Jayne Guberman (JG): My name is Jayne Guberman and today is Monday, March 27, 2017. I’m here with John Ruskay, at his office at the UJA [United Jewish Appeal] Federation in New York City, and we’re going to record an interview for the Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project. John, do I have your permission to record this interview?

John Ruskay (JR): You have my permission. Nice to see you, Jayne.

JG: As you know, today, we’re going to explore your experiences during the late sixties and early seventies, and particularly, your involvement in the New York Havurah and then the impact that the havurah had on your own life and on the larger Jewish community beyond. I’d like to start by talking about your personal and family background, and to flesh out a bit who you were at the time you got involved in the New York Havurah. Let’s begin with your family, when you were growing up. You were born in 1946 in New York City?

JR: I was born in 1946. Far Rockaway, New York City.

JG: You described your family as a “quintessential, two-civilization family.” Can you tell us about your family when you were growing up, starting with your parents?

JR: Well, I would say my grandparents were a quintessential, two civilization family, and that’s my paternal grandparents. To illustrate that, they had a wonderful home in Lawrence. They had been founders of Congregation Shaaray Tefilla, where Rabbi Rackman and others served as rabbi. So, I have recollections of going to their home for Shabbat dinner on Friday night, and then we would return for Sunday dinner, which was Sunday lunch. All sorts of people would be there on occasion: Mordechai Kaplan, Henrietta Szold on one occasion. People would come down, and after Sunday dinner — which was Sunday lunch — we would go to the living room — I remember, as a kid, hard velvet couches — and my grandfather, Cecil B. Ruskay, would recite Shakespeare, Shelley, and Keats by heart. So these were people, deeply involved in Jewish life. I had two great aunts who were national residents of Hadassah. My great-grandmother, Esther J. Ruskay, was published by the Jewish Publication Society in 1901.

JG: Published in —

JR: A book, I have it here, called Home and Hearth Essays. And by the way—is this it? No, it’s not. It’s not here. I can find it. There are chapters on Shabbat.
There are chapters on intermarriage. 1901. It’s one of the first years of the Jewish Publication Society. So that was my great-grandmother. My grandmother was very involved in founding of a synagogue, Modern Orthodox, and ran for the State Assembly on the American Labor Party in 1948 and carried the Five Towns. So, this was a family involved in Jewish life, (00:03:00) involved in the broader culture. My grandmother would go to New York and read — I mean, this is, like, from another world — would read Shakespeare and other things to prisoners. So they were a two civilization. And my other great-grandparents were involved in founding the Society for the Advancement of Judaism with Kaplan.

JG: Also on your father’s side?

JR: On my father’s side, and actually, the SAJ [Society for the Advancement of Judaism] on W. Eighty-sixth Street was a home of a great uncle, an Unterberg. It was two brownstones put together, the SAJ. So there deep roots there, but my parents, I would say, were generation-skipping.

JG: What was your mother’s background?

JR: My mother was very, very Reform. My grandmother was born in Hoosick Falls, New York. That’s east of Albany. Also all my grandparents went to college. But it was very Reform. When she was growing up, she was a member of Temple Israel of Lawrence, but a pretty Reform synagogue. Reform to the point that my maternal grandmother, and her sister, who lived together for many years, had a Christmas tree. And we had a Christmas tree growing up — my memories of a Christmas tree — until I was five, six, seven, with stockings, and the whole bit. But when my parents were home — we’ll come back to that — my parents were wonderful. Everett and Edith Ruskay, let me acknowledge them. I would say my father was a businessman. Had his own shirt company. Traveled therefore. But his loves were — he had not gone to college. Felt bad about that. His brothers and sisters did, but he was an autodidact. He was into opera, and culture and boards and skiing and sailing, so I grew up in a wonderful — they call it upper middle class. It’s not rich as we know it today, but it was sailing and skiing. So if we were home for Friday night, my parents would light candles and my father would recite Kiddush and Eishes Chayil in English. But they were three times a year Jews in synagogue. I mean synagogue was not their thing. They went on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. And I don’t think that Jewish life — it was not a deep part of their life.

JG: Were they involved politically?
JR: Yeah. I mean, they were involved liberally, in liberal politics, left politics, for a long time. I don’t think they were a member of the Communist party, but they were certainly, at that point, they were progressive: pro-union, (00:06:00) anti-Fascist. Many of their friends had been in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War. There would be parties there of those folk. There were books in the fifties that were put in the attic. But basically, they were liberal Democrats. So very involved in Allard Lowenstein’s — my mother was involved in Allard Lowenstein’s congressional campaign in 1968, involved in Women Strike for Peace. I went to anti-Vietnam War demonstrations with my parents. Very pro-Civil Rights. My parents had great compassion for the people left out.

JG: Did they connect that to Jewish values, do you think?

JR: No. I think they connected it to liberal values.

JG: Liberal American values?

JR: Liberal American values: Roosevelt, pro-union, anti-fascist. So it was a wonderful family.

JG: Did you mother work?

JR: My mother did not work. She volunteered. She was a Boy Scout troop leader. She was a good parent and my grandparents were around.

JG: Do you have siblings?

JR: I have a wonderful sister, Judy. She’s four years older than I am, although I refer to her now as my younger sister, but that’s a joke. She’s great. We live nearby one another. We’re quite close. She’s a psychologist. She has a Ph.D. in psychology, and her specialization is eating disorders. Now she’s — I’m seventy and a half; she’s almost seventy-five. She still has a practice, but she’s spending a lot of time with grandkids, and I don’t think Jewish life — she went to Hebrew school as I did. It was not a significant place for her. But because of my involvement, she’s been connected to some of the more interesting places in Jewish life, but I wouldn’t call it deep tissue.

JG: So you grew up in the Five Towns?
JR: Five Towns.

JG: Explain what the Five Towns is.

JR: So the Five Towns are — I don’t know how it got the name, but The Five Towns are Lawrence, Cedarhurst, Woodmere, Hewlett, and Inwood. They are right across the border from Eastern Queens, on the south shore by the beaches, although Long Beach is a little closer and Lido Beach. There are five towns there. We had — at one point, early on — a quarter of an acre and we were growing corn. My mother, by the way, was a gardener and president of the gardening club, and gardening was an important thing. So gardening, sailing, skiing, opera, ballet, music. It was theatre, it was reading. My grandfather was a poet. There were poetry books around a lot. He was a lawyer, but that was his love. So in some ways, it was a wonderful — (00:09:00) I went to Hebrew School at Temple Beth El of Cedarhurst. Hebrew school didn’t grab me, but the synagogue grabbed me.

JG: What was the Jewish community like in these five towns, and which town did you live in?

JR: Well, I grew up in Cedarhurst, but my parents — excuse me. My first year I was in Hewlett, and then my parents moved to Cedarhurst, and then we moved to Woodmere, right near Hewlett Bay Park. So they moved around a bit, but this was all within three miles. I would call it suburban. Many of the people there were people who had moved from Brooklyn out to the suburbs. My parents, as you heard, met in Woodmere Academy. Both of my parents grew up out there. And their friends therefore — many of them from Woodmere Academy, a private school there — they felt that they had been there longer; they were the more established, as people came out from Brooklyn and Queens to live in a nicer suburb. As that happened, synagogues were created. I don’t know the history of the synagogues in the five towns, but when I grew up. In the life I grew up in, on the one hand, very strong synagogues with very charismatic, strong rabbis. Rabbi Emmanuel Rackman at Shaaray Tefila, at Beth Shalom — Rabbi Klapperman, Gilbert Klapperman. At Temple Beth El of Cedarhurst — Rabbi Edward Sandrow. Temple Sons of Israel, Rabbi Irving Miller. I could tell you all the things these people did beyond their synagogues. They were strong. They were basically progressive. They spoke out.

JG: These synagogues were affiliated with —?
JR: Reform, Conservative, Orthodox. I just mentioned several. There was another Temple Israel, which is a Reform synagogue. Then there was a split off of the synagogue.

JG: So the full range?

JR: Yeah the full range. But it was kind of suburban Judaism of the fifties. What we see today — you go to a Conservative synagogue, Orthodox synagogue, on Sukkot, everybody brings a lulav and an esrog. Trust me, at Temple Beth El of Cedarhurst, there was one lulav and esrog, it was in the synagogue, maybe two, and at the appropriate times it got passed around. I’m using that as an example. Jewish life has just changed so much, forgetting about the Five Towns has now become, for the most part — particularly Lawrence and now Cedarhurst — a Modern Orthodox, Orthodox, stronghold. That was not the case then.

JG: The synagogue you belonged to was —?

JR: A Conservative synagogue.

JG: Conservative.

JR: Rabbi Edward Sandrow was down the block (00:12:00) in Cedarhurst. I’d go to Hebrew school there.

JG: Say a little bit more about the Jewish environment in your home.

JR: Well, the first years — I still remember it in Cedarhurst — we had a Christmas tree. There was also Hanukkah. And we’d go to a Pesach seder. But, I didn’t know anything about Kashrus for Pesach. In other words, on Pesach, there was matzah on the table. My mother would make charoset, and there would be maror. Our house was not kosher. I didn’t have a clue about kashrus for Pesach. But later, my mother would go to a bakery, and there’d be some kosher-for-Pesach-like something there. In other words, I mean, they were assimilating Jews. That’s where American Jewry was at.

JG: Did your friends’ families have Christmas trees also?

JR: No. Very few. No. My maternal grandmother and her sister did until the end of her life and loved it.
JG: So you started to mention your Jewish education a bit. You went to Hebrew school?

JR: I started going to Hebrew school, which I didn’t love, but I do recall something that I liked about the synagogue, going to synagogue on occasion. I liked the spirit in it, the feeling in it, the quiet. And, I would say, my mother until the end of her life told an interesting story, and this took place before I was seven or eight, because I’d go to synagogue occasionally with my parents on High Holidays. I remember sitting on my father’s lap in the third row looking — in the auxiliary service — and seeing the rabbi preach. My mother would tell this story that I would put a bathrobe on, put a bureau out at the top of the stairs, and pretend I was a rabbi. This is when I was five, six, or seven.

JG: Something was touching you.

JR: Even though I didn’t like Hebrew School —

JG: Were you a student? Did you like school?

JR: I liked school when I got to college and graduate school. High school was not —

JG: You were not, I mean — the fact that you didn’t like Hebrew school —?

JR: Right, I mean in third grade, fourth grade, fifth grade — I was not a great student all the way until college. I flunked chemistry in high school. I almost flunked trigonometry — I didn’t understand: why did I need to learn the trig of thirty-six? Like why? (00:15:00) I loved history and did well. I liked literature. But I didn’t like science and math.

JG: And did you like Hebrew?

JR: No, I didn’t love it. I’m not a great language student, and I’ll come back to that cause it actually affected my graduate studies. So, I didn’t love Hebrew. I didn’t love Hebrew school, but I did become the rabbi of the junior congregation.

JG: In high school?

JR: I don’t know when that was actually. It was probably high school. I liked conducting services; I remember doing that for teen services during the High Holidays. During high school, a dear friend of mine, Eddie Schecter, now a rabbi,
a Reform rabbi and I studied with our senior rabbi, Mishnah. But that was later. So I didn’t love Hebrew school. Conjugating verbs was not my — you know, $g’marti$, $g’marta$, $g’mar$ — was not my cup of tea, and then I had a bar mitzvah, and I remember learning that, and learning how to put on a tallis and tefillin, etc.

JG: Did you learn the trope, or did you learn from a record?

JR: I learned from a record at that point, or whatever, a recording. My parents, to their credit, didn’t do big things. Nothing at night. We had a luncheon in the synagogue. They didn’t believe in that. In fact, embarrassingly, because my friends were there, but people like my grandfather and my uncles and aunts, they’d write things, like a poem — so that was, of course, a bit embarrassing. Everyone else had fancy parties. There was quality I should say about growing up in the Five Towns — I’ll just add one more thing since we’re creating an archive here. So my parents had good values in a lot of things. Everyone else had gardeners, but my parents loved gardening. The other mothers would be in high heels and whatever, and my parents would be in their jeans out there creating beautiful gardens. Everyone else had wall-to-wall carpeting; my parents had antique oriental rugs. As a kid, you don’t know. There were houses we’d go to, and again, I’m not judging anything, had plastic through their living room, and plastic — and, of course, my parents would have none of that.

JG: What do you mean by plastic?

JR: Plastic covering the carpet or covering the —

JG: Furniture.

JR: Furniture. And my parents were into politics in a serious way. And opera. My father would sit on a Saturday afternoon and listen to the opera and cry. I was sent, by the way, from a young kid, to the Five Towns Music and Art Foundation every year. At eight: to Carnegie Hall (00:18:00), and to the opera, and to the ballet. As the youngest kid, being young, the first thing I’d do is check how many intermissions. Well, I’m an opera lover now. And so — and we played a lot of sports. I mean, my parents were on national ski patrol.

JG: What is that?

JR: Skiing has, their ski patrol, which takes people off the mountain if they have a fall. You have to be trained for that. You have first aid. Not only first aid, you need to know how to put a patient, put a skier who’s had a break, on a toboggan
and take them down off the mountain. My parents went skiing every weekend. They had a place near Beallerye, New York. Beallerye was a big ski place. We went with them. Skiing, you know, we say, skiing and sailing. There are a lot of different worlds. Skiing is a world, trust me. You get home Sunday night zonked. By Tuesday, what are the ski conditions, and you’re planning to go up on Friday. And you have a whole life up there. Other people are up there. Kids up there. Skiing was a whole life. Sailing was a life. My father was Commodore of the Yacht Club. I grew up racing lightnings. Walking the beach, even in the dead of winter. And as a kid, I mean, playing football between the telephone poles. You played football and basketball. I was on a number of teams: Little League. I was on the high school freshman football team and baseball team.

JG: It was a very full life.

JR: It was a wonderful life. I’m very lucky. And those great athletic careers ended when my life changed with Camp Ramah because I couldn’t play on Shabbat.

JG: So how did you get to Camp Ramah? How old were you when you first went?

JR: The day I was bar mitzvah, Shemini Atzeret, 1959. Afterwards, I was hugging, whatever, I walked to the lobby on the way to the luncheon, and a guy, who I didn’t know well, but a peer, named Eddie Schecter — I spoke about this when I received an honorary doctorate at HUC. You saw that talk, but you might want to. It’s about the four things that changed my life.

JG: I didn’t see it.

JR: It’s a very interesting talk. Eddie Schecter comes up to me and says, “You’re great. You were really good. You should go to Camp Ramah.”

JG: What was he pointing to?

JR: Well, the bar mitzvah.

JG: The way you handled it.

JR: The way I did it, the way I handled it. We barely knew each other (00:21:00) “You should go to Camp Ramah.” “What’s Camp Ramah?” And then somehow, the rabbi encouraged it. The associate rabbi was asked to lead Hebrew school one day, and we were playing basketball in the backyard, and he said, “Why don’t you
go to Camp Ramah? You’d be great there.” There was an active effort, by the way, of the Conservative movement there to encourage people to go to Ramah, and I go to Camp Ramah, that summer. So I go in nineteen — my bar mitzvah was in Shemini Atzeret ‘59; I don’t get there until ‘61. So I can’t tell you —

JG: So you were fourteen? Fourteen, turning fifteen?

JR: Fourteen, right. And Ramah changed my life. I’ve written about this a great deal and spoken about it. What was it about Ramah?

