We all resonated with the **niggun**. It was very nice, it was really very nice. I started very cynical. A couple of us started cynical. I wasn’t the only cynical person there! But you know, we all got into it. We eventually got into it. But there were musical instruments that were not part of my tradition, either in Conservative synagogues at that time, or alternate, especially for the High Holidays, alternate prayers for sending the goat out, the sacrifice of the goat, alternate prayers. Now all the synagogues do that, all the Conservatives synagogues do these alternate memorial things, but none of my synagogues were doing it at the time.

JG: So these were new?

PS: Yeah, they were new! They were new to me. And new to all of us, so we were just trying to make our way through — making the **davening** and making the prayer more relevant to us, as who we were. Bringing in some political statements (1:45:00), you know, how do we deal with the prayer for Israel? How do we deal with the prayer for the United States when the war with Vietnam is going on?” These were all issues that we talked about and dealt with.

JG: And how would you deal, for instance, with prayer for the United States?

PS: We rewrote it! I’m sure we rewrote it. You know, even the Prayer for Israel right now is totally supporting the government and supporting the **tzavah** and supporting whatever. Now, in my synagogue, it doesn’t read like it reads at my brother’s Orthodox synagogue. My brother’s Orthodox synagogue is a lot more of — it’s less grey, its more black and white, in terms of the support for Israel and the **tzavah** and the soldiers, etc. And in my synagogue, the prayer is a little bit more modified, definitely in support of Israel, but much more modified, you know, hoping that Israel will be a light for peace in the world. And I think that we did that, we did that. I don’t know if others were doing it at the time, but we were doing it.

JG: In the fall of 1971, Martha Acklesberg and Dina Rosenfeld had the idea of starting a class on the status of women that grew out of their experience of **davening** at the **havurah**. Did you know about the class?

PS: No, I was probably out of it by then. I knew when Ezrat Nashim was formed. All my friends were in Ezrat Nashim and they talked about it all the time. I was not in Ezrat Nashim until I came back into the community, which was several years later.

JG: When did you come back? Was it ’74, ’75?

PS: Hmm, let me see. Seventy-four, maybe, ’74, ’75.

JG: So you had left because of a job.

PS: My husband’s job.
JG: At Stonybrook. When was that?

PS: Sharon was four months old, she was born in September ’70, we left February ’71 and came back when she was exactly four, so it was four years later, so what did I say, February — so it was three and a half years later. ’71, ’72, ’73, ’74, ’75. We were back, and with an apartment on the Upper West Side.

JG: So a lot had happened in terms of the beginning of Jewish feminism?

PS: A lot had happened. And we were very aware of what was going on where we were but I wasn’t a player (1:48:00) in that early movement. I didn’t go with Ezrat Nashim up to, where was it, Grossinger’s Hotel, or the Concord, to bust up the — sorry, I didn’t go.

JG: What about the conference, the first conference on Jewish women, the national conference in 1973, I believe?

PS: In New York, I was there. I was definitely part of all the national conferences. I definitely was there, so I came in for that.

JG: What was that like for you? Can you remember? There were four or five hundred people at that first conference.

PS: It was great, it was wonderful. But already I was a feminist. Remember, I was a feminist because I fought my way through architecture school. So I was a secular feminist before I was a Jewish feminist. When I was in Stonybrook, all of those years, I was part of a consciousness-raising group. So I had credentials in the feminist movement.

JG: And you were a working mother, and wife.

PS: And I was a working mother. And I had a non-traditional — I worked on a construction site! I worked on a construction site. I was the only woman. There were three hundred and fifty men on the construction site. So I was definitely a feminist, so it was not unusual for me to be a Jewish feminist. I just thought it was really great to be among all these Jews, and some of them Orthodox, and trying to make their way through the tradition and figuring out how to — it was more enlightening for the people who were still within the Orthodox tradition, which I wasn’t anymore. I had long since left that. Women’s role in the Orthodox — I had long since left it.

JG: Was there a time that you remember women started wearing tallisim? When was that?

PS: Oh, sure.

