Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project

DAVID G. ROSKIES

Interviewed by Jayne K. Guberman

December 22, 2016

A Project of the Jewish Studies Program
at the University of Pennsylvania
Jayne Guberman (JG): My name is Jayne Guberman. Today is Thursday, December 22, 2016. I am here with Dovid Roskies at his home in New York City, and we are going to record an interview for the Jewish Counterculture Oral History project. Dovid, do I have your permission to record this interview? —

Dovid Roskies (DR): Absolutely.

JG: As you know, today we’re going to explore your experiences during the late sixties and early seventies, particularly your involvement in Havurat Shalom, and the impact that the havurah has had on your own life and the larger Jewish community beyond.

I’d like to start by talking about your personal and family background so we can flesh out who you were at the time you first got involved with Havurat Shalom. So let’s begin with your family, when you were growing up. You were born in 1948 in Montreal, to which your family had immigrated from Vilnius in 1940.

DR: Not from Vilnius, but from (00:01:00) Czernowitz. They had already moved to Romania in 1934, and this —

JG: So tell us a little bit about your family’s life in Europe before they immigrated.

DR: Okay, so first I want to say that I have prepared sartorially for this interview based on the principle of “think Yiddish, dress British.” This is my British polo shirt that I’ve worn especially for this occasion — two essential pieces of my identity and my past. So I am the youngest of four children. Two were born in Europe, and two were born in Canada. And that’s actually quite important because my parents had a very rich past in Europe. They met and fell in love in Vilna, which was the cradle of Yiddish secular culture in the 1920s. I would say my parents were first generation rebels. (00:02:00) They both grew up in strictly Orthodox homes, particularly my father, in Bialystok, and he was the only member of his family to receive a university education — which in Poland was extremely rare in 1928 when he received his Master’s degree from Stefan Batory University in chemistry. He was one of three Jews — three Jews to receive graduate degrees in that year.

[Pause as viewpoint is corrected]

So he rebelled against his Orthodox upbringing and adopted the Yiddish secular world. My mother grew up in a Russian speaking home, a russified home, already rather acculturated. And adopting Yiddish, for her, was also a means of rebelling against what she considered to be their assimilationist tendencies. So (00:03:00) that was part of the
family narrative. Their youth, their student years, and the sense that they had created a new counterculture of their own. But that counterculture was deeply, deeply rooted in Jewish folk life, in Yiddish, in Jewish observance. For example, when my father wrote his master’s degree on the properties of yeast for Stefan Batory University, it was extremely boring because he had to wait twelve hours for the yeast to rise. And what he did to keep himself occupied so as not to die of boredom, was to sing cantorial music to himself, right? Because that was the music that he remembered from his childhood. So that’s my father. And my mother expressed her rebelliousness also through song, music, Yiddish cabaret. (00:04:00) And we grew up in a home where my mother could accompany herself on the piano, and she had a rich, extraordinarily rich repertoire of songs in Yiddish, Polish, Russian. Even she remembered Hebrew songs from her elementary school. So I grew up knowing that time was split in half.

JG: Your parents came to Canada at what point?

DR: So they got out literally on the last boat in the summer of 1940. They had planned this escape. It’s a very dramatic story. It was actually my grandfather who masterminded the escape of the Roskies from Europe. It’s something I tell in my memoir, Yiddishlands, a chapter about the last Passover seder, where Dovid Roskies, after whom I am named, (05:00:00) planned, literally masterminded the escape — when, how, and why they should get out of Europe at that particular moment. So most of the Roskies did arrive safely in Canada in 1939, 1940. And my parents arrived in New York Harbor on Erev Yom Kippur, 1940, with two children — my elder brother, Ben, and my sister, Ruth. And they made their way to Canada where the rest of the Roskies had already settled and established a foothold. My father was then part of the family business, which was textiles. So I grew up in what we call the “shmatte business,” and Huntingdon Wool Mills was a family enterprise. And that’s what my father did. That was his day job. (06:00:00) My mother was, it’s almost comical to call her this, but she was a stay-at-home-mom. What she did all day, I couldn’t possibly tell you, but she was always busy doing something. Among the many things she did, she was a patroness of the arts. And so our home in Montreal, as was their home in Czernowitz, was a salon for Yiddish writers, artists, actors, scholars. Montreal was an extremely congenial place for my parents to arrive in 1940, because there was an infrastructure of Jewish secular institutions, and they could enter into that immediately and become active on all fronts. The central Jewish organization in Montreal to this day is a unique organization called the Jewish Public Library. (00:07:00) The Jewish Public Library. It’s non-denominational, and it serves the entire Jewish community, in those days in Yiddish and in Hebrew, and then in English, and then in French, and then in Russian. Whatever languages the Jewish population speaks, that’s where they can find their books. And that was the cultural hub of the entire community. Writers came and read their work and were feted, so that all of Yiddish
culture made its way to Canada. And after having an official evening at the Jewish Public Library, it could also happen that my mother would invite them for a private soiree in our own home. And she called the shots. She decided who was in and who was out. I grew up sitting underneath the piano at these literary gatherings, at the feet, (00:08:00) literally at the feet, of some of the greatest Jewish writers of all time. Avrom Sutzkever, Chaim Grade, Yabkev Glatsetin, not to speak of a whole group of important writers who were Montreal-based. Melech Ravitch, Yehuda Elberg, Chava Rosenfarb. And now we get to the crucial piece of it. The other key institution of Montreal were the network of Yiddish day schools. Montreal, like Argentina, like Mexico City, had a very strong network of day schools, because in Canada, there’s only a parochial school system. There’s no public-school system, as there is here in the United States. So we, all of us, all four of us, actually graduated from the same school, the Jewish People’s School or Folkshule. (00:09:00) And our teachers were also the personal friends of our parents. So I would say that I grew up in a space that was called the yidishe gas, the Jewish Street, which is a concept in Yiddish. Yidishe gas means the home, the school, literally the street that speaks Yiddish, a Yiddish daily newspaper, Yiddish amateur theater, Yiddish political parties. The Bund was very active — the Farband Labor Zionist. My parents were Labor Zionists — Jewish communists. All of this activity was conducted in Yiddish. That’s where I grew up, and as the youngest I was mama’s boy, very attached to my mother. I would say that the core of my education was sitting at the table listening to my mother (00:10:00) tell her stories of the past. My mother insisted that history ended in 1940. So I grew up believing that time was divided into time before and time after. Time before was Europe, was this glorious civilization, multi-lingual, spunky, radical, creative, extraordinarily creative, and then it ended. The world ended in 1940 when my parents left that. But my mother kept faith with that world, and consistently, persistently talked about it three times a day — breakfast, lunch and dinner. And the deal was, so long as my mother was talking you couldn’t get up from the table. (00:11:00) [laughs] So my older siblings managed to conspire to find reasons to leave the table earlier or when they needed to. But I had no interest in leaving the table, because what my mother was telling me was so much more interesting, so much more interesting and provocative than what they were teaching me in school — none of which, of course, was age-appropriate. But that was my education, listening to my mother tell stories about the past. So why would one ever want to leave a world like that? That’s the question. That’s really the question. And I was a wunderkind, and I was in love with Yiddish. I was in love with my mother, but the way that I could express my love for her was through this passion for Yiddish, which I evinced from a very early age. And I started playing on the Yiddish stage first in school productions, and then, from the age of thirteen, in an amateur Yiddish theater (00:12:00) group run by Dora Wasserman. And we were all of us, by the way, were in the theater. Theater was English language, Yiddish language theater, Hebrew language theater. This was very much a part of our lives. We went to Hebrew camps, I was sent to
Camp Massad. My older sister, Ruth, when to Pripstein Jewish summer camps. This is really cradle to grave.

JG: What kind of education were you getting in the school that you went to?

DR: A most unusual education. The two foundations or pillars were *geshikhte un literature*, Jewish history and, basically, Yiddish literature. That was the core curriculum of our Jewish studies. The day was divided in half, and all the Jewish studies were conducted either in Yiddish or in Hebrew. So it was *Ivrit b’Ivrit*, but everything that wasn’t actually in Hebrew (00:13:00) was conducted in Yiddish.

JG: Does that mean all of the —?

DR: Excuse me, only the Jewish subjects.

JG: But the students came from Yiddish-speaking environments all over —

DR: Yes, yes. They all did. Yeah, everyone still had Yiddish at home, some more, some less, but yes, Yiddish was alive in the home. You spoke to your teachers in Yiddish, and so Jewish history was taught — we studied, depending on what level you were at, you started studying humash and translating it into Yiddish, but in the end you were doing it in Hebrew. So the idea was to celebrate Jewish literary creativity, and Bible and Midrash, *Sefer Ha-Aggadah* were just — and the siddur were a part of Jewish literature. (00:14:00) So, for example, in seventh grade, we studied siddur. And that’s the only time of the week where we had to put on a yarmulke, out of respect for the siddur. And the idea was not that, God forbid, we should become religious, because it was a secular school, but should we ever walk into a synagogue, we shouldn’t feel estranged. We should know how to negotiate the prayer book. We should know what the *Sh’ma* is. We should know what the *Shemona Esrei* is, more or less. And that was an hour a week, nothing more than that. It was very bracketed. The Jewish holidays were very important, but the holidays were always interpreted in a secular way, much as they are in Israel. You know, Pesach is a liberation holiday. Hanukah is a folk holiday, and so on and so forth. So (00:15:00) it was bilingual Jewish education. They taught us to breathe through both of our nostrils, Yiddish and Hebrew. And that was the Labor Zionist Party line, and that’s really what the ideology was. Namely, that Hebrew was obviously the language of the utopian future in Israel, but so long as we were living in golus, the language, our language, was Yiddish.

