Jayne Guberman (JG): My name is Jayne Guberman, and today is Sunday, November 20, 2016. I’m here with Richard Siegel in New York City and we’re going to record an interview for the Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project. Rich, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Richard Siegel (RS): Yes, you do.

JG: As you know, today we’re going to explore your experiences during the late sixties and early seventies, and particularly your involvement in Havurat Shalom and subsequently the New York Havurah, and the impact that the havurah has had on your own life and on American Jewry more broadly.

I’d like to start by talking about your personal and family background and flesh out a bit who you were at the time that you first got involved in the havurah. So let’s begin with your family, when you were growing up. You were born in what year and where?

RS: I was born in 1947, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

JG: So tell me briefly about your family when you were growing up.

RS: I was the third of (00:01:00) three sons. My parents were born in America to — both their parents were the immigrant generation. They were both born in Pittsburgh as well. They came from what they would say were Orthodox families. I’m not sure really what that means in today’s jargon, but they — my grandparents were more observant in general. My grandfather on my father’s side was basically the founder of almost every Orthodox synagogue in Pittsburgh at the time.

JG: What did your parents do for a living?

RS: My parents — my (00:02:00) father was a jeweler and they had a store which was Siegel’s Jewels and Appliances. It’s a kind of combination that you don’t see much today. They sold everything from diamond wedding rings to clock radios. So it was —

JG: And watches, right?

RS: And watches, yes. As they expanded, one part of the store was the jewelry and watches, and there was another part of the store where they sold dishes and silverware and radios. And then there was another part of the store that was my uncle’s optometry shop (00:03:00) because optometry was a division of jewelry at the time. You would go
in and you would put on different glasses until you found ones that worked for you, and that was your eye exam, as it were. And then optometry became more of a profession. But my grandfather had started the store. He came over as a watchmaker, had a little watch-making shop, and eventually went from watch-making to jewelry. My father dropped out of school in the ninth grade to go work for my grandfather, and they built it into a fairly significant small business, as it were.

JG: And your mom you described as a renaissance woman.

RS: (00:04:00) Yeah, she was. Professionally, she began as a teacher. And when I was in high school she went back to school. She went to Pitt and got a master’s in —

JG: Reading, you said?

RS: She became a reading specialist, but her Master’s was in educational testing. But she became a reading specialist, and also she conducted educational tests, whether it was the IQ test or the preference exams, things like that. But when she stopped working — (00:05:00) she took up a number of different pursuits. Throughout her life she played piano as an avocation, but she was pretty good at it. But sequentially she did crocheting, she did weaving, she did macramé, she did jewelry-making for a small amount, and some of it was quite complicated and sophisticated. One of my regrets is that I don’t have any of her macramé. She did the whole backdrop of my father’s store in macramé. And the arc for the Boston Havurah, she did the macramé cover for the front. [laughs]

JG: Many people have commented on that and remembered that it was your mother who did it.

JG: Tell us about where you lived (00:06:00) when you were growing up. What part of Pittsburgh was your family in?

RS: I grew up in Squirrel Hill, which was and, remarkably, still is a very Jewish neighborhood. It’s one of the most — from what I believe, from what I understand — one of the most stable Jewish neighborhoods in the country, in the sense that once the Jewish community moved in there, it’s pretty much stayed in there.

JG: And it’s a significant portion of the population, from what I understand.

RS: Yeah, it’s a good size. But, you know, Murray Avenue had the bagel store and the deli shops and Weinstein’s restaurant, and — kosher bakeries, the Pinsker’s religious shop where you got your kippot and tallisim. And wine! That was the other thing.
Pennsylvania, I think still, is a state-controlled liquor state, so you had to go to a state store to buy any alcohol, but you could buy kosher wine at Pinsker’s — because it was kind of a religious sacrament kind of thing. So Squirrel Hill was kind of an upper middle class community.

JG: Would you describe your family as upper middle class?

RS: I would say so. They — again, it’s hard to say. There were — I think basically you would have to say that. We had a very nice house, we had a car, we had — we didn’t belong to the country club — both my uncles belonged to the country club — but that wasn’t really of much interest to my parents. But, yeah, we never — I was able to go to summer camps and college.

JG: So what was the Jewish community like in this part of Pittsburgh, and more about your own family’s religious observance and ways of identifying Jewishly?

RS: Well, we were a Conservative household. We belonged to Beth Shalom, which was the major Conservative synagogue in Pittsburgh, but particularly in the Squirrel Hill area. At that time, I think — well, some of the manifestations of this that are different than things might be today, I went to Hebrew school, but the Hebrew school was four days a week after school. And then Junior Congregation on Saturday, and Sunday school on Sunday, so I was going to Hebrew school pretty much six days a week in one form or another, and that was just what we did. It’s wasn’t like —

JG: Was that common in your community?

RS: It was common in the group that I hung out with. My middle brother revolted against it, but I kind of went along. I was a member of USY [United Synagogue Youth]. That was kind of our major youth group, although I also became a member of Young Judea. It kind of wasn’t clear to me what the distinctions were, so much, between the different kinds of youth groups.

JG: Was your family Zionistically inclined or involved?

RS: They were engaged with Israel but at a remove. My parents never went to Israel until — actually, when I spent some time there in college they came over to visit. My grandparents were very involved, but also had never gone to Israel. So I was the first member of the family to have gone to Israel. When I graduated high school, I spent the summer on a kibbutz. And it was very important for my grandfather. I brought him back a little siddur with the filigree on it, and it was very meaningful to him.
JG: You described your parents as “Jewishly functionally illiterate.” What did you mean by that?

RS: Well, we would go to synagogue, my mother particularly, pretty much every Shabbat morning, but she didn’t know any of the prayers — certainly, in Hebrew. My father had a passing ability to read Hebrew, but certainly was in no way Hebrew literate. He always struggled to get through Kiddush. But they went to shul on holidays, and certainly on the High Holidays, and we observed — Friday night at our house was a command performance. We had to dress up.

JG: What did that mean? How did you dress up?

RS: It meant you didn’t wear blue jeans. You wore what you would wear to synagogue. Nice pants and a button-down shirt and, I don’t know if we wore ties, but certainly we couldn’t come to dinner wearing what we came home from school with. We’d have to change. And obviously, as we got older we went out after — we being the sons — we’d go out after dinner to do whatever we would do, but that was a concession. By the time I came along, all these fights had been fought, but for my brothers, these were not givens — that they would go out Friday nights.

JG: How did your parents feel about the fact that their children — and you sort of were much more functionally literate by then — I’m sure you were able to do Kiddush and do other things, read Hebrew more fluently, etc. Was that a good thing from their perspective?

RS: I think they were a little perplexed about it, particularly when I started taking it seriously. They were a bit confused. Because there was some judgment in that — like when I realized that the Kashrut I grew up with wasn’t really Kashrut that in the sense that I had later come to understand.

JG: Now what point are you talking about? Is this high school still?

RS: No, that was already in college. But you know, I grew up in a kosher home, which meant that we didn’t have non-kosher meat, we would wait until the dishes were cleared before my father had milk in his coffee after a meat meal. We didn’t have two sets of dishes. We didn’t have two sets of silverware. And when we went out, we could eat whatever we wanted. Shrimp with lobster sauce on Sunday nights was kind of a standard. So it took me a long time to kind of understand that people were kosher, not houses were kosher. (00:15:00) It was a different concept there.
JG: Yeah, definitely. Was there a particular political atmosphere in your home?

RS: Nothing major. We were clearly a Democrat family, but there was no, as I remember, major political conversation.

JG: So you attended the public high schools in Pittsburgh?

RS: Right, we went to Taylor Allderdice, which is a large public high school. And it was clearly tracked. I was in the college track, so taking AP classes, and the only time that I really interacted with, essentially, non-Jews in my high school (00:16:00) was when we took shop. We had to take a woodshop, and in gym. I also was kind of the manager of the track team, which meant that I carried the equipment and collected the towels after practice. [laughs] That’s where I kind of interacted with the Catholics from Greenfield and some of the black students from different parts of the city.

JG: But your own classes were largely Jewish, it sounds like.

RS: Pretty much. Yeah. There may have been one or two non-Jews in our class.

JG: In terms of your Jewish education, you mentioned that you had a pretty intensive (00:17:00) Jewish education for a Conservative synagogue. At what point did you start to feel like you were really interested in this stuff. Or did you during that period at all?

RS: It’s not a question of being interested in it, because — I think that if I didn’t relate to it on some positive level, I probably would have found a way to get out of it. And the fact that I didn’t meant that there was some — that I was enjoying it on some level. But it wasn’t until college, really, that I realized I was good at it, and that it was something you could be good at. And that this was a differentiator (00:18:00) and that it was a possible career track. So that was really the difference.

JG: You mentioned that Camp Ramah in Canada was where you spent several summers, four summers I think, right when it was founded starting in 1960.

RS: Yeah, right when it opened — 1960.

JG: What was your experience of Ramah like and how did it influence you, would you say?
RS: I think, as you’ve probably seen from other interviews, Ramah was a major factor in the identity formation of a lot of the people who became members of the havurah. It was a way of kind of integrating the Jewish identity with American values and ethos in a seamless way that was quite exciting, and energizing. Ramah in Canada, first of all, was a gorgeous camp — was out on a gorgeous lake and a lot of our activities were outdoors. I don’t remember baseball and softball, though I’m sure we did, but I remember a lot about canoeing and sailing, and we would go on four day canoe trips up the — I forget what the name of the lake was. Our lake, which I thought was huge, opened up onto a real lake that was even huger, and we would go on really long expeditions. And that kind of physicality, but also integrated with obviously a Jewish sensibility on many levels, whether it was saying prayers before you ate and after you ate, or you know, the classes that we took, the studies that we did.

JG: What kind of classes were there at Ramah in those early years — that you remember, at any rate?

RS: I mean, as I remember, they were kind of basic. Classes in Prophets, classes in modern Hebrew. Really substantive types of classes. But at that time, Ramah was still, at least nominally, a Hebrew-speaking camp. So even though we were encouraged to speak Hebrew, our counselors spoke to us in Hebrew predominantly, and certainly all the announcements in the camp were made in Hebrew. The plays were all done in Hebrew. I remember I was in Pirates of Penzance in Hebrew, and Oklahoma in Hebrew.

JG: How was your background in comparison to other kids who were coming? Could you come to Ramah if you didn’t have a strong Hebrew background, or it would have been over your head completely?

RS: I was probably somewhere in the middle. There were kids there who had less Hebrew background than I did, but there were clearly kids who had a lot more — either went to day schools or took their Hebrew classes more seriously than I did when I was in Beth Shalom.

JG: Can you elaborate at all on what you meant when you mentioned just now that it was a sort of melding of Jewish values and an American ethos?