JG: And then also being counted in a minyan, for instance?
PS: You know, I’m trying to think, I think women were counted in the minyan in the havurah, but I don’t — that’s an interesting question. Somebody else has to answer that question. Were the women counted in the minyan in the havurah, I would say from early on, but I can’t swear to it. A lot of women wore tallisim, a lot of women covered their heads and I remember we went to a havurah bar mitzvah in Teaneck, New Jersey, and it was — I came in with my child and another friend of mine came in with her infant. This was later on. And Paula came in, etc., with her children, and so (1:51:00) we were all in this conservative, Conservative synagogue. So somebody said to me, and I’m sitting with this child on my lap, he says, “You have to cover your hair.” And I said, “I’m not married.” Well, I wasn’t! [laughs] I never covered my hair in shul.

JG: You weren’t at that point because you were divorced, you mean?

PS: I was divorced, but I answered honestly. I said, “I’m not married.” And so then my friend is sitting there with her adopted infant in her lap, and he said, “Well you have to cover your hair,” and she said, “I’m not married either!” [laughs] And then he walked over to Paula, who was wearing a tallis and a kippah and everything, and he said, “You're going to have to take that off,” and she said, “What? Go away!” We made such waves in that synagogue, because we weren’t going to change.

JG: Do you remember when you first wore a tallis?

PS: I first wore a tallis when I first had my first aliyah. So I borrow my husband’s tallis and I said, “I’m going to the Torah, I need a tallis.”

JG: When was this?

PS: I don’t know, probably I was in my thirties — probably in my thirties, maybe in my twenties. I have to really tell you, going to the Torah either for an aliyah or especially to read Torah, is profound in my life. I don’t do it too often, but it is profound. It is a very, very important and totally moving moment for me every time I do it, more than almost anything else I do Jewishly. Standing at the Torah, with the yad, and reading Torah from that print, moves me beyond almost anything religiously that I've ever done. That is very important to me and I should do it more often, but I don’t. Because I have to be perfect, I need to be perfect and it takes me weeks to become perfect in the reading and in the trope. I need to be perfect. If I didn’t need to be perfect I would do it more often, but it is one of my more profound moments, Jewishly.

JG: Do you remember from that period in the seventies, and as you were saying, the height, the strongest period in the New York Havurah was not the first year, but starting in the second, third, fourth, and in that period and into the mid — at least mid-seventies — (1:54:00)

PS: Past that. Pretty much going to the eighties, I would say. Havurah was pretty strong, very, very strong, for a very long time.
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JG: Do you remember any significant first times women did various kinds of things? *Shaliach Tzibur*, reading Torah, other people’s first aliyahs, bat mitzvahs, any of those kinds of things?

PS: Not specific.

JG: Do you have a sense of how that changed, over time? Even if there was a relatively egalitarian attitude from the beginning, still it changed because not many women knew how to do those things early on.

PS: Right. Well certainly the first year, I can’t think of anybody who knew how to do it that first year. Any of the — because we were basically, except for one, we were all girlfriends or wives. So I don’t think there was anybody — maybe Martha, I don’t know. I'm not even sure about her. But once we did it, those women who were strong in those areas basically participated. It might have been a *d’var torah*, it might have been reading the Torah, it might have been *davening*, and it was a gradual transition, so it wasn’t like an abrupt one. It wasn’t something like in one day we decided how it was going to be. So it was more of women learning how to do it and then taking over. It’s like, one day I declared — and this was always a Johnny Come Lately — one day I declared, “I know the —” What was it? It was the Sukkot reading, “I know the parashah for Sukkot, I want to do it,” and they were like, “Oh! Great! You got it!” And that was it.

JG: Was there an evolution of attitudes towards egalitarianism and what constituted genuine egalitarianism within the *havurah* over the course of those years?

PS: It was an evolution, it wasn’t a revolution. It happened. I would say that — I think that most of the men in the *havurah* were, if they weren’t feminist to begin with, they became feminists. They were married to high-pressure women, they were married to women in careers. I think that — and probably my generation was the first generation, and this group (1:57:00), was the first generation to have high-pressure careers and be in the world. Either as academics, like Paula, like Judith, like Martha, like now Dina, Flora, Jackie — *[laughs]* we’re all college-level academics! Myself, because I became an academic after a few years of working as an architect. So we all basically — I don’t think any of the men had any problem with it. They were happy to have another set of Torah readers.