JG: You described Pesach as the religious anchor in your home. What would you say your parents’ attitude was towards Judaism as a religion, and the practice of religion in your home?
DR: So technically my parents were Yiddish secularists. But by American standards they were Conservative Jews. We went to shul a few times a year, and we belonged to a fancy-schmancy Orthodox shul. All the synagogues in Montreal when I was growing up were Orthodox (00:16:00), so the shul you didn’t go to was an Orthodox shul. The shul you drove to was an Orthodox shul. That’s the way it was. We didn’t know from Reform and Conservative, let alone Reconstructionism, which I only learned about when I got to college. So observance, it was a sliding scale. And I should say this. My parents re-consecrated their lives to Yiddish because of the Holocaust. My sister, Ruth, was raised speaking German in Czernowitz. My brother, my oldest brother Ben, was raised speaking Polish in Krosno. By the time we were born, the language of the home was Yiddish. They never said — they never expressed it in so many words, but now looking back on it, it’s very clear to me that this was their way of rededicating their lives to (00:17:00) Yiddish culture, that which had brought them together, and to create Jewish continuity through Yiddish. And my father was extremely involved in Jewish cultural life. He was something that in Yiddish is called a kla-tuer, a kla-tuer means a cultural activist. It means that during the day he does his day job, and as soon as he comes home, he’s running off to various meetings, the president of this, the president of that, and when he’s not doing that, he’s on the phone. So my father was the president of the Jewish People’s School, the Folkshule, the very school that we graduated from, for many years. And he was very close with the principal of the school, Shloime Weisman. He was the chairman of the Montreal YIVO Committee, and he was chairman of the Melech Ravitch Book Committee, and so on and so forth. (00:18:00) In other words, he always stood up to be counted. And my mother held down the fort, with raising her children in Yiddish, and her literary soirees, and supporting Yiddish writers. So any Yiddish book published in Montreal will have a dedication to Masha and Leyb Roskies. And their name will probably come at the top of the list because they gave the most money. So Pesach. Pesach was an extraordinarily important event. It was probably the religious focal point and high point of the calendar year. And, [laughs] we had a separate set of treife dishes only for Pesach. So that’s the answer. They were kept separate. They were just as treife as all of our other dishes. We did not keep kosher. My mother said, “What’s (00:19:00) treife is not what you put into your mouth, but what comes out of your mouth.” We ate ham at home, but we had a separate set of Pesach dishes — I mean obviously, because it’s Pesach. And we didn’t eat bread. We only ate matzah. They were Conservative Jews. They created their own halachah. But they were really deeply rooted. The Jewish calendar was our calendar. We didn’t have another calendar. And the other important holiday was Hanukkah, because that’s when our mother would sit us down and she would accompany us on the piano and we would sing Yiddish Hanukkah songs. So those were essentially the two major
holidays. And for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, like everybody else, we went to shul.
What else do you do?

JG: And Shabbos?

DR: No, Shabbos, no. Shabbos I would go for haircuts with my father. But what did — ah, so here’s where Shabbos does come in. We asked my father at a certain point whether he would make kiddush. (00:20:00) So he did. And my mother would light candles. I suspect that in Europe she did not light candles, but at home, she did. And it had to do with the school, that there was a kind of expectation that kiddush was part of making Shabbos. So we had a Friday night meal, always, always. Friday night meal was sacrosanct.

JG: Family? Or were there guests?

DR: The whole family, yeah, had to get together on Friday night. So we did Shabbos, and we lit candles, and my father would make kiddush. The fact that you could watch television or do whatever else you wanted afterwards, that’s your own business. But Shabbos was Shabbos. Okay. Now, here’s where my story — where I begin to individuate. My father did something extraordinary. Before my bar mitzvah, he hired Shimshen Dunsky, who was the vice principal (00:21:00) of the Folkshule, to tutor me in Talmud. Why? The Folkshule didn’t teach Talmud. It wasn’t part of the curriculum.

JG: And by this — the Folkshule you were going to, were you still in the —?

DR: I had graduated from, just about to graduate from elementary school. It only went through seventh grade, and then they had something called mitlshule, where three times a week you would go and continue your education while you were going to the Protestant High School. And mitlshule for me was a very big deal. It was Tuesdays, Thursdays, and half of Sunday. It was a lot of hours. And I loved mitlshule, actually more than I liked high school. High school was a bit traumatic for me. It was a Protestant high school, very strict. I hated high school. (00:22:00)

JG: And was that, everybody went —?

DR: No, no, only those who were most committed continued in mitlshule.

JG: But everybody went to the Protestant high school? That’s what there was?
DR: That’s what there was. There was one Hebrew high school. Shana, my wife, went there. There were two Hebrew high schools actually — the Hebrew Academy and Herzliah, but they were Orthodox. So what was I going to go? I couldn’t go to an Orthodox — They were nominally Orthodox. But even that is something I could not have countenanced. Anyway, I knew where I belonged, and it was obvious that I would continue with mitlshule because my siblings had continued with mitlshule, and I loved going there, and these were the things I was most interested in anyway. Back to Shimshen Dunsky. This was very important. My father had a very difficult childhood — wandering. He spent his childhood basically in exile during the First World War. (00:23:00) Their family fled with the German advance in 1915, and he spent his entire adolescence deep in Russia. He actually saw, heard, Trotsky speak at Red Square in 1917, so he was there in the thick of things. But what suffered was his traditional Jewish education, and he wanted me to have what he’d lost out on. So the idea was — and how my father knew that this is what I needed, to this day I don’t know, but it was the greatest gift he ever gave me. — he decided that I should study once a week with Shimshen Dunsky, who was a Talmid Chochum. He came from Lite [Jewish Lithuania]. He could have been a rabbi if he had not broken away and become a Yiddish, secular Jew. Extremely learned. And I was his only student. And I met with him on Shabbos (00:24:00) morning — for six years, five years, for five years. Every Shabbos morning I walked to Lerer Dunsky, and we had an hour-long class — in Gemara. So that was amazing, because I think my father’s hidden agenda — he knew that there was something very restless about me, and that maybe, who knows? He read me — he understood that Dunsky would be more than my teacher. He would become my rebbe, my pedagogue, and he did. I dedicated one of my books to Lerer Dunsky and his picture hangs over my desk at the Seminary. I have three portraits over my desk — Lehrer Dunsky, Sholem Aleichem, and Avrom Sutzkever. Those are my (00:25:00) three rebbe’im. And so he taught me the way he had learned, basically. He was teaching me Gemara more or less in the way and order it had been taught to him, (00:25:35) the way he had learned, basically. He was teaching me Gemara, more or less in the way it had been taught to him — well, with modern meforshim. What he didn’t do, unfortunately — I regret this to this very day — he didn’t teach it to me with the sing-song. He was too embarrassed to do that. So I never heard the way Gemara was really learned in the Yeshiva. He could have done it, but he just couldn’t bring himself to get really back into the swing of it. So that gave me a grounding that none of my classmates had. And he took me under his wing, and I became really his disciple. (00:26:00) And he wasn’t a radical Yiddishist. He was, even though he was the vice principal of a Yiddish Hebrew school, and I’ll give you one example of this that really drives this home. In Argentina, they were preparing an edition of Peretz’s writings. And they turned to Lerer Dunsky to provide the glossary of difficult terms, because Peretz is well-known for all the Hebraisms and Aramaicisms, and it’s hard for a regular reader to cipher them. So they asked him to prepare the glossary, which he did.
And then he mailed it to them, and he got a letter saying, “We’re going to press and we’re going to call this book, *Khamishe Khumsev Peretz*, the Peretz Pentateuch. (00:27:00) At which point Lerer Dunsky said, “Absolutely not. I retract my work. You cannot publish my work. This is sacrilege. With all due respect to Y. L. Peretz, this is not Torah. You can’t do that. I will not cross that line.” And he told me that story. Obviously he wanted me to know that. So you’re picking up a certain message here. There is sacred, and there is profane, and you have to know what the boundaries are. As important as Yiddish is to us, we still know the difference between Torah and not Torah. So why would anyone want to leave a world like that? And the answer is there is a gadfly, and his name was David Hartman. Rabbi David Hartman parachutes into Montreal in the early Sixties, and Montreal was his first pulpit. (00:28:00) And he had an enormous impact on our lives. Enormous. Beginning with my brother, Ben, who was not observant and probably the most rebellious person in our family, who, thanks to Hartman, sold his house, moved into Cote Saint-Luc and became a member of Tifereth Beth David Jerusalem, which was Hartman’s synagogue. And my sister, Ruth, when she founded the Jewish Studies program at McGill, her comrade in arms was David Hartman, who had just gotten his doctorate from Fordham, and he established the Jewish Philosophy part of the curriculum. Hartman created a youth group that met in his basement. You ready for this? [laughing] So we’re fifteen and sixteen years old, and this group is called (00:29:00) Shomrei Ha’uma, the Keepers of the Flame, the Guardians of the People, of our nation, the Guardians of our Nation — Shomrei Ha’uma. Who were they? So I knew these — they brought me in because I knew them from camp. My cousin, the other David Roskies, Shelly Shreter, David Kaufman, these were people who were my bunkmates who went to these schools — to the Herzlia that I mentioned and to the Hebrew Academy. They went to Orthodox high schools. But they knew me, and they wanted me to be part of this group. And I was happy to join. We met every week, Wednesday nights in Hartman’s basement, and we put out our own mimeographed journal, called *Shomrei Ha’uma*, and he would appear for (00:30:00) forty-five minutes and give us a private *shiur*. So —

JG: Had you known him personally before that?

DR: Well, I must have started — that was my first real one-on-one contact with him, I suppose. I would start coming to shul very irregularly. I mean, I didn’t believe in God. I didn’t *daven*. I didn’t do any of these things. But we were all attracted to him because he was so charismatic. So we went to shul, basically to hear Hartman. But I had now the inside track. Part of this inside track was the following. Hartman had this amazing idea that to revolutionize Jewish education, you couldn’t do it from the bottom up, you had to do it from the top down, and that you needed to bring together the best Jewish minds and create a kind of Jewish think tank. And he convinced a few (00:31:00) *balebatim* to
underwrite it, so for two summers, two consecutive summers, he brought together what today is the Hartman Institute, but this was the germ of this idea, really brilliant idea, of bringing people who were Jewish thinkers and scholars from across North America, let’s say five days, for a few days, up north, in the Laurentians just to talk to each other and to teach one another. And he allowed a small group of high school students, all of us male — it was an almost all male group, there was one girl in the whole group — to be flies on the wall. This was extraordinary, because that’s where I met [Jacob] Petuchowski; (00:32:00) Yochanan Muffs; a very strange beatnik-y looking guy named Zalman Schachter, who looked like he didn’t belong there because he dressed like a hippie and he spoke Yiddish, but he was obviously considered to be an important thinker; David Novack — really from the entire spectrum. These are people who under any other circumstance would never meet one another, let alone spend quality time. So this was the germ of something amazing. And to be exposed to that, and to know that you were at the birth of something that was beginning to percolate, that if you could bring these great minds together in one place, that something would happen, and this would reverberate — this was all (00:33:00) Hartman’s idea. And I was there, and I understood zero of what they were talking about. It was way over my head. But it didn’t matter. Just to see who these people were and the level of seriousness, and their passion. And to have met Zalman, who was going to be the lynchpin for the next chapter of the story. I would never have met him otherwise. Hartman understood something that we Yiddish secularists did not wish to admit. Namely, that that world was about to die. Yiddish secular culture was in deep crisis, and it could not be replicated, it wasn’t sustainable. And he created his own Jewish day school, called the Akiva school, where my sister Ruth broke ranks and actually sent her kids there instead of what she would have been expected to do, send (00:34:00) them to Folkshule, right, the school that we all graduated from. So Hartman changed the direction that her life was going to go in as well. And this was a Modern Orthodox day school without Yiddish. So it was a completely new model. So I’m now fifteen years old, and I’m beginning to see that there are other forces out there, much more dynamic, and that Yiddish culture really is in crisis, and it’s obvious demographically. There are no new writers appearing. The average age of the people at these gatherings is sixty plus. Whenever I would go to a Yiddish cultural event, (00:35:00) me and my friend Khaskl would be the only young people in the audience. So when I was sixteen, I started a Yiddish youth movement. I won’t belabor the point, but it was a quixotic but very brave effort to revive Yiddish culture, and it was part of the youth revolution. We were beginning to understand that we had the possibility of changing the world.