JG: What was it?

JR: Thanks for asking. We went to a total dump of a camp. It was Camp Ramah Nyack, which was a sleepaway camp.

JG: Where’s Nyack?

JR: Nyack is an hour from New York, right by the Tappan Zee bridge. A dump of a camp. And it was its opening summer. So the ball field wasn’t ready. The tennis courts weren’t ready. So we played stoop ball. But a wonderful group of people. And what I remember then — this was 1961 Ramah — there was a lot Hebrew spoken. I don’t want to say it was only Hebrew, but in the dining room, we were expected to speak Hebrew to get the milk, or whatever. And we had services every morning. And then we had classes. I can come back to the classes. And then was sports and theater, and what’s most powerful for me was not the Hebrew plays [sings from “My Fair Lady” in Hebrew]. Anyway, that was “Get Me to the Church on Time,” or “Get me to the Beit Knesset on Time.” What struck me, and I want to say, touched my heart and soul, was Shabbat there: preparing for Shabbat, quiet down Shabbat afternoon; cleaning the bunk, and going off into beautiful prayer services. I didn’t even understand the words that were being said then, but the tone of Kabbalat Shabbat, of the introductory service on Shabbat (00:24:00), I just thought it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever experienced. It not only seared my soul, but I think I learned there that I had a soul and a heart. In other words, I don’t think I really knew that. I experienced it there, and it just, whoa. Maybe I was a young adolescent, fourteen. I’ll come back, there was also something else about Ramah. This was an enhanced way to be on the planet.

JG: And a very Jewish way.
JR: Retrospectively, I think I was experiencing *kedushah*, a sense of the holy, and that generated a journey that led me to deepen that: youth groups, later Israel trips. In ‘63 went to Israel for the first time. Came back in ‘64 to Ramah as staff, ‘65 to Israel as staff. So the group experience, Shabbat sermons, Shabbat *tefilah*, prayer. I experienced it as an enhanced way to be on the planet, and I think from then on, so much of my whole professional life has been about how can we increase the numbers who participate in what I call inspired Jewish community — I call that inspired Jewish community — and help transform our gateway institutions to be inspired places. So many of our gateway institutions, in my opinion, had become devoid of *kedushah*. In the rush to assimilation, in the rush to acculturation, the large synagogues — Jewish, Christian — you don’t have to find meaning there. You want to acculturate, become a good American — Christians are members of churches; you should be a member of a synagogue. Someone once said recently, If American Judaism can survive the suburban synagogue of the fifties, it can survive anything. So I think everything I’ve done, in all the positions, has been how do we help transform out institutions, which requires participatory Judaism, not being spectators but getting involved in creating Jewish communities that work, and helping to transform gateway institutions, and increase the percentage of people that participate in them.

JG: What was it about Ramah in those early years that actually created community? (00:27:00) What was it about it?

JR: I would add another element. One was the *tefilah*, the prayer.

JG: And were you fluent enough in the liturgy?

JR: Not at first. Not at first. I mean, I have a memory, which I’ve joked about, that at some point — probably second summer — I agreed to read Torah at Mincha on Shabbat and it was a disaster. By then I was probably reading Torah back in the synagogue, but either I didn’t prepare adequately or I got nervous, and there was, I will not mention, but a very traditional volunteer leader who was there for Shabbat and kind of never forgot and it was a bit humiliating. There was also at Ramah — as a teenager, two things I remember. One, there was a sense that this was an ideological, educational experiment. There was a Professor Schwab from the University of Chicago, and Professor Seymour Fox and that crowd were all imbued with bringing that method and testing it, the notion of relating to each other. There was a Professor Schwab from the University of Chicago, and Professor Seymour Fox and that crowd were all imbued with bringing that method and testing it, the notion of relating to each other. There was a notion of relating to each other with *kavod*, with respect, of listening to one another. And there — I forget it — there should be a nurturing *madrich*, and a challenging force as well, so you should be challenged and
nurtured. And I have memories also of sitting endlessly one on one, with both peers, having heartfelt adolescent conversations about important things. Well, the combination of tefilah for the first time — I liked it.

JG: You learned to daven there.

JR: I learned to daven there. I learned and I liked it. Compared to many, even most, my Hebrew skills were weak. So I was never that often a baal tefilah, a prayer leader, but the first summers I came to like it. I liked putting on tefilin. Trust me, I felt like I was a relationship to God. The feeling wasn’t there always, but Shabbat and Havdalah. It was wonderful. By the way, I’ve just concluded, I’m making a capital gift (00:30:00) to Camp Ramah in Nyack, and I’m making it in memory of my parents because when I came home and said we have to have kosher, we have to be a kosher place, they didn’t say, Take a walk. They didn’t say — they could have done a lot of things. They were totally supportive.

JG: Did they have —?

JR: No. They had separate stuff that they continued, but when I was there — actually this was also when I went to rabbinical — I went to rabbinical school for a year — in both settings, they would accommodate me. I would not call it halachically medakdek, but it was obviously an attempt to be supportive. So what else was it? I loved playing baseball in Hebrew, cadaor basis. I loved the plays.

JG: In Hebrew?

JR: In Hebrew. But I think it was the tone and the soul and the heart.

JG: So you also got involved from this in USY.

JR: From this, I went back, got involved with USY. Became quickly a regional officer and then a national officer. Between USY and Ramah and I got involved in LTF, which was Leaders Training Fellowship, and I was in Hebrew high school. So Jewish life. So in fact, in freshman year, my parents moved from Cedarhurst to Woodmere, and I went to Hewlett High School, but my life was outside of Hewlett High School. My life was USY, Ramah, LTF, the synagogue. I’ve recently gone to high school reunions and actually chatted about this with people and they never thought I was as out as I felt. As an adolescent at high school, and I never did very well. So all these folks were acing it, and I was
flunking chemistry. People had come from places like Lawrence or Hewlett High School have done great things, but I am pleased I am on the Hewlett High School hall of fame wall, but it was certainly not for the academics, nor how I felt at the place then.

JG: Did USY do it for you in the sense of giving you that sense of community, and providing Shabbats throughout the year?

JR: Well, I’ve said the Israel trips, that was a whole other thing. Thanks for asking.

JG: That was 196 —?

JR: Sixty-three was the first time to Israel. With USY Pilgrimage. And that was, I mean, you asked me a question about USY. I’ll come back to that. Because my first roles were social action (00:33:00) chair. This was Kennedy, Civil Rights. So I was able to bring that to USY. I learned Israeli dance at Ramah. Hayiti b’chug rikud b’machaneh — I was in a dance group. I did not, as others, throw myself into textual study. Hebrew language. Eddie Schecter, I mentioned. He went to Ramah in the Poconos. Every time he heard a Hebrew word that he didn’t know — he walked around with a notebook; he’s a cool guy — and he wrote it down. Impressive. So, what did USY — I’m thinking. You ask an interesting question — because Shabbat — we went to many regional retreats. It was a different thing. Regional retreats. Other synagogues. I think I was just embracing Jewish life.

JG: How did your first experience of being in Israel affect you? That Pilgrimage was your first time?

JR: Sixty-three.

JG: So you were like?

JR: Sixty-three I was sixteen, seventeen. I’m in August. Fell in love with the place. I thought it just represented everything I could imagine. It was progressive. It was sexy. It was idealistic. Kibbutzim! It was an amazing miracle. I mean, ’63, was thirteen, and sixteen years. It was this young state, and yet, I remember, in ’65, when I came back as staff, there was an international Jewish youth convention. And I went. It was an international USY Convention. Ben Gurion spoke.
JG: In Israel?

JR: In Israel. I met Ben Gurion. I mean, holding aside — government. It was so impressive what was being created. I took the whole narrative and imbibed it. And I felt that in ’65. Israeli Arabs could vote and could participate. If it wasn’t for those Arabs armies that wanted to eliminate us in ’48. Thank God, in ‘56 (00:36:00) our military and soldiers were so impressive.

JG: Had your parents been —

JR: No.

JG: — involved in Zionism at all, or Israel? Had they been to Israel?

JR: No, they had not. They went once. I’ve probably gone ninety-five times. They weren’t big time. I do remember early watching a movie about the creation of Israel, like Kill 42 or something, and my parents started tearing up. So they weren’t anti at all. They were supportive. My father’s mother was very involved with Hadassah, and my great-aunts were national presidents of Hadassah. So there was kind of a Zionist — let me put it this way: no one knew there was a dark side then. It was just light, right after the Holocaust.

JG: This was right after, Eichmann was ’63, the trial.

JR: There was no — I mean, people were proud of it. But there was no counter. Israel just reinforced it. So all these things reinforced. But that said, you know, it’s interesting. I’m just thinking out loud with you. I didn’t do very well in high school. I had pretty good boards and applied to colleges. And everybody at Hewlett High School went to college. I got rejected from my first three and got rejected from my next three. It’s now May and I wasn’t in college. There was no anxiety. It was amazing. And my parents were okay with it. And eventually I applied to — so I had started at Brandeis and Western Reserve and Wash U or something — and got rejected from all of them. Now it was down to the University of Pittsburgh, New Paltz and Hofstra. I got accepted to all three of them. University of Pittsburgh sounded more serious. So I went to the University of Pittsburgh. I had never been there. I knew nothing about it. I sort of liked the idea of being in a city, and went there, and had a fabulous time there. But I would not say — well, I’ll make two comments. You know, I spoke a little earlier, that I never felt in my high school, so when I went off to college, I said, I’d like to sort of feel more part of the whole thing, whatever that meant. Well, I went to this
place, as opposed to what happens today — Eddie Schecter, who I mentioned to you and my dear friend Peter Geffen, who had been national president of — (00:39:00), these were my close friends — they drove me to Kennedy.

JG: Through USY?

JR: Yes, but we were dear friends by then. They put me on a plane and I went there, and I got in a cab, and I went to the University of Pittsburgh. It’s not like anyone took me there, etc. I just went. So this was September of ’64. Just I loved it academically. Classes on world history and philosophy. I felt my head being stretched. Terrific teachers.

JG: What did you major in?

JR: I majored in political science and history. Skipping ahead a little but not too far, if Camp Ramah was the first place that changed my life, the second place was a course on the Middle East in 1967 with a fabulous professor named Richard Cottam.

JG: Who?

JR: Cottam. C-O-T-T-A-M, who was a wonderful teacher, because it was the sixties and Vietnam. So I had to take courses in Asian politics, and African and South American, and Russian history, etc. And then I took a course on the Middle East. It was three times a week, so the first — most of it — was learning about the Middle East, and I found myself drawn to it, and then the last month, the last eight sessions were a simulated conference on Arab-Israeli, and I learned there that there were multiple narratives. So this was 1966 or 7. And I was at first angry. How come the Middle East? I was at Ramah, USY, right in the middle of the community, and they couldn’t put on some of the gray?

JG: Meaning that it had been presented as black and white?

JR: Black and white. Good and evil.

JG: A land without a people for a people without a land.

JR: Exactly. And that sent me on a whole — and ultimately I get a Ph.D. in Arabic politics. And the pursuit of serious Israel education and Middle East reconciliation, if not peace, have become central components of my life.
JG: You felt angry, you were saying?

JR: Furious. Angry. Not furious, but angry. And I really —

JG: Did you feel disrespected?

JR: No, I didn’t do that — meaning by the community? I was angry that the community presented it in black and white terms, good and evil.

JG: Why did you think that was?

JR: I’m sorry, what?

JG: Why? Why did you think they presented it in that way?

JG: Well, the tendency of all governments is (00:42:00) to present things as black and white. They’re not interested in debate or discussion. They’re interested in people’s support. And from that, I mean, has been a loss to both Israel and the Jewish people. In other words, I teach, what I consider to be an interesting class — I’m skipping ahead — on pre-Zionist visions, pre-state visions. It’s a class that I do excerpts of works from Jabotinsky, Aleph Daled Gordon or Ben Gurion, and Magnus (00:42:22) And it provides an opportunity for people to understand that before the state, you weren’t just a Zionist. There were different visions of what the state could be, should be, might be, and you had to grapple with it. So I define Israel education as helping young and old develop their own views, even conflicting views, on what Israel can, should, might be, which strengthens commitment. That’s the irony. So after ’48, everyone rallies around the flag, and all we’re asked to do is clap. And there’s tons to clap about. But therefore no one develops their own views on what this place could be and I define Israel education as dealing with the gray areas, the complicated areas which we’ve systematically avoided. Most of us are liberal nationalists. The Zionism that prevails is a conservative nationalism. It preferences a group. And therefore, when you’re confronted with this — I believe the community is intellectually naked. People say this is a problem of the college campus. Trust me: this is a problem with the whole community. So that was the second element that changes my life.

JG: Were you involved in Jewish life on campus? Was there Jewish life on campus?
JR: Minimally. I was involved in politics. Excuse me, I was involved in academics.

JG: First time for that, really.

JR: And loved it. I stayed with it and loved it. And I was involved, so in nineteen — early, ’64, 65. I take the lead in creating a party that takes over student government called the Pitt Progressive Party. In the spring of 1965, March, the bridges stopped in Selma. I mean, I’ve involved in antiwar stuff. The bridges stopped. And SNIC, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee puts a call out for Northerners to come out to Montgomery, Alabama to pressure Governor Wallace to allow the march to take place. I organize with a few others, I was a leader of 120 of us, three buses, traveling to Montgomery, Alabama. (00:45:00) We spent eight days there.

JG: Eight days.

JR: I was the leader of that. I spent time with Dr. King as the leader of a student group.

JG: John Lewis was there, right?

JR: I will tell you a story of John Lewis. We go there the first night and we go march to the capital. That’s the night that Lyndon Johnson gives the “We Shall Overcome” speech in Congress. We listened to it on the sidewalk. The next day we come back, and a posse with bats and whips disperses us. I’m standing next to John Lewis.

JG: Posse of whom?

JR: Alabama police. To disperse us. Bats and whips. We come back to the African-American, black area in the churches, and that night Dr. King comes and Andy Young comes, (00:45:56) and Abernathy, and to hear those preachers preach in those churches — I sometimes have said, I learned about tefilah, but I learned about inspiring, I mean, the gospel music, the singing, the preaching. I mean, what a privilege. So I was involved with that, antiwar, student government, academics, and starting my sophomore year, I taught Hebrew school. I had little to do with the Hillel. Now, the Hillel at the University of Pittsburg, was, I would not call it a great Hillel, but the Hillel Director was Professor Richard Rubenstein — Rabbi Richard Rubenstein — “death of God” — who, by the way, I invited to
come with us on the trip to Alabama and then later came back and got quite involved in criticizing the Civil Rights Movement for being anti-Jewish. That’s a whole other — I found it, occasionally I would go on High Holidays if I was there. If I hadn’t gone home, but I did not find it compelling, at all. I found it bleh. I taught Hebrew school and enjoyed it. At the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburg.

JG: Were you at Ramah during those summers? ’65 you were back.