JG: And the kids who were growing up in the *havurah*, were they growing up basically feeling, experiencing, basic egalitarianism, where their mothers were as likely to be leading services —

PS: Those who led! I mean, you remembered here are some men who didn’t lead either. Not everybody led services, not everybody was equipped to lead services. So there were women that were, probably a minority in the beginning and the majority of the work went to the men, but I think they grew up in an egalitarian — you’ll have to ask the kids! You’ll have to ask the kids! *[laughs]* Some things you have to ask the kids.
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JG: Let’s turn to the issue of social justice and social activism for a minute, because of the New York Havurah, as the other havorot were, were founded and grounded in what Meredith Woocher called “the nexus of political and religious values,” that a lot of people were looking for that.

PS: Yes.

JG: How important was political activism to you personally, as a component of havurah?

PS: Very, very important. It was a very important component of what I did. It was — the demonstrations that I went to were with the havurah. The Washington trips I made were always with the havurah. It wasn’t independent, not until later did I get on a bus and go to a demonstration in Washington. But it was always with the havurah. We marched together, sometimes our shifts for particular events was four o’clock in the morning, we set the alarm, we got up at four o’clock in the morning, and we marched until eight o’clock in the morning. It was a very — it was one of the very important highlights of the havurah. Now, I have to also say, once I knew I was pregnant, once I was visibly pregnant, I was afraid of being jostled, so I didn’t go anymore. (2:00:00) But for the first year we must have gone down to Washington quite a few times.

JG: Did you and David go to the March on Washington in ’69?

PS: Yes.

JG: Which was “The Mobilization.”

PS: Yes. And we went to march on Washington, we went a few times, I would say three times, maybe four, in that first year and a half. Well, let me see — the first year, before I was terribly pregnant or had a newborn infant.

JG: And where would you stay, when you were in Washington?

PS: [laughs] There was — one time we stayed in Gerry Serotta’s sister’s studio apartment. Gerry Serotta’s sister had a studio apartment, and we must have been twenty people that descended on her in that apartment. So she had one bathroom, and we were twenty-one people, if you count her. I think it was Gerry’s sister, I think it was Gerry’s sister, and we had to call dibs on — we took turns sleeping, because even floor space — who was on the piano, who was under the piano, who got the sofa! Now it was decided early that the women would be able to use the bathroom but the men had to run downstairs across the street to the gas station, and use the toilet in the gas station, even in the middle of the night! You’d look out the window and you'd see one of us running across the street to the gas station because there were just too many people in that poor bathroom!

JG: Did you daven together on those occasions? Was it a Jewish event in that sense?
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PS: It was not a weekend, necessarily, so if it wasn’t the weekend, we might have said Shacharit, I don’t remember. We also — that particular march, I think, was the one we did in the middle of the night. I don’t remember davening, I don’t think we were there for weekends, those particular times. Remember, I was still shomer shabbos at that point. And so were a few of us. I wasn’t Orthodox but I was shomer shabbos.

JG: So it had to be within walking distance?

PS: If it was Shabbos we had to walk to wherever we were going.

JG: The Six Day War had happened in June of ’67.

PS: Yeah, I was going to say, that was before the havurah.

JG: Yes, but not that long before. Two years before. Did the war and Israel generally have any significant impact on your Jewish identity at that point?

PS: Not my Jewish identity. I’ve always had a very strong Jewish identity, (2:03:00) I don’t think it’s ever been challenged. I don’t think I've ever challenged my Jewish identity. It was a profound, totally terrifying, scary moment, leading up to the Six Day War. Happy to know that it turned out — which we thought was great. Now we’re challenging and rethinking how great that territory was, but at the time we thought it was terrific.

JG: In addition to Ezrat Nashim, another significant organization that came out of the New York Havurah was Breira, which was formed in ‘73, and had its offices — office — in the apartment early on. It was very short lived, about four years or so. Were you aware of Breira?