RS: Well again, because — I’m thinking particularly of the outdoor dimension of this. It was really a camp that emphasized the physical dimensions of the camp experience, and yet it was integrated into a — so we would learn, although I’ve forgotten it, the name for hatchets and axes and sleeping bags in Hebrew. And it felt like a very integrated type of experience, where the Jewish wasn’t extraneous or external or added
on but was very much part of the fabric of living a normal life (00:23:00) as an American teenager.

JG: How did it affect your sense of Jewish identity and Jewish spirituality? It sounds like *brachot*, you mentioned, were part of the everyday experience of living, whether it was blessings after meals —

RS: *We davened* every morning, put on *tefillin* after I was bar mitzvahed. It’s partly where I became adept at leading *tefillot*, because campers would lead *tefillah*. And even though I went to Junior Congregation and learned the skills when I was in Hebrew school, this was kind of putting them into action in an everyday environment. (00:24:00) What was the question?

JG: That’s what we were talking about. Did it change your — have an impact on your sense of Jewish spirituality, or how —

RS: Well, I became much more skilled at just the practice, Jewish practice. So what I was learning in Hebrew school was more or less almost theoretical because it wasn’t put into action very often, or when it was, it was in Junior Congregation, which was kind of — “like” praying but here this was actually the real thing.

JG: So let’s go on to your post high school experience. (00:25:00) You went to Brandeis for college — how did you decide where to go?

RS: Well, I didn’t want to go to Brandeis, as it turned out. I didn’t even apply to Brandeis. I applied to Harvard, Tufts, Georgetown — and there was a fourth school. I didn’t get into Harvard. I got into Tufts. I got into Georgetown, and I wanted to go to Georgetown. They had us down for a recruiting weekend. I went down with my family, fell in love with the place. I would have been one of ten (00:26:00) Jews in my class, and I found that somewhat exhilarating. Already, in this recruiting thing, I was being asked all these questions about Judaism, and I found that kind of interesting. I was at that time still in the wake, or in the shadow, of my oldest brother [Bernard Siegel], who was nine years older than me and had gone on to law school and was interested in international relations, so I thought that I was going to go into law, go into the foreign service, and Georgetown had a fabulous foreign service school. I would have been one year behind Bill Clinton. Anyway, I was all set to go to Georgetown. And my parents, (00:27:00) particularly my mother, freaked out that I was going to go to a school that was decidedly not Jewish. I mean not — she didn’t mind my going to a non-Jewish school, but this was Catholic. She was really not happy about that, so she enlisted my older brother, my oldest brother, to prevail upon me to apply to Brandeis. So I applied late, I got in, and I still
didn’t want to go, and she somehow got me to agree to let him make the decision. And I
don’t know what bribe she offered him, but [laughs] he said I should go to Brandeis. So I
went to Brandeis. But it was not my first choice.

JG: Given that beginning for you, how was Brandeis? How did you find it? (00:28:00)

RS: Well, come on. This was 1965 to 1969. It was the heyday of the chaos on campus. It
was — and Brandeis was not really the epicenter, but it certainly was one of the hotbeds
of radicalism at that time. It was thrilling! The inmates were running the — the
institution. So I had a great experience. It ended up I had terrific teachers who were very
influential on my development intellectually, and ultimately career-wise.

JG: What did you study at Brandeis, as an undergrad?

RS: My degree was in politics. (00:29:00) But I took a lot of courses in philosophy and in
psychology. So those were kind of minors, although we didn’t really have minors.

JG: Who were some of the most influential teachers you had?

RS: It’s funny, I took a couple of philosophy classes — I’m trying to think what his name
was. Meyan, I think, George Meyan — who I haven’t really — didn’t follow afterwards,
but it had a profound influence on my critical thinking. I remember the first day of class,
he said, “You can read every book here, (00:30:00) and you can pass every test, but if
you don’t show me that you’re thinking, you’re not going to pass.” And it scared the shit
out of me! [laughs] Jesus, I know how to read, and I know how to write, but I don’t know
how to think! That kind of opened up a little path. I think I ended up taking three courses
with him, and that was a great experience.

JG: Can you describe a little more the political and social environment at Brandeis during
this period — this was mid-sixties. The anti-war activities were really acting up, people
were concerned about the draft, the Civil Rights Movement was in full swing at that
point. What was the impact on Brandeis, on the Brandeis campus, and on you?

RS: Brandeis was one of the areas that there was a student takeover of the administration
building, and there was — the Black Student Union took over one of the other academic
buildings (00:31:00). You know, it wasn’t clear exactly what the demands were, but it
was — that was — our contribution to the student revolution. There was certainly a lot of
anti-war activity. I think that was largely what the administration building was taken over
for — I think to have Brandeis issue some statement opposing the war. But it was also,
you know, this was a time of sex, drugs, and rock ’n roll. So there was an annual
Bronstein Day — Bronstein was kind of this revered teacher of art history that for some reason became this icon. And Bronstein Day was really a bacchanal! They roasted a side of — basically, they roasted a calf on a spit in an open fire out in the courtyard of the castle, and people were dropping acid. It was — it was a thing! So the war and Civil Rights, there was certainly a lot of activity on that, but it was also a lot of — kind of drug-related music-related —

JG: Counterculture. To what extent were you involved in Brandeis Hillel? You haven’t mentioned Jewish anything so far at Brandeis. So Brandeis Hillel, and also did you take any Jewishly related courses while you were at Brandeis, or not, during this period?

RS: Well, I took Hebrew because the summer before I entered Brandeis I went to Israel and was on a kibbutz for a couple of months. And when I came back, I took the placement test for French which was my language up until then, and everything came out in Hebrew. So I took the placement for Hebrew and placed in fourth year Hebrew. So I had some acquaintance with — but I don’t think I took any other Judaica courses. (00:34:00) My relationship with Hillel was kind of on the side of Hillel. Al Axelrad was the Hillel director of Brandeis —

JG: He had just started.

RS: He began the year that I began. In fact, I remember my father taking me to the Hillel, to the chapel where the Hillel office was and introducing me — having me meet Al Axelrad — and Al saying, “Well we’re both freshmen.” But then I really didn’t spend any time there until I got back from Israel. I went to Israel in the first semester of my junior year. Brandeis had (00:35:00) its own semester in Israel. It was called the Hyatt Institute. The focus of it was social sciences, basically sociology, politics. So I went on the Hyatt Institute. And that became a real turning point for me, because we were supposed to leave on June 4th of 1967, and there was that whole build up at the time towards what eventually became the Six Day War. And so our trip was postponed. We didn’t leave on the fourth, but we ended up leaving on the fourteenth. So the war went from the sixth to the twelfth, and two days later we were on a plane (00:36:00) to Israel. So coming into Jerusalem two days after the end of it was just an extraordinary moment in time, and studying there for the six months, and the access to areas that hadn’t been opened —

JG: What do you remember about coming to Israel at that time? What was it like? Can you describe it at all?
RS: It was euphoric. It was euphoric. I remember the first day walking up to the — which gate was it? The Jaffa Gate, and just — it was like, people — everybody was in shock. Israelis were in shock. Arabs were in shock. Everybody was in shock. But euphoric, I mean, it was just people streaming through the cities. I mean that’s kind of one image that I have, but that whole six months, we would go to Hevron, we would go to Shechem, you could go anywhere because everything was open and nothing was dangerous — oddly enough, even though there had just been a horrendous war there. So that experience was really — shaped me in many respects. So when I came back from Hyatt, I wanted to become more involved with Israel activism on campus. So I went to Hillel and talked with Al about it, and I think we did something in regard to that. I don’t really remember. But what he got me into at that time was to get involved in the alternative minyan that he wanted to start. So this was the same year that the havurah — so I came back in basically the beginning of ’68, and the havurah was starting in ’68.

JG: The fall — so it was in the planning year?

RS: The fall. So Al was kind of involved, and the idea of having an alternative service was very attractive to him, and certainly I kind of liked the idea too.

JG: Had you ever met anybody, a Jew like Al, a rabbi like Al at that point? What he represented?

RS: Um — no, I think that he was probably one of the first to kind of push the boundaries of Judaism into a more contemporary direction — as I think about it because this was before I met Zalman. It was before I met Art Green. And Al, really, in a sense, steered me, or encouraged me to explore those directions. In my senior year — thinking about it, he may have been the influence here — in my senior year, so this is ’68-’69, at Brandeis at the time, if ten students petitioned to have a class, they could get a class entered into the curriculum. This was — I told you, the inmates were in charge. So I remember working with, getting together with another student, Cliff Trollin and petitioning to have Zalman, who was studying at Brandeis at the time for his Ph.D with Cyrus Adler — to teach a class. And I didn’t really know who Zalman was, but I assumed that it was Al who had kind of encouraged us to do something with him. So we got Zalman to teach a class which was called “Psychology of Religion.” but was really, as I’ve come to see, Zalman-ology. He taught it as a “lab course.” So what did that mean? It meant that every week we would have some laboratory experience or experiment. Okay, so one week — you know, Brandeis has three chapels, all done by the same architect, all in the same style. Basically all identical. But our experiment was to walk through each of the chapels blindfolded and see if we could feel a difference in each of the chapels. So that was —
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JG: Well, could you?

RS: Well, minor — because basically you were feeling cold brick in any of them. But I did have a kind of epiphany in the Jewish chapel, which, a little embarrassing to report, but — so the (00:43:00) bimah was kind of down at one end of the chapel, as I remember it. So I’m feeling my way, you feel the wall, and the pews, and you kind of are walking down, come up to the bimah, come up to the ark, feeling the curtain in front of the Torah, and then reaching my hand behind the curtain and feeling the covering of the Torah covering. I reach my hand under the — under the Torah mantle and touching the — smooth skin. I mean, it became very erotic, and it was really the first time (00:44:00) that I got this glimpse of the Torah as this feminine symbol — in a really visceral fashion.

JG: Did you go off campus also as part of these ten experiences that you were having?

RS: Well, the labs themselves were all on campus. Let me just give you a couple of the others. One was he took us into the theater and we all lied down on the stage, and he put on a recording of Leonard Bernstein’s Kaddish symphony. And it was — I think we were all stoned at the time, but it was just this really remarkable kind of experience. So that was the stuff that we did on campus. But we also had an assignment for the course to (00:45:00) visit ten different religious ceremonies around Boston. None of them could be the ones that we grew up in.

JG: So, of your choice though?

RS: Yeah, whatever we wanted. So I went to Hare Krishna. I went to the Bostoner Rebbe — you know, the Hasidic place. I went to a Catholic service. A variety of different services. And then we had to write about them. And one of them, as it turned out, was I went to Shabbat services at the havurah that had just begun that year. And then I wrote about it. (00:46:00) So I have — I’ll send it to you — I actually have my rather inflated rhetoric about my experience of Shabbat at the havurah. “I danced through the streets with the Sabbath Queen at my side —” [laughs] It was a little inflated, but —

JG: What do you remember about it? What were your impressions?