JG: So this was Yugenruf?
David Roskies, 12/22/16

DR: This was Yugntruf. The existential a-ha moment was something else — was when Gabi Trunk, who I’d never met before — I was sixteen and he was fifteen — came to visit in Montreal, and we decided on a lark, simply on a lark — we had a play date — why don’t we speak Yiddish to each other? So we started speaking Yiddish to each other, and it was the first time in my life (00:36:00) that I’d ever spoken Yiddish horizontally, rather than vertically. I never spoke Yiddish to my siblings — only to my parents, only to older people, and only to my teachers.

JG: Not in school, the kids didn’t speak to each other in Yiddish?

DR: No, not in my day. There had been times, maybe decades before, when they would speak to each other, but no. So that was what I call my Eliezer Ben Yehudah moment. Wow, you mean you can really do that? You can talk about kid stuff, the things that you’re interested in in Yiddish, and use that as the actual living vehicle of communication? That was really a breakthrough moment. So even if Yugntruf meant nothing else, even if we hadn’t published a magazine, and (00:37:00) had our annual conventions and whatever else we did, from that moment on, I had a group of friends with whom I would speak exclusively in Yiddish. And that is true to this very day. And it was very, very difficult because we lacked the basic vocabulary for everyday life. We couldn’t talk about sex. We couldn’t talk about cars. We couldn’t talk about sports. We couldn’t talk about anything other than Yiddish literature and Jewish history. [laughs]
That’s the only vocabulary — and food! That’s all we had to talk about. But what about the rest of the world? So we had to learn the vocabulary and gain fluency all over again, you see. So that’s very empowering, and you can see where I’m going here. There’s a shift in your consciousness when you realize (00:38:00) you can live a total Jewish life but you’re going to have to invent half of it. Certain things you can take, absorb, accept, adapt. But at a certain point, you’re going to have to make a crucial move forward.
You’re going to have to make this great leap forward in order to make this real for yourself. And at first, it’s going to be hokey, and artificial, and weird. But eventually, it’ll become second nature to you. So the first hurdle was learning to speak Yiddish as my lingua franca among my peers. And my second — now I’m really giving away my trade secrets — is that for reasons no one quite understands, even native speakers of Yiddish in Canada, almost all of us spoke with (00:39:00) the English raish. We spoke Yiddish as if it were a foreign language because we used this English raish. Why am I saying this? Because at the founding conference of Yugntruf on August 30th, 1964, I got on a train with my other Yiddishist friends. We were the Montreal delegation to Yugntruf. I, as the founder of Yugntruf, gave the founding inaugural address, which I had memorized, and I knew public speaking, I’d been on the stage for many years, so that wasn’t the issue. But I spoke Yiddish with this raish. So two things, very important things, happened immediately thereafter. One was that twenty-four-year old Leybl Zilbershtrom, and you
understand, I was sixteen, he was twenty-four (00:40:00) — that’s a big difference — he came up to me and said, “Fraynd Roskes, es past nishtaz der grinder fun Yugntruf zol reydn yidish mitn ‘reysh.’” This is not becoming. You, as the founder of this movement, you’ve got to get your act together. You’ve got to master this raish because it sounds really weird and it makes you sound like a foreigner.

JG: Were you aware of it before that?

DR: I wasn’t — yes, but not to that degree. I had dialect envy. You know there’s penis envy? Well, I had dialect envy. Because my best friend Khaskl, from Folkshule — he was my official best friend since the age of twelve — not only spoke with the raish, but he spoke two dialects. The Litvak dialect (00:41:00) that we used at school, and he could also speak Warsaw Yiddish. But in the Yiddish secular schools you weren’t allowed to speak your home dialect. Everyone had to adopt the Lithuanian norm. So he was inter-dialectical. You get it? [laughs] And I thought, “Oh my God, I would give anything to be inter-dialectical, I can’t even speak one dialect properly because of this thing called the raish.” Yes, I was aware of it, but I didn’t know that it was going to be such a major stumbling block, and that my whole political career would be blocked as a result, you see? Okay. So that told me I had work to do. And the second thing is at the end of the morning session, Mordkhe Schaechter, who was our sort of elder statesman, said, “I would like to introduce you to someone. This is Dr. Max Weinreich. That’s like meeting a Lubavitcher rebbe. (00:42:00) It’s like meeting Martin Buber. You can fill in the blanks. That’s when Max Weinreich, the founder of YIVO — and of course I knew who he was — looked at me and said, “Fraynd Roskes, di yidish-forshung darf aykh hobn.” “Yiddish Studies needs you.” So, sixteen years old, so I got the call from none other than Max Weinreich, which I did not heed then, but I certainly did not forget. That he placed his hands on my head, and sort of with a priestly blessing, and chose me to carry the flame of Yiddish. So I did go home and started practicing the raish in front of the mirror for a half an hour every day, and eventually mastered it. But I understood that — (00:43:00) that there was — it wasn’t clear we could keep this culture alive. At seventeen, I go off to Brandeis.

JG: Why Brandeis?

DR: Good question. So Yiddish is actually the reason for it, and this is also going to be another segue into the havurah story. Because you just don’t know, when you’re on a journey, how the journey’s going to lead you, and all the byways and pathways. Jewish kids of my generation did not go away for college. They stayed in Montreal. There’s a very good college, McGill University. And if you didn’t get into McGill, there’s a second-tier college. But my sister, Ruth, the older of my two sisters, said to my father,
“You should allow David to apply to go to the United States because he’s not going to like McGill. The first two years (00:44:00) are just required courses. It’s not for him.” So the deal was that I could apply to two schools, and if I got into either of them, my father — who is a very honorable man — would pay the tuition. And it was a lot of money, a lot of money in those days. So Columbia we knew about because my sister had done her Master’s degree at Columbia. And Brandeis. So, why Brandeis? There was a man named Michael Astour, who was a friend of the family, formerly from Vilna, who taught Yiddish at Brandeis. And he took us for a tour of the campus. I went with my parents that summer, before I began applying. And it looked beautiful, and he said that he would take me under his wing, and I’d be able to do Yiddish with him. (00:45:00) Sounded like a good deal, right? And Columbia had Weinreich. So even though I was only an undergraduate, I could certainly try to take courses with him. So Yiddish was basically what clinched it. I didn’t get into Columbia, but I got into Brandeis. However, by the time I got there, Astour was no longer there. He had been fired — probably for his anti-Zionism, or because he was a very difficult person. Whatever the reason was, he was no longer there. But I was. And I arrived in a place that I had never experienced before, an entire campus of self-hating Jews. I didn’t know there were such thing as self-hating Jews. Who wouldn’t want to be Jewish? What is this? Everybody’s trying to pass as something else! This was a real shock to my system.

JG: This was 1965?

DR: This is — (00:46:00) yes, this is August, 1965, that’s right. I was the class of ’69. It’s also the height of the Soviet Jewry Movement. The first plane, the first flight I ever took was a chartered flight to Washington for a Soviet Jewry rally, so there was a lot going on. But I hung up my shingle all around campus that I was offering to teach Yiddish under the auspices of Hillel.

JG: Who was the director of Hillel?

DR: Al Axelrad had started — that was his first year, his very first year. So I knew that I had a certain skill set, that I was bringing something that nobody else had.

JG: Did anybody want it?

DR: Yes. I thought I would teach five students, and I had two parallel (00:47:00) beginners classes and an intermediate class going simultaneously. I had more work — this was, on my own time, but there I was teaching Yiddish to very motivated students. It was my first teaching experience.
JG: Would you include those students among the self-hating Jews you just referred to?

DR: No, obviously not. So I flushed out those Jews who were not self-hating. So that’s important, because I could draw people to myself and I was not embarrassed to be who I was, and people warmed to me. So I had something that nobody else had, and this Yiddish thing—and I’d never left an environment that was not cradle to grave Jewish, so this was really a challenge. But I never had to give up who I was. On the contrary, I represented something. (00:48:00) And with time, I began to understand what that something was. Okay, so one day at Brandeis I’m visiting a friend, and they introduce me to Art Green. What attracts me to him is that he was the last student of Yiddish of Michoel Astour, and he knew Yiddish. Well, I was always recruiting people who spoke Yiddish and were interested in Yiddish. My only interest in Art Green was the Yiddish connection. So we struck up a friendship. I got him to submit something for Yugntruf, a piece that he wrote which was about the Holocaust. I remember what it was called, Shehora ani ven’avah, a title from Shir Ha’Shirim. (00:49:00) And I also visited him in his last year at rabbinical school, on a Shabbos.

JG: At JTS?

DR: At JTS. Which was the first time I’d ever been to JTS. Okay. But to be honest, the only thing that drew me to him was our connection to Yiddish. I wasn’t thinking beyond that. I was always recruiting for Yiddish. So I thought, Art Green, why not? If he’s interested, it behooves me to learn more about him and to befriend him. Okay, so that happened early on in my career. And the other major milestone which was going to shake up my life forever was my junior year in Israel, which coincided with the Six Day War. (00:50:00) May of 1967. I —

JG: You went in May of 1967?