PS: I was aware of Breira. I was aware of the politics of Breira, I was very sympathetic to the politics, but I wasn’t in town at that time. Again, just like I wasn’t part of Ezrat Nashim, I was aware of what was going on but really wasn’t a part of it.

JG: Many commentators have noted that political activism as a communal activity faded over time. Bill Novak for instance, for one, said that the inability to unite for joint political activity was what he considered to be the outstanding failure of the New York Havurah. He wrote that in 1970, so it was relatively early on.

PS: Yeah. I would not agree with him on that in 1970. Maybe in 1974, or 1975, or 1976, yes. But — you know, it also depended on how active you were and how aware you were. I mean Gerry Serotta was always very, very involved politically. You interviewed him, you must know that. Very, very involved politically, and very, very active on the left, so if he said that, I would say, maybe that was his perception. But I’m surprised that Bill Novak said it, because until ’71, we always got out the vote. We were always marching in Washington, it seemed to me. And I stopped doing it when I was visibly pregnant.
JG: And also, the Vietnam War came to an end.

PS: And then that happened too! So then there was not a whole lot to protest. Whether we were sort of being very politically active pro-Palestinian, pro-peace, I don’t remember. I don’t remember coming as a group, moving as a group in that direction. Maybe he was talking about that. I don’t know. But as far as the war in Vietnam goes, I wouldn’t even agree with that statement in 1970.

JG: I want to move to some larger reflections on what the havurah meant, both in your own life and also its implications and impact on the larger Jewish community over the past half-century. So you were a member of the New York Havurah from its inception and onward.

PS: And onward.

JG: Until as one member said to us, it “faded out.” What would you say were the most significant ways that New York Havurah evolved or changed over the course of the seventies and into the eighties?

PS: Well what happened was, the most intense years as I said, were probably the first five, six, or seven of it. Very, very intense: the regular davening, the High Holiday services, the regular retreats, etc. And then people got very, very — first of all, a lot of people moved away. A lot of people moved away. They still kept their ties but they moved away. And then they had children, and then they had career moves, and they had two people working in the family. So preparing for weekly davening, people went to Minyan M’at, some of the people went to Minyan M’at, that’s where Alan ended up, that’s where Howard and Dina ended up, because we were not doing the davening anymore, we were not pulling it together on a weekly basis anymore. So I think that the weekly davening went first, the weekly meetings — we had two apartments for a very, very long time, and then the Upper West Side was coming up and the rents went high, so we didn’t have an apartment anymore, so that was also a pulling-back. We were actually, the first year, we were looking for a house to buy! I mean, to think that these straggly graduate students with no money were looking for brownstones! I actually, being the architectural student, I was the one that went around to look at the brownstones! We looked at houses to buy. I said, “Where are you going to get the money from?” And they said, We’ll get a mortgage. I said, “I don’t have any money, you know, where are you getting a down payment from?” Don’t worry about it, we’ll get the down payment! So we were really looking to live communally in that first year. And then little by little, it faded away. But we still get together as a havurah at least once a year, on Rosh Hashanah.

JG: When on Rosh Hashanah?

PS: After everybody goes to shul, on the afternoon of Tashlich, we get together as a community, past members, current members, we sometime get forty people for lunch!
JG: And where do you meet?

PS: Here, once on my roof, people’s homes, that’s all we have. People bring food to this and we have a communal dinner and then we go to Tashlik together. So the havurah still lives in that. Sunday night, I'm going to dinner at a friend’s house and it’s all havurah people. My oldest and longest-standing friends are still my havurah friends. I don’t have any elementary school friends anymore, I don’t have any friends from high school anymore, but a couple of my strong friends from Pratt, I still have, and the basis of my friendships, my long-term friendships, are from the New York Havurah.

JG: And what's striking is that’s true for so many, which is why you get forty people.

PS: Which is why we get forty people, right. And when somebody comes from Boston or somebody comes in from Montreal, or somebody flies in from the coast — Isa Aaron come in from the coast, the Hundurts come in from wherever — we get the call, who’s coming to dinner, how many are we, and we make a reservation. There might be twelve and there might be fifteen people that’ll get together to say hi to the person who’s coming who they haven’t seen in a while. So I can’t really say that the havurah died completely, but it sort of faded away in terms of that activism. And it’s interesting that in my new life, and creating community here on the Upper West Side, my example really is the havurah.