JR: Right, so in ’66 I get an award from the University of Pittsburgh, which is a scholarship to study at the University of Oslo Summer School, which is an international summer school. And I go. It’s an award to study and travel. So I arrive in Scotland and hitchhike all through Europe. I then spend six weeks at the University of Oslo, which is quite interesting, with students from all over the world. Russians. (00:48:00) This was in ’66. Whatever the year was. ’66. I do organize a demonstration on July Fourth against the war in Vietnam at the American Embassy. And actually, my closest little group — there are 500 students or 1,000 — my close group was a Russian, a Yugoslav, and two other Americans. We spent a lot of time together. When I came back to Kennedy airport, they stopped me and did an eight-hour strip-search — so I don’t know. I can’t imagine American intelligence is that good, but they certainly were interested in me. Oh, actually, one of the Americans the day before we left broke down and said he was working with the NSA. He had been sent here to report on any Americans involved extensively with people from across the curtain or did any politics, so did that lead? Who knows. So that was ’66. What did I do ’67?

JG: Sixty-seven was right after the war.

JR: Ah, ’67.

JG: Sixty-seven the war happens, the Six Day War.

JR: A dear friend of mine invites me to go home with him — from the University of Pittsburgh, now a professor at Columbia — his home was in Uganda, and I go and I spend the summer of ’67 in Uganda. He was an East Asian. He was an Indian, so it was more an Indian experience than it was an African experience. I was not an enthusiast for the ’67 war. On the one hand I felt scared, like everyone else, and mobilized. Excuse me. Particularly afterwards, because I read so much about the efforts that had been underway diplomatically to diffuse it. And later, was the preemptive war — I mean, I was both. I do remember being scared at the
early reports, but the truth is it was a quick victory. Um, you know. I wasn’t scared for Israel —

JG: When you say you weren’t an enthusiast, was that because of these courses you’ve been taking? You were thinking in other directions?

JR: I realized occupation. So I was sort of relieved that Israel, which I had come to love had been preserved. There had been threats, to drive them into the sea. But on the other hand, I actually was skeptical of that because I knew that Israel’s military advantage was substantial even then. So I had these mixed feelings — Israel’s military advantage was substantial even in ’67 — also even before that — and yet, you can be afraid too, given (00:51:00) what was being broadcast. So I’m saying. I didn’t buy into the whole thing. And then I saw the occupation. Now what was going to happen?

JG: Meanwhile, were you aware of feeling any sort of anti-Semitic strands within the New Left, the antiwar movement, the Civil Rights Movement?

JR: None. Is that true? None?

JG: Black separatism?

JR: A little Black Panther stuff about Jewish landlords or whatever freaked me out a little bit. But I basically, in part from where I came from, grew up, felt secure, and —

JG: As an American.

JR: As an American and as a Jew. And I always thought the anti-Semitic callouts were a little exaggerated, even then. But I was sensitive to them, and I didn’t like when I heard a Black Panther leader say things about any racial group but particularly about Jews I didn’t like it whatsoever.

JG: But it wasn’t driving you out of the movement.

JR: No, no! And by ‘67,’68, by ‘68, I was involved big time, was state director for the Students for McCarthy, but I was always a Kennedy — but John Kennedy, I adored. His assassination in ‘63 — really heavy. I used to run home from school to listen to his press conferences. I thought he was the most elegant, humorous, smart. And by the way, and we’ll come to ‘68. So I was very involved. I got
involved in student politics. I mean, I was involved in ’67 — Oh, before I went to Uganda, I did Vietnam Summer. Vietnam Summer was knocking on the doors of people to try to both test and talk with them about the war in Vietnam, and you’d literally walk through streets —

JG: In Pittsburgh?

JR: In Pittsburg knocking on doors. Which was a fascinating experience. Particularly in the Catholic areas you’d see a picture of the Pope and John Kennedy in most homes. I mean, the war on Vietnam and Civil Rights were compelling and were engaging, and I was engaged in them. So I was teaching Hebrew School. I think actually, I said, leaving my intense involvement in Jewish life in high school. I think I wanted to feel more comfortable in the school, in the university, and get into academics a little more, and politics took over.

JG: And yet, you emerged (00:54:00) from college to go to rabbinical school.

JR: So I go in 1968: what am I going to do next? So I remember in the spring or whenever. I prepare multiple applications. I apply to the Peace Corps, I apply to graduate school in Middle East politics, and I apply to Rabbinical School at JTS [Jewish Theological Seminary].

JG: What had led you in that direction?

JR: Because I think I wanted to be a clergyman. My issue, which would become an issue when I go to JTS and I had a great year at JTS, but they wanted to make me a rabbi and I wanted to, at that point, become a clergyman in the model of Heschel, Coffin, King. I was still struggling with universalism and particularism. And so I go to JTS in the Mechina Program, which is a preparatory year. I would say, on the one hand, I had great teachers. Professor Joel Roth in Talmud, (00:55:09) Neil Gillman in theology, Cal Brand in who knows what, Jewish Thought, and who knows. Ray Scheindlin, in text and humash or actually we did Shmuel, brilliant. I mean, they were brilliant. And since political, I had come to — they assigned me — at that point you worked off your scholarship by serving with a faculty member and they assigned me to Professor Heschel. So I spent a year as Professor Heschel’s assistant at JTS.

JG: What was your image of Heschel when you came into JTS? Your image?

JR; I knew little about him. I knew little about him.
JG: The iconic photo of him walking arm-in-arm with Martin Luther King.

JR: Right. I’d known that.

JG: You just said he was one of the — he was the Jewish person you mentioned in this pantheon of —

JR: Yes, so I knew enough about him, right.

JG: You knew that. You knew that he was involved.

JR: These were people involved in social justice, involved in trying to deal with the ills of the world, yet deeply rooted in religious tradition, and that was connecting different pieces of mine that felt real at that point. Not unrelated to the creation of the havurah. I went there and I wanted to talk about life and death and meaning, and they wanted me to study humash and Rashi.

JG: At JTS?

JR: [nods] I wanted to think about the purpose of life, what’s the meaning of life, and how to discern meaning. They said you got to first learn.

JG: You just mentioned the tensions you were struggling with between universalism and particularism. (00:57:00). You were in rabbinical school or heading into rabbinical school.

JR: In rabbinical school.

JG: Which is a very particular path, shall we say. How was that struggle manifested for you at that point?

JR: Well, I think in what I wanted to focus on. I wanted to focus on the bigger issues of life and meaning, and they wanted me to focus on text. Retrospectively, I appreciate it. It was later, when I studied weekly, particularly with a haver, Richie Siegal, that I, for the first time, really had a powerful textual experience and learned the joy of studying texts and the way that can connect you to God. I hadn’t had that experience, and add that to feeling, probably, insecure Hebraically, particularly in that context. The whole thing was kind of intimidating. You know, they’re going to call on you. When I got an honorary
degree at JTS, I told the story about what it was like to get on an elevator at JTS — and they were small elevators — and on would come Ginsberg, or Professor Finkelstein or Lieberman, (00:58:26) and you would just, when would the door open? [laughs] So, I didn’t feel much community there. I mean, in Southern churches you felt community, and in political groups, including McCarthy and Kennedy, you felt community. I didn’t feel much community there. I wasn’t really studying the broad issues that I wanted to be thinking about, and I was probably still struggling with universalism and particularism, which, by the way, let me skip forward. So I mentioned two things that changed my life or shaped my life. Maybe there were only three. Jewishly. One was Ramah. One was taking a course in Middle East politics. The third, late that spring. I’m already leaving JTS, and I’m going, probably late winter, and I’m in Europe with my parents.

JG: Talking about —

JG: Sixty-nine. Italy. And on the way back — we flew into Munich — my father, or mother, says we should stop and go to Dachau. And we go to Dachau, and I can still vividly recall standing in front of those ovens, with the shovels next to it, and I’m looking in them and thinking, even though I might believe we are all one and we are all human beings, I would have been in those ovens. And I accept being (01:00:00) a Jew right there, as a point of departure. It resolves my universalism-particularism issue from right there. And then the issue is what do I want to do with my Jewish life. During the year at the seminary, which I want to say again, they treated me great, they were wonderful. I’m actually remembering a very funny story. It doesn’t matter; it’s not related to the havurah. But I read three important books that I still recall beyond the studying texts, which I was introduced to. Number one, I read Kaplan, and since I was having theological doubts, Kaplan was very important for me and in many ways, helped me understand that I could connect kedushah with something other than a supernatural God above. Second, I read both the Introduction and dabbled in the Introduction to The Zionist Idea and dabbled in it. That was also really important for me to understand the multiple — more about Zionism, etc. And third I read Heschel. I loved The Sabbath, I loved The Prophets.

JG: Did you develop a personal relationship with him?

JR: We always had a warm relationship. I mean, my memory of it — this is 1968, ’69; he dies in ‘71 or ’72 — he had me several times to his home for Shabbat. I met Susannah there, and his wife, who I knew and connected with in a different
setting, later at the Ninety-second Street Y. First of all, I was the secretary for him. You literally came once or twice a week, and he would occasionally call. I remember coming in. It’s an office, I mean, maybe even smaller than this, but it’s packed with books. Packed. And he’d be there. And often, my memory is, I’d walk in and he’d have a cigar, with its ash, I’d be petrified the ash would fall on his beard and he’d be —

JG: Incinerated.

JR: The second is his attention to language. He’d dictate letters, and by the way, the letters were going to the Pope, and if they weren’t going to the Pope, they’d be going to somebody, number two at the Vatican. You know, his attention — and first of all his brilliant use of English; this was not his native language — this attention to language, it was really amazing. (01:03:00) He was kind. When I told him that I was leaving the seminary, he was really sorry. He encouraged me to give it another year. At different times, for example, we organized this sanctuary for a draft resister in the seminary in the main place where services were. I arranged for him to come down to it, which was a big thing for the event, and speak at it. I don’t want to overstate it or understate it. By then, by ‘68, ‘69, as you said, he was Heschel. Even more so, after his death, I want to say. Remember, he was isolated at the seminary, very isolated at the seminary. For a lot of reasons. I mean, he was not a Talmudist. He wasn’t being out there in the world.

JG: Did you continue to see him involved in these larger struggles?

JR: Did I continue to see him?

JG: Involved in these larger struggles that had —?

JR: Sure. That’s part of what he did at the seminary was the interaction with those folk. Scheduling, correspondence. There was no email or anything. So it was a privilege, a total privilege. I mean to have had the opportunity to work, if briefly, with Dr. King and Professor Heschel, you know. [nods]

JG: This was also a period of high anxiety for many young American men, with the draft. What was your situation, since we’re talking about ‘68, ’69?
JR: Right. Well, I had applied to be a conscientious objector. In fact that was the basis also of my application to rabbinical school, and it was denied by the draft board.

JG: On what grounds? Did they tell you?

JR: And a member of my draft board had told my rabbi that no Jews could be Co’s [conscientious objectors]. They hadn’t even read anything because no Jews can be Co’s.

JG: Why?

JR: They were only giving draft consideration to members of traditionally pacifist churches, which were Seventh Day Adventists — even though the law said differently. We sued the whole selective service system, based on my rabbi reporting this to me — they hadn’t read anything in my files because no Jews can be Co’s — we sued the whole selective service system, and it was the front-page New York Times. I was part of that. When I had my JTS rabbinical school interview I used that as an ethical issue that I had dealt with. And there was a huge fight right in the committee between Professor Simon Greenberg and Professor Seymour Siegel about that issue. (01:06:00) So, front page of The New York Times. Because I had not applied for a 4-D.

JG: Which you could have, as a rabbinical student.

JR: Which I could have. And they gave me a 4-D, but by that time I was out of rabbinical school. They wanted to get rid of me once I was on the front page of The New York Times.

JG: Which “they” wanted to get rid of you?

JR: The Selective Service. They didn’t want to deal with it. The New York Times editorial support, press conference in Washington with then Senator Charles Goodell, who was a senator after Kennedy was killed, he was named senator and Allard Lowenstein, and it received a lot of attention. I actually spoke at Madison Square Garden at a big anti-war rally with Jane Fonda. [laughs]

JG: Had you couched your conscientious objection application in sort of a Jewish frame?
JR: I claimed that the Judaism that I identified with is about many things. It’s about connecting to God; it’s about building community, it’s about caring for the hungry and the homeless and the widow. It’s about pursuing “Tzedek, zedek tir dof.” It’s about pursuing peace by peaceful ways. “Tzedek, zedek tir dof.” There is a Jewish tradition of that that I read about of conscientious objector, and refusing to participate in war, with the notion that the decision to take another person’s life is the most awesome decision that one ever has and when you join an army you give that to someone else. So, you know, I wrote the application, and, I think it was Seymour Siegel, may he rest in peace, who said, “Yes and no. If, then” — etc. Would you have, going back to World War II. I said I’m a product of a nuclear era, of a different system, and a different context, and ultimately, I think war leads to more war often, and one of the ways to stop it is to live prophetically.

JG: People didn’t ask you in terms of the Six Day War?

JR: They may have. I said one of the ways to end conflict is to end conflict, and to model that. They admitted me to rabbinical school. [laughs]

JG: And you got out of the draft.

JR: Well, I wasn’t seeking that. I was ready to go to jail.

JG: Yeah, well, I understand that. The end result of that seems to be that the draft ceased to be an issue for you personally. (01:09:00)

JR: Right, right.

JG: Which brings us to 1969.

JR: Nineteen sixty-nine. So I then decide that I am leaving the seminary, and apply, or reapply to Columbia. I had applied to Columbia and been accepted, so reactivate my application, and actually go that summer to the University of Pennsylvania, where I study Arabic for the first time, because I’m going to a PhD program in Middle East politics. I wanted to concentrate in Political Science and the Middle East and Penn has a very fine Arabic department. But by then, by the spring of ‘69, is when the efforts are made to begin to create what is the New York Havurah. Isn’t that right?
JG: Yes. So tell us about how and when the ideas for this new community began to take shape.

JR: Right.

JG: And what the motivations were for the people who were involved.

JR: You know, when — I remember, I recently had a conversation with Rabbi Wolfe Kelman (01:10:34), a very distinguished rabbi, then the head of the Rabbinical Assembly. He said, “When people take new jobs, there’s always a push and a pull.” There was obviously something among the group of people that was not comfortable at the seminary, at that point. And that group in the beginning included my old friend Peter Gefen; I would say Rabbi Eugene Weiner, who was working at the seminary as the head of the Finkelstein Institute, quite close to — it’s now the Finkelstein Institute; it wasn’t called that then.

JG: It was the Lehman Institute for Ethics, is that right? (01:11:09)

JR: Maybe. It had a couple of different names, actually. So, he was very involved in it. I mean, we had become friends during my year at the seminary at Sukkot. He had a place in Northern Massachusetts. We went up there for Sukkot.

JG: You and Rabbi Weiner?

JR: [nods] with his family. Actually, Hillel Levine was up there. Steve Shaw was up there that weekend. Peter had already been a friend of Gene’s. I had actually met Gene at Camp Ramah in 1961. He actually encouraged me to come to the seminary. I was thinking about it. We had dinner and he encouraged me to come to the Seminary. That’s another cute story. When I was deciding to go to rabbinical school, I actually contemplated going to HUC, and when I got my honorary degree at HUC, I told the story (01:12:00) of how I went to the admission department there. Because I thought in many ways, I’m a non-halachic person. I thought maybe I’d do better at HUC. And I told them and they said, you don’t belong here. You belong up at JTS.

JG: Why? Why did they do that?

JR: Then, I’m told now by people in the Reform movement, that that was a more insular place. They wanted people who were more movement oriented, comfortable in the movement. And I clearly seemed to be a Conservative, and not
about their movement. You never know what would have happened with all these things. So first of all, this year — Havurat Shalom had been created in the fall of ‘68, so word of it was all over. That was about smaller community and studying in different kinds of ways.