DR: No, I wanted to. I wanted to volunteer. But my parents wouldn’t let me. I was underage. And I was scheduled to leave in August anyway. And my parents who had already been through two world wars said, “You don’t really have the skill set for wartime. You don’t add value. Why don’t you wait and see? And you’re supposed to go to Israel anyway, so we’ll see how it happens.” And of course, what happened was Israel won the war in six days, and I left as scheduled. Well, Israel was going to change my life. So the third person who was going to shake me up, my third rebbe essentially after Dunsky and Hartman, was Leyb Rochman. (00:51:00) The first address that I had, the first phone number of anyone I had in Israel, was a Yiddish writer whom I had never heard of. And I got his phone number from Yehuda Elberg, a very good friend of his who was part of this Yiddish literary circle, himself a survivor. And he said, “When you get to
Jerusalem, call him up.” And I remember the phone booth in Kiryat HaYovel. I remember the asimonim. I remember my hands shaking because I didn’t know exactly how the phone worked, and I didn’t understand that you had to keep feeding asimonim into the phone in order to keep the conversation going. I thought it was like dropping a dime in and that was it. I called him up and I introduced myself in Yiddish, and he said, “Come on over at five o’clock.” And I did, and I never left. Leyb Rochman became kind of surrogate (00:52:00) parent for me, and this became my home away from home. And it was, in some respects, similar to what I had known before, but in other ways fundamentally different. It was similar in that it was also a salon for writers. It was a meeting place. But it was day after day after day, from five o’clock until midnight, every day, every day. So all you had to do was stay in one place, and the whole Yiddish world — I mean, the entire Yiddish world, because he was a correspondent for the Forverts. He covered the Eichmann trial, for example, for the Forverts. So he knew all the Yiddish journalists. He had spent time in Paris, so all the Yiddish writers from France were his buddies. The world of Holocaust survivors. Hebrew writers who were tired of speaking Hebrew and wanted a place where they could let their hair down. (00:53:00) Veteran writers, who would be embarrassed to speak Yiddish in any other environment also showed up there. A young, unknown writer named Aaron Apelfeld was a ben bayit and would read Kafka with Rochman. So it wasn’t just old timers. It was everyone who had any interest in things Jewish, cultural, and Israel, would find their way there. And I began to bring — after I became close to him, I introduced him to my entire circle of friends, so they began coming, and bringing their friends. How was it different? It was different because he was a real rebbe, and his table was a hasidic tisch, and he held forth like a rebbe sitting at the head of the table. And he would take on people, and conduct conversations and debates. (00:54:00) One of the best chapters, I think, that I wrote in my memoir, Yiddishlands, is called “Between Two Mountains,” which is a semi-fictionalized dramatization of Leib Rochman meeting Art Green. I’m getting ahead of the story, but it’s only two years later. That meeting will take place in 1969. We’re still in 1967. Rochman, who, in a kind of novelistic twist, had the same name as my father, Leyb. My father was Leyb, and here’s Leyb, so he really did become a surrogate father for me. You couldn’t have scripted it better. But he took me in hand, and he made me into a Zionist. He said, “All this cosmopolitan stuff, and all this diaspora nationalism, it’s just bullshit. Where you belong — you belong here. This is your country. (00:55:00) And you have to defend this country, and no one else. And if you don’t do it, who’s going to stand up and defend this country?” And he kept — he was really the first adult who took me on intellectually and challenged me day after day to defend my own position and worked over me. And by the time I left, there was no question. By the time my year was up, there was no question. I was going to go back to Israel sooner or later.
JG: Can you just say a few words about what was the situation of Yiddish, and the attitude towards Yiddish in the general population in Israel at that time?

DR: It didn’t matter because — my agenda in being in Israel was to meet all the Yiddish, all the literati. And I’m twenty years old, and nothing’s going to stop me. So just in the same way as I called Rochman, I made calls all over the country, and traveled the length and breadth of Israel meeting the most extraordinary people, some of whom, whose stories I’d grown up on, of the Vilna pantheon, who were real people. So the two poles of my existence were Leyb Rochman’s home in Katamon on Yordei ha-Sira, where I was there almost every day, and then Avrom Sutzkever’s home in a very fancy apartment in the upscale part of North Tel Aviv, where I also could come anytime. I couldn’t drop in on him. You had to make an appointment, but I was there fairly often because I decided I was going to publish a special issue of Yugntruf. this magazine in Israel by Israelis. Israelis means Yiddish-speaking people, most of whom were not native born, almost all of whom were not native born, but nonetheless. And I did. I got together a group of young Yiddishists, my own age, and we published a beautiful double issue of Yugntruf. And in order to do that, I needed to find a printer in Tel Aviv, opposite the horrible Tachanah Merkazit, which was where all the publishing houses were. So about once a week I would get on a bus, and I would go and meet with the printer. I was very busy. And it did not occur to me that this would be my last chance, that in ten years from now, most of these people would not still be alive, or most of them. I just wanted to immerse myself in that Yiddish world.

So whoever I wasn’t meeting at the Rochmans, I went out and met. Now, yes, obviously, it was very clear that the official ethos was to make light of Yiddish, and who needs this. But you should also remember that the runaway hit on Off-Broadway, the Israeli version, was the Megile-lider [by Itzik Manger], which was the first time Yiddish broke through the language barrier. And here was this musical comedy that kept playing to audiences, increasingly who were not Yiddish speaking. So something was happening. And Rochman was a believer. Rochman was a passionate Zionist. And he convinced me that if there’s a future for Yiddish, the only place will be in Israel. So that seemed — if he believes it, I believe it. And why shouldn’t I? I mean, look, the variety of people that I am meeting all over the country. There was a group of youngish writers called Yung Yisroel outside of Haifa. I went to meet them, and they reconvened — they reconstituted themselves as a group in order to meet me. In order to meet me. They hadn’t met as a group in, I don’t know, ten, fifteen, years, but they wanted to meet this kid who was publishing a Yiddish magazine. It sort of intrigued them.

JG: Did this help Yugntruf grow at that point?
DR: Well, not really. But who cares. As long as it kept me busy. And it kept the flame lit. But it showed me that — Israel was a homecoming. Why? Because I was back in Eastern Europe. (01:00:00) I was back in a place where the porters are Jewish, where the pickpockets are Jewish. Where the most gorgeous women you’ll ever see are Jewish. This is the world of Yiddish literature that I grew up on. And, okay, so they’re not all speaking Yiddish. Nobody’s perfect. But I could pick up the Yiddish in their Hebrew speech, I could pick up that there were idioms that were translated from Yiddish. “Matayim elef lirot lo holkhot bargal.” It’s a Yiddish expression. “Tsvev hundert tovznt lire geyt nisht tsu fus.” It means, “It’s nothing to sneeze at: 200,000 Lira, it’s nothing to sneeze at. It’s a significant sum.” It’s a slang expression which made its way into spoken Hebrew. So, I had come home. (01:01:00) I didn’t come there as a Zionist. I was very cool to all of that. When I arrived in Israel, I still swore by George Steiner, and I was a cosmopolitan Jew and proud of it.

JG: Why did you go?

DR: Because I went there to study Yiddish literature, which was the only department of Yiddish literature in the world, and which I did. And I took every course available to me. And then, as I said, my sideline was meeting all the Yiddish cultural people, and then some. Okay, so what was painfully obvious is that when I visited the homes of the Yiddish writers, their children did not speak Yiddish. And not only did they not speak Yiddish, they looked askance at me. So I knew what I was up against. I didn’t have any illusions. But with one exception, that was the Rochman home, (01:02:00) where his two children did speak Yiddish, and the older of the two children was a Hebrew poet, Rivka Miriam, and an artist. That was very attractive, [laughs] and she spoke a fluent Polish Yiddish, and she called me not just Dovid, but she called me Duvidersh, because in Polish Yiddish that’s what they called me, Duvid turns into Duvidersh. And she still calls me, so that’s like, whoa — my God! Powerful stuff for a young romantic like me. Yeah, and I was starting to go out with women. It was altogether — I’m twenty years old, for crying out loud. And Rochman, Rochman himself, never stopped talking about women. This was one of the major topics of our conversation. So we had — he was older than me but not older in spirit. (01:03:00)

JG: So you came back to Brandeis.

DR: Okay. Now, we finally get to the havurah. So you come back to a campus, and the campus obviously is in turmoil. It’s post-’68, and we’re going to go to commencement with black fists pasted on the back of our caps and our gowns. So rebellion is in full swing. We closed down the campus.
JG: Were you part of that? Did it move you?

DR: Vicariously. One of my two roommates was Sid Blumenthal, who now is very famous. Trump has made him infamous. But he was already very politically involved in SDS. So I knew what was going on, but it was not my cause, it was not my cause. But you know, you went (01:04:00) on protest rallies because everybody did. I was never really a political animal. This was not how I express my inner passion. But what did begin to happen was we had a group of people — Michael Strassfeld was one of them, a couple other of my classmates — who would be allowed to attend services at this new thing called Havurat Shalom, on campus.

JG: So this was the year ’68 – ’69. Havurat Shalom was brand new.

DR: Brand new, and I had just come back. I can tell you exactly what we’re talking about, February or March of ’69. It’s my senior year. And there’s a carpool going to Cambridge to check this out. (01:05:00) So Art I already knew, as I explained, through this Yiddish connection. Somebody else I knew, who was a founding member, was Michael Brooks. How did I know Michael Brooks? He was our dorm counselor the last year that I lived in the dorm, and we became friends, and I witnessed his religious conversion. I saw this amazing thing happen to him. Someone who was completely American, I would almost say deracinated, found God — and completely changed his whole life and became totally immersed in Jewishness. And the next thing I know, he’s part of this thing called Havurat Shalom that had just been founded, and he’s there. And I watched him change. I never saw (01:06:00) something like that, a person transform himself in that way. It was a completely new experience for me. And Michael Brooks is not a — he’s a very serious and intense human being, so if he’s going to do something, there are no halfway measures with him. And he had an aura about him. So there’s this weekly Shabbos car pool, and the one that I remember, which is going to change my entire life, is Shabbat Zachor. (01:07:00) And that means we’re looking at March, 1969 roughly, because that’s when it usually — it’s the week before Purim. And Zalman Schachter is the shaliach tzibur. Had I seen Zalman in the interim? Probably not, but I recognized him, and he recognized me. And we knew that there was this Yiddish connection. And he led a — a Zalman-like service, which I don’t remember the particulars of.

JG: Had you ever experienced that before?