JG: Talk about that. So you’ve retired in the last couple of years?

PS: Yeah, I retired maybe six years ago.

JG: From your career as an architect, as an academic.

PS: Yeah. And at some point, my husband Herman was the impetus behind the Bloomingdale Aging in Place. He said there was a community in Boston, Beacon Hill, there was an aging-in-place organization called Beacon Hill and it was in the Times, there was a whole article about it in the Times, and he said, “You know, we should be doing that on the Upper West Side!” Not him, God forbid, somebody should be doing that on the Upper West Side. So he gave me the article and then we met — we have a very active block association here on this street, and so we took that idea to the president of the block association, in the elevator, and she said, “Oh, that’s a good idea! Why don’t you come to a board meeting (2:12:00) and talk about it?” So we went to a board meeting and we talked about that. And then she took it to the neighboring block association president and they got very excited about the idea, and we were invited to become part of a steering committee of twelve people, and we put together Bloomingdale Aging in Place.

JG: Where did the name come from?

PS: This area is Bloomingdale Road, Broadway was called the Bloomingdale Road in this section, It’s the Boston Post Road. It’s the road that went to Boston. And our
neighborhood branch library is the Bloomingdale Library, so it’s historically noted. And we had a smaller border, we have a slightly larger border now, but it a geographic area, we have no age limit, we only have a geographic area. And it was to help people that were aging. But we decided early on we were not going to charge anybody anything. We weren’t going to pay anybody anything. So it’s all volunteer. And we have — by this time we must have thirteen-hundred members, and half of them are very active.

JG: So how do you see it as —

PS: How do I see it as —? Well, first of all, when you’re part of a havurah then you learn how to do lots of things. You learn how to organize things, you learn how to keep lists, you just learn a lot, and of course I was a dean, so I learned a lot from the havurah that I took when I became a dean, in terms of organizational skills and people skills. So you take that and — you know we have bring-stuff dinners, and people can’t organize it. And I said, “What is so difficult about a potluck dinner? I mean, you sign two people to bring the protein dish for thirteen and you assign two people to bring vegetables and two people the starch dish, two people to the dessert, the bread, and somebody else the wine! What is so difficult?” They look at me as if I’m doing magic! Well, this is all we did for havurah! We did this over and over and over again. To me it’s just second nature. Some of these things that are so easy for me are so difficult for others.

JG: So this aspect of community-building is what feels in so many ways to you as living, so to speak, in the legacy of the havurah.

PS: Exactly, exactly. It’s exactly what I feel, for me, is the legacy of the havurah. This is what I had and this is what I want others to feel. And it’s amazing how many people feel it, and it’s amazing how we’ve grown. And we do it, not by massive amounts of people. We do it by units of people. So that woman (2:15:00) we met in the diner is a woman who is in my history reading group. I’m leading a walking group twice a week. These people go out for coffee afterwards, they bond. They form a community. So when you’re walking down the street, you know, you start knowing people. My brother said to me, “God almighty, you know every old lady in the neighborhood!” And I said, “Yeah, maybe! And a lot of the old men too!” [laughs]

JG: So that’s very much in the legacy-building of what was most strong and positive about the havurah. When you look back on the havurah, what do you see as having been as most challenging about it? Not necessarily for you personally, but what were the biggest challenges?

PS: The biggest challenge, and obviously — I don’t know what happened to Havurat Shalom, I think it’s still there, it’s morphed into something else, different people, it’s very different, I’m assuming. I think that the biggest challenge is keeping that amazing amount of dedication and the work people put into it, and the work they were able to do when they were graduate students and single, or newly married and didn’t have kids and didn’t have to write, didn’t have to get tenure and didn’t have to work two jobs. Keeping that
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going, that was the challenge. And basically — and we always did bring in new members, but it didn’t — it’s still there, but it’s not there the way it was.

JG: And it’s different people.

PS: No, it’s the same people.