RS: Well, it was unlike anything I had ever experienced before in my life, but it was revelatory. We were sitting down on the floor, first of all. I was in this room — it wasn’t particularly aesthetic or attractive, just a room in an apartment, or in a house, and — (00:47:00) relatively small number of people, maybe twenty. Zalman was leading the service and doing his thing, so there was singing. It followed the course of a service, but
it wasn’t — it certainly wasn’t what I was brought up with or experienced at Camp Ramah, which was kind of following the Matbeah Tefilah in a very organized way. And it just was life-affirming. I don’t know, it’s hard to really capture the kind of difference in the approach to — it was praying like they meant it, you know. They were — this was a serious religious experience. (00:48:00)

JG: Did the music in Havurat Shalom that first Shabbat sort of move you particularly?

RS: Yeah, this wasn’t just sing a song, sing it through, and then move on. This was sing it until it had kind of grabbed you and taken you on a journey and brought you home. And that was characteristic of music at the havurah in general, but this was, you know, seeing this for the first time, experiencing it for the first time. So even though it was a Jewish service, it was a Shabbat service, and I had been to Jewish services, this was not a service that I had grown up with. [laughs] So it fit the category of a different religious tradition, as it were. (00:49:00)

JG: So what was the impact on you personally of going to this service? Did it have any immediate influence on how you thought about Jewishness?

RS: It opened up for me that there was something new happening, and that there was a new — that there were new opportunities opening up that I hadn’t had any consciousness of before. I wasn’t really focused at the time on — on the havurah as a possible venue for me, (00:50:00) but that, just seeing that, opened up the sense that there is something, there’s something here that I hadn’t realized before — that this was an avenue that bore looking into.

JG: Did you know Art Green before that service?

RS: No, that was the first time that I met him, as I remember.

JG: And did you continue your relationship with him?

RS: Mhm. [shakes head]

JG: Not at that point. And so you became a member of the Havurat Shalom actually the following year?

RS: Right, so that senior year was very important. Partly, again, the aftermath of the Israel experience. (00:51:00) Partly not being entirely convinced that I wanted to go into law at that time. I had taken another course at Brandeis in Psychology of Religion but
taught from a totally different perspective by this guy James Klee — and began to understand that I was much more attracted to spirituality and to spiritual search, particularly attracted to Eastern dimensions of spirituality, particularly Hinduism at the time. And Klee (00:52:00) was — I wouldn’t say he was anti-Semitic, but he liked to tweak the Jewish students. I remember, for instance, he drew this diagram on the board, and the challenge was, can you take — can you draw a single line through all segments of this diagram without crossing any segment twice? And in two dimensions, you can’t do it, right. So people would try to do it and struggle. So he said, “In order to do it you have to draw a — you have to go into a third dimension and go over the line and come back.” And he says, “You Jewish students probably think that’s anti-Semitic.” Now, I remember this comment really clearly, and thinking, “What does that mean?” (00:53:00) I mean, what does that mean? And as I thought about it, he was indicating that Judaism, at least the way that we were being taught it, is within the lines, and you don’t break out of the lines.

JG: As in a system of laws? Halachah? That?

RS:  I guess he was referring to that, but that it’s kind of a constrained system. It’s within the knowns, and it doesn’t look at the unknowns. And, as I was reading more about the Eastern religions and, you know, some of their senses of the feminine Godhead, and kind of these — impressions from whatever (00:54:00) of my background started coming in, I said, “Well, there seems to be some of this in Judaism, too. Isn’t there something?” So before I go down this path, I think I should look at the Jewish stuff more seriously, and see if Klee’s wrong! [laughs]

JG: Do you remember having conversations with Zalman in which you were exploring these kinds of ideas and perspectives within Judaism? Did he continue to be an influence?

RS: Well, this course proved to be extremely important to me. Just the experiences that we were having, and the (00:55:00) terminology and the perspectives that Zalman would bring to normal experience, but kind of with his characteristic twist and absolute mastery of metaphor. Kind of just explode the concepts, it seemed. It was extremely attractive to me. So that did have a big impression on me. One of the exercises for the class I mentioned is — there’s a famous Bratslav story, “The Seven Beggars.” And one of Zalman’s exercises (00:56:00) for people was to write the seventh beggar. “The Seven Beggars” is a very complicated series of stories, of stories within stories, but there’s only six stories told. And the seventh story is kind of left until the Messiah comes. So one of Zalman’s exercises was to write the seventh beggar’s story. And I got seriously engaged in trying to figure this one out. And it became a kind of mystical journey in and of itself. I remember, I was stuck at a certain point in kind of this intricate structure of the story, and
I had a dream, and the story came to me in a dream. Literally. I never dreamed like this, but I woke up and that kind of captured the story.

JG: Can you convey some of your — what was going on in the story for you, and in this dream?

RS: Well, I should have reread it before this interview, [laughs] but I didn’t. All I remember is that the story was basically about the collapse of opposites into a harmony where distinctions kind of disappear into the wholeness of the experience. I mean, that’s essentially where the story was going. (00:58:00) But within each story — so there’s the beggar who has an infirmity who comes to the wedding couple to say, “You think that I am lame, but actually the roads of this world mean nothing to me.” And then proceeds to tell a story that reveals the blessing in the infirmity. So that was kind of the structure that I was trying to — what was the story that the beggar, who I can’t even remember what his infirmity was, was dealing with that would lead to this — anyway, so. (00:59:00)

JG: And this story was later published.

RS: Yeah, Zalman published the seven beggar stories.

JG: With his translation.

RS: Yeah, his translation. And he added this. And there was a record. He did a record of it and recorded it — because he thought that in some way Reb Nachman’s spirit had manifest in some way through this. But —

JG: Sounds like you were rather taken with, or infused with, mysticism at that point?

RS: I was. I was very drawn to it —

JG: What was it about Hinduism that was particularly drawing you?

RS: I think it was the multiple faces of God that it offered. That it wasn’t just (01:00:00) kind of — the “old man in the sky,” but it was the dancing God and the challenging God and the feminine God. That reality has so many dimensions, and the divinity can be seen in all of these dimensions without precluding any aspect of experience from it. So that I think was what I was particularly attracted to. But also, at this time, yoga was just beginning to emerge. Just beginning to emerge. And I started getting very involved in some yoga. (01:01:00)
JG: And did that become a real practice for you?

RS: It did, it did. Beginning in late college, but then carrying over into the havurah, I became a — I wouldn’t say a disciple, but I certainly was a hanger-on with Swami Satchidananda who was this kind of wonderful puckish guru. And at the havurah we became very close with — “we” meaning the community in some ways, but also some of us in particular, became very close with — we just knew her as Mataji [Gayatri Devi] who had an ashram in Cohasset (01:02:00) that we would go spend time with —

JG: It sounds like the whole spiritual universe was opening up to you at the same time that you were also beginning to explore the similar ideas, looking for them within Judaism?

RS: They were opening up for me, and I wanted to find them in Judaism.

JG: So what led you from this point in your senior year in college to actually decide to explore the havurah seriously?

RS: Well, so there was this confusion about where I was going, and the fact that law school was less and less of an interest to me. There was this rising spiritual quest, (01:03:00) and my interest in pursuing it within a Jewish framework. And so I started looking at what were my alternatives at that point. I wasn’t going to go to the Seminary, I mean JTS [Jewish Theological Seminary].

JG: Were you thinking about the rabbinate?

RS: Well, I began to. This was the point at which I began saying, you know, I’m pretty good at this Jewish thing. What’s the way of professionalizing this in some capacity, or making a living out of it? And so the rabbinate was pretty much where you went. What other — that was in the natural progression. (01:04:00) The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College had recently opened up, I think maybe the same year.

JG: Sixty-eight, I believe.

RS: Yeah. And that was very attractive because it also offered a Ph.D. So you know, you could go to get rabbinical, hedge your bets and get a secular degree at the same time. And then there was the havurah. And the havurah was much riskier, because even though it was Havurat Shalom Community Seminary, and the seminary was a defining part of it — it was a rabbinical program — it was just starting. It didn’t have any institutional backing to it. It was — who knew what it was? So it was a real risk. (01:05:00) So there was this
Reconstructionist thing on this side, and there was *havurah* on this side, and so I remember, I mean there was — also on a somewhat embarrassing note, but I had taken mescaline at some point senior year and had this fabulous experience, and just kind of the harmony of the universe just revealed itself to me. And when I came down from that trip, I ripped up my ticket to the law boards. *(laughs)* So I knew that was out. And I said, I want out. *(01:06:00)* I want out. I want to apply to the *havurah*. I felt that was where, that was where my inner drive was leading me. Not towards — even though the Reconstructionists offered this kind of safe harbor of a Ph.D., that wasn’t really what I was interested in. I was interested in the more personal religious search. And that’s what the *havurah* seemed to offer.

JG: Would you say that that was what the main appeal of the *havurah* was for you at that point?

RS: Definitely. Absolutely.

JG: Can you describe the process you went through in being admitted as a member?

RS: *(laughs)* *(01:07:00)* Well, I came in the second year, so the —

JG: So this was ’69. This was also the year that the draft —

RS: Oh, the draft! I forgot to talk about the draft. *(laughs)* This was another — I’m sorry, I should have mentioned it. The draft did play a major role in my decision. At that point, all deferments were cancelled. So my middle brother was deferred because he got married. They still had a married deferment. Graduate school deferments were gone.

JG: Other than a very few situations, like seminaries. *(01:08:00)*

RS: Yes, so there was 4D, which was divinity. And that was basically what — there was conscientious objection, but I didn’t think that I was going to be able to pass a conscientious objection. Then there were physical and psychological, and that would be a crapshoot. Then there was the lottery, and my number was like fifty-six, I think. And they were drafting up to 120, so this became a very real concern. And rabbinical school offered 4D deferment. In fact — it wasn’t the only reason that the *havurah* was established, but it’s not *(01:09:00)* without some consequence in the creation of the *havurah*.

JG: And they had actually gone to some lengths to make sure that they had the 4D deferment.
RS: Yes, they were chartered by the state, and so on. So this was — I graduated in ’69. I started applying, I guess, in early 1969. I was the first group of members. Members were both students and faculty, because it was a community. And this eventually became the tension that broke up the havurah as it was at that point. But at that point it was still trying to be both a community and a seminary. (01:10:00) And the process was that I had to meet with five of the — there was probably an essay I had to write — but I had to meet with five of the members and have these personal interviews with them. And — [laughs] it was in its own way a very grueling experience, because these were each quite interesting individuals who had their own ways of interviewing. One, for instance, Steve Zweibaum, was just an hour or so spent in silence just looking at each other. That was —

JG: During your interview?

RS: That was the interview. (01:11:00) He was not a person of very many words, so — [laughs] we were just kind of sitting and looking at each other for an hour. It felt like an hour. It could have been more. [laughs] I met with Joey Reimer, and that was kind of a normal type of interview. I met with Art, and — that was a difficult encounter actually.