DR: I probably knew what to expect, that you didn’t know from one week to the next what was going to happen — who was going to be the shaliach tzibur, and that the ethos of the havurah was whoever led the group would determine the nature of the service,
right. (01:08:00) So you had to trust who the shaliach tzibur was. I knew very little about the structure of the davening, so as far as I was concerned, the more experimental the better. It was all exciting. It was all new to me. I’d never been to a service that Zalman had led. And the only piece of it that I can still recall is the part that was life-changing. When we got to the kaddish, at the end, he began singing it, Yit gadal v’yit kadash sh’mei raba, b’alma dvra cherutei v’yamleech malchuteh, b’chayechon u’v’yomechon u’v’chayei d’chol beit Yisrael.” So it’s Shabbat Zachor, and what he’s doing is incredible. He’s connecting Shabbat Zachor to (01:09:00) the Shoah. And he’s doing it by short-circuiting the kaddish, singing the kaddish to the *Partisans*’ *Hymn*. But is he really short-circuiting it? You could say that he’s challenging the kaddish with the Shoah, but I’m hearing it in a different way. I’m hearing him say to me, “You know, this *Partisans*’ *Hymn* is really liturgy. If you know how to use it liturgically, you can harness that energy for liturgical ends. It’s no less sacred than any other melody. You can turn it _—_

JG: Again that question of boundaries.

DR: Right. It goes in both directions. It changes the meaning of the kaddish by singing it to the *Partisans*’ *Hymn* because you’re bringing it up to date, you’re opening it up to all kinds of questions. (01:10:00) But you’re also saying, you know, this Yiddish secular world that you come from, it might not be an either/or proposition. There may be a way of harnessing that energy for liturgical, religious, spiritual ends. And I thought, I want to be able to do that. I want to be able to reach the stage where I can do that. I’m not there yet, but that to me is — that’s where I want to go. And if the havurah can enable me to reach that point, then this is the address for me. It’s going to have other repercussions later, but for the time being that was the a-ha moment.

JG: You didn’t grow up in a religious world. You haven’t really talked about a growing interest or affinity to anything (01:11:00) that even touches on that.

DR: Right, it’s hard to piece all of that together. I kept a journal in college, but sporadically, and I was very surprised to read that I would — that I made several trips to the Bostoner Rebbe. Which I don’t really remember, but if I said that I did, then I must have done it. So I’m looking. I’m looking for something, clearly. I knew from the get-go that Reconstructionism was absolutely not for me. That censoring the prayerbook and removing everything that was theologically objectionable was a non-starter. That if I was going to daven from this book called the siddur, I had to daven from the siddur. I had to make these words mean something to me. But censoring it! And changing the name of God, and circumlocuting — (01:12:00) for me, that was just anathema. Thanks to Rabbi
Axelrad, I actually led a Kabbalat Shabbat service for the first time in my senior year. He insisted on it. I was scared shitless, but I did it.

JG: In which minyan?

DR: In the Conservative, in the Conservative. Yes, good question. There were three different services, and the only one that I really identified with at that point was the Conservative. I remember standing up there. It was very awkward, but I did it. It was the first time that I was shaliach tzibur. You know, it was formal, we all got dressed up and all of that, so I was ready. I was moving. And I think (01:13:00) Israel was really determinative because I came back from Israel with this real hunger. And Brandeis couldn’t meet the hunger. The hunger was for a total Jewish experience. And the havurah seemed to be about as total a Jewish environment as one could find anywhere. And since I was already moving in a direction of wanting to learn a spiritual language, all of that came together. So if the havurah didn’t exist, if I wasn’t at that point, at that place, at that time, in that moment, I don’t think I would have ever become an observant Jew. I don’t think I would have become what I call a homo davenus. (01:14:00) Davening would not have become core to my being. I would have become — probably, yeah, go to shul because that’s what you’re expected to do. Sit there and be interested in the Torah reading. I’d be a passive, behavioral Jew. I would be a behavioral Jew, that’s basically what would have happened had it not been for that confluence. So, becoming a member. How does one become a member?

JG: Exactly. And let me just add another piece to that question, which is: the havurah in this first year that you’re visiting is a seminary.

DR: Right. I didn’t know that.

DR: Didn’t register. First of all, (01:15:00) I don’t need the 4-D deferment. I’m a Canadian citizen, so I never was part of the rabbinical track. And what happened is this. I didn’t know any of this until much later. The original core group of twelve was basically in the seminary track. But then they created a two-tiered system of admission. Those who would continue and would commit themselves to the actual curriculum, and those like myself, who were pursuing a graduate degree or doing something else but would fit in with the havurah and its ethos and would add value but didn’t have to be full-time students. And in fact, we only had to commit to, I don’t know, two courses a week or something like that, and other activities, which were laid out pretty clearly. (01:16:00) So they created a new category for people just like me. I’d just graduated, I was part of a
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graduate program. I turned down a five-year State of California fellowship to go to Berkeley and study Comparative Literature with Robert Alter in order to stay in Boston, and basically become a member of the havurah. I didn’t really care all that much about my graduate training at that point. I had a teacher who would let me do whatever I wanted to do.

JG: At Brandeis?

DR: At Brandeis. Basically. But my graduate training was essentially an add-on, an excuse. The reason I was in Boston was all my psychic energies were now going into this thing called the havurah. This is — I was willing to do everything for this, cause this —

JG: So what was the admissions process, for you? (01:17:00)

DR: Well, I was what they were looking for. And we’ll get into the details of it later. But the fact that I came from this Yiddish world, and that I represented Eastern European Jewish culture, was very important in terms of the gestalt of this havurah, which was really a latter-day shtibl. The neo-hasidic, the connection to Eastern Europe, the Yiddish — even if most of it was only symbolic, was very important. And I was happy to add that element, and I think Art was looking to me to do that as well. That’s the chemistry there, the spiritual chemistry was right. And then the (01:18:00) admissions process was a conversation. I know that Barry Holtz was one of the people in the room, I don’t remember who the others were. Maybe I was lucky and it was Michael Brooks as well. But, you know, I seemed like a personable guy. And, as I said, the profile was right. I was going to do a doctorate in Jewish Studies. That meant that I had all the skills. I could parachute right into the highest-level courses. I didn’t have to start from aleph bet like Jim Kugel. Or Stef Krieger. I already came with a B.A. in NEJS. So I could graduate to the top of the class. [laughs] And, you know, I was obviously on that journey. I was on the journey. It was extremely important to me to be part of this because this was the only (01:19:00) way I was going to become an observant Jew. The only way that I could enter into the system would be through the havurah. I would never be able to become part of a Conservative synagogue, or an Orthodox shul or anything like that, or go to a yeshiva, or any of these things. This was created for me. It was small, it was experiential, and it was neo-hasidic. It had a certain passion which I recognized and which I was looking for.

JG: So all of this got communicated in your conversation with the quote-unquote “admissions committee,” and in your interactions with people over the course of the day or so.
DR: Yeah, yeah. And remember, Barry — I knew Barry from — (01:20:00) I guess from Brandeis. And Michael Brooks was very important. Not only Michael, but Ruthie. Ruthie was also studying Hebrew literature with me at Brandeis. So I knew the two of them.

JG: Michael Strassfeld, you said, you knew?

DR: I knew Michael, but Michael didn’t join yet. He comes later. He’s still in college. He hasn’t graduated yet. He’s the third cohort.

JG: Yes. So this is the second cohort.

DR: So, after lunch we can pick up and I’ll tell you — we’ll talk about the retreats, the orientation retreat, and what that was all about.

JG: Many people point to community as the heart of the havurah endeavor. And as you pointed out, you emerged from college desperate to be part of community, and desperate to be a part of this particular community. (01:21:00) Can you tell us about the very beginnings, what it was like for you as you were becoming a member?

DR: Yes, my most vivid memories are the very beginning, our orientation at Packard Manse, which must have been June of 1969, before we all broke up and went off to various places. And I’d just graduated from Brandeis a few weeks before. That’s when the group more than doubled in size. We went from a group of twelve to forty, and I was the second cohort. So even if I knew a person or two from the original group, from when I used to drop in on Shabbos, most of the faces were new. And it’s like that first day of school experience, or the first day of camp, where you’ve never been to camp before. It’s a completely new environment. And Packard Manse was a retreat center. (01:22:00) Did Everett Gendler live there?

JG: Yes, he did.

DR: He did. So that’s where we first met Everett Gendler, who was obviously cut out to be in a place like that. Very much at home in nature, a whole other strand of the movement that I had not yet been exposed to. He had just come back from Mexico. I could already tell that this was the radical fringe of the group, going off in directions I had never encountered. It was extraordinary, because you’re meeting people for the first time, and some people are really stand-outs. Hillel Levine, I remember, physically, he looked like a prophet — very bushy hair. I have a visual memory of him doing agricultural work, wearing a white shirt. He wasn’t dressed for the occasion. We had to (01:23:00) earn our keep, our room and board, by doing agricultural work in the fields,
which turned out to be a disaster. Whatever we did had to be redone after the fact, but a certain amount of times, we were out in the fields. It felt like we were building a kibbutz circa 1920 in the Galilee. So Hillel Levine was very memorable. The evening entertainment, I will never forget, consisted of a recital — Stephen Mitchell at the piano and Liz Vitale on the cello. They were already husband and wife. Liz Vitale was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my life, and Stephen Mitchell was gorgeous. They were an amazing couple. And the two of them as a couple seemed to represent some sort of messianic — [laughs] union, that I guess happened when you became a member of this magical group. And — they broke us, I don’t even remember what the organized, other than the agricultural stuff and having meals together, we could break up into interest groups, okay. And I volunteered to lead a group in Yiddish song. And that’s where I made my two haverim for life. Because in my group were two people, Mike Swirsky and Joel Rosenberg, neither of whom I’d ever met before. They wanted to learn Yiddish songs, so they became part of my little — there were other people there too, but these remained my haverim forever — forever and ever and ever. And that’s where it happened, at that particular moment. George Savran, I remember, had a terrible migraine headache and stayed in bed for half the time, and I remember — I knew him because we were undergraduates at Brandeis. That stays in my memory. So the fact that we were away from the house that we were yet to occupy, 113 College Ave — we hadn’t moved in yet. We were only going to move in in September or the end of August.

JG: This is the house that the havurah had just purchased?