JG: Your group is the same people, but the people who are there now —

PS: Oh no, no, they’ve managed to keep the dynamic but it’s not the same dynamic anymore, its different. And I imagine — how many of the oldest members are still there?

JG: At Havurat Shalom, none.

PS: None of them, okay. So is that good or bad? One of the things about Bloomingdale Aging in Place that we decided very early on was there would be term limits in the leadership. So I was on the board for the first six or seven years, but I’m no longer on the board. I still have a leadership position because I’m Head of Activities and activities is eighty-five percent of what we do. And all the other — a lot of the other former board members have very important roles, but they're not making policy anymore. We have all new people making policy. And maybe that’s good, maybe that’s not, and whether it’s going in the direction that the original steering committee framed for it — my feeling is that every organization has to morph, and every organization has to grow organically (2:18:00), and decide where it’s going every year. And like a tree, move with the wind. And if it doesn’t do that, then it dies. So I guess Havurat Shalom did do that, and they still have an organization. We have a friendship. We have cousins. We’ve remained cousins.

JG: I think that’s what people in the original Havurat Shalom have also. Which leads to another thought, which is that one of the things that people in the early havurot, and certainly in Havurat Shalom where there was tremendous emphasis on this struggle, was the demands on intimacy, on being intimate and deeply open with other people, with everybody else in the group and a lot of processing around that kind of intimacy, which people struggled with.

PS: I don’t remember that becoming an issue — intimacy — with the group. I think that friendships developed, strong friendships, mostly because we were thrown together so much. We were with each other more than we were with our extended families. We were with each other more often than people we went to school with, than any of our other friends. So when you saw people twice a week, or three days a week, that’s a lot. That’s a lot, so I guess — I know all the tragedies and the high points of all these people’s lives. I care about these people.

JG: And yet there were events that took place: there were some divorces, there were people who struggled with homosexuality or homoerotic feelings that surfaced for them within the group, etc., that sort of complicated relationships within the group. Is that fair?
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PS: That’s fair, that’s fair. Whether it broke us, it didn’t break us. And that’s the important part, whether we were challenged by it, yes, we were challenged by it. Whether the people you’re talking about thrust it in our faces and said, “Take it or leave it!,” they didn’t. They stepped back. They stepped back, and only stepped back in when they felt that the waters were warm. That’s my reading of what they did. So it didn’t, in a lot of ways, it didn’t hurt us. But it was life! I mean, just like any family, any group of people, any neighbors, any block (2:21:00) that comes close together, we had the same challenges everybody in our generations were feeling. Marriages broke up, even within — and you probably don’t even know all of them! You probably only know the ones of the people you’re interviewing! But there were others. Other marriages that broke up because of intimacy within the group.

JG: Did you ever become involved with other havurot, over the course of — what happened with your personal journey?

PS: My personal journey? No, I never — because I was always in New York, so I never became part of — I was always part of the New York Havurah. We had joint retreats, we had one joint retreat with Havurat Shalom in the second year. I remember because I went to Boston with the baby.

JG: Did you ever go to Weiss’s Farm, any of the retreats at Weiss’s Farm, the inter-havurah ones?

PS: Oh the inter-havurah ones. No, I never became part of the inter — I never became part of Weiss’s Farm. Maybe because it started when I was out, and I just never became part of it.

JG: And what about the National Havurah —?

PS: I was aware of it but I never participated in it.

JG: It didn’t appeal to you?

PS: It appealed. It appealed, but either I was in the middle of a divorce at the time, or I had a new relationship — I just never went. Nobody actually said, “Phyllis, you’ve got to come! I’m making you a reservation!” You know, sometimes you need somebody to drag you into it.

JG: True, true. Would you say that there are enduring aspects of the havurah vision that continue to motivate you in your life, in your Jewish life and generally speaking too? Did you join a synagogue, for instance? And clearly the issue of community has continued to be important to you.
PS: Important to me, right. Jewishly, I sadly needed to join a synagogue because I needed to belong to a community once the havurah wasn’t davening. So I joined a synagogue, I still belong to a synagogue. I’m not a weekly worshipper, that’s not who I am anymore.

JG: Are there any ways in which you feel your Jewish life, your ideas about Judaism and ideas about Jewish life, have diverged significantly from what was important to you during your havurah period?