JG: How so?

RS: Well, Art, if you know him, (01:12:00) is a rather intense personality. And I was still very tentative about all of this stuff, so I’m not sure that my dynamic meshed all that well with his. But we got over it. That was the nature of the interviewing process. I met with a couple of other people — Jim Kugel, who was a member at the time. Oh, and Michael Brooks, who I knew from Brandeis because he was the year ahead of me and we had some interaction. That was also a very intense and not a lot of talking interview. (01:13:00) A lot was based on kind of — a sense of interpersonal rapport and tolerance for silence.

JG: Which would fit into this community.

RS: Yes. Right.

JG: Were you anxious about whether you’d be admitted?

RS: I don’t recall very much. I’m sure I had probably some anxiety about it. Again, I had a fallback. And I wasn’t really committed into this path yet. And there was a sense that — (01:14:00) — there was a sense that I was going to be admitted. There wasn’t a lot of
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question about it. I had good bona fides. Zalman was referring me. Al Axelrad was referring me. I had good recommendations.

JG: Yeah. So when did you find out that you had in fact been admitted? Was it a quick process?

RS: I guess so. I don’t really recall much about that spring. But it must have been because that summer I went to Camp Ramah with half of the class who came — [laughs]

JG: With half of who?

RS: Half of the entering class of the havurah — as teachers and counselors. (01:15:00)

JG: Camp Ramah in Palmer? Was that your first time there?

RS: Yeah. As faculty, or as —? Yeah.

JG: Were you there as faculty, or as a counselor?

RS: Well, I started as a counselor and then I became faculty. That year — the year after I think I became faculty. But they eventually closed Palmer, partly because of us. [laughs] We were having too good a time as a cohort. We didn’t really pay enough attention to the campers. The campers were having a great time, but it got a little — undisciplined. [laughs]

JG: When was it that they closed it?

RS: I believe the chronology is — okay, ’69, ’70 — I think they closed (01:16:00) it in ’71. And I went back in ’72. I was faculty in ’72.

JG: So they closed it for one summer, you’re saying?

RS: Yeah. But that summer in ’69, it was Joey Reimer, and Alan Mintz, and I forget who else were unit heads. And then it was George Savran, and Bella, and me, and Gail Reimer —

JG: Twersky, at the time.

RS: And — who else? There were others who were either in the havurah or in that realm who were (01:17:00) also on staff at the time.
JG: So your formal membership started when? In September, when you got back?

RS: Well, I guess when we got back.

JG: How would you describe the havurah’s notion of community at the point you became involved?

RS: It’s actually very difficult for me to describe this. I’ve tried over the years in talking about the havurah, and it’s always somehow never quite captured what — as I understood it, the havurah wanted to be an intentional community. (01:18:00) Essentially, a monastery in the city.

JG: Why do you choose the word monastery?

RS: Because it was to be a religious community, men. Because that’s who all the members were. At that time, women weren’t — hadn’t been ordained in Reform or Reconstructionist. But the point — I say monastery because a monastery’s a very (01:19:00) enclosed world, an encapsulated world. And I think that’s what I understood the intention of the havurah to be. That when you joined the havurah, you were committing yourself to the community as your primary focus. So that, as I remember it, in order to do anything outside the community, you had to get the permission of the community — which meant, to go to graduate school, as I did in my second year there, to teach at — I taught Hebrew high school at Mishkan Tefila — you had to get the permission of the community essentially to do this. (01:20:00) Because your primary universe was really to be the community. To study there, to engage with your spiritual life in that arena. So that’s why it had the sense of being a monastery, which is a committed religious community. Although, in the city, meaning it had porous borders, and doors were open.

JG: And yet there were, in the beginning anyway, full-time and part-time members, as I understand it. You, I gather, were a full-time member.

RS: I was a full-time member. (01:21:00) And I don’t know anyone who came in with me who was a part-time member. I could be wrong, but I don’t think.

JG: And those who came in with you, were they interested in the havurah as a seminary, as a community seminary, or not the entire group?
RS: Well, I would say that most of them were. I mean, we were doing a — we did have kind of a course of study, as it were.

JG: A relatively set curriculum?

RS: It wasn’t set, but the dimensions of it were set. (01:22:00) Rabbinics and classical text, and Hasidut, and kind of various practical dimensions, whether it’s tefilah — I mean, thinking back on it now, I realize that a lot of the people who came in with me were not on a rabbinical track. George Savran may have started, but he quickly became involved in doctoral work. And David Roskies was also, I think, more interested in the kind of intellectual, academic dimension.

JG: And people were doing various kinds of things. Joe Reimer was at the Ed School at Harvard, I believe. (01:23:00) So they weren’t all engaged in rabbinical training as a primary endeavor, at that point.

RS: Yeah.

JG: Do you remember anything of the dynamic between full-time and part-time people during the time that you were there?

RS: In the beginning, no. It seemed to be fairly seamless. And I think that most of the part-time people were considered more on the teacher side of things. Buzzy Fishbane, he was at Brandeis. Hillel Levine was at Harvard. It became an issue in my third year there. (01:24:00) So the fourth year of the havurah, it became a big issue because a group of people came in who were very —

JG: So this was ’71-’72 that year?

RS: Seventy-one, seventy-two, yeah — who were very communitarian, and they really pushed that value and, in pushing it, broke another —

JG: What does that mean, concretely — what were they pushing? And what change were they looking for?

RS: Well, as a community, there are no teachers and there are no students, right? We’re all teachers, we’re all students, I paid 500 dollars a year to belong to the havurah. The teachers were not paying — they were, I believe, getting some kind of a stipend. So (01:25:00) this was already a differentiator in terms of the dynamic of the community. And there was this group of people that said, “If we’re really a community, then this is
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“bullshit.” And there were those who felt strongly about that, and there were those who felt very strongly that if that’s what it is, we’re not interested in it.

JG: On what side? People who were faculty or?

RS: Yeah, primarily. But also students. I mean, I wasn’t particularly interested in that — pushing the community dimension of this that hard. I was fine. I mean, because, essentially outside of curricular issues, it wasn’t an issue. In other words, when it came to any of the other dimensions of the community. In terms of setting up community standards and how we conducted services and celebrations and meals and all other — and divided up work tasks and things like that, it was a community, but it was only in this one dimension, as I recall, that there was this tension.

JG: When would that tension come to the surface, and how? Was it during communal meetings, the community meetings that happened on a regular basis?

RS: Yeah, and there was a group of members who lived in another building, and that was kind of — it was called “Dorton,” “there.” [laughs] And they kind of had this experience of it — (01:27:00) and it created tension within the rest of the community. And ultimately, some people left — they left, other people left.

JG: Is this the same period that a group left and became part of the founders of Kibbutz Gezer also?

RS: That was a little earlier, after. The Gezer group was — ’69, ’70. I think it was a little bit earlier period. And I don’t think that was because of this issue. I think they just wanted to make aliyah or spend time in Israel. When I left — I left in ’72 — I was the last rabbinical student.

JG: Meaning the last person who had come in for the purposes of studying for the rabbinate?

RS: [nodding] And the last person who was there, still expecting to become a rabbi.

JG: I see.

RS: And in fact, I left to go to JTS, to continue my rabbinical work. At that point — in reality, the tension between the community and the seminary — Havurat Shalom Community Seminary — the community and the seminary were in conflict, and ultimately what happened is it became neither a community nor a seminary. It didn’t
become a community in the sense that the people who really wanted it to be a total egalitarian community wanted, and it certainly didn’t become a seminary. The illusion at that point that it was a seminary kind of dissipated at that point. (01:29:00)

JG: What year are we talking about now?

RS: Well, that was ’72. I left in ’72.

JG: Seventy-two. But until that point, what was happening that was changing the understanding of whether or not Havurat Shalom was actually functioning as a seminary?

RS: Well, I think a lot of people came in who frankly weren’t interested in studying for rabbinical ordination.

JG: But they were being admitted after a pretty rigorous process, so that must have been clear.

RS: Right, so the boundaries began to be a little bit elastic at this point. There were a lot of tensions that were pulling away from the community. First of all, people were getting married. (01:30:00) Not beginning to have families yet, but the marriages became the focus of their lives as opposed to the community.

JG: Many people who were involved in these early years, however, describe their relationships as being, essentially, nurtured in the context of Havurat Shalom. People who got married during this period, or had serious girlfriends — typically, they were men. So that seems a little bit at odds with what you’re saying. Couples were — sort of subsumed within the community, it felt like, in the very early years.

RS: They were, they were. But in terms of (01:31:00) the energy that the individual was putting into the community, that became — a lot of it became devoted now to the relationship as opposed to the community. So it was a relaxing of that community. Yeah, it embraced more people, but the links were —

JG: At what point did you get married?

RS: Long after I left the havurah.

JG: Long after. So not during this period at all. Many people have commented about the constant need to engage in group processing, as part of the effort to create this intentional
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community. Do you have memories of this? (01:32:00) And can you describe what that was like? What were some of the issues that were being, that were surfacing, also?

RS: Well, it was excruciating.

JG: Everybody says that, that it was tough.

RS: I mean this was — we had a couple very intense t-groups, or group process sessions. But it all —

JG: What’s a t-group? Can you explain?

RS: I forget what it stood for. But it essentially was a group of people getting together and going at it in terms of group dynamics, inner group dynamics, kind of trying to resolve (01:33:00) issues both public and private, but in a common space.

JG: In a public way.

RS: I mean, there were certain rules to it, but it really depended on having skilled facilitators and I’m not sure that we always did have skilled facilitators.

JG: Were there facilitators? Were there people playing leadership roles in that context?

RS: At least in one of the instances we did have an outside facilitator. But there were times when personal conflicts surfaced and became rather (01:34:00) brutal — and ultimately, in some way, very destructive of what we were trying to create, ironically. One of the rules is you don’t walk out, right? You engage, and you engage and engage, and resolve, at a certain point. Well, in one instance, the wife of a member walked out. And that caused a bit of a crisis because then the member had to leave, and it was destructive. It was harmful. There were also other — I introduced co-counseling (01:35:00) into the havurah. When I was doing graduate work, I took a course with Maurie Stein at Brandeis, who had become enamored of co-counseling at the time and kind of was teaching a class in co-counseling. And I started getting into it.

JG: What is co-counseling? Can you just describe it?