DS: We had just purchased. I don’t think I’d set eyes on it. I’m pretty sure — no, I know that I’d never seen the building yet, only heard that we’d made the purchase. So the idea of a retreat — remember, all of this is new. There were no such things as a Jewish retreat center in 1969. It hadn’t been invented yet. So if you wanted to do retreat, you had to go to a non-Jewish environment, and that’s what we would do. Either we would go to a Ramah camp, which we did for Sukkos, or we would rent space at a Christian retreat center. I was married at a Lebanese Christian retreat center near Methuen, Massachusetts a few years later. We had just enough time to take the crosses off the walls before my parents arrived! [laughs] So, retreats and being out in nature — that was going to be part of the communal thing. Avodah b’gashmiyyut meant also you’re using your body in a different way and entering into the cycle of nature and putting those pieces together. The first sukkah that I ever built as an adult was the retreat that we did in Palmer, I guess, where we built a sukkah. Up until then, my only association with Sukkos was as a child in folkshule. And only children did that! It was a children’s art activity, and nothing more than that. That it could have any real significance? So Everett was really into nature symbolism, mother worship, mother
goddesses, and other amazing things that were really heady. It wasn’t my language, (01:28:00) but it was a language. And it was obviously a legitimate part of the larger picture. So music, and song. And I guess Packard Manse was validating for me for that very reason. If I could teach Yiddish song, and that was validated, that already signaled to me that I brought something to the table. And somehow or another, that was going to be part of this new thing that we were creating. So that was extremely significant. Not to speak of the friendship, the actual friendships that you create. So, haver. Let’s think about this term. (01:29:00) I mentioned that there was a two-tiered system, and there was talk of creating a haver which would be an alternative to the rabbinate — that when you finished the program, your title wouldn’t be “Rabbi,” but you would be “haver.” And you would go off into the world with this new name called haver. Whether that happened or not, whether anyone achieved the official status of haver, I couldn’t say. But it was there as a kind of utopian idea and ideal. But we nonetheless recreated a new norm of what haver was. So let me try to unpack that. One obvious piece is hevrusa, you know, you have a study partner, (01:30:00) and we were going to do studying together. And I had a hevrusa — that was Mona Fishbane. We were in Art’s advanced Hasidut class, and she became my study partner. But much more than that, because she was the first married woman with whom I had a real relationship that I could talk to about anything. And the nature of study at the havurah was that it could lead in any number of directions, because the text was your life, and you were living the text. So having her as my hevrusa was very special, and it felt extremely grown up. Because this is not college anymore. This is real life, and it’s a different kind of relationship — around study, but she’s your spiritual partner as well. It’s not just an intellectual give and take. There’s something else at stake here. (01:31:00)

JG: Were there many women?

DS: So, at that point it was only spouses. The first year there were as yet no independent women members, if I remember correctly. So there was Janet Holtz, certainly Kathy Green. I would call them the imahot. We had our own imahot. Ruthie Brooks was not so much an active member. I don’t remember her as such a visible presence, but she was married to Michael Brooks, and going to their home for a Shabbat meal was an extraordinary experience that they did together. They crafted this thing called a Shabbat meal, which was unlike any other Shabbat meal. And that was true of anybody — you walked into a person’s home, and there was a different aura that each person created around the Shabbos table. (01:32:00) So Buzzy and Mona Fishbane were a unit. I don’t remember ever going to their home for a Shabbos meal, but I would see Mona, as I just said, as my study partner. So there were these married couples who went together, you know. You didn’t mention one without the other. And I actually was close to a number of them — to Janet in particular. And to Epi — Seymour Epstein and Eva. They were
Canadian — I was not the only Canadian. They were from Toronto and I was from Montreal. And they were already married. And they were very much a unit, even though he was the real member and she was less interested. So — haver. Haver meant hevusa, and I was lucky to have a study partner. (01:33:00) But here’s the thing. The closest analogy is something from my parents’ life. There’s a Yiddish word called shifshbruder — a shif’s brother or sister, somebody who made the ocean crossing with you, from Europe to freedom. In the case of my parents’ generation, it was to America. And it goes back another generation. Shif bruder could have been someone who immigrated with you, and you met them on the boat. The thing is this. These are people — if you weren’t on that journey, you’d never meet them, because they’re from all over the place, and only the vicissitudes of life and history have thrown you together on that boat, but that ocean crossing is the most significant thing you’ve ever done. (01:34:00) Because you are transitioning now — from a state of servitude to some place that’s going to be your liberation. And you’re full of expectation, and you’re very nervous and apprehensive because you don’t know what’s there on the other side. You only know that you have to get there, and that your life is going to be changed. And you’re meeting those other people who are all undergoing a transformation together with you. That’s what the havurah was. That’s what it was. You were all coming from extremely disparate places. Some were in flight. Some had just come out of a crisis. Every story is different. But we were the shifshbrider, and that experience of crossing the ocean would be (01:35:00) what we would have in common for the rest of our lives. And if it weren’t for the ocean crossing, we never would have met. When would I have met Joel Rosenberg from California? I mean, no — impossible. Mike Swirsky had already graduated from JTS, and he was fed up with the rabbinate. Maybe I would have met him later in Israel. Possibly. But we would never have been friends if we had not been haverim to begin with. When would I have met Steve Mitchell — someone who was on the verge of converting to Catholicism when he was at Yale? And the deal at Yale was that the Catholic clergymen, if you came to convert, they would send you back to where you came from. Before they would accept you for a conversion class, they would send you back to where you came from. So who was the Hillel (01:36:00) chaplain? Dick Levy — Richard Levy — who changed his life. So he became a Jew again, and learned Hebrew, and sat down to translate the Book of Job. And then joined the havurah, having already translated the Book of Job, after having taught himself Hebrew. I mean, really? Okay. Jim Kugel, Stef Krieger, all these people that came together for so many different reasons. And — when you’re on the boat, you know that your life is about to change, so you’re right for that, you’re open for it. Okay, so once you join this group, and the self-consciousness — I think it takes a long time for it to wear off. (01:37:00) I think we were all pretty — at least that second cohort that I was a part of, it took a while to grow into your role. So you had to change. There was a dress code. You had to have long hair. So this is me, as my, in the havurah, with my long hair —
JG: Rimless glasses.

DR: — and my rimless glasses, looking very spiritual. And this picture was actually taken in the havurah when a photographer and journalist came from Hadassah Magazine to do a story on us. And Richie Siegel was there, and I was there, and our three pictures will later appear in Hadassah Magazine — the three flower children representing this new generation. So the dress code. (01:38:00) Long hair, is absolutely a requisite part of it. Women — loose blouses, long skirts. If you have a psychedelic tallis — you know that this was the invention of Zalman. He had this thing called a “tallisarium,” which he had created already a decade before, where he would take kids in camp — I think, it started at camps, Ramah, where they would design multicolor tallisim, and then they would bring the tallisim back to their Conservative shuls and all hell would break lose. And the rabbis say, But no way are you going to wear that ridiculous thing in the sanctuary! But why not? It’s a kosher tallis! So, you slowly insinuate your way into the Jewish establishment by your dress code. So having a multicolor tallis is a big deal. Learning to (01:39:00) wear not one of these dinky tallisim that they gave you in synagogue — the little silk thingies that look like a scarf — learning how to wear a full tallis, it’s not so simple, folding it! It took me six months to figure out what the hell to do with — how to fold it so it looked like what other people were doing. But you had to learn it. It doesn’t come naturally! [laughs]

JG: Did you learn just by imitating, or did someone teach you?

DR: Probably someone ended up having — someone must have politely told me, You know, you’re not doing it right. It’s very simple. All you have to do is fold it this way, and then it will stay on your shoulder, and the problem is solved. But there’s a right way and there’s a wrong way. And, okay. Speech — there’s a speech code, all of which is unwritten. (01:40:00) You have to learn how to talk in blank verse! [laughs] You can’t use profane language in the havurah. You have to learn a new vocabulary. I’m already talking way too loud to be a real — you’re supposed to speak much more quietly. You don’t raise your voice as much. There is time for boisterousness, and there were people in the havurah whose official role was to be pranksters. Larry Laufman was an official prankster. Arnie Cover was a prankster, Epi loved to be uproarious. But really, for communal things, for meals, there was a rule of decorum which probably is closer to a monastery than it is to anything particularly Jewish. (01:41:00) Lots of silence. Lots of silence. Lots of silent meditation, which is something I never warmed to, never warmed to. But I’d never gone to an ashram. It never appealed to me. My rule of thumb is, silence is not a Jewish form of self-expression. But it was for other people, and you had to respect the silences, and the long silences. Ah! So here’s a piece of folklore that I heard
from Stef Krieger — that Steve Zweibaum’s interview, when he came to interview — he’s the first cohort — consisted of him sitting opposite Art in a room for a half an hour and not saying a word, but just smiling, his Cheshire cat smile — and that was enough. That’s enough. (01:42:00) Okay. So you had to learn a different vocabulary. When I wrote my chapter in my memoir, *Yiddishlands*, about the *havurah*, it’s the only chapter in my memoir that’s not written in translation. By which I mean, all the rest of the book was really happening in another language, usually Yiddish, and I’m translating for the reader, and interpreting. The *havurah* chapter is the only one where I tried to actually capture the cadence of the English that was spoken. And it was on a much higher linguistic pitch, using words that you’ve never used before. There was a whole different spiritual vocabulary that you were supposed to make your own. Okay, so there’s the dress code, (01:43:00) one for men and one for women. There’s the speech. Food! Yes! The consumption of food — very important, and especially for communal meals, which we did a lot of. We had an obligatory communal meal on Wednesday nights. And at these meals, you were supposed to be pretty quiet. And now we come to the music. The music’s very important. The *havurah* coincides with the niggunic renaissance. We just appear on the scene a few years later. After the first LPs appear of real hasidic music, of Modzitz and Chabad (01:44:00) — the records that still have warning labels, “Do not play on the Sabbath or festivals.” And the person who had the largest collection of such records was Hillel Levine, because his father and uncle owned Levine’s Bookstore on Eldridge Street. So he had a complete collection of these songs, and he knew them all. So the mechanical means of reproduction — to begin with, records — play a very important part. Someone brings these songs and teaches them to the group. The only person who came with a whole cultural baggage was Reb Zalman, but he was only there intermittently, if he was on — I think our year he was on sabbatical from Manitoba. Okay, so we saw more of him, and then he disappeared. No more Zalman. (01:45:00) And so whatever impact he had, he had. And then we would meet up with him on various occasions. So he obviously was a repository of niggunim, and body language. One Shabbos morning he taught us how to *shockle*, and that there are different ways of *shockling*, and each Hasidic group *shockles* differently. Now, I don’t know, I hope he managed to record this before he died, because this is a *torah she’be ’al peh* that’s well worth preserving, that you don’t find in any written source. But he taught us the art of *shockling*. So, the meals. We’d never — none of us had ever had a meal like this. None of us grew up with this. This was something that evolved, that we created.

JG: So this was the communal meal, the Wednesday night —

DR: (01:46:00) Yeah, yeah. But we actually met twice a week. Once was *seudah shlishit*, where we were all supposed to come back to the *havurah* and hear a *d’var torah*. somebody actually give a *d’var torah*. I think that Shabbos morning it was just
discussion, I’m pretty sure I’m remembering this right. That there was a pretty wide-ranging Torah discussion. But a formal presentation, if there was one, would be at Seudah Shlishit which was only for haverim. Remember that on Shabbos morning it was open to the public, so that already dissipated the magic. But Seudah Shlishit was only for the group, and it was that magical, transitional time, where someone would speak, and we would sing the niggunim.