PS: No, I don’t think so. I think that those were very formative years, in terms of egalitarianism, in terms of belief, and in terms of my morphing (2:24:00) from an Orthodox woman to a non-Orthodox woman, let’s put it this way. In terms of my commitments to Judaism, in terms of my identity as a Jew, I think that being part of the havurah kept me very much in the fold when I might have drifted off from it at that point. Still does, probably.

JG: Do you still consider yourself a, quote, “havurah Jew?”

PS: Yes. I never really thought of it that way, but — how quickly the “yes” came out should tell you. I haven’t really thought about it.

JG: As we were saying, in the course of your career, you’ve worked as an academic, you’ve worked as a practicing architect, you’ve worked as a dean, and you have a private practice. Are there any ways in which your havurah experience had an impact on your vision for yourself professionally or in your work?

PS: That’s hard to say. It’s hard to come up with a glib answer. The intense relationships and the friendships that were made in the havurah; the assertion, the self-assertion, when I had to make that speech to the havurah that first year on the fact that, “What do you mean, we’re not part of the havurah?” I think that that was part and parcel of building me up as a professional. Being able to assert myself — I can’t say that this was all due to the havurah, but I think part of it was due to the havurah. I had the first baby in the havurah, that first year, and I had no intention of breastfeeding. No intention of breastfeeding. But those women, they clabbered on me! [claps] These twenty-two-year-olds, they were like, “What? What do you mean? You’ve got to breastfeed! You have to belong to La Leche, you have to get —” You know we didn’t even have pumps in those days, it was pre-pump days. “You have to, you know, you have to breastfeed.” So when I went to the hospital, I said, “I’m breastfeeding,” and they said, “What! No, you can’t breastfeed here!” And I said, “I’m breastfeeding.” And people said, “How come you’re breastfeeding?” And I said, “My friends won’t talk to me if I don’t breastfeed! I’m pressured!” Because you know, everyone was saying at that time that women were pressured to not breastfeed, that they had to be strong to breastfeed, they had to really assert themselves. Me, it was the opposite! I had to breastfeed, (2:27:00) because no one will talk to me if I bottle-feed this kid! [laughs] So I breastfed. That’s how — these are the pressures of who you’re with. These are the peer pressures. And they were good peer pressures.

JG: So finally, looking back, it’s almost a half a century, next year —
PS: [under her breath] Shit.

JG: 2018 will be a half a century since the founding of the first havurah, Havurat Shalom in 1968. So what would you say have been the havurah’s most important contributions, as we are moving forward?

PS: Societally? I think that the havurah movement in general, those first three havurot, were looked at by synagogues as the way to go. And I think that the impact on synagogues was to start their own, whatever they're called, little havurah, havurot, within the synagogue movement. I know that that was done. And also, the introduction of alternate means of prayer, of guitars and poetry and readings during services, etc. — I don’t know if it was done much before, I’m not sure. The introduction of taking the niggun to the next level, and after the la-la-la-la-la’s, the eternal la-la-la-la-la’s, that’s definitely the havurah. The alternative Jewish Renewal Movement is the havurah outcome. Would they have done it without the havurah? Who knows? So I think that on Jewish life, certainly, the havurot collectively, the havurah movement definitely impacted Judaism. I think it had a big impact on it. Whether that legacy will survive, I think it will. That innovativeness and that forming community, definitely. And you know, here I am in a large synagogue, happy to be sitting in the back pew and just letting it wash over me, I’m very happy to do that now. But still.

JG: And still very involved in creating community.

PS: And still, in another way, very involved in creating community.

JG: Phyllis, thank you so much, it’s been really, really wonderful to talk to you, and we’re very grateful. Thanks.
Addendum

Pg. 6: I spent six years on the Camp Ramah staff.

Pg. 7: I was twenty-two when I was made head of Arts and Crafts.

Pg. 10: For clarification, I did not visit Harvard, but I did visit Yale.

Pg. 27: I think this was the chai year retreat (18). The girls were in high school.

Pg. 28: Actually, a number of these kids became professional Jews in one capacity or another.