JG: Did you personally know Art Green from —?

JR: No. In fact I didn’t know anybody there. I don’t think.

JG: But people there did: Alan Mintz knew Art Green, for instance.

JR: But Alan wasn’t at JTS then. Alan was an undergraduate at Columbia. I mean, I think Gene Weiner did. People did. But we knew of it. I’m just giving it my own participation.

JG: So it’s a small group.

JR: I’m thinking, who are the people. We had done some things together, including organizing the sanctuary for a draft resister.

JG: Who was the draft resister?

JR: Burton Weiss (01:13:35), who ends up being a member of the New York Havurah, now in Berkeley, I believe. So that’s when we first met Burton Weiss.

JG: And I understand that you used to meet regularly in Eugene Weiner’s apartment?

JR: Regularly I think is a little overstated. Gene was involved in this in an important way, and why he was uncomfortable — he was very close to the Chancellor, Louis Finkelstein. What this was about for him I know not. And he ultimately, he ends up making aliyah, so he checks out. But there was some part of him — and by the way, Gene, who I stayed related to — actually it was his funeral in Israel several years back — there was a changed element in him, and he was a tumeler and he was involved in creating the Abraham Fund and other things. I do remember one or two evenings at his home. One, a very important one. So we were trying to contemplate what it would be to create a small, intentional community seminary. Those words. Community was part of it. One that also had a deep commitment to social engagement, if not social justice. All of us were (01:15:00) involved in — it led to the question of what would we even
want to study. There was had a wonderful evening in his home with Jack Neusner. Do you hear about this?

JG: No.

JR: So Gene had become very close with Professor Jacob Neusner.

JG: Where was Neusner at that point?

JR: I believe he was at Brown. And we had an evening with him and he gave the following — and this is now thirty-one, forty-one, almost fifty years later, in which Neusner is — he gave a lecture which was called “Torah Myth.”

JG: Excuse me?

JR: “Torah Myth.”

JR: “Torah Myth.” And he said the problem with all of the seminaries is as follows: You are a young seminarian. You want to study and probe life and meaning and purpose. They say, you can’t do that; you need to study texts first. So you study humash and Rashi and Talmud and you study, you become a rabbi. You now say: Now I want to study life and meaning and purpose and death. And they say: No, no, no, no, no, you need a Ph.D. in Talmud to do that. So you spend another five years, you get a Ph.D. in Talmud. You’ve learned this, you’ve got your Ph.D. in Talmud. Now you want to study life, meaning, purpose, Torah. No, you need to become Lieberman. You never become Lieberman — Lieberman, the great Talmud professor. He said, I reverse it. What are the issues that are leading you to want to become a rabbi? What it is that you need to study — life and meaning and death and let that drive you. Learn the texts and the skills that are needed to understand the issue that’s driving you there, not assuming you’re going to master this whole sea which you will never master. I’m telling you this forty-seven years later, so it was a very powerful evening. It led us to think about what we want to study. I was already going off — you see, there were people in this group who wanted to go to the havurah as a form of rabbinical school and become rabbis. Others of us were more involved in creating a community which would be intimate, personal, intentional community. We talked about communal meals, we talked about study, we talked about Shabbat retreats. This was all in the spring. The question I’ll come to is: who is that. And then the classes, but the classes would not be from the textual — it would be from the issue — Neusner affected that discussion.
JR: Who was the group?

JG: Mmhmm.

JR: I think the initial group, but I can’t tell you who the connectors were of this, who pulled the people in. The initial group, and I was searching at home to see if I have the original brochure. Do you have the brochure?

JG: I don’t have it, but I’ve read pieces of it.

JR: Do you have the names?

JG: The names I have are: You, Reuven Kimmelman.

JR: Who was then an advanced rabbinical school student.

JG: Peter Geffen and Alan Mintz. Those were the four names.

JR: And Gene Weiner.

JG: And Gene Weiner.

JR: Um.

JG: So are you saying it was a broader group than that?

JR: Not much. That group. Then we went to go and reach out to people.

JG: But was it — I’m trying to understand. Was it originally conceived, as Havurat Shalom was that first year or two, as a seminary, as an alternative seminary?

JR: Yes, no. Yes, it was on the table, we applied for whatever we needed to do to be able to —

JG: — be chartered.
JR: — be chartered and to give the degrees, which we were granted.

JG: How much of that had to do with wanting to be a way for people to get a 4-F?

JR: I think for one or two people that mattered a lot.

JG: But it wasn’t the primary driver?

JR: I think the primary driver was — well, you know, your question is leading me to be reflective myself, which I suppose is what a good interview does about this thing. I was still drawn to Jewish life leaving the seminary, and I wanted a Jewish community of seriousness. So a small, intimate one that would be deeply engaged with social issues in varying ways spoke to me.

JG: Pull together the key elements that you were looking for in life: community, learning, study

JR: Prayer

JG: Prayer, and —

JR: — and friendship

JG: And activism?

JR: And activism.

JG: Your activism would come through this engagement with each other.

JR: First year or two, or three, going to anti-war demonstrations together, making Shabbos together as part of that, would be a component; it would feel to be integrated.

JG: All part of the vision.

JR: It would feel to be integrated.

JG: There were other ideas. What about the notion of place? How important was it?
JR: I trust you know — excuse me, I shouldn’t trust you know. So, we spent a lot of time on place. One of Gene Weiner’s closest friends was Everett Gendler.

JG: Connection to Everett.

JR: Everett was spending that year in Guenavaca. (01:21:00)

JG: Mexico.

JR: Mexico. Gene, Peter and I somehow pooled money and gave him a plane ticket to come up, to try to recruit him to be a key member and we found an estate upstate. I have no idea. We traveled up there. We were going to buy this estate, which would be a place where we’d be located.

JG: Where people would actually live or a retreat place?

JR: Live and/or a retreat place. We also searched in New York. I remember looking at the then-slums on Eighty-fifth Street and Eighty-fourth Street between Amsterdam and Columbus. Right across from the Brandeis School. Which, they were dumps then. This is 1970. You could buy them for fifty grand. They’re probably worth five million today. During this year, by the way, a few of us went off and did some fundraising for this.

JG: Who did you fundraise with?

JR: Somehow I remember going to Rabbi Martin Siegal. You know the name? So Martin Siegal is a rabbi who my parents were a little bit involved with, down in the Five Towns who ultimately put out a book, or had a huge article in New York Magazine called “Diary of a Rabbi” which became its own scandal. He was well-connected, and I think from a wealthy family himself. We did a fundraiser in Cleveland at Park Synagogue or something. There was kind of support from people who knew that the large suburban synagogues — they wanted more participation, more intimacy, more intensity, so it sort of had resonance.

JG: What would have been in it for these funders?

JR: I think retrospectively, it was a period of time in a certain way when they saw young Jews doing anything, they were so excited, so positive. In other words, they still cared enough to —
JG: There was anxiety that people were assimilating.

JR: Right.

JG: Anxiety.

JR: I don’t know. I don’t know if it was anxiety — that’s a great question — I don’t know if it was anxiety that people were assimilating, or if it was to see young Jews in the 1970s actively trying to create Jewish life. There were a lot of people who responded to that very positively.

JG: Did you actually raise money?

JR: Some, but I wouldn’t overstate it.

JG: Not enough to —

JR: Not enough at all. So that we don’t buy the building on Ninety-fourth Street. Everett decides to go to Boston. He and Mary buy a place outside and he becomes a figure at Havurat Shalom. And we rent an apartment at —

JG: Ninety-eighth.

JR: Ninety-eighth and Broadway, and everybody (01:24:00) pools money to pay the rent and whatever else we need. That’s a whole thing also that differentiates us from present generations, which expect funders to pay this. Somehow, we all figured this was our responsibility to figure out how to cover it. We didn’t ask anybody else. We paid the cost going forward. Then at a certain point we went to include others, and so there was an interviewing process.

JG: Yes. Definitely. I have one other question before we get to that. In the consideration of whether or not this would be an alternative seminary, I’d like to understand how you were thinking about positioning this in relationship to JTS and HUC, because a number of people who were potentially going to be involved were actually students at one or the other of these; they were rabbinical students. Was the idea that they would leave JTS? This would become their rabbinical school? Or that this was somehow supplementary?

JR: I don’t recall. I was leaving. Peter was not in JTS.
JG: Nor was Alan Mintz.

JR: Nor was Alan Mintz. I think we were positioning it as an alternative seminary community. We put out the first call was sort of “Here we are,” and if you’re interested in pursuing this — I think the number of people who were interested in pursuing seminary through the New York Havurah were very, very few, and one or two of them, you might say, were there, I mean, I don’t know this one hundred percent, but might have been there for the deferment. I don’t think it ever became. I mean, in candor, between the announcement, which if you asked me when, I’d say March or April of ’69 and its first year, which was the fall of ’69, I think simply the process of who was there led the seminary piece to become, notwithstanding, and it was now an alternative Jewish community of intensity, or a desire to be intense.

JG: You were mentioning just a minute ago that you produced a brochure. Who developed the language for the brochure and who was your target audience, so to speak, for this brochure? Where was it going to be distributed?

JR: You know, I vaguely recall, and this is interesting. I think I was involved in drafting. I think Gene Weiner was involved in drafting. Then it was circulated around. Peter had some comments, Reuven Kimmmelman, and maybe Alan Mintz. We sent it out to the Jewish media. That means The Jewish Week and whoever else.

JG: In New York.

JR: In New York. The Jewish Post and Opinion, I think. We sent it out to Hillel rabbis.

JG: Locally?

JR: I think nationally. I think we sent it out to rabbis. Somehow we got the names of the RA and the Reform Rabbinate. And maybe Jewish studies. Jewish studies was not what it is now, but it was emerging. I think that’s who we sent it to.

JG: How many people were you envisioning being part of this intentional —

JR: I think the first year we hoped for twenty or thirty, max. Max thirty.
JG: Here is some of the language form the original brochure. This is the introductory language: “Free from ties with other institutions, the havurah will aim to create a new kind of religious leadership for the Jewish community and serve as a model for a new form of Jewish life.” Can you elaborate on what —?

JR: A little overstated. A little, uh.

JG: What was motivating a desire for a new form of leadership and, for that matter, the vision for a new form of Jewish life?

JR: This is now forty-five years later. What comes to mind is, number one, the distance between the intensity of Jewish life which most of us enjoyed, whether it be at camp or Israel trips, and most of the Jewish life that we experienced in synagogues and Hillels, etc., number one. And number two, the extent to which religious leadership — I would say, number two, the distance also of so much of the Jewish community from deep engagement in the social issues of our day. And third, I would say the kind of performance that had become routine in so many of our large institutions.

JG: Performative aspect of being a rabbi —

JR: And a cantor and the davening, and that was part of the distance from Ramah. We had learned — all of us had experienced participatory Jewish life (01:30:00), which felt to be with soul and heart, and yet so much of the institutional Jewish life felt to be performance, assimilative in acculturating, by design.

JG: Passive.

JR: Passive. I think that’s what we meant. We were adding the engagement with social issues which joined us.

JG: So you’re going to send this out, and there was a process. How did —

JR: Well in the meantime, I remember Gene was very important. We should reach out and identify people. We all started talking about people we knew, at Columbia, JTS, and around, and people started identifying names, and a pretty haphazard process, particularly the first year, was developed to meet with, interview, and somehow — I’m trying to remember if I did any of the interviewing, and my recollection is no. Just because I was busy and doing other things. So I don’t know who did.
JG: Right. So this became, actually, a point, this interview process, this application process, became an area through which people leveled criticisms at the havurah, that it was elitist in its conception and how it went about getting members. Do you recall discussions about —

JR: That.

JG: That, in and of itself, and also were there in fact criteria for selection and what was the process that people went through to become members?

JR: [sighs] I’m pausing because I’m genuinely uncertain. Interviewing was — years later it was joked about — but it didn’t feel good at the time. There were a few people, names escape me, that people were not welcomed. Retrospectively, I think it’s fair to say that the New York Havurah simply did not develop with the self-awareness, consciousness, intensity, that Havurat Shalom did. In other words, it had some of the aspirations (01:33:00) for that. It became more of — excuse me, I may be romanticizing Havurat Shalom.

JG: Havurat Shalom had the same critiques around elitism in terms of who was admitted and who wasn’t. People were rejected. There was always a question of fit. This was the elitism in the sense of looking for people of a certain kind of background, perhaps, local knowledge, perhaps. And fit, just in terms of —

JR: Interpersonal.

JG: Interpersonal. Who you wanted to be hanging out with in this intensive —

JR: But then it became, to which some would say, was it really a social club? Yes, it had Shabbat retreats, etc. But was it a selective minyan? It was more than a minyan, because the retreats, as no doubt you’ve heard, and we’ve discussed, were very intense. But there was a social club quality. I’m trying to think about who was not accepted and why. Do you have any names?

JG: Yes, but not that I want to say on camera.

JR: Yes. I do remember there was one instance, where someone had gone out with a woman. And there was a question of whether everybody would be comfortable. They had broken up. They decided they could be and they were.
JG: Was there a particular kind of person that you were looking for in filling out this group, in terms of background?

JR: I think, retrospectively, we were looking for people who had a serious desire to build Jewish community, and could bring: whether it be knowledge, learning; whether it be experience in community organizing; whether it be experience in Jewish community building, I should say. I think that’s what we were looking for. Someone who had no interest in this or no experience is this was — we weren’t looking for them to become a member. Although later, we had Shabbat services, we had High Holiday services, they were welcome to come. Somehow we thought membership — but my recollection on the membership is pretty weak.

JG: How about in terms of political orientations of people who were likely to become involved. How would you describe the group in that —?

JR: You know, in 1968, ’69, and ‘70, (01:36:00) as opposed to today, the community had more or less shared broad shared views. Antiwar, civil rights, pro-Israel. The huge bifurcation of Jewish life about what it means to be pro-Israel had not taken place yet. In a certain kind of way, Mort Klein and J Street are fighting about what it means to be pro-Israel today. They both believe they’re pro-Israel, if not others. That was not the case then. But you are correct. It may have been — I would say something which really doesn’t feel great. There was some sense of seriousness. People needed to be serious. My dear friend Alan Mintz is a serious person. Ditto Reuven Kimmelman with a great sense of humor. Serious. And so, I used that as two examples, and I could cite others as well. So seriousness, I think was — seriousness, and assets that they would be bringing — by which. I don’t mean money, but knowledge, experience in building community.

JG: One thing you haven’t mentioned at all is the policy toward the admission of women.

JR: Well, we knew there weren’t a lot of woman at the outset, so the list you mentioned —

JG: There were none.

JR: There were none. I think early on there was a conscious effort to say, can we identify some women. Right at the outset. I believe we were able to recruit, entice. I think that Liz Koltun became a member at that point. I think Phyllis and David
Sperling became members at that point. David had been at seminary. I don’t know where he was. He may have been teaching at HUC at that point, or maybe at JTS. Um, I think Shira, then Shira Sugarman, and Alan Sugarman. They became members at that time, in the first year. So I think there was a conscious effort.

JG: To reach out to women?

JR: To get more couples.

JG: Couples.

JR: Right.

JG: Bring in women as well. Which was in contrast to Havurat Shalom, which for the first several years did not admit women. Women were only there as girlfriends or in a few cases as wives. But it was a seminary, and this was what Art Green describes as a pre-feminist moment. The first ordination of a woman was several years away.