JG: Can you set the scene for that? Cast back in your mind’s eye. What does it look like? What’s the atmosphere?

DR: Oh. So, (01:47:00) it’s on the main floor. Yes. Okay, so there are basically only three rooms on the ground floor. One is the davening space which is only used for davening. And that’s where the pillows are on the floor, and there’s an aron made out of — which is a basket, which is our aron kodesh. It’s not a multi-purpose room. As far as I remember, we only used it for prayer and meditation, and that’s it. Off on two sides — is a room where you could just, with couches, that you could sit around, and on the other side is a room with tables, which is the study space. And there was another classroom upstairs as well which was also with a table and benches. So we’re talking about sitting around the table. That’s what I remember — (01:48:00) the room adjacent to the study, to the tefilah room, to the prayer room, to the chapel, if you will. And everyone’s crowded around the table. And there’s food, and someone at the head of the table speaking, and I think probably singing a niggun to set the mood.

JG: Any lights at this point?

DR: Hmm, are there any lights? I don’t know. There may be. I don’t think there was incense or anything like that. It’s just a liminal moment at the end of Shabbos, and the fact that we’re all together, and that we’re all each about to go our own way. But I couldn’t recreate for you what the lighting was (01:49:00) and whether there were candles. I don’t remember. I did one of those, which was extremely meaningful for me — that was really kind of a coming of age, because I spoke about where I was on the journey, and about my relationship to Yiddish and how that was changing, and the Eastern European past. I was weaning myself away from the romance of the past in order to embrace this new model as being equally authentic. For me, that was the thing. Are we play-acting, or is this real? Is this a real alternative? And it was beginning to feel like a real alternative, even though we were making it up as we go along. And I remember Joel Rosenberg making a presentation, and he spoke in Hebrew and in hasidic English. (01:50:00) It made absolutely no sense, but it was just magical, because it was this other language! You couldn’t understand it, but it sounded right. It sounded like what a d’var torah would be if you were giving it in three languages at the same time. He was also
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learning Yiddish. He was one of my students. He had begun studying it in California—gee, was I giving a Yiddish class? I may have actually been teaching Yiddish, come to think of it. I gave a formal class as part of the Lehrhaus—

JG: We’ll come back to that.

DR: We’ll come back to that. Seudah Shlishit had a certain aura. There’s no question. Because it’s still Shabbos. You’re still feeding off that moment. We’ve been together. We didn’t have Friday night services, by the way. There were, but it wasn’t obligatory. Shabbos morning was obligatory, and Seudah Shlishit.

JG: You were starting to talk about the niggunim. (01:51:00)

DR: I remember them being really important for the Wednesday night communal meal, because you had to observe a different decorum. So what’s different? Remember that one of the ways, excuse me, one of the ways you define a group is by what you’re not. What we weren’t was we weren’t Camp Ramah. I didn’t know that at the time, but I figured it out later. The last time you were at a table with young Jews was in camp, okay. And what did you do? Bang on the table, singing these camp songs at the top of your lungs, (01:52:00) and it’s—no, verboten! That is absolutely unacceptable. So this alternative musical culture was essential to our very essence. If we were going to create a spiritual language, and we were going to do it through music, where were we going to learn these? These were not things that any of us knew growing up. So the records were where we learned them, and the most popular, the most compelling ones, were the dveikus niggunim. The dveikus niggun is kind of like a mantra, where you repeat, you repeated over and over again. And oftentimes it has no words. It’s just the melody. You repeat it again and again and again. Okay, so, one of the dveikus melodies, I know where we got it from. (01:53:00) It came from a movie. It came from the 1937 Dybbuk — Poland 1937, which opens with a scene of hasidim in shul, and this is what they’re singing. [sings] (01:54:00) Okay. So it’s sung a few times and it becomes a kind of leitmotif. And this is actually the real deal. I did a lot of research on this play, and on the — a Jewish ethnomusicologist called Yoel Engel was on an expedition in 1911 with Ansky, and they recorded these melodies on the first—

JG: The cylinders.

DR: — cylinders, yes. And then it became part of the fixed repertoire of every production of The Dybbuk in Yiddish, maybe in Hebrew too. So I arranged for a screening of this someplace. I remember the whole havurah came for this, and the melody just took off, and we adopted it. while I was still at the havurah (01:55:00) Barry Holtz used it for
Kedsusha, I think, on Rosh Hashanah. He was the one who really understood how powerful this was and that it could be turned into liturgy. So I’m citing that as an example of the kind of musical culture, something like a mantra, where music is supposed to transport you into another sphere of consciousness. And the power of it was the thing itself, and that you were turning your back on the musical culture that you grew up on. Now one Shabbos, Mike Swirsky, also a graduate of Camps Ramah, also same rabbinical school class as Art Green from JTS, (01:56:00) decided to do a straight Ramah-style service. And the rule was that you had to trust the sheliach tzibur. And the rule was, whatever the sheliach tzibur did, you had to go with him. So he did a straight Ramah-style davening —

JG: Which is what? Can you —?

DR: It’s Conservative. It’s just a Conservative nusach. And that’s — the point is nusach. So there are two competing principles. One is nusach, which is the way, you know, the melodic line, you know, for Shacharis, for Musaf or Ma’ariv. You learn it in junior congregation, and when you go to Camp Ramah, you lead the services. And that’s how you show that you’re one of the boys, is that you’ve learned (01:57:00) the standard melodies. We introduced something or reclaimed something very different, which was the niggun. And a niggun could be several things. But one is it personalizes the davening because you are introducing a melody from a different place, and you’re making it new. You’re doing something innovative. You’re changing the rhythm. You’re changing the flow. Zalman was, of course the master at this, finding the niggun that matched the words, so that you’re singing a normal prayer but to a different melody, which altogether creates a whole new set of meanings. So it’s not just singing a melody (01:58:00) and interrupting — you could do that too. That’s perfectly okay. You can slow down the davening in order to introduce a mood and change the whatever. But to adapt a melody to words, that’s already a second tier. So it creates — it’s like the difference between a classical composition and jazz. So a classical composition — you go to a concert, and you expect a certain performance, you know what the score is, and you appreciate it as performance — how close they are, or how closely they interpret or adhere to — but a jazz concert is half-improvisational. Okay. So a niggun is like jazz. It’s half-improvisational. It was a very tall order to learn all of this. (01:59:00) So if you grew up, as half of the group did, already knowing the nusach because, like Barry Holtz, being in a junior congregation, or like half of them, going to Camps Ramah, that’s what you learned. Okay, so, shaking things up. So you learn how to shake things up. But supposing you’re like me, and you don’t even know the nusach yet. You’re still learning the ABCs. But you’re supposed to be able to do that, and do the next step, the improvisational — very hard to learn all of that together. So I learned everything backwards. It took me much longer to learn the nusach than to learn the improvisation. So for me, davening was
first and foremost the improvisational part and adapting melodies, because I don’t have any musical training. And for me to learn nusach is a matter of rote repetition — took me an extremely long time. So, a meal could become a kind of service. Because if you captured the right niggunim, then it’s almost like you’re davening, because the niggun is really what holds it together. So I didn’t finish the story. Mike Swirsky, one Shabbos morning, decided — it’s perfectly acceptable, let’s do a straight, traditional, Conservative-style davening, at which – somewhere, into the davening, Art stood up —

JG: Art Green.

DR: — Art Green stood up and walked out of the room. (02:01:00) Okay. That was unacceptable. So he wasn’t going to stop Swirsky, out of respect for him, but he wasn’t going to sit there either, because for him, this wasn’t davening anymore. It was totally non-spiritual, it was such a downer, that he might as well not even be there. Okay. So, you see what the tension here is.

JG: To go back to the communal meals —

DR: Yes.

JG: The niggunim in part were about transforming the meal into a spiritual occasion.

DR: Yes.

JG: The table is your —

DR: — is your altar. Definitely. The table is your altar.

JG: And that is what’s wrong with Ramah — banging on the table, etc.

DR: That’s right. And I think it’s true. That’s exactly right. (02:02:00) So where are we going with this? The power, the cumulative power — you could walk in, and you could say, This is ridiculous. Why are all these hippie types sitting on the floor, on pillows? It’s not Jewish and it’s like an ashram. It’s all play-acting. What is this?”

JG: Now you’re talking about tefilot.

DR: Tefilah, yeah. But we’re adopting certain forms that are both — it’s coming from a modern sensibility, and it’s coming from our exposure to many different religious and spiritual strands, but we’re making it Jewish. We’re making it Jewish. And that’s what
worked. So beginning with the very concept of *havurah*, beginning with that very word — which is different from Farbrangen, (02:03:00) and is different from Reb Zalman’s *B’nei Or*, or it’s different form the House of Love and Prayer which is very California, you hear that term and it conjures up all kinds of things, psychedelics or whatever — you take this term, *havurah*, which nobody had used before. Jacob Neusner gave all of us complimentary copies of his book on the *havurah* in second century Judaism and wanted to believe that we learned it from him and that he was kind of the guru of the movement, but it came after the fact. So *havurah* has to do with being a sacred fellowship; creating a new model of affiliation, which is the *haver*. But really, but all of that would have been (02:04:00) without substance if it weren’t for Hasidism. So the key here is the *niggun* and the musical culture. Because I think, if we knew it or not, we were creating a co-educational *shtibl*. Hasidism, in actual fact, was core to the curriculum, certainly for me. That’s what I was most interested in studying. It had to do with the genealogy, the spiritual genealogy of Reb Zalman, Heschel, and Art. And we all knew that Art had been Heschel’s *talmid muvhak* and that he had learned from the source. And Heschel was our source in two respects. (02:05:00) Not only was he a scion of hasidic dynasties, and not only was he a scholar of Hasidism, but he was a social activist, and he had marched in Selma with Martin Luther King, Jr. So he was everything. He was the “*havurah*” and the “shalom.” He was also the social activist, all in one person. Hasidism became — I think, is really the glue that held it all together. This idea that in our musical culture and in the tremendous emphasis on prayer, on contemplative prayer — that was what most of the time — I mean, what did we do together? What did we actually do together? We prayed, and we ate. And yeah, there were courses. But the courses were small. You sat, you studied here, and you studied there. (02:06:00) It was — so it was — coming together for Shabbos morning. And it was only Shabbos and Yontef, we didn’t have a morning minyan. People could go to a morning minyan, but it wasn’t part of —

JG: And Friday night was just the *havurah*, just the members, *Kabbalat Shabbat*.