RS: Co-counseling is a form of peer-to-peer counseling, essentially, where — again, there’s a certain framework and rules — but essentially the premise is that we’re all carrying around residual hurt that can be released through various physical manifestations. Shaking, crying, laughing, a variety of things. And that you can facilitate
the discharge (01:36:00) of these emotions by active listening. And as a peer-to-peer, it would be — so we would have a session. And for an hour I would be listening to you, and any questions that I would ask, would be asked not for my own information but to help you further engage with whatever emotions you were addressing at that point. And then after an hour we would switch roles. So this became a kind of therapeutic process that I introduced into the havurah, and a lot of — I’m not sure if everybody did it, but a lot of people did it. So, I mean, that was helpful. I wouldn’t say that these t-group, or encounter sessions were all negative, but I think the overwhelming (01:37:00) lasting impact is the hurt that came out of it, as opposed to — although there was one phrase that we learned to adopt, which is, “I would like to sleep with you, but I choose not to.” That became the kind of — a mantra that we would —

JG: What did that mean?

RS: Well, it was addressing the sexual tension in the —

JG: So specifically. Quite literally, you mean.

RS: Yes.

JG: I didn’t know how metaphoric that was!

RS: Oh no, this was very explicit, you know. “I would like to sleep with you, but I choose not to.” [laughs]

JG: So, I mean, in a way, you’ve been touching on this. But I just want to ask it more explicitly. (01:38:00) A related aspect of this group processing was what some people called the new age of interpersonal sharing, and the ability to share and be open to every other member, as well as the ideal of balancing individualistic and communal needs and ideals. And — does that resonate for you? That particular tension, the need for people to — people were engaged in their own personal spiritual quests, to an extent —

RS: There was an expectation that you would have deep personal, meaningful relationships with everybody in the group. But it was clear that that was an ideal that was not going to be achieved. (01:39:00) Some people felt that more keenly than others, on either side of it. In other words, wanting to have closer relationships with some and being rebuffed, or not being invited in. But that wasn’t a major issue for me. A lot of this, and I’m sure this is not a surprise to you, a lot of this revolved around Art. I mean, a lot of these issues revolved around people’s relationships with Art.
JG: How so? How did one person become so central in this?

RS: He was the — [laughs] he was the central figure! Everything, really, revolved around Art and his personality, [01:40:00] and his likes and dislikes. A lot of emotion was spent on — trying to negotiate that relationship — the distance between themselves and Art.

JG: You mean for each individual person? Wanting to be close, or whatever?

RS: Mhm. [nods]

JG: With him, personally. And yet for most people, it sounds like during this early period, Havurat Shalom was the center of their lives and their community, the people with whom they did things, worshipped, ate —

RS: Yeah, it certainly was for me.

JG: So, in a way, many things did work towards the creation of community. What do you see as the most important elements (01:41:00) in that sort of positive push towards community?

RS: Well, certainly in Havurat Shalom, prayer was a major element of binding the community.

JG: Okay. I’m going to come back to that in one second, because I want to spend real time on that. What about, for instance, communal meals?

RS: I was just going to say, meals as well. And meals had an almost prayer-like dimension to them, because there was always singing at meals.

JG: What meals are you talking about, for instance?

RS: Well, there was always once a week, there was a communal meal.

JG: So even at that communal meal, you mean the Wednesday (01:42:00) night meeting one that was often followed by a meeting or a program? And there was singing as part of that?

RS: Yeah, yeah.

JG: So not just Seudah Shlishit or something like that?
RS: Yeah. Or retreats. And retreats was another place where the community really bonded really strongly. And we had retreats several times a year.

JG: What about Shabbat, Erev Shabbat meals, and the community as a quote, “inviting community?”

RS: Well, yeah. Friday night — but it wasn’t as the entire community. But yeah, one of the conditions of membership, supposedly, was that you could walk to the havurah, so that walking to people’s houses became an important element. Yeah, so Friday nights and Shabbat lunch, those were two critical bonding experiences.

JG: Were there — a sense of cliques within the community, or not? Did, for instance, a certain couple tend to invite the same people over and over again to Erev Shabbat or would they consciously try to invite different people over the course of time?

RS: Again, Art and Kathy were kind of the ur-house. I think they were pretty good at making sure that their house was embracing of the community. Now, I don’t know whether people felt like they weren’t invited enough, or — that, I don’t know. Everybody else was kind of more peripheral in that regard.

JG: So let’s turn to tefilah, which was obviously a central piece of life in the community. How would you describe the attitudes towards tefilah within Havurat Shalom, and how did that relate to your experience of prayer in other settings?

RS: Well, certainly in the initial couple of years, prayer was a very open quotient — No one service was like any other service. I mean, there was no — there was really no set liturgy or musical frames. Every service was its own invention. And the responsibility, whoever was leading service, was a tremendous amount of responsibility, to be a good guide. To open an area of exploration that people would go with, but you know — you really had to prove that it was worth staying with you. There were some real masters. Burt Jacobson, for instance, was really a master of melody. And he would often pick a melody that would go through the entire service. Not every psalm, or tefilah, but weaving it in at points so that it would build and climax and nuance and moving. It was just a masterful construction. So very often there was a — there would be a — whoever was leading the service would give an opening kavanah, which would then dictate the course of the rest of the service — which psalms would be done in the Pesukei Dezimra and which melodies would be sung, and —
JG: Can you think of an example or two of kavanot that people might bring? I remember one, for instance, I don’t remember who it was — it might have been Joel Rosenberg, somebody was talking about light — it was for Hanukkah, and the kavanah was about light. It was woven through.

RS: Could be. I can’t come up with any one specific —

JG: It’s more a feeling-tone that is arising for you.

RS: You know, if services started at ten, people were there at ten. This was not like, you show up around Torah reading. (01:48:00) It’s — you were in for the ride. And it was the ride that you wanted. And it was exhilarating, just to kind of go on that journey each week.

JG: Many people have talked about, or mentioned, the intensity of the singing, or of davening as an experience. That sounds like that resonates for you. Is that right?

RS: Yeah, absolutely.

JG: What was it about the singing and davening that made it so powerful?

RS: Well, people were davening like they meant it. The sense of kavanah, of really getting into the words in a (01:49:00) deep, deep, deep way was palpable. And I became, at a certain point, one of the leaders of the davening. But it was — it took a while for me to develop the — I mean, I had the skills, I knew how to lead davening, from junior congregation to Camp Ramah. But this type of davening was something — you really had to be skilled, and you had to be flexible, and you had to be (01:50:00) confident. It was a complicated — so the first time that I led [laughs] davening —

JG: How far into your tenure was it? Was it in the first year?

RS: I would say it was the spring of my first year. Must be, because I certainly wouldn’t have done it in the fall, but I think it was the spring of my first year. And we were on a retreat. And I was absolutely terrified about doing this. And I decided what I would do is open up, start with an exercise. (01:51:00) I was part of a theater group at this time that was doing ecological theater. But somebody who had come to the havurah — was kind of a regular visitor — was organizing kind of a pick-up theater group and invited members of the havurah if they wanted to participate, so I and a couple of others were part of this theater group. And we used to do this exercise to start our theater process. And I found it a very opening experience. So I decided that I would begin the davening
with this exercise, and then after that kind of see where things went. So, the exercise was lying down on the floor, and kind of took people through a kind of — (01:52:00) relaxation, centering experience. And then imagine a sound internally, and then begin to vocalize it externally, and then do it louder, and louder, and then allow the sound to bring you up to your feet. And then move with the sound into the center of sound in the room. And then — and then kind of draw back, and all the while sounding your sound. So that was the exercise, and (01:53:00) at the end of that, okay — so, we started this. People started vocalizing. It was just this cacophony of sound, but it was absolutely gorgeous. And people got up and went into the center, and then they kind of moved back. And I was about to call it to a close, and somebody started saying, “Ah…Sh’mam…” and then somebody picked up, “Sh’mam…” And then somebody else picked up, “Sh’mam…” And then other people started coming in, and then (01:54:00) somebody else said, “Safa…” And other words started coming in, and then bits of prayers started coming in, and it took on a life of its own, and a niggun emerged out of it, and went on for I don’t know how long. And then back into these sounds bouncing off. It went on — it must have gone on for an hour. And then it closed. And we all looked at each other, and we said, “That was Shacharis.” And that was it! (01:55:00) That was — that was the —

JG: Is that what you meant when you wrote in your questionnaire about singing at times having this leader-less and evolving quality?

RS: Well, that was certainly an example of it, but that was not the only example.

JG: What are some other examples?

RS: Well, singing — I’ve experienced there like I’ve never experienced everywhere else. Normally, you do a chant, you sing it three times and it’s over. Songs at the havurah would go on, would go on and on and on and on. And at a certain point, they would take on their own life. Nobody was leading it, but it was — it had an organic intensity to it (01:56:00) that you just became part of this sound, and this — sound combined with words, and the words then adding an intensity to it that could go on ten to fifteen minutes. No one was counting. No one was going anywhere. It was a — not an expectation that this would happen, but there was certainly an invitation to it. And a willingness to go in that direction.

JG: So that was your first time leading?

RS: [laughs] Then I could do pretty much whatever I wanted after that! Because that kind of broke all the —
JG: It’s a spectacular first attempt!

RS: [laughs] I know, and everybody thought I was brilliant! (01:57:00) But it — it was emblematic, really, of something about the havurah. People invested — for some people — people trusted me with that and invested themselves in that process. And kind of allowed that dynamic to just carry them wherever it — and there are still phrases — Safa Brura is a — whenever I encounter it in morning tefilah, I’m brought right back to that — Safa Brura — that clear —

JG: Someone had brought that in, in that first encounter. Someone had brought that in, not you —

RS: Dovid Roskies. Yeah. I remember, particularly, David Roskies — “Safa Brura!” (01:58:00) I — I was done. I was not leading it.

JG: Right. Many people have pointed to the creative tension between tradition and innovation, including the use of a very eclectic array of sources, Jewish and non-Jewish, in the course of tefilot at Havurat Shalom. Can you think of any examples of how other traditions, and sort of experimentation that worked or that didn’t work, for that matter?

RS: (01:59:00) Other religions, I don’t —

JG: Or not religions, just other non-Jewish sources, it might have been poetry, music — all kinds of things —

RS: Certainly, neo-Hasidic stuff that was like — our basic texts were kind of the Hasidic stuff that Art really was introducing. Art and Zalman, particularly.

JG: So that came in in terms of music, presumably —

RS: It came in in terms of kavanot. It came in certainly in terms of study. Definitely in terms of music. Hillel Levine was just a master of melody. And Bert, like I said, Bert Jacobson.

JG: Can you say a few more words about what Hillel Levine brought — in terms of music? (02:00:00)

RS: Well, he had the whole Hasidic songbook in his background, so — sitting on a Friday night he would be pulling these niggunim from here and there. And other people
came, Nehemia Polen. Nehemia coming from B’nai Israel in Baltimore. He brought some absolutely gorgeous melodies.

JG: And did some of these become melodies that were really familiar and sung over and over?

RS: Yeah, yeah. Roskies introduced a number — he also had — kind of the theme song of the havurah was the (02:01:00) Kotsk Song. And this was Roskies’ introduction. We would sing the Kotsk song at every major occasion.