JR: Right.

JG: Nineteen seventy-two. Sally Priesand of the Reform movement. So this is a contrast, if New York Havurah was actively recruiting women, right from the beginning (01:39:00) in ’69.

JR: I don’t want to overstate. I think there was a conscious effort. I don’t want to overstate it. We were trying to get a great group together. A group that would create community. People would bring interesting things in the learning and davening, etc.

JG: Some people have pointed to a joint experience of going to the Mobilization for Peace in November 1969, right after the New York Havurah was founded as a real opportunity.

JR: Very powerful.

JG: Can you describe what that was like for the havurah as an experience?

JR: I think it was integrative. I think there was a desire there to end the diffuse nature of life. The notion of integration – of having your religious community,
your *davening* community, and the one where you shared core — not uniform, but core social and political instincts felt powerful and desirable. And therefore, going to the mobilization and making —

JG: Say a word about what that was, too.

Jr: Mobilization was one of — there must have been eight or ten times we went to Washington — to protest the war in Vietnam, starting in 1965, my first.

JG: This was a very large one.

JR: This was one of the largest. I can’t remember anymore the immediate event that led to this one, but it may have been an escalation of bombing. But it was going to be a very large one. We had a deep desire to go and we were able to make arrangements so we could have Shabbos dinner and Shabbos *davening*, and stay close enough for us to walk together to the march. That felt like, wow, that’s what we’re about here.

JG: Did you go down in cars or in buses?

JR: People went down in cars, but separately. You hitched a ride with a different people.

JG: You all stayed together?

JR: Stayed together in sleeping bags on the floor. Had Shabbat. Still I can visually remember, again, not a particularly elegant, but Shabbos dinner, Shabbos *davening* on Friday night.

JG: Where was that? Where did that take place?

JR: Your question prompted the memory: Was it Serotta’s apartment? It was Serotta’s sister’s apartment, I believe.

JG: Gerry Serotta?

JR: Gerry Serotta’s sister. I think that might be right. She was living in Washington.

JG: It was near enough.
JR: It was a large floor and it was close enough. It was in DuPont Circle. You had to get down to the Mall for the demonstration. (01:42:00) I think what it reflected was the desire for people, like ourselves, who had serious Jewish journeys and interested in Jewish community, not to do politics with others, but be able to do it together as Jews.

JG: As Jews.

JR: As Jews. I think that was a very powerful birthing, early birthing. Solidifying. You do that. You know, the travelling, the making Shabbos dinner, who’s bringing the siddurim? The whole thing, you’re sort of a tent community. And then we come back and we do Havdalah in the apartment. And it’s my recollection that it was a cold day.

JG: November.

JR: It was a cold November day. Didn’t have to be cold, but it was.

JG: Did it, would you say, approach the feeling of kedushah that you had experienced earlier?

JR: No. I mean, I think on many retreats, the retreats were a very important element of the New York Havurah, and many Friday night davening, and Shabbos morning and holidays — we went away for Sukkot and Shavuot — I did feel that sense of specialness, sacredness, etc. This was too much of a balagan. We were all piled into places. There wasn’t enough room. Everyone had to have their suitcases. It was balagan. But we were glad to be there because it was Shabbos and protesting the war.

JG: Would you say that participating in this mobilization as a havurah had an impact on the directions that the havurah took in terms of political activism or just the sense of purpose?

JR: I think it was a confirming event. Confirming because that’s why we created this thing: to be able to do this. In truth, I don’t think there were many more events of that kind — we did some, where everybody was there. It was still new, it was the first time. I need a history of the antiwar movement to tell you where we were in that process, but it was very confirming. That’s why we did this, and
others, including, the other havurot. They wouldn’t have done this. We did this! And it’s about who we were.

JG: Actually, Havurat Shalom members were there as well.

JR: With us?

JG: I don’t know if they were there in the apartment with you, but they were there as a group.

JR: Cool. I stand corrected.

JG: I think this might be a good time for a break. How does that sound? (01:45:00)

[Break for lunch]

JG: We were discussing before we took a break for lunch some of the things that create community. I want to look at some of the key areas of havurah life and go back to the issue of community a little bit. So, some observers have commented that compared to Havurat Shalom and Fabrangen, the New York Havurah found its greatest strength as a social and intellectual community, rather than as a prayer community or even a social action community. In the first place, would you agree with that assessment?

JR: Yes, but I would say the intellectual was often about social engagement. So many of the issues we studied, discussed, communal meals, retreats, were actually related to broader social issues. I think action, like the mobilization, became less frequent. But we’d have speakers, who’d come on occasion, if they met our approval. And many of the heated discussions and non-heated discussions were about social policy, the war, civil rights, Israeli-Palestinian relations, etc. That said, I think there was an element of that. I think with one more addition: social. I mean the social though was arranged around Shabbat, Sukkot, Shavuot. It was the most intense communal moments, periods, were the monthly Shabbat retreats. That’s very intense. Just the organization. At each retreat, there would need to be a coordinator. That requires location, transportation, food, tefilah, discussion, and each of those had people. So it was about creating a Shabbos community of which tefilah was an element. I don’t think of tefilah as standalone but building a community. Ditto on Shavuot, the tikun, but always the davening, the food. All of this was about providing an opportunity for religious moments, for extended
religious moments, which included tefilah. I don’t think tefilah was stand-alone, but I think it was deeply embedded. When I think of social, I think of going on a Saturday night with friends. That was not this. (01:48:00) My social life was not with the havurah. I was single. I had my friends. In other words, religious community, creating a monthly Shabbos retreat is a — it wasn’t every month during the summer, but it was seven, eight a year, maybe nine, and on Sukkot, and on Shavuot. Anyway, I’ve made my point.

JG: Yeah. In fact, the havurah did gather on a regular basis. You had weekly —

JR: Shabbos Dinner.

JG: Communal. Thursday nights.

JR: Right.

JG: Thursday evening communal meals followed by a meeting to discuss something or a program.

JR: Right.

JG: So, the New York Havurah is also described as the one with the really good food. Food and creating of community around food and discussion were really important as well. Where would these communal meals take place?

JR: The weekly communal meals would take place at the apartment on Ninety-eighth Street.

JG: Was it the same kind of thing that someone in charge?

JR: Yes. Someone was in charge.

JG: Would people bring food? Was it potluck, where people made food?

JR: I’m trying to think of that myself. There was good food at the havurah, but I don’t remember the food being as central as that. I mean, in other words, it was okay. There were some good cooks. Some members were serious cooks and they took it very seriously. Others of us brought the drinks.

JG: Right.
JR: The paper foods, the setup, the cleanup. They took place and it was serious. There too, this was a serious amount of energy to plan each week a communal meal. First the meal, and the program, and if there was a meeting, the meeting was on a business matter, whatever the business matter was.

JG: Can you describe the aesthetic of the apartment and what this meal was like?

JR: The apartment had a living room and two bedrooms, one on each side, and a kitchen, and a sort of large foyer that you come into. Generally speaking, the living room was the area where we gathered for the eating, and/or meeting or whatever, and the davening, when you had services would extend into the foyer. At different times, people lived in the bedrooms.

JG: Both bedrooms or just one?

JR: Definitely one; I was trying to think that myself. And so someone was often living there, but that other one, which might be empty, so if you had some important conversation, you might go into the other room to have the serious one-on-one, while the group was eating or socializing or gathering. That also allowed two classes at a time. So there were times, you’d have two classes going on before a communal meal. Particularly in the first few years, there were incredible teachers, teaching at the place.

JG: Right.

JR: So they could be two at a time. Or there could be a class and people preparing the communal meal, or a class and a meeting.

JG: So there was a lot of activity going on.

JR: There was considerable activity, retrospectively, for a voluntaristic community of which almost everybody was doing a lot of other things. People were graduate students. People had jobs. Some people were teaching. So this was a lot of energy for people. There were no kids yet.

JG: Which was significant.

JR: Significant.
JG: As we just said, in addition to the meal, there was often either a meeting or a program. I want to talk about the meetings for a minute. Would you say there were major issues or topics that came up for discussion? What were the kinds of issues that the havurah was —

JR: At the meeting?

JG: At the meetings.

JR: First of all, the financial issues. There were at times membership issues. Some people are moving to New York and want to become members. People are leaving. Whatever. What’s coming up — this is a lot of years back. We want to buy siddurim. Which siddur?

JG: Right.

JR: Four, which I am somewhat embarrassed about, is, because, for example, I do recall Nachum Goldman speaking to us.

JG: Say who he is.

JR: Nachum Goldman. Dr. Nachum Goldman or Rabbi Nachum Goldman was the head president of the World Jewish Congress. But during the forties and fifties and sixties, he was one of the premier global Jewish leaders outside of the State of Israel, I mean after ‘48. He was also a major dove, and a very cultured guy, and very interesting. (01:54:00) So we had him speak to us. We had a debate about whether Mordechai Kaplan should be invited to speak. And if my recollection is correct, we decided no because he’s too denominational, which strikes me as crazy. And I think that was a kind of fierce discussion. There may have been a lot of elements around that, because we had people tied to the seminary, etc. Kaplan at this point, of course, was still tied to the seminary. My vague recollection is that we did not, after extended conversation, have Dr. Kaplan come to speak to the group.

JG: Were there often debates about whether a particular individual was someone you wanted to invite to speak to the group?

JR: Not often. But we didn’t have that many outside speakers. But I do recall that one. The meetings were more taking care of — the retreat. We have a problem — we can’t get the place. How do people feel about this place, it’s three hours away
as opposed to an hour and a half. All sorts of logistics relating to the communal meals.

JG: How about logistics relating to — were there logistics relating, not only to how many hours, but what the import of that was relative to, let’s say, what time Shabbos started or those kinds of issues?

JR: Yeah. Yeah. And there were issues with food having to get there by Shabbos. In other words, there were people that would not travel on Shabbat, and there were people who traveled more loosely or did. There were people who would not eat food unless it had arrived by Shabbat. That was always an issue. That was an issue that people were aware of. We had to accommodate, and that might have been a factor in thinking about a three-hour trip, particularly during the winter.

JG: Shabbat started earlier. Right. These were things that would get discussed and hashed out in the meetings?

JR: My memory is more that the meetings were about a range of logistics relating to — could be prayer. We had High Holiday tefilot. The first year I believe we had Shabbos services every other Shabbos during the day, Shabbos morning.

JG: Shabbos morning.

JR: That drifted off when it wasn’t as viable. There were a lot of logistic arrangements. There was no staff. This was entirely voluntary. Whether it was tefilot, Shabbos dinners, communal meals, Shabbos retreats, the money. That’s what the meetings were about. Most people didn’t have that much tolerance for it.

JG: And membership issues.

JR: And membership issues. Inclusion, exclusion. Yeah. (01:57:00)

JG: In the other havurot. At this point it was only Havurat Shalom, these meetings were often very fraught and emotional. Did that happen here too?

JR: On occasion. My memory is on occasion. My imagination is the meetings at Havurat Shalom was more about ideology and substance. Jewish substance, in whatever way. How are we going to do this? Should we do this? Maybe I’m wrong.
JG: Were there things that were taken for granted here, like kashrus?

JR: Kashrus was taken for granted.

JG: Level of kashrus.

JR: Yes, the level of kashrus. I’m trying to think. People did bring food cooked at homes.

JG: That included meat, i.e. chicken, etc. It wasn’t vegetarian.

JR: It was not vegetarian. I would assume only food from kosher homes, but no one checked it. To my knowledge, there was no checking of people’s kashrus level.

JG: In their homes.

JR: In their homes.

JG: But it sounds like, not just tolerance, but people could do whatever they wanted in their private lives. Is that right?

JR: Definitely, definitely.

JG: Kashrus, Shabbos, or any other kind of religious observance?

JR: Right, right.

JG: Was this community also an inviting community in the sense that the occasions or ways the community gathered went beyond when it happened in the havurah apartment itself. For instance, did people invite each other to their homes for Friday night dinner?

JR: There was a lot of — in my opinion — Shabbos home hospitality. Particularly by the first — I don’t know when — there were a lot of couples. Then you had the first children. The first child was a Sperling. Sharon Sperling. I would say that was 1971. Then Ilana Ruskay, then Ilana Sugarman, which was January of ‘72, so that was a whole new, so that was a — I’m just trying to track this back. ‘69 fall we get going. In ‘71 the first child is arriving. Sharon Sperling. She was pregnant X months before. To answer your question, there were a lot of Shabbos
entertaining, particularly I want to say among the couples. And/or those that were more strictly shomer shabbes. To the extent to some who were single, like myself, some would or would not at that stage, make other plans, and others wanted to be a family setting like that.

JG: So they would be invited.

JR: Right.

JG: So we’ve talked about retreats a little bit, and how important they were. Can you try and convey what the atmosphere was like, and what was going on at these retreats? Many people described the Shabbat retreats, the monthly retreats, as more or less the heart of New York Havurah.

JR: I think that’s correct. Your question evokes the following thought, which is, some people have said: camp people are camp people forever. So the extent to which that many people in the havurah had shared Jewish summer camp, much of it Ramah — not entirely — the retreat approximated that, and it approximated it with growing familiarity and caring about one another, a group of broadly shared values. And I would add, the group that both davened seriously, and tikun was kind of serious, and had fun. You know, Shabbos afternoon we’d have touch football games.

JG: People have mentioned hiking.

JR: We’d have some hiking. It was fun. It was kind of a re-tasting of camp. I said earlier today that the mobilization in Washington was confirming. I think this was confirming. No one said this. This is why we did it. To create this kind of personal, intense, Jewish community that we were creating, and we imagined would be a model long for the future. But holding that aside, it was just pleasurable. People cared about one another. The davening was — it wasn’t always exquisite, but it was quite good. Making Shabbos dinner. Zemirot. Bentching. And the one-on-one talks, the one-on-three talks, getting up in the morning. Study. People prepared d’vei torah.

JG: Was it also in camp-like settings?

JR: Yes. Almost always. We were often — thank the Lord for Protestant camps. So in Manhattan — you wouldn’t have Jewish life in Manhattan if you didn’t have churches that were open for synagogues to rent them. So we were
often at Protestant camps. Occasionally Eisner, but Eisner was further. So we rented. It was winter, we’d have fireplaces. We’d make fires and keep them going.

JG: So this was also one of the issues that needed resolution, people have said: whether or not there could be a fire made by a Jewish person.

JR: I think it was started before Shabbos. Anyway, those kinds of things. You’d try to have — apropos of what I said about Ramah, one-on-one — you’d try to have a meaningful conversation about something of import with as many people if not everyone. And it didn’t feel good if you hadn’t. I mean, everyone didn’t like each other, they weren’t drawn to each other. There were very rich, and wonderful. And I think they were more than the weekly communal meals, which was too harried. Peoples dropped in, dropped out, came late, went early. This was —

JG: It was Shabbos.

JR: It was Shabbos. Everybody had made the venture to create Shabbos and be together.

JG: And as people were finding partners in the world, they could bring those significant others to these.

JR: They did. I mean, it’s interesting. This conversation is evoking a memory of who. So, to my knowledge, I mentioned: we had Sperlings and Sugarmans, and then Hunderts (02:04:51) year two. I’m trying to think of the couples, and I’m trying to think about who coupled, and the people who coupled later. People brought girlfriends at different times. Once in while someone brought a boyfriend; that is, a boy brought a boyfriend; that was its own — and many of us had zero experience with that in 1970 or ‘71.