JG: What was the appeal of it? He sang it for us, by the way. But what was the appeal? Why was that so resonant?

RS: That’s a good question. Partly, it was that the Kostker Rebbe was this enigmatic Hasidic figure, so there was a great deal of — appeal to him. But also the song, talking about (02:02:00) coming back to the essence, felt like that was defining what we were doing, on a certain level.

JG: Right. You mentioned that you wrote and introduced a new song setting for Psalm 150. Can you tell us about that?

RS: So this ties back into Camp Ramah in a way. So when I was now a teacher at Camp Ramah, in ’70, I brought something from my Camp Ramah experience in Canada to do these two or three day kind of retreats. (02:03:00) So I did one in ’70, and then the camp closed in ’71, and then in ’72 when I came back, I was a teacher and I led a — kind of a three-day retreat. We went to a synagogue actually in Hartford. The whole unit broke up into several different groups, but I took a group on this arts retreat. And the focus of it was the last five psalms, which were all musical or aesthetic — instruments, and sound. (02:04:00) And each of the campers was charged with doing something with one of those psalms. They could do it in music, could do it in art, could do it in plastic, could do it in photographs. Pick a psalm, explore it, and come up with some artistic expression. So what was I going to do while they were doing that? So I and another camper, kind of strumming along, did a new song setting for Psalm 150.

JG: Tell us about Psalm 150, just to start with, for those who are listening.

RS: Well Psalm 150 is the last psalm. It’s, “Praise God with a timbrel, praise God with a drum, praise God with the cymbals.” (02:05:00) The last line is, “Everything that has breath praises God.” So, you know, I developed this song setting for it, and introduced it when I got back at the havurah. And the introduction for it was, if I can still remember —
what is hallelujah? So, there’s a — it’s become kind of a common teaching now that the four-letter name of God is (02:06:00) unpronounceable. Well, there’s an admonition not to pronounce it. But it’s also unpronounceable, so the admonition is probably beside the point. But that the closest you can get to sounding it is breathing. [breathes in and out] So what is “hallelujah?” It’s the four-letter name of God, plus la la la la la. So that was the introduction. And the psalm, the setting is, “Hallelujah…” [sings] (02:07:00)

JG: That was yours? I grew up singing that every week.

RS: See?

JG: Not grew up, I mean, in those years.

RS: It was introduced one Shabbat morning at the havurah, and through some mechanism that is totally mysterious, it became ubiquitous. So I’ve done a lot of things once. I wrote a short story that had divine inspiration once. I wrote a song, once. (02:08:00) I’ve written another song more recently, but it —

JG: What is that? What’s the most recent song?

RS: Well, I’m particularly attracted to a verse that, for some reason, has never had a song setting to it, as far as I can — and it’s — [Sabbath morning prayer (Shaharit]: Pesuke dezimrah, nishmat kol hai - ve-her la-nom ra’i yisho. Tshemorim teshem. Tshemorim nirdamim. Veha-mekits nirdamim; cf. Psalm 121:4] “God neither slumbers nor sleeps, God awakens the slumberer, that those who slumber — and rouses those — “And to me, that always — the resonance of that is (02:09:00) to me that’s almost definitional. That is, God is the consciousness that is always awake. And for us, God’s entrance into our life is to awaken us, to wake us up, to make us — to rouse us into consciousness. And for me, staying awake is kind of a mantra. To kind of stay present, stay present. So this is a, I think, a very resonant verse. So I developed a setting for it. It has not yet become ubiquitous so, who knows. But it’s (02:10:00) [sings in Hebrew] (02:11:00)

JG: Beautiful. Thank you for sharing that. I want to talk for a minute about Torah readings, and d’vrei torah during the course of the service. How would you explain how people approached the question of interpretation regarding the weekly parashah and how it was presented within the havurah?

RS: All right, this is not my long suit. I don’t think I ever gave a d’var torah at the havurah. Davening was okay, but — (02:12:00) So the — it was always an exercise in
psycho-spiritual reflection on the meaning of Torah. And the very best were combinations of poetry and intellectual brilliance that kind of converged and — I mean, I still remember Joel Rosenberg — you might have heard this already — but Joel Rosenberg did (02:13:00) the d’var on Mishpatim. So, the catalog of laws, right after the Ten Commandments — the big drama of the Ten Commandments, and the next week you have this catalog of laws. And he reinterpreted that. And classically, the narrative of the Bible stops here. And then the rest of the Bible becomes either recapitulation or elucidation of the laws. And he reinterpreted that to show that each one of these laws was a narrative in and of itself. And he would draw the picture of (02:14:00) the situation that led to that particular law, and the interpersonal dynamics that were going on, the societal — and it was stunning, as a total reinterpretation and turning on its head the classical understanding of what this was. But it was done in such a beautiful, poetic fashion. So it wasn’t just the intellectual brilliance of it, but the delivery itself was just —

JG: Stunning. And memorable. Let’s talk for a minute about gender, and the role of gender, specifically the issue of women’s roles in the context of public worship. How would you describe the attitudes towards (02:15:00) women’s participation in public worship at the time you were involved? This was early. It was before the formation of Ezrat Nashim in ’71-’72 and the early feminist gatherings that took place in New York, ’73, in those early years. So this is early on, but just before that. Just before the ordination of the first woman, etc. in ’72.

RS: Well, again, given that the havurah was set up as a seminary at a time — particularly around the draft — the people who applied and were accepted were men. And that was kind of taken for granted. It was just the way it was. No one was objecting to it, and (02:16:00) as time went on and women started entering into relationships, men started entering into relationships with women, the women started becoming a part of the fabric of the community. They were accepted into the fabric of the community. There was very little issue about that, and certainly, from the very beginning, Kathy Green was kind of a full partner in the enterprise. And women took classes — any of the classes that we were taking, women were taking.

JG: Were they taking any roles during services?

RS: Not initially. Maybe in Torah reading, (02:17:00) I don’t know about, but not in leading services, certainly. And I’m not sure about divrei torah. I don’t think so.

JG: Do you remember any women wearing tallit or kippah?

RS: Yeah, I don’t think that was an issue. I think —
JG: It may not have been an issue, but was anybody doing it? Or was it just before —

RS: I can’t really remember, but I would be surprised if there weren’t women wearing tallisim. Again, Zalman’s presence here was profound, and Zalman was kind of the one who broke out the tallis from its black and blue and white stripes, and kind of introduced it as an article of personal expression.

JG: What was his tallit like?

RS: Zalman introduced the B’nei Or tallis which was (02:18:00) kind of a multicolored striped and blacks, based on this sefirotic chart. But he also had paisley tallisim and whatever. So I’ll even go as far as saying, yes, women were wearing tallisim — or some, at least.

JG: What about counting women in a minyan?

RS: So I remember the exact time when we — [laughs] let’s see if this jives with what others remember. So we were on a retreat, and one of the women was saying kaddish, and we didn’t have a minyan of men. (02:19:00) And she got up and said — and I believe it was either Mona Fishbane or Eva Epstein, I think, who said, “I’m going to say kaddish.” And we all looked at each other and said, “Okay.” You know? And that was it. From that point on, women — it wasn’t an issue of counted or not. In other words, we didn’t go through this long deliberation, and investigation of Halachah. (02:20:00) It was just obvious when it was pointed out, and it wasn’t an issue anymore. Now that was in terms of counting women in the minyan —

JG: Do you have a sense of when that was?

RS: Well, it had to either be in my second or third year. I don’t think it was the first year. So it was either ’70-’71, or ’71-’72. But in terms of women being a member, that was an issue when Ruby Flashman, I guess, broke up with — I forget who she was going out with. (02:21:00) But anyway, she had been part of the community and then they broke up, and she said, “I’m still part of the community.” That raised a lot of questions. And then that became part of a deliberative process. But the end result of it was, yeah, she was. And then we started accepting women.

JG: And I believe that Michael and Sharon Strassfeld were the first couple — they were then a married couple — where both members of the couple had to be accepted individually as members. So that was in that period too, in the early seventies.
RS: That could be. That was probably in ’71.

JG: I think so. (02:22:00) Why do you think the minyan question was so easily resolved and other issues required more deliberation? And were there other issues that required deliberation, whether it was women giving d’vrei torah, women —?

RS: No. Once women were — once the issue came up and the issue of women’s participation, then I don’t think there was any question about, “Well, what about this, what about this —” Then it was just a question of whether anybody wanted to do it. The stakes were very high, so if you’re going to be the first woman to lead davening at the havurah —

JG: I want to ask you briefly about the role of learning and study for your classes within the havurah, and then I want to get to the Jewish Catalog. (02:23:00)

RS: Okay.

JG: So, what was the role that havurah envisioned for study and learning? Where was it situated in relation to tefilah and other — social action, for instance?

RS: It was in between tefilah and social action. So, the greatest emphasis was on tefilah, and the least emphasis was on social action. And kind of, everybody was expected to be learning, and learning in classes at the havurah. So whether that was a full course load, (02:24:00) as it were, or not, but I think everybody was engaged in some type of learning. And the learning covered the gambit. I mean, I learned whatever Talmud I know from — well, I began — when I went to the seminary I learned more, but I got my basis in Talmud at the havurah, and we also learned Hasidic texts with Art and studied Job with Buzzy.

JG: And Everett? What was the area that he was most instrumental in conveying to you?

RS: You know, I’m sure that I studied with Everett, but what I really learned from Everett I learned out in the field. I mean, I used to go out to his house where they had basically a farm (02:25:00) and I would just work alongside him in the fields. Covering the blueberries, picking the corn — that’s how we would learn, how I would learn from him. I’m sure that we studied texts, but what I learned from Everett was much more about kind of the holiness of nature.
Richie Siegel, 10/20/16

JG: So you just mentioned social activism. Where would you say — what place did social activism have within Havurat Shalom?

RS: Well, it was a principle, and it was one of the pillars, but it was observed in the breach more than in the reality. There was a group of havurah members who took it very seriously and created a major — a real community outreach (02:26:00) unit called “Brookline Power,” or “Heat and Power?”

JG: I haven’t heard about that. What was it?

RS: Oh really? It was “Brookline Heat and Power.” It was a little storefront that was a community organizing base for underprivileged kids in the Brookline area. And we were all supposed to take turns participating in it.

JG: And it was all run by the havurah?

RS: Yes, but by a few people. [laughs]

JG: And how long did that go on?

RS: [shakes head]

JG: You don’t know. Okay — so let’s get —

RS: It was called “Light and Power.”

JG: Is that it, not heat —

RS: Yeah, “Brookline Light and Power.”

JG: So as we mentioned, in your second year at the havurah, as I guess it was becoming apparent that the seminary was not (02:27:00) going to be a reality, it wasn’t going to become a path, at any rate, you decided to go pursue a Master’s degree at Brandeis.

RS: That’s right. I wanted to — I felt I should have an academic credential.

JG: What happened to the rabbinate at that point?