JG: Hm. Was that a subject of conversation at all or simply accepted?

JR: It was simply accepted. I mean, period. It was simply accepted. I’m trying to think about the couples. Someone might — I bet Phyllis Sperling might have — the years in which people were there and how they moved on. People were there, and then people got jobs out of New York. They left, etc. And then other people came in.
JG: And on these retreats, would most everybody (02:06:00) try to go, so that you’d have —?

JR: Almost everybody.

JG: So it would be like, you’d have twenty to twenty-five people as members in a given year. Is that right?

JR: Right.

JG: So you’re talking about twenty-five to forty people, or something like that?

JR: There weren’t that many. I mean, there weren’t that many couples, and everybody didn’t come. I would say most retreats were in the twenty to twenty-five area. Actually, there was discussion, actually at communal meals about where we were on that number for the retreat in one week or two weeks or three weeks, and if we had a critical number, because at a certain point, there was a financial — we had to rent the place, and did we have enough people? I don’t remember retreats in the early years being canceled, but I think later, commitments, kids, more so. But that issue of fiscal viability.

JG: Once people started having kids early on like the Sperlings, etc., there were some small children at the retreats also. Did that change things at all?

JR: Well, by definition had to.

JG: Well, sometimes it just changes it for the couple.

JR: Yeah, I think the group welcomed the kids. I think the couples were more exhausted. Then there were issues of sleep, and noise and sleep, because some of these places were very small and there were times that everyone — I mean there were bedrooms and there were times when there were mattresses around a fireplace. Everybody was out there. Now with little kids I don’t think that works. Kids obviously over time changed things. You could ask them. That’s something that would be interesting to do: to interview some of the kids who grew up in this environment, and what was it like for them. How did it look? How did they experience it?

JG: In addition to these monthly Shabbat retreats, starting in about 1973, I think, there were also periodic retreats several times a year at Weiss’s Farm that
members of the New York Havurah also participated in. Do you have any memories of those? Did you go to any of the retreats there?

JR: I did. I mean I don’t have the sequence, but you had Havurat Shalom, New York Havurah, and Fabrangen.

JG: Nineteen seventy-one.

JR: Seventy-one. So the first impetus for that was to bring us together, so I do recall Weiss’s Farm and being there for many — a number of the — I don’t know how many, but two or three, certainly I went to.

JG: Was that different in feel, would you say, compared to the (02:09:00) monthly retreats?

JR: Oh yeah. That was a different thing. That, you had the audacious imagination that a movement was emerging. I shouldn’t say audacious imagination. A movement was emerging, a force in Jewish life which actually I believe has impacted synagogues. It has impacted Jewish life broadly. I don’t want to overstate it.

JG: We’ll come to that.

JR: I don’t want to overstate it or understate it. You had the feeling, number one, that you had three havurot, quite different, were emerging. What they shared, I think, was a shared commitment to participatory Jewish life, actively creating Jewish life. This was not about our group, our havurah coming together. It was about being with others, learning, hearing from each other, meeting. It was a quite different experience. In my memory, a quite different experience, although you felt related to these other people.

JG: Did you feel like there were any outcomes or outgrowths of these retreats, where there was some cross-fertilization of ideas and experiences that affected you? For instance, somebody described the idea of tzedakah collectives as being discussed at one of these retreats and then being instituted, certainly in New York.

JR: I think, retrospectively, you know, Ezrat Nashim was emerging, so it was kind of sneezed in a setting like that. Do you know what I mean by sneezed? It’s a groden term. I mean, you talked about it and therefore others picked it up. I thought about it, tzedakah collectives. I think there was beginning to be thoughts
— issues about the Israel-Palestinian stuff. Breira was created in the fall of ‘73. So these ideas were kind of at different times discussed and shared. But it was more of a little mini convention of havurot than one’s own havurah meeting and deepening.

JG: Would you say, at least according to your recollections, that there were truly significant differences in the approaches of these havurot, the original three?

JR: Year one, the New York Havurah traveled to Havurot Shalom, to Boston, and we had a Shabbos in Boston. I don’t want to speak for everybody. My recollection is that we came back and realizing that this was a more serious religious consciousness going on here — (02:12:00)

JG: By here, meaning Havurat Shalom

JR: Havurat Shalom. From prayer to davening, and we were less intense on those issues, for good or for bad. Havurat Shalom was heavily associated with Art, and I think Fabrangen was heavily associated with Arthur.

JG: Waskow.

JR: Waskow. I think New York Havurah didn’t have someone like that, for good or for bad. I think we thought it was for good, but it was just a different model. We imagined also, but this may or may not be correct, but that Fabrangen was more political than us. We were about social engagement, but they were more haredi in their political commitment.

JG: And they were in Washington, D.C.

JR: And they were in Washington. Arthur had done the Freedom Seder by then, and he was part of the Institute for Policy Studies, and some of the people, I remember, Bob Agus and other were involved in government stuff in a way that none of us were.

JG: Exactly. So let’s talk more specifically on the question of prayer, tefilah, in the havurah. So you said you came to the havurah, at least out of your Ramah experience, with a strong love of davening in the right setting. How would you describe tefilah, and the attitude toward tefilah in the havurah, as it was getting started, the New York Havurah?
JR: [pauses] It’s an excellent question. It prompts in me the notion that I don’t think the New York Havurah had an attitude toward davening. I think it had davening times, spaces, etc. Individuals at totally varying places in their individual journey used the opportunity of being with hevrah to do it, to do tefilah. In other words, Reuven Kimmelman, and this is a positive, and Alan Mintz, were just more seriously engaged in davening — my memory is — at that time, that others members of the havurah, who either had been but not certain, they were waiting for the kiddush. (02:15:00) Personally, I myself was kind of in between. I was not proficient like they were. I liked it and wanted to be into it. In a certain kind of way, I was still learning. You know, the havurah for me was still a place where I was learning: how to daven, how to feel comfortable studying texts. It was a few years later actually that I started studying on a weekly basis, with Richie Segal. And for me, that was the first really interesting moment — much of the teaching in the New York Havurah was, from my perspective, too philological in orientation. The shoresh of this is related to that. You know, the textual analysis, the Wissenschaft approach, the science of Judaism, analyzing texts. When I started for the first time, studying in a more serious way with Richie, you know, studying texts I think we did less of that. He was ahead of me on that. But we did more into the meaning and how it spoke to us, which we loved. Then later yet, have I come to feel the echo of text in the language. But that’s an acquired taste. It takes time to be comfortable with the language, which for me — because for me, other than the year at the seminary, my learning has been on the fly. But I had come to love the more textual language-based study that I couldn’t get into at that stage. So, I’m davening. Now I’m really comfortable with davening, but I was learning there. I think I learned a lot in the havurah about davening, about breathing, and about experiencing the —

JG: What do you mean breathing?

JR: Breathing. We did, I mean, you know, breathing.

JG: It was the sixties. You did breathing —

JR: We didn’t do a lot of it. Just relaxing with tefilah. There was quiet. There were long periods of repetition of the Amidah that you spend with the text and yourself. I liked that. I went to a different level, madregah, of davening, and that continues in some way. I’m now at a very interesting shul where they take it to another level.
JG: Huh. As you said, in the beginning, Shabbat Services, Shabbat morning services were maybe every other week?

JR: Right. That’s my memory. (02:18:00) I think that lasted about a year.

JG: And then what happened after that?

JR: There just weren’t enough people. People were going elsewhere. Then it just stopped. We’d have Shabbos when we went on retreats and occasionally, other times, maybe on Rosh Hodesh, but after a year or two, my recollection, there were no Shabbos morning services. Rarely Friday night services because people wanted to be home having Shabbos dinner.

JG: So that’s why the main tefilah experiences were at the retreats.

JR: Yes.

JG: And that continued.

JR: [coughs]

JG: While you were having services and during the tefilah at the retreats, would you say that people were experimental at all in the way they led services? The havurot are typically described as sort of inhabiting this realm of tension between innovation and tradition.

JR: I do have recollection, I do recall, that every once in while there would be someone who would volunteer to lead a Kabbalat Shabbat on Shabbos morning, in a way that was not part of the minhag of havurah. I would say the minhag of the havurah was heavily Ramah. Once in a while, someone would want to do it, and I don’t know, they’d want to, you know, read poetry.

JG: And they were free to.

JR: And they were free to, but I think it often created some degree of discomfort. There were a number of traditional — people liked the traditions that they had and didn’t feel great about having them disrupted. I think that did lead to some conversations about the limits, or how we think about that together. And should there be a process of letting people know this is going to happen, so if they wanted to daven before, or daven after. So, this very conversation I’m having
confirms there was a notion of \textit{minhag}, of the tradition of the way we \textit{daven}. So in theory, a person could come and do something quite different. You know. Obviously at different times, occasionally, someone would bring readings or poetry as part of the service, but once in a while there was someone that really would do something quite different.

JG: Can you remember any of those? Did Richard Segal do something quite different at one point?

JR: That was a beautiful \textit{davening}. Richie was a beautiful \textit{davener}. (02:21:00) That’s not coming up. The more bizarre ones — not bizarre, I shouldn’t — were people that would kind of come and read a poem and that was Kabbalat Shabbat. Those people would think they might have conserved the order and so how prepare for that and how to still leave room for it.

JG: Can you elaborate on your comment just now that it was in the tradition more or less of “\textit{minhag} Ramah” in many ways. Well, first of all, what is “\textit{minhag Ramah}” and how did that relate?

JR: You know, a joyous Kabbalat Shabbat.

JG: Meaning, singing?

JR: Singing, and hugging, and welcoming the Shabbat with a kind of quiet seriousness, and then Maariv following, a little less joyous but still full, full-hearted. The whole thing probably forty minutes, an hour. The tunes were kind of known, many of them from Ramah. The truth is, that many of them are at Conservative and Reform and some Modern Orthodox synagogues today. So many of the people had come from camps. Friday night \textit{tefilah} is an important piece of camp, and that became kind of an expectation, informal or formal.

JG: Let’s look at the issue of gender and women’s roles in the context of communal worship because when the New York Havurah first started, it was before Ezrat Nashim was formed, and as I said earlier, Art Green had described this as a pre-feminist moment. What do you remember about the attitude toward women’s participation in public worship and the roles that they played?

JR: You mean leading?
JG: *Leyning*, reading Torah, I mean *Baal Tefilah*, leading services, being counted in a minyan.

JR: I have slight memory, only. I don’t know what that reflects. A member of the *havurah*, and I don’t know if she was a member; I think she was a member was Arlene Agus (02:23:41). She’s an exquisite *davener* and *leyner*. So I do remember — when was that? I think Phyllis loved to *leyn* Torah, and (02:24:00) I don’t remember debates about it, but I don’t remember women leading *tefilah* too often, so you may have to head elsewhere.

JG: Well, in a way, it’s confirming it was a pre-feminist moment. In some senses, people are saying it wasn’t really in their consciousness. They weren’t thinking about it. I’m not sure that’s true of the women, but certainly the men weren’t necessarily thinking about it, and yet, many of the members — women founders of Jewish feminism came from the New York Havurah. Do you have recollections of that period — how Ezrat Nashim was formed and what its relationship was to the New York Havurah, if any?

JR: Well, this may not be correct. Obviously Liz Koltun and others, will have — I think Ezrat Nashim began as a study group of the New York Havurah. There were different groups going on. People were studying different issues. Some studied texts. This was a study group. I think Liz was in it and Arlene was in it and —

JG: Paula Hyman.

JR: Paula Hyman, may she rest in peace, was in it. Which then I do recall them deciding to go to the RA convention. I think that was ’72 but I may be wrong. Was it ‘72? I do remember that being discussed at a communal meal.

JG: What was discussed?

JR: I don’t know. We were planning to go. This was a study group at the New York Havurah which was about to go to the RA to sort of nail on the doorpost a set of demands and concerns from Ezrat Nashim, which —

JG: Do you recall a moment or period of time when this started to become more conscious for everyone including the men in the community? Or that the thinking that was going on in Ezrat Nashim was having an impact on how you all, as a *havurah*, were —?
JR: That’s a great question. They were going, and if my recollection is correct, one of their important issues was women’s ordination right from the outset. I can’t imagine those same people coming back and saying, it’s time for us here. So, I think the question you’re asking, or at least I would love to know more about, which I don’t, is: Were there women who wanted to lead davening or read Torah who were not able to do so at the New York Havurah (02:27:00) because they were precluded?

JG: One of two things. Precluded, or didn’t have the skills to do it?

JR: No, no. For those who wanted to and had the skills, I meant, were they able to or were they precluded?

JG: At any point. Did that change at any point?

JR: I am blanking on that. I have no memory of them being precluded, but I don’t have too many memories of them leading, other than Arlene.

JG: But you do have a memory, which is significant, of the discussion —

JR: I do. Not of those issues, but of them going. Clearly, it came —

JG: Came up.

JR: Well, it was part of the New York Havurah. Let me not only say, I would say that Ezrat Nashim from the earliest, attracted a fierce interest and commitment on the part of the women that gathered around. That was not the case with that many other issues.

JG: Right. Yeah. So the other part of that question is, as the women in this study group that became Ezrat Nashim were wrestling with these issues and trying to chart their course forward at the Rabbinical Assembly and elsewhere in Jewish life — having an impact on Jewish life, speaking in synagogues, etc., increasingly, what impact, if any, what changes if any, were happening within the New York Havurah as the result of their growing consciousness and activism? At what point were men’s consciousness being raised about these issues? At what point, for instance, did women start wearing tallisim? At what point did they wear kippot? Were they counted in the minyan formally? Was there ever a time they weren’t, and then were? When they were regularly took leadership roles in the service, whether it was reading Torah or leading tefilah.
JR: Well, you’re going to need to ask others. My recollection is not clear on this stuff.

JG: That’s okay. So we’ve talked a little about study and learning, which was another one of the key pillars of the havurah. The original brochure states very clearly that study and learning will be central to the life of the havurah. So how did the havurah seek to turn that vision into practice both in terms of the content of the learning, but also in the ways in which teaching and learning took place, in the relationship between teachers and learners, the kinds of classes that were offered? (02:30:00)

JR: What’s coming up with your question — you ask very good questions, doctor — at the outset, I think there was an effort, reflecting the overall vision of what we were trying to do, to have classes about community, about Judaism, and about social engagement or social issues and at times where they linked. I mean, it’s mind-blowing to recall that year one, again, and I don’t know how long it went on, but among the teachers: Shlomo Riskin, Paul Goodman, David Sperling taught, and I think Reuven Kimmelman, I’m almost certain, taught.

JG: So members who had expertise?


JG: Say who he is please.

JR: Paul Goodman was — I mean, he’s long passed, but he was one of the leading sociologists of the twentieth century; I mean, maybe that’s overblown, but not much, not much. Just broadly regarded, one of the people who wrote endlessly in places like the New York Review of Books and other places. His brother was Percivil Goodman — I think a leading architect, and he was an engaged Jew, in a nontraditional way, and he had written about community. So we wanted to better understand the nature of community as he understood it. I think Shlomo Riskin was engaged in the evolution of Jewish law.

JG: Where was Riskin at that point?