RS: Well, that wouldn’t necessarily be an academic credential. That would be —
Richie Siegel, 10/20/16

JG: So this might have been in addition to rabbinic ordination.

RS: Yeah, I wasn’t doing this — I was still intent on going through the program. But there was a program at the time, Contemporary Jewish Studies, and it seemed like a good adjunct to what we were doing.

JG: Its focus was (02:28:00) — was its focus on Jewish communal service at that point?

RS: No.

JG: What was it?

RS: It — [laughs] damned if I know! It was an academic program looking at, primarily, the contemporary Jewish experience. So it was more sociological. But I was also in the education track, so it was a way of kind of building up my education bona fides.

JG: So you had to write a Master’s thesis for this program. And this — something that’s had tremendous ramifications in your life, and many other people’s as well. So tell us about the moment you came up with the idea for the “Jewish Whole Earth Catalog.”

RS: Well it actually began the moment was in my first year. (02:29:00) There were twenty of us out in the backyard trying to figure out how to put up a sukkah. And as I say, a bunch of Jewish guys who didn’t know which end of the hammer to use. And I said at the time, I said, there should be a “Jewish Whole Earth Catalog” that you can look into and get instructions on how to build a sukkah! And someone said, “That’s a good idea!”

JG: Now, the Whole Earth Catalog you described as your Bible at that point.

RS: I was really enamored of the Whole Earth Catalog. It really caught the ethos of the counterculture as I engaged with it, which is a kind of re-appropriation of the tools for living and getting away from vicarious (02:30:00) experience, whether it’s in building a house or building a sukkah. And the sense that we can be empowered to create the conditions of our own life, and you don’t have to farm it out to experts or to others. So it underlay the “Back to the Earth” movement — grow your own vegetables, till your own farm. And it was also the spirit of what we were doing at the havurah — that in spite of the fact that we were ostensibly a seminary, I think what we were saying is that Judaism is something that everybody can do. And you don’t need to (02:31:00) farm it out to your rabbis or to teachers to be the vicarious Jews. You want the experience — you can have the experience! So I mean — the opening line of the Whole Earth Catalog is, “We are as Gods, and we might as well get good at it.” And that kind of summed it up, which is —
this magical compendium of tools and resources and books and people that enabled you to kind of construct a life however you wanted to do it, using your own hands and your own ingenuity. So the idea of a “Jewish Whole Earth Catalog” was kind of, wow! (02:32:00) That sounds like a really — because it was a manifestation of what we were doing. It was kind of an actualization, or a concretization, of what we were doing. So that’s where the idea began. And I started noodling it for a while and began kind of working on it as it were. Going over my papers, there were a lot of manifestations. What was it called? For a while we were calling it “Olam” or “Mishkan.” And sent out letters to people all over the world —

JG: Wait is this before or during when you were writing this thesis, or this is after that?

RS: No, no, this is before.

JG: This is before!

RS: This is before. The thesis was already two years later down the line. But there was a lot of preliminary noodling (02:33:00) and —

JG: And you just said “we.” Who’s the we?

RS: Well, it was me and whoever else was interested in working on it. It wasn’t a coherent — I remember Joel Rosenberg had a voice in it, and we were in contact with the World Union of Jewish Students, WUJS, and kind of sent out a letter to them saying, This is something we’re thinking of doing. Who has ideas of what you think should go into it? We started — there was a conversation going around this. No, when we got to — when I started the graduate program and we had to do a thesis, that seemed — (02:34:00) the idea of actually doing a thesis that would lay the kind of theoretical understructure for such a book became an idea. That didn’t create the idea, that was kind of an opportunity to give it more reality than it had up until then. And George wanted to work on it, so we worked on it together.

JG: He was also in the program?

RS: Yeah, the CJS program. The two of us were in it together. And again, it wasn’t a very rigorous program. [laughs] There weren’t a lot of demands in it, and something like this was accepted as a thesis, even though it was — (02:35:00) I’m delighted that it was accepted as a thesis. I’ve gone through it. There was actually some substance to it — because we did some historical referencing. Where does it come from, and what are the values that we’re going to be addressing —
JG: Was it your intention even at that point to actually create this book, whatever it was going to be called? When did that become a real reality for you?

RS: Well, it started to become a reality when we were doing the thesis. And we realized we needed to get, if we were going to do this, we needed to get serious about it. So we actually applied for a grant. This was the same time that the Institute for Jewish Life was created by the Federation movement. (02:36:00) The institute was supposed to be a stimulus for creative ideas in the Jewish community. Unfortunately, it passed out of existence very quickly because the major spearhead behind it, I forget what his name was, died and it kind of fizzled. But it did set up a grant process, and George and I applied to the institute for a grant to hire a secretary who would help us kind of organize this increasing mass of material. So, in their wisdom, they didn’t give us a grant, but they gave us a loan of five thousand dollars. (02:37:00) And we hired Sharon Strassfeld —

JG: In your wisdom.

RS: — to be our secretary. So we were working on it at that time —

JG: Was this after you finished the program, or while you were in it still?

RS: It was while I was in it. And so we started organizing — George decided to drop out because he wanted to go on to get his Ph.D. Sharon asked if her husband could join us. I said, “Sure.” It was very loose at the time. Why not? And then we began kind of — we took it to Schocken, the idea. And Schocken was quite interested in it. (02:38:00) But at the same time, Chaim Potok, who was on the committee of the Institute for Jewish Life that gave us the grant, was also interested. So he also approached us about having JPS [Jewish Publication Society] publish it. Then we got into this little riff between Schocken and JPS. We were kind of not real experienced, obviously, about the protocols of publishing. And we started negotiating with JPS after we had already received a contract from Schocken. We hadn’t signed the contract, but we had — so that wasn’t really quite kosher. So that’s kind of the (02:39:00) development of it.

JG: As you mentioned, the Jewish Catalog became its own phenomenon, and it really became the number one bestseller, after the Bible, of JPS.

RS: Still is. [laughs]

JG: To this day, to this day. Why do you think this concept of do-it-yourself Judaism was so resonant, and for whom was it so resonant?
RS: Well I think that it caught a moment in the ethos. We thought we were writing it for us, right? We didn’t know that anybody else would — but as the Whole Earth Catalog demonstrated, there were lots of people who were interested in this kind of re-appropriation of the tools and resources of life to empower and (02:40:00) revivify their experience. And re-appropriating Judaism and Jewish life was a dimension of that. So I think that it both expressed an ethos and it helped catalyze an ethos that was out there.

JG: Jonathan Sarna, in a relatively recent essay for “My Jewish Learning” credited the Jewish Catalog with helping to move what he called the values and ideals of the Jewish counterculture from margin to mainstream. Where do you see the Catalog as having had its greatest impact, as you look back over these decades? It was published in ‘73.

RS: (02:41:00) I think that it — there are several different levels on this. Part of it, it empowered — it gave this whole generation growing up at that time the — it’s not just the tools, but it was an attitude that was expressed in it, that Judaism doesn’t have to be this staid, boring, by-the-book, stay within the framework — you know, we had stuff going on in the margins. We took it into a different dimension. (02:42:00) It can be playful. And so I think that for this whole generation that was looking for ways of re-appropriating the tools of living, for whom Judaism was an important identity quotient, it was in some ways a lifeline. That’s how people described it to me. I think it was very important for women. Many who wrote in said they did their bat mitzvah or their confirmation and kind of used this, broke out into a new creative space on it. So there was that. And that lasted for a long time. It also had an impact, interestingly enough, totally outside (02:43:00) of this culture, in other parts of the world. We were on a congregational trip last year up the Danube. From Budapest to Prague, and Vienna. Wherever we went, Laura [Rabbi Geller] and I would go into the local Reform shul or alternative minyan and kind of try to meet the people there. And invariably, on their bookshelf, was the Jewish Catalog. And it was incredibly moving. (02:44:00) And when we say, you know, “I wrote that.” It’s like, “Oh God!” they would say, “This has been a lifeline for us.” Because where would they learn? They don’t have teachers or role models.

JG: That’s amazing. Do you want to say something about — did you find it in Poland also?

RS: We went to the Krakow festival, which is this fabulous — the Krakow klezmer festival. Thousands of people from all over Poland, all over the world, come to Krakow for a klezmer festival every year. So we’re out there at the klezmer festival, and (02:45:00) we were told that we should meet with this couple that were instrumental in
the Jewish underground under Communism, to kind of create a new Jewish spirit in Poland at that time. So we’re meeting with this couple — brilliant, very charismatic, very influential in terms of their impact on Jewish life in Poland — and they said they would meet in cemeteries because it was the only place they could meet privately. I said, “So, who did you learn from? What books did you use? How did you —?” (02:46:00) And she said, “We had this book. I don’t know if you’ve heard about it. It’s called the Jewish Catalog. And everything was in it. And we learned everything.” So, you know, I didn’t know what to say. I was just kind of mute. Laura said, “He wrote it.” [laughs] “Ahh!!” So, in some ways — I don’t know how to evaluate it, but it was clearly not just, you know, twenty-somethings, counterculture or borderline counterculture Jews in America that were looking for this. It touched a chord in people who were searching for their Jewish access (02:47:00) to their Jewish substance, in a way that was totally unanticipated. What did we know? Nothing. Really nothing.

JG: We only have a little while left, so I’m going to move to the next stage of your life. The Catalog was published in ’73, and in the summer of ’73 you left Boston to attend JTS. Were you intending to be in a rabbinical program at that point?

RS: I was in the rabbinical program.

JG: You were in the rabbinical program. Just tell us briefly, what were your plans? What were you envisioning at that point?

RS: Well, I was still intent on becoming a rabbi, and since the havurah wasn’t able to do it, I decided to follow the path that most of my teachers had and going to JTS. But knowing what they knew about — none of them had good experiences at JTS, (02:48:00) although they all said that they got a good education — the social, psychological, spiritual experience was not. So I insulated myself in the very beginning by joining the New York Havurah, and actually becoming the shamashe. I lived in the havurah.

JG: And the havurah in New York actually was in an apartment, a rented apartment right?

RS: Mhm. Ninety-eighth, Broadway and Ninety-eighth. It was a two-bedroom apartment. I lived in one bedroom. There was a very big living room which was kind of a living room-dining room, and there was another room where we would have classes and other things like that. Yeah, and the two experiences were quite different. I mean, Boston (02:49:00) was a very intentional community, very spiritual in its core, very serious about its study. New York — you know, the characterization is that Boston was the spiritual havurah, New York was the intellectual havurah and Fabrangen was the political. That’s
not entirely wrong. So the religious aspect of the New York Havurah was not the major element, by any means.

JG: Services weren’t regular, I understand, there. Not the way they were at Havurat Shalom?

RS: They weren’t generally well-attended, and —

JG: What was the heart of the New York Havurah community, in your experience?