JR: Shlomo Riskin at that point was the founding rabbi of Lincoln Square Synagogue, and actually invited the New York Havurah there to meet. I remember meeting with him. Lincoln Square as we know it was located about
Seventieth and Amsterdam Avenue for the better part of forty-five years. It has just sold that property, and a built a new, very beautiful, synagogue two blocks south. But before there was the Lincoln Square Synagogue, it met in an apartment of Shlomo Riskin’s. That’s where it met, you know, and we had a meeting with him and he invited the whole havurah in. The emerging synagogue met in his apartment, in that constellation of apartment buildings there.

JG: Why was he interested in inviting the havurah to come?

JR: Well, first, he was building a synagogue. (02:33:00) Excuse me, you’d have to ask him. He was, you know, known as a kind of maverick, YU [Yeshiva University] prodigy, open, I mean I would say at that point, as it appeared to me, he was a practitioner of Open Orthodoxy before it existed. Obviously, need I say that in the fifty years that have passed, or forty-five, what has happened in the Orthodox world has changed all this. But then, he was trying — maybe he saw Jewish energy, some of it was sort of traditional, and saw it could be brought in. I don’t know what his motivation. Our motivation was he was already a person speaking, a little bit like Yitz Greenberg, pushing the limits of Orthodoxy about women, about social engagement, about text, etc. He was young; he was our age. He was a young, charismatic guy. And, by the way, a number of people recently in the last six months, told me they still recall the class I taught on Zionism.

JG: Tell us about that.

JR: I have taught at different stages about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the emergence of Zionism. So we probably in a slow way, read texts, read Hertzberg, the introduction, read some of the texts, got into conflicting narratives. For many of those folks, I remember many folks, including sometimes on Friday night or Shabbos retreats, they just had never heard of this before.

JG: They had not been living in the gray.


JG: This is before the Yom Kippur War.

JR: Right. Some of these classes, I’m sure, were amazing. I don’t remember them all. I remember studying with David Sperling.

JG: What did you study with him?
JR: I think we studied, I mean this is [*makes noise*], you know — *Shmuel* or *Shoftim*. But it was a textual — pretty heavy text. And I still was grappling with it. He was a great teacher.

JG: How did the roster of classes get decided and how many classes were being taught at any one time?

JR: Communal meals. It was also a time when roster, a new class — classes (02:36:00) were beginning for the fall, but sometimes it would dissipate and then another class would be added. In other words, it was kind of rolling admissions. Not entirely, but there was a certain aspect of that, or people I’d like to study this, how many would want to.

JG: How many people would it take for a class to be put together?

JR: Four or five.

JG: So a few people were interested.

JR: Absolutely.

JG: If the teacher was someone other than one of you, one of the members, how did the outreach to that person — what incentive would they have?

JR: I recall people coming to a communal meal saying, X person is willing, or is open, or would like to, who would want to. Someone would say, I’m already doing three classes, I have a job, I can’t do it now. Can we put it off? I mean, let me say that, you had a question before about the conceptualization. I have no idea how they did it in Havurat Shalom, but we did not have, for good or for bad, someone assigned to sort of who’s the — I don’t mean dean but — who is the person who conceptually is going to try to decide whether to have a class on X, Y, and Z. This was much more, for good or for bad, ad hoc, evolving from interests of students, availability of teachers, just who crossed paths with whom.

JG: And it was for the members?

JR: For the members. Occasionally, someone else would sit in. But that was occasionally.
JG: Right. So not like —

JR: Or sometimes someone wanted to join might take a class and that would lead to, I want more.

JG: Someone could, from the outside —

JR: Yes.

JG: — at least on a limited basis.

JR: Well, I think as time went on, boundaries became reduced. It wasn’t going to become the ultimate seminary community. It was more of an informal, or I should say, voluntaristic Jewish community of intentionality and intensity of X, Y, and Z elements, and therefore it didn’t have the notion that we were about to ordain people. By a certain point it was just not real. We weren’t giving degrees, so we were really kind of — they call it an urban kibbutz. I don’t mean it that way, but a kind of urban, small Jewish community.

JG: That must have taken the pressure off of any notion of needing to conceptualize a curriculum that had any coherence.

JR: I would say in candor, I think overtime the classes became fewer and (02:39:00) this basically became a Shabbos retreat, communal meal, discussion at different times, short term — and the classes, study. You didn’t have Paul Goodmans teaching ten years later. I don’t mean Paul. I mean — it just didn’t happen. You had speakers coming, and classes, I think, became less, so the ordaining, I think, evolved, or dissipated, and the notion of classes as an ongoing way — I think people were just — it wasn’t happening. People were studying elsewhere. Some were at the seminary. Some were at HUC. Some were at Columbia. That doesn’t mean they weren’t serious d’vrei torah, there wasn’t serious study on a retreat, there weren’t occasional important discussions at communal meals on subjects or extended for a few weeks, which went on also. A discussion would begin and you’d continue, but the notion of classes the way I mentioned in year one, I think, over time weakened, dissipated.

JG: Same thing you were saying happened to Shabbos morning services, so it was sort of becoming distilled to, in essence, so to speak, what was going to hold this group together.
JR: [laughs] Social engagement around Shabbos, chagim, and creating Jewish community.

JG: Let’s go back and touch again on the issue of social justice and political activism, which we began discussing because you were so deeply involved in political activism yourself, and, you know, Meredith Woocher described the havurah as living at the nexus of political and religious values, and that’s in essence what you’ve been describing too, in many ways. What were you seeking from the havurah in terms of political activism? You were continuing to be politically active in a variety of ways.

JR: Yes, sorry.

JG: So, (a), what were you involved in outside your classes at Columbia? By this time, you were working toward your Ph.D. in Middle Eastern political science, and you were involved in the havurah and you were also still very engaged in political activities.

JR: For most of it, out of the havurah.

JG: Yes.

JR: The period, I would say, of ‘73 through ’75, ‘6,’7 was intense. Breira was intense. We created Breira in the fall of ’73.

JG: Go back for a minute. Talk a little bit of your own evolution from post-'67, and where you were. You described yourself as an early dove. You were on the left in terms of Israel-Palestine.

JR: Anyway [pause], I think I mentioned that when I took a course in ‘66 or ‘67, I realized shortly thereafter — actually it wasn’t then. It was when I read Herzberg for the first time. In Hertzberg’s introduction, he has a very interesting —


JR: Arthur Herzberg, Zionist Idea. He has a very interesting section which talks about the fact that — what led to the emergence of Zionism was the emergence in central Eastern Europe conservative, (02:42:00) even racist nationalism which precluded the Jew from being part of it. In other words, Napoleon sweeps across Europe, tells Jews, come on out of the ghetto and you can be part of society. But
later on in Central and Eastern Europe, beginning in the '60s, '70s, 1860s, '70s, Wagner, Van Schnurer, and others, a kind of conservative reaction emerges to this which says, No, we want our nationalism to be based on blood. So that, increasingly in Central and Eastern Europe, precludes the Jews, weeds Jews out, which in part, Hertzberg is arguing, leads to the emergence of Zionism. I first had to cope with the fact that, wow, the Zionism that prevails is also a conservative nationalism. There was a liberal Zionism, which actually was bi-nationalism, which had more support than any of us think as late as the mid-forties, 1940s. Thirty-eight, forty percent of the vishuv, in the Histadrut, voted for political parties broadly supported bi-nationalism. But the Zionism that prevails is a conservative nationalism. So first I had to cope with that since I was a true liberal. I came to accept it as part of the historical necessity. I thought Jabotinsky’s argument, while it was not perfect, that Arab states did have a huge number of other states. It was not perfect, but I came to terms with that. But then, though the study of other things, I came to the realization post-'67, that all occupations produce resistance, period. All occupations produce resistance. And therefore, (02:45:00) if we’re going to help Israel be the Jewish democratic state proclaimed in its Declaration of Independence, we ought to do everything we can to end an occupation. At that point, when people wanted to talk about Palestinians, not only would Golda, who was then the Prime Minister, say that there are no Palestinians, but she would say “Ain Breira: There is no alternative.” I began with a group of people. I had been so involved — so I was searching for this after '67. Where could you deal with this? There was no place that I was aware of so I did associate myself with something called the Committee on New Alternatives in the Middle East: CONAME.

JG: When was CONAME founded?

JR: I don’t know.

JG: But right in that period?

JR: I thought before, but I don’t know. I was then teaching Hebrew school at the seminary, in the havurah. And early on, I realized this was way too far out of the Jewish community to have an impact on anything that mattered. In other words, CONAME was out in the peace community, out in the fellowship of reconciliation community, but if you wanted to impact the Jewish world — and so the impetus for Breira begins. Now, you mentioned about X time ago, that there were Weiss’s Farm conclaves. There was actually another interesting conference organized by Rabbi Steven Shaw, who later created something called the Radius
Institute. He organized an interesting conference in Rutgers in 1973, in the spring of ‘73.

JG: So before the war.

JR: Art was there. Arthur Waskow was there. There was some overlay of the havurot. Steve Shaw is a very interesting guy and it was a very interesting gathering of people about creating the Jewish community of the future.

JG: It wasn’t specifically focused on Israel?

JR: Not at all. But there was a session on it. That’s where I met Stephenn P. Cohen who became a dear friend. He just died. And that’s where we had a serious conversation, and from that —

JG: After this class, this session?

JR: It was a large session. I believe it was on Shabbos afternoon. It was a large session and people said, we ought do something. From that, I and others, but I principally took the impetus to create Breira. Now I did that with people, and I linked people. I remember we were going to the airport because Stephen Cohen was going to Israel for the year and I tried to get him to sign on to the opening Breira statement. The Breira statement opened with: Israel is the name of the land, (02:48:00) a people, and a state, and it gets into the need to discuss these matters, etc. Stephen P.Cohen — very brilliant — did not sign on then, because he felt that we did not understand enough about the nature of the American Jewish community and how they’d respond to it. So I had been involved in CONAME, a little bit the McGovern campaign of ‘72. They’d asked me if I’d be a delegate. I was involved in that. The Allard Lowenstein campaign of ‘72. So I was involved in politics; I was involved in the CONAME and then the startup of Breira, and I was getting a Ph.D., trying to get a Ph.D.

JG: Busy guy.

JR: Busy guy. It was all good.

JG: Were you married by then?

JR: No.
JG: No. Still no. The early, the very beginnings of Breira had what kind of relationship, if any, would you say, to the New York Havurah?

JR: Well, the first office of Breira was in our apartment. And I was living with Gerry Serotta.

JG: In the apartment.

JR: In the apartment. No, not the havurah apartment. We had an apartment, as students, at 111th Street. 529 W. 111th. They called it a walk-in off the fire escape. So our first office was there. Someone linked us to a guy named Bob Loeb. And we hired Bob Loeb as the first director Breira, and he worked in an unused — I mean it was a tiny apartment. I think the rent was ninety bucks.

JG: In the other bedroom?

JR: This was not the New York Havurah apartment. This was 111th, this was our apartment. It was not the New York Havurah. It was Gerry Serotta and I lived as roommates at 529 W. 111th Street.

JG: So Breira was in your apartment?

JR: In our apartment in a little room. It was a tiny room. That’s where it began. Eventually, six months later, we moved out. But we began it there. Bob Loeb was hired as staff and —

JG: Can you talk a little bit though about, as I said, the relationship of Breira to —

JR: To the havurah?

JG: To the havurah and to havurot because there were others who were involved. There was a substantial overlap.

JR: Uh-huh. That’s a really interesting question. On the founding committee of Breira: Gerry Serotta, Peter Geffen. These are, by now, we’re in ‘72, ‘3, all people around the New York Havurah. David Saperstein.

JG: Who became the Director of the RAC [Reform Action Center]?
JR: And just the ambassador (02:51:00) for Religious Freedom, just finished. Alan Mintz was on the original committee of Breira. Later wrote a demural in *Response Magazine* about Breira.

JG: People associated with Fabrangen?


JG: Max Ticktin.

JR: Max Ticktin.

JG: So there were Hillel rabbis who were involved. A number.

JR: We went out to get an advisory board. Rabbis, Hillel rabbis, etc. I mean, Breira was — many of us involved with Breira — but it was not — I guess the question is, it’s true we had traveled together so to speak, but I do not think of Breira having a lot of space at Ninety-eighth Street. It doesn’t mean that we didn’t occasionally have a discussion about it, but I don’t recall a lot of discussion about it. Although actually as I think about it — because what happened then is that I get married. I connect with Shira then Sugarman, a member of the New York Havurah — we connect. In 1975, we get married and we actually drift off from the *havurah*. Her ex-husband, Alan Sugarman, stays in it, so we drift off and we get involved in some other things. So more discussion of Breira may have taken place then and we weren’t really around at that point, although we later came back when he left. So in other words, Breira is created ‘73, ‘74, ‘75. Shira and I get together in ‘74 and we sort of drift off, etc. So you’d have to ask others if the Breira, which heated up intensely with the communal attacks on Breira —

JG: You were still involved with it then?

JR: Deeply involved. A volunteer, so to speak, but deeply involved. Breira finally falls apart in ‘77. But I stayed deeply involved through the whole time. I ended up being the person — because we had debt — who gets every board member to put in two years of — you know, we had debt, we had no money, so I took care of helping to close it down. So the relationship — I would think there were many fellow travelers to Breira in the New York Havurah, but I want to also say there were many others who were not political. (02:54:00) They thought Breira was too far out for them. They had not yet either wanted to or struggled through — in other words, they all came from a different place. So that’s why — yes, many of
us were involved in the *havurah*, but also Fabrangen, Havurat Shalom. But it didn’t occupy that much space at Ninety-eighth Street, and I mean Ninety-eighth Street as the *havurah* or on retreats or whatever.

JG: And the positions that Breira —

JR: Took.

JG: — took — you may want to say what they are briefly — didn’t come up for discussion?

JR: I imagine we may have taken the original statement and had reviewed and read it and discussed what it meant.

JG: Say briefly what Breira stood for and what it was trying to do.

JR: Breira was the first effort to try to open discussion in the American Jewish community about a range of issues facing the State of Israel and the Jewish people. They included, how to deal with the Palestinians, the divide of Ashkenaz and Sefard, the divide of secular and religious, and the appropriate relationship with North American Jewry and Israeli Jewry. So that was the opening statement which was trying — I think it was a call for a forum for discussion. We probably for around sixty very prominent rabbis to endorse them, the advisory committee. You know, Yoachim Prinz, rabbi.

JG: Balfour Brickner.

JR: Brickner was involved in the active working committee. But the advisory committee was Yoachim Prinz, and Robert Gordis. These were huge names in the community. Probably got fifty of them. We had a little editorial support of *The New York Times*. It was building support. We then took a position when Arafat came to the UN, and I believe there was a demonstration against terror or something. I don’t remember this exactly. And we put out a statement. People — I was not one of them — leafleted the rally, saying all Palestinians aren’t terrorists, and we have to somehow figure out what we’re going to do for a community that’s being occupied, that wants its independence, to live in peace. And that freaked out the Far Right, who then, in my view, did a pretty intense assault on Breira. From my perspective, doing a bit of character assassination. Ruskay had been involved with CONAME and Noam Chomsky was with CONAME, therefore Ruskay — I never met Noam Chomsky. (02:57:00) Ditto on
Arthur Waskow and a few others. This was Commentary. It was a pretty serious. Things got hot. I don’t know where the havurah was at at that point.

JG: And it was not a subject of much discussion, it sounds like?

JR: The attack was later. I wasn’t there.

JG: Later.

JR: I wasn’t part of. I don’t know. You’ll have to ask other people. This is good-bad. This oral history is about people during the original years. We’re now after five years meaning you’re talking about ‘75, ‘6, ‘7. This later period, and there are other people involved. Rabbi David Ellenson was then a member of the group. Interesting folk were there.

JG: We’ll have to see. I just want to come back for one minute to the question of the havurah vision as a laboratory, as a nexus between religious concerns and sociopolitical issues of the hour, which was seen originally as one of the key pillars. People were looking for a way, in the sixties, late sixties, to express their views, their activism, within a Jewish context. For many reasons, both because particularism was becoming more acceptable, and diversity was a hotter, sexier thing. Black separatism had been pushing things in a certain direction also. Looking back, how successful do you think the havurah was in fulfilling this aspect of its vision, the sort of nexus of religious and political?

JR: Well, you and I haven’t discussed, which I will now discuss, that I don’t stand with all of my comrades or colleagues and friends in the Jewish community claiming that Jewish values lead me to this. As I said in certain ways, I was a liberal before I was a Jew, as I’ve recounted. I actually find often, both sides — liberals and conservatives — that they often like to use these texts to justify politics arrived at independently. So, that said, I know I was seeking to have a place where the search for kedushah and sacred community and my political concerns were shared. It does come from that impetus (03:00:00) in the sixties that sort of create the commune, create the small, intensive, intimate community. On the one hand, you’re asking now how successful that was — you’re asking how successful it was back then or now?

JG: Looking back.
JR: Let me put it this way. I’m now a member of two synagogues. One has 3,000 members, and the other has, let’s say, fifteen hundred. But both of them are more intimate, more participatory, a total different — I think, in other words, the core messages of the havurah about ending the cathedral-like synagogue, more participatory Jewish life, more presence, has actually been introduced to many, not all, of congregations and other institutions, or is still going on. That said, there were also many, many — and I think we contributed to this — large congregations that have small minyanim meeting all over them. Maybe in the Orthodox community, but certainly did not take place in the Reform and Conservative synagogue community, that I’m aware of, when I was, quote, growing up. I’m still growing up. So the combination of multiple minyanim taking place in Reform and Conservative, and the tolerance for that — now where did that come from? It came from the fact that these institutions saw this energy and wanted to invite it in. I’m aware that in each of these settings negotiating that relationship was not always done easily on both sides. But in scores, if not more — I don’t know how many — Reform and Conservative synagogues there are multiple minyanim.

JG: Often called havurot.

JR: Often called havurot. Ditto, I think not all, but many large congregations have become influenced in terms of prayer, study, engagement, by the havurah movement. I don’t know what to say. If the impetus for creating the havurah movement was creating something that worked for us, for a period of time it worked for us. If the impetus was to have an impact on American Jewish life, either by replicating it or by impacting the major institutions of Jewish life, my intuition is it’s done more the latter than the former. But I may be wrong. There’s a lot of independent, out there, non-institutional Jewish life going on that’s very difficult to catalog. We’re in a period that highlights the startup and (03:03:00) the new institution, and I think it understates the continuing role of large, legacy institutions, in continuing, for good or for bad, to shape Jewish life. That said, and by definition, many Jewish institutions have been changed much for the better.

JG: So, that was a great segue into the final part of our conversation here about the impact of the havurah on yourself personally and the larger Jewish community. So you were saying — I want to get a picture of to what extent you continued to be involved in the New York havurah, so you were saying that once you and —

JR: Shira —
JG: Shira were married in 1975, you sort of drifted away from it. Did you ever come back into the New York Havurah?

JR: We came back. Excuse me, we never came back into whatever the havurah had been. It was a changed havurah. Everybody was older. It was more diffuse. Shira and I did maintain relations with many of the people in the havurah — go to simchas. By the time, by the eighties — you’ll have to check this elsewhere — I don’t know. I think the apartment was long gone. How long did the apartment last?

JG: After my period here, so I don’t really know. But my question is that after ten years or so, it was gone?

JR: Right. So we came back, so to speak, Shira and I, into relationships with many of the people. Friendship, Shabbos dinner, simchas, etc.

JG: Many of whom who had also moved on into some other —

JR: Configuration.

JG: Configuration. Some people do say that — if you ask them what was their period of involvement in the New York Havurah, and they’ll say, 1970 to the present. By which I understand them to mean that there has been an ongoing Rosh Hashanah lunch or something.

JR: Right. Shira, my wife, died in 1998. I remarried in 2000. The last years of my life with Shira, I don’t think we were there often. Occasionally for Rosh Hashanah. Almost never now. Now I know for some others, it continues to be important — the Rosh Hashanah dinner; I don’t know how many events there are — continues to be — I mean, (03:06:00) my life just got projected. You know, I still feel I care about those people. I’d be there, and I occasionally see them at different things. But I’m not involved in that at this point, but I feel like it was a very important time and experience in my life.

JG: Did you become involved in other havurot, or what sort of Jewish worship communities did you get involved in afterwards?

JR: I think mostly, by the nineties, we were members of B’nai Jeshurun and that became an important place for us and I consider myself quite close to Roli
(spelling?) (03:06:44) and Shira then died, and I remarried, and we remain members of BJ. Now, one of the things I have to say is that Robin and I bought a place in the country, which is not great for shul attendance, and so we’re also involved in a synagogue upstate called the Woodstock Jewish Congregation, but peripherally — it’s a wonderful place. Also we’re members of Romemu in New York.

JG: Say what that is.

JR: Romemu is a wonderful congregation with another wonderful rabbi. Terrific davening. A little more meditative in style. Robin and I, my new wife — now it’s been fifteen years, eighteen years — not new anymore. We went on a wonderful retreat with BJ for meditation and davening and study for a week to Costa Rica, and meditation has become an important part of our practice daily. We’ve done many meditation retreats. And therefore Romemu, which integrates that one step more — and there’s mindfulness work now at BJ which is also going on, so we’re sort of in a different place on that.

JG: Are there other ways you feel like your own ideas about spirituality and observance has diverged significantly, from where you were in those early days of the New York Havurah? What you’re looking for and what your practice is?

JR: A very important part has been getting quieter, which is the meditation work. Maybe that’s age-related, you know.

JG: Could be.

JR: You know, we were kids. We were twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four. We were kind of screaming to the hills. Now, as someone said, the runways are getting shorter. It’s been a privilege to have the life, to lead the life, and do the work I’ve done. A privilege. I feel very positive about it. (03:09:00) I mean, in a certain way in some of what I wrote about — I’ve written at different times that I consider myself a havurah Jew, and that is what continued to frame my work as the CEO of UJA Federation of New York.

JG: So you’ve had this long —

JR: Let me just finish. How to help people, motivate people, become a resource for people creating Jewish life which works for them. That notion of actively being a creator, as opposed to simply an attempt to be a consumer, is, I think, a
very key part of what camp was about, what the havurah was about, about what we’ve done. I was very pleased to lead in this Federation — there are others — to become deeply involved with helping to strengthen synagogues, transform synagogues, invest in synagogues, which, before people like myself and others got here, it just didn’t take place. That notion — I mean the first article I wrote when I came here was called “To Create” —

JG: Here being—

JR: UJA Federation.

JG: Say a few words about your career because you’ve alluded to it without saying it, so someone listening to this fifty years from now, won’t know what you’re talking about.

JR: When I received my Ph.D. by 1975 – actually ’77 — I realized that I was too much of an activist to want to do more research. By then I had been teaching Hebrew school. I got offered to be the Executive Director, principal of the Hebrew school at the SAJ [Society for the Advancement of Judaism]. I always say that was my best job, because forty years later people come up to me and say, you changed my life. And whatever I’ve done, and I’ve done a lot of interesting things, it’s mostly indirect. Subsequently I was there. I was the Executive Vice President at the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation for two years. For six years I was education director of the Ninety-second Street Y — a glorious period. I was then eight years as Vice Chancellor for Public Affairs at JTS. The first non-rabbi, nevertheless rabbinical school dropout.

JG: Is that true?

JR: And then I came here to work originally on the issue of Jewish education.

JG: Here you mean UJA?

JR: UJA Federation.

JG: Of New York.

JR: So after the 1990 population study which reflected the dramatic increase of intermarriage, there was focus in the community on how to strengthen Jewish education, how to strengthen the likelihood of positive Jewish education, identity.
UJA Federation had a whole work on that. They invited me to come lead that, and I came — four jobs back — back to lead what was then the Jewish Continuity Commission, working with — and in 1999, became the CEO, for which I served for fifteen years. The first talk I gave when I came here — the first article I wrote when I came here was called “To Create Inspired Community.” (03:12:00)

JG: Creating Inspired Community?

JR: “To Create Inspired Communities.” And I argued the challenge at hand — let me say it differently. Most people after 1990 said that the way to respond to the challenge of inter-marriage and assimilation is Jewish education. And I argued, if you haven’t been raised in a committed family or committed community, why learn this stuff? What’s needed is to participate in something inspiring that touches your heart and soul that says: I want to participate in this community.

JG: Otherwise there’s no incentive, you’re saying?

JR: Why would I need to learn this stuff unless I want to participate in this community? For those not raised in inspired places, inspired communities, or committed families, why learn this? Because we say it’s important? So I argued that the transformation, the challenge is how — and I of course cited Ramah as what does it mean to create inspired places for Jewish learning and Jewish living. And I think among the key places, or key gateways, are synagogues, centers, camp, Hillel, and — so that notion, and how to increase the participation, reduce barriers to what clearly are the most inspired examples of Jewish living and learning: summer camps, Israel trips, youth groups — informal Jewish education.

JG: So you’ve got a photo, that’s right over your shoulder there. Tell us what that photo is.

JR: That’s my bunk, in 1961 in Camp Ramah. I keep it here.

JG: In your office.

JR: Right in my office. Well, just as a reminder of the wonderful people I was in camp with and the power of that experience. It initiated the journey. In other words, what I think in Jewish life we need to do — and it was a wonderful group of people. Some of my campmates — we were fourteen, fifteen years old. But this is Jonathan Woocher, who for twenty-five years led JESNA, which was Jewish Education, whatever of North America. Cantor Rosenblum, Dean of the Cantors
Institute at JTS. Carl Wolken, a rabbi in Chicago. It came from this bunk. Almost all of us, none of us had been to day school or anything. We were all Hebrew school kids. Or most of us. So if you’re not raised in this, what initiates the Jewish journey? Educational, spiritual journey. I think that’s the challenge and opportunity of our time. Can we create — (03:15:00)

JG: So, when you look back at your experience at Ramah and later in the New York Havurah, do you see a direct connection between Ramah and the havurah and what you see as the challenges that we have ahead in the twenty-first century?

JR: Totally. We live in the most open society where Jews have ever lived. In other words, I mean, when I was growing up. Let me step back. I said this earlier. We had Napoleon swooping through and we had Jews come out and we live in an open society, and so Reform Judaism, Conservative Judaism and Zionism are in their own ways related to: How are we going to live in the open society? Those ideologies get brought to North America with the great migration of 1880 to 1920, and Jews do incredibly well here in every dimension. We build movements, we build institutions, we do well economically. And we think we’re doing well, which we are, but we are still a somewhat protected community. Even though we can go to the best universities and we can go to the best law firms, and everything else, because social norms in America, among all groups, kept us as a kept community. Everyone married within. Germans, Swedes, Italians, Catholics and Protestants. You can get out, but it was not so easy. In the 1960s, all that comes tumbling down. Everyone is marrying everyone. So for the first time, as Rachel Cowan first said, we were “Jews by Choice,” and that means —

JG: Everybody’s a Jew by Choice.

JR: Everybody. Therefore, can we create Jewish life that is sufficiently inspiring, that Jews will choose to self-identify, not because they have. They don’t. Not because of guilt. They have little. But because of the meaning and purpose and kedushah that they find. That’s the challenge/opportunity. For me, I learned that there [points to Ramah bunk photo].

JG: One of the —

JR: And the New York Havurah was a place to try to say, could we create that kind of community that would work for us. I think we did. For us it was a brief time. I went on to try to do it professionally. I found those settings. But it was all part of this [pointing again at bunk photo], and that’s where I first tasted it.
JG: Picking up on what you just said, some havurah members have commented that looking back on the impact that the havurah had, that one of the salient features, that was perhaps a weakness, was that it was not an institution in the sense that —

R: Right.

JG: Therefore, most of these havurot changed dramatically. Even Fabrangen which continues to exist to this day, and Havurat Shalom are dramatically different from what they were in the early days. New York Havurah doesn’t exist in the same way. (03:18:00) And you went on to —

JR: Run a big institution.

JG: Run a big institution. You — former radical, continuous radical perhaps — here you are —

JR: Liberal democrat. It’s only the Jewish community that thought I was a revolutionary.

JG: Right. Why here? Why the particular choices? What do you see as the thread from Ramah, havurah, to running the New York UJA Federation?

JR: Again. Much of what I tried my leadership to be here, was how could we try to become a resource for creating an inspiring, and I would add, caring communities. So what I learned there, I took in and fused with — if you read the endless things that I’ve written and spoken about, I’ve written about in spades. But you’ve asked an interesting question, which is, many of the startup communities; they come and they go. You devoted twenty plus years to one of the largest institutions. Some call it “the establishment.”

JG: You were just giving us some of the statistics of what this organization raises.

JR: But I actually think — for reasons I told you — that it’s the counterculture, because it’s about collective responsibility. It’s a counter to the individualism. It’s about the wisdom of crowds, not the notion of individuals that become equated with wisdom. Holding that aside, I’m a person that believes in inside out. There are times you need to be outside in. But I probably believe that — why did I go back to the seminary? From Ninety-second Street Y, back to the seminary.
Because I developed a relationship with Gershon Cohen, *zichrono l’vracha*, then the chancellor, and I thought he and I had deep conversations about Halachah and what it meant to train rabbis, and even though he was asking me to be Vice Chancellor of Public Affairs, he was an aid in that and I wanted to help him do that, how do you transform the large institutions. And he was into that. Shortly after I came, he announced that because of his illness, he had to step down — subject for another day. So, in the end of the day, even though there are great things, startups out there and things going on outside, I think large institutions continue to shape more of America and the Jewish community than we sometimes like to acknowledge. Sometimes you go out and demonstrate potential. It can affect them, as I think the havurot have done for many of the synagogues. I think that *tzedakah* collectives and startups and all the foundations are good. As I told you earlier, one of the stories of the last twenty years, is the continuing strength of federations in a period of post-Israel-at-risk, at least in federation dollars. Not that we don’t do good things; it’s just a different context in the 1950s and sixties. What does it mean? It means inside outside. I know you use the word radical. I actually wasn’t a radical. I was a Liberal Democrat. My friends in college, some of them were SDS. I was working on the McCarthy campaign, the Kennedy campaign, civil rights. I wasn’t for blowing it up. I never was for blowing it up. I was always about inside outside, but I think the power of the outside experience at camp led me to believe — how do you bring that in? I didn’t know how to do that. And so we created an entity and others did, which I think has infused back. Not quite enough, but I think there’s been progress on that front.

JG: Is there anything else you want to add at this point?

JR: It’s a great privilege to spend this time being able to share at least my take on this chapter of the *havurot* and American Jewish life.

JG: Thank you, John. It’s been absolutely wonderful.

JR: My pleasure. My pleasure. (03:21:53)