RS: It functioned more around kind of — the dominant image I have of the New York Havurah was the retreats, which were a lot of very good study. We had some serious scholars there, David Sperling and Judith Plaskow and David Ellenson, you know. So the learning component was pretty substantial. And the social element. The New York Havurah in some ways still exists even though it doesn’t, because on Rosh Hashanah they kind of — and I don’t know, maybe on Shavuos, they get together for holiday meals. (02:51:00) There’s still a kind of—

JG: The original?

RS: Yeah.

JG: Those early groups. For those members of the havurah who were students or staff at either JTS or HUC, what did involvement in the New York Havurah represent? What did it provide for its members that the seminary did not?

RS: I think that’s not really my — I wouldn’t really know how to answer that.

JG: For you?

RS: I was part of the seminary. Oh! (02:52:00) Well, it provided for me the social, psychological, and spiritual dimension. I went to JTS for the courses, I mean.

JG: Was that true of others? I understand that other members of the seminary, JTS and HUC, were members of the New York Havurah. There were both faculty and students from those institutions.

RS: Faculty, I don’t remember if there were any students.

JG: Other than you?
RS: Yeah. I think Jay Greenspan was, but he dropped out. I don’t remember any others. I mean Ruskay [John] was, but he dropped out of it, but certainly, when I was there, I was the only student. I remember in my admissions interview, Gershon Cohen was the head of the committee, and he asked me whether the havurah wasn’t a violation of “Al tifrosh min ha-tzibur.” You know, “Don’t separate yourself from the community.” He said, “Don’t you think that being part of this havurah is a separation from —?” I said, “No, it’s like a shtiebel. You can go to your shtiebel. I go to my shtiebal. We’re all part of the same community.”

JG: You said that?

RS: I said that. They let me in, so! [laughs]

JG: Gerry Serotta, they were also students at that time, no?

RS: Jerry was at HUC, yeah. And who else?

JG: Levi Kelman?

RS: Levi wasn’t in the havurah when I was —

JG: Not when you were there?

RS: Rim Meirowitz.

JG: Meirowitz, yeah. Okay. So I want to turn, in our final few moments here, to reflect on, quickly, what the havurah and your experience within it has meant for you personally in your own evolution of your career, and more broadly as well. So after completing a Master’s you went on to become a Hillel director at Stonybrook, but then the bulk of your career was at the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, starting in 1978.

RS: Right. I was there from ’78 to 2006.

JG: What drew you to the National Foundation? What did you hope to accomplish there?

RS: Well, when I was at Stonybrook, one of my single achievements there was to create the Long Island Jewish Arts Festival, which was one of the first Jewish arts festivals in the country, and it was really a spectacular event. We had speakers and
performers, and art exhibitions, and it was highly successful, except on campus. It drew people from all over Long Island to the festival. Students really couldn’t care less about it. I mean, they did about some of the things, but — and I realized then that there was a lot happening in the cultural arena, about pushing the boundaries of Judaism and Jewish life, and exploring Jewish meaning in forms from theater, to music, to literature, dance that really were not being well-distributed or encountered. And that, of all the things I did at Stonybrook in those four years, that was really what got me energized. And I wanted to do more of that. So I started looking around for some opportunity to do something similar. So I applied for a grant — there was something at that time called the Radius Institute. I don’t know if you’ve encountered this at all. Steve Shaw had created this really wonderful convening place for people who were doing new energy around Jewish life. CAJE was created by the Radius Institute, as an example. Anyway, Steve kind of embraced me within this, and I developed this idea for what I was calling at the time the Yuval Project. Yuval was the first musician mentioned in the Bible, and this was going to be, basically, an artists’ collective. And through Steve I was able to get a grant of $20,000 from this philanthropist, Michael Taubman, who is this wild guy in and of himself, to basically underwrite the Yuval Project, which meant to basically pay my salary. So I went to the National Foundation at the time, which had just announced that they were going to do a Fund for the Arts. And I say, “Well, who’s running the Fund for the Arts?” And they said, “We don’t have anybody.” And I said, “What do you expect to happen?” And, “We don’t really know.” It was really crazy! They had made this public announcement that they’re going to do a Fund for the Arts, and they had not a clue what to do. So I said, “Well, I have $20,000 to start a project in the arts. Why don’t you hire me to do that here?” And they said, “Okay!” [laughs] Really, this is emes! So I ended up with a desk and something to do called the Yuval Project. And that quickly — it didn’t materialize into anything very much, but meanwhile I started insinuating myself in the National Foundation, and I became the developer of what became an increasingly large component of arts-related cultural activity. And it was a bit of a struggle, because the people who were in charge at that time really had no appreciation of the arts as a dimension of the Jewish experience. It was all scholarship and academics.

JG: Where did your own emphasis and sort of intense interest in the arts come from?

RS: So this, this is where my experience in the havurah, in a funny way, influenced what I was doing. Because even though culture and religion are generally seen as opposite ends of the spectrum — right, you have the Yiddish secularists, and you have the religious institutions — I didn’t see them as polarized — I saw the kind of questions that were being asked by artists and the types of expressions and explorations they were doing as very much a reflection of a spiritual quest. And a way of kind of using Jewish
language to explore very deep levels of contemporary meaning and value. And so I didn’t see them as opposites. And I felt (03:01:00) a lot of what I was there to do at the Foundation was to really see that, to kind of expose these deep levels of artistic expression as, in a sense, a spiritual search.

JG: And did that seem to you as an outgrowth, at least for you personally, of the kinds of exploration and spiritual seeking that you’d been engaged in through the havurot that you were involved in?

RS: Yeah, in a funny way. It certainly wasn’t linear. If you look, from that short story that I wrote in college for Zalman or the setting to Psalm 150 that I did at the havurah — (03:02:00) these were artistic expressions as much as anything else. It was just the form that they took, and so I can draw the thread, even though I didn’t.

JG: What was your involvement, if any, in the evolution of what became known as the havurah movement? Were you involved in that at all?

RS: No, I wasn’t. I was never particularly political — Political in a small “p” sense. So I just found what was going on in these different places so diverse, I really didn’t know what was the underlying ethos that would (03:03:00) bind them together.

JG: You mentioned that you had a disagreement with Art Waskow over this question.

RS: We were on a retreat together at this point, and he was very intent on trying to galvanize a havurah movement. And I just couldn’t — I couldn’t wrap my head around it. I mean, it wasn’t disagreeable, but we just —

JG: — didn’t agree.

RS: Didn’t agree.

JG: When you look back at the havurah’s vision of community and social justice and prayer, and learning, what would you say were its greatest strengths and its longest lasting impact?

RS: (03:04:00) Well, in a certain level, its greatest impact has been the people that were most influenced by it. It’s a litany of people who are now leaders in the Jewish community in all sorts of ways. From leading religious community, to leading academic institutions, to Ruskay [John] being the head of the New York Federation, for God’s sake! Who would have thought?
JG: Your role in the arts —

RS: My role in the arts, yeah. So there — I think the people that have come out of it that have been — in some sense had their identities very much shaped by that experience — has probably been its major impact. I mean, I don’t know whether (03:05:00) that’s where you want to go, but I’m involved with something now which, although it looks very different, I feel in some ways is a maturation of that vision or that experience that I had forty-some years ago. So we’re now involved in trying to create a synagogue-based village. Villages are now being created all over the United States as social rubrics to facilitate people to age in place. Most baby-boomers, eighty-five percent of baby-boomers, want to continue to live where they’re living. They don’t want to move into senior communities, and they don’t want to go and create intentional kind of communities (03:06:00) elsewhere. They want to live in the home where they’re living now, but they need support systems to provide both social capital and to provide some social services as they get older and have different needs. So what we’re trying to create is really the first synagogue-based village.

JG: Who’s the we?

RS: The we is my wife, Laura Geller, and a group of people, both at Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills and Temple Isaiah, two Reform synagogues in L.A. who have come together to kind of create this initial village. And one of the principles of the village that I’ve been really insistent on is that (03:07:00) everybody who’s part of the village makes a contribution to the village. Not just financial, but of time and energy. And that part of being part of the village is helping to build the village. So whether it means running a program, or taking somebody to the doctor, or working in the office, or serving on a committee, or making phone calls to members to check up on how they’re doing, that everybody has a responsibility to help build that community. So, in a way, this is like the havurah grown up. We are building an intentional community. And we’re all responsible for putting the energy in and benefiting by the resource that (03:08:00) we’re creating. So it wasn’t necessarily my intent in doing it, but the more I reflect on it, the more I see that this is a through line.

JG: One last question is that you and Laura are also engaged in writing a book.

RS: Yes.

JG: Which also feels like, in some ways, a bookend to the Jewish Catalog. Just say a few words about the book you’re working on.
RS: Right. Well, as we were moving into our mid-sixties — and I’ve now retired two years ago, Laura retired recently — but as we were kind of contemplating this, it occurred to me (03:09:00) that it would be good to have a resource similar to the Catalog. The way that the Catalog provided some kind of guidance at this stage of life, to empower, to self-empowerment, that we’re now going into a new stage of life. It’s uncharted territory. It’s really uncharted territory. I mean people have become this old before, but we’re looking at — health provided — twenty or thirty years. This is a new phenomenon that we’re going through. A hundred years ago, the life expectancy was forty-seven. Now the life expectancy is seventy-nine. We’ve added thirty-two years, not at the very end of life, but now. And where are the guides? Where’s the Whole Earth Catalog for the tools that we need to empower our lives (03:10:00) at this point? So I began thinking, well, okay, this should be the next Jewish Catalog. And we began thinking about this as the next Jewish Catalog.

JG: So this is from a Jewish perspective.

RS: Yes, we’ve been thinking about it from a Jewish perspective, but as we’ve gotten into it, we’ve started broadening it because we were able to do the Jewish Catalog because the Whole Earth Catalog existed. There’s no Whole Earth Catalog for this stage of life. So in a sense, we’d like to open up into that broader territory as well. So right now the book is called Getting Good at Getting Older. Subtitle, not quite sure. (03:11:00) “A practical guide based on Jewish wisdom” is something that we’re thinking about in that regard. So we’ll see. We’ve — we have a publisher. We have a publishing date in 2018, so we’ll see.

JG: 2018 will exactly match fifty years since the first havurah —

RS: That’s right, that’s right.

JG: So in a way, it’s coming full circle, and a way of giving back, once again —

RS: Yeah.

JG: — for you. And thank you so much, Rich, for this interview. It’s been really wonderful, and we really appreciate you making the time while you’re here on the East Coast to talk to us.
RS: I appreciate the opportunity. And as I mentioned before the cameras were rolling, but I think I want to preserve for posterity, this would (03:12:00) have been my mother’s 101st birthday.

JG: Today, November 20th?

Laura Geller: And her macramé is still on the ark.

JG: In Havurat Shalom, which is still going in Somerville, Massachusetts, and that was Laura. Thank you so much and thank you both.