DR: I guess that must have been. The reason I’m hesitating is I didn’t attend *Kabbalat Shabbat*. And the reason I remember it is because I lived in the building for the first six months. There was one telephone in the kitchen, which was adjacent to the prayer room. And my parents insisted that I call them every Friday night. And as a dutiful son, I would call them every night. And as you can hear from my interview, I talk (02:07:00) quite loudly. And at a certain point, very gently, Art came to tell me, “We can hear your conversation when we’re trying to *daven*. Maybe you should reschedule your Friday night talk with your parents.” So because I remember that, that’s how I know that I didn’t go to *Kabbalat Shabbat*. Okay, so presumably it wasn’t an obligatory part of the week. It was optional.
JG: Can we go back for one minute? I just want to talk about the role the house played. The house was brand new, as you were saying, when you came into the havurah in the second year, and was a factor, played a real part in (02:08:00) creating this havurah sense of community. Can you talk about the house itself?

DR: Right. Uncle House. So. I lived there.

JG: Why Uncle House to start?

DR: I don’t know — somebody coined that phrase. You’ll have to ask Joel Rosenberg. He’ll remember. One of the Steves maybe called it that. Somebody coined this phrase. So first of all, we had a resident cat. Has anyone mentioned the cat?

JG: I think maybe Joel.

DR: They called him Krishna Cat. I used to call him Krish-ma Cat. *Kriyat Shma [laughs]* But his official name was Krishna Cat. I didn’t like cats, and I was allergic to most cats, so I was not partial to him to begin with. And I had to live with him. Or was it a she? I honestly don’t know if it was a he or a she. So one bonding experience was painting the house. (02:09:00) And I happen to have saved this unique document, which is all sides of the house. We had to paint it yellow, so they divvied up, and I’ll put this online so you can all see it. So this is the front of the house. So what I’m holding in my hand is the outline of all facades of the building on College Avenue, and how we divvied up the responsibilities for painting. So this is the west side, painting the street, which is College Ave. And it says I’m responsible for section number seven. And here are the instructions. “Number seven includes the ceilings, posts, and railings of the porch and the lattices under it, and the wall where the door is, (02:10:00) but not the floor or the steps.” And I recognize the handwriting as Joel Rosenberg’s because nobody had as beautiful a handwriting as he. So when you visit — I’m very proud of this — when you visit College Ave and the havurah today, you will see a plaque that says *Kehilah Kadosha Havurat Shalom* in Hebrew. “Kuf Kuf,” Covenantal Community, “Havurat Shalom.” It’s the Armenian potter on Via Dolorosa. I commissioned that in the summer of 1969 and brought it back — before, I think, I’d actually seen the building, because we left for the summer after Packard Manse, and we only moved in in August. So probably I ordered it during that summer break, and I brought it back, and we affixed it. (02:11:00) So living in the house, and the house itself, was very challenging because it was a filthy place, absolutely filthy. There were reefers everywhere. We had to figure out a rotation. And it took a long time for the rotation to kick in, because people came and went. Nobody likes to do cleanup. The worst of all was the kitchen. That was terrible. And I was rooming
with two Steves, Steve Zweibaum and Steve Epstein, who weren’t the neatest people on earth, and they lived in the attic.

JG: And you lived where?

DR: I lived on the second floor. And they lived on the third floor. Three people living there — Richie Siegel had a room up there, and the two Steves. Were they sharing a room? They shared a concubine, so — (02:12:00) her name was Rosie, and she wasn’t Jewish. So I guess they lived in the same room. I don’t know. You’ll have to ask them.

JG: What was your room like?

DR: It was very neat. It had no door. So Charles had to build me a door. And Ruthie Brooks sewed me burlap curtains, because it had no curtains. So the place was very rundown. And the floors creaked, but it was spacious. So the second floor had my bedroom, and it had one large classroom, as I recall. Or it seemed large at the time, and I think that’s where the library was. And I’ve already described the main floor. Whether this is still on the walls or not, I don’t know, but Mike Swirsky did a calligraphy — (02:13:00) it was framed, on the first floor in the study room. It read, “To be Jewish is to remind the world that we have not yet done with ambiguity.” Sounds pretty profound, doesn’t it? He made that up: “To be Jewish is to remind the world that we have not yet done with ambiguity.” So, this is fifty years ago, and I still remember. I don’t know whether it’s still hanging there, but I remember that sign and I know that he did it. So the house was definitely the focal point. It was our house of study, it was our Lehrhaus. It was our shul. It was our shtibl. It was our place where we ate our meals. Everything happened in the house.

JG: Community meetings happened in the house also —

DR: Oh, (02:14:00) the meetings. Oh yes, around the fireplace, definitely.

JG: There was a fireplace? That I didn’t know.

DR: Whether it was a real fireplace or not, I couldn’t say, but there was a fireplace on the first floor, just as you walked in.

JG: Talk a little bit about the meetings themselves. A number of people have talked about the intensity of those meetings, and the challenge of those meetings.
DR: So first of all, the only halachic principle of membership, the only thing you absolutely had to do, was you had to live a certain parameters of the house. Close enough so that one could visit each other on foot on Shabbos, so you wouldn’t have to drive. (02:15:00) So that’s very important, because really what we’re doing is we’re recreating the shtetl, where everyone who’s important to you lives within walking distance. So the halachah really played into that, and the house was the epicenter. And remember, Art and Kathy lived across the street. So you can’t get any closer to the center of sanctity than 113 College Avenue and whatever their address was, literally across the street from the havurah. Meetings were very intense because there was a lot of tension. So, what we didn’t know when we joined the group is that there had already been a failed attempt at a covenant, that Stef Krieger initiated (02:16:00) to draw up a ten-point covenant that everyone would sign on to. And that went absolutely nowhere, and he can tell the story much better than I, because it was on his beat. There was — I went through my notes — someone made a passing reference to it. I think Jim Kugel. In one of his statements, he mentioned a covenant, and I didn’t even know what it meant, when I read it originally. The group basically split within the first year. I mentioned that there was a two-tiered membership. Well, that’s okay on paper, but in actual fact it created a lot of tension between those — originally it was supposed to be those who were on the rabbinic track, (02:17:00) who really wanted, let’s say, the haver degree at the end of the line, and those who had other — who were studying, working during the day, and studying and praying and spending as much time as they could. But it’s the first group that wanted the havurah to be much more than it could be. And they had a name. Their name was the Dortonians. They lived on the far side of Powderhouse Circle, which in Yiddish is dorton — they lived dorton. It must have been me — I don’t know — because who else would have come up with this. Dorton means “over there,” so they’re the people who lived “over there.” And they became, in our parlance, the Dortonians, the radical fringe. What was the radical fringe? (02:18:00) They wanted the havurah to be their life and they wanted us to pool our economic resources. And they wanted us to be kind of like an urban kibbutz. And basically, a very, very high level of commitment. And the two groups couldn’t co-exist. So this precipitated a major period of soul-searching, where each of us had to present a position paper.

JG: This was suggested by Art as one way of working your way towards a resolution.

DR: Yes, yes. And in the end it was decided that there wasn’t room for two disparate visions, and that the majority ruled, and that the Dortonians, if they weren’t happy, had to go elsewhere.

JG: So what happened?
DR: They did.

JG: Did they go elsewhere, or did they just disconnect —?

DR: Well, they may have physically stayed (02:19:00) in the — Michael Paley, you can ask him this. When he would come visiting, those were the people he hung out with. They were the ones he was closest with. If you wanted to find Paley, that’s where you would have found him. I think, well, Stef left, very early on. Kugel left. Yeah, I would say, probably the ones who — the core group ended up leaving. But there was an enormous amount of *sturm und drang*. And I and many of us have complete sets of all of these position papers, which are extremely interesting and very self-conscious.

JG: What did people do in the position papers?

DR: Each one (02:20:00) enunciated what they wanted from the *havurah*, what their personal vision was — some more articulate than others, and some more all-encompassing than others. Some said, We like it the way it is. We don’t want a total environment. The way things exist today is fine Maybe just tweak it. And others said, no. The whole thing, writ large, was a utopian experiment — utopian because we were all in our early twenties. There were still no children on the scene. We could invest all our psychic energies in this enterprise. And we were reinventing ourselves. I think we all felt that the models of Judaism that we had come from (02:21:00) were bankrupt, and everyone for a different reason. We were really leaving Egypt. We were really leaving Europe behind. We were really leaving something behind and entering into this new space, which, for us, if this didn’t work, it was kind of an all or nothing proposition.

There was nothing to go back to. I think that’s what most of us felt — nothing to go back to. Either we were going to make this work, or who knows how we would go on living meaningful Jewish lives, spiritual life, fill in the blanks. So this exercise of self-definition was actually very beneficial, because it was discreet. It wasn’t defined as an existential assignment. You don’t have to write about your whole life. You’re just writing about the thing itself. What do you want the *havurah* to be? (02:22:00) And it turned out that there were many, very many disparate ideas and levels that people were aspiring to. Essentially it was this moment in time. The meetings were difficult, and what made it difficult is that, after a while, you could anticipate what anyone was going to say. And I have to say that this has been the bane of my existence all through the subsequent decades, because I belong to a spinoff of the *havurah*. Meetings are the least enjoyable, precisely for this reason, because you already know in advance, basically, what everyone around the table is going to say. But the group process dictates that (02:23:00) you have to hear from everyone. Everyone has to be heard from. It’s very time-consuming because there’s no leadership model. It’s a leaderless group, at least theoretically, and you know, I’m not
going to go into this whole question of Art’s role of wanting to be a rebbe, not wanting to be a rebbe. That’s a really complicated issue that I don’t really want to address. But certainly, there wasn’t anybody to say, “Okay, now that’s it. Enough is — you’ve said it all, now take a vote.” I don’t even remember taking a vote on anything, frankly. I don’t even know how things were decided. It was all process. It was all process. I may be missing something. But it wasn’t as if, let’s take a vote and decide to reject the Dortonians. Everybody in favor raise their hand. (02:24:00) I don’t think we ever had anything like that.

JG: Because it was a consensus model, basically.

DR: Yes, totally. The other episode, which I should mention, because it had very profound personal repercussions, very painful, leaving aside this whole issue, we had one encounter group. We had a facilitated encounter group where we actually brought in someone from the outside because it was felt that we couldn’t handle this by ourselves, and maybe an outside intervention would, you know, would alleviate matters. It was an all-day affair, and in the first part, the before lunch part, they did this exercise where the group leader placed Art in the center of the room, and he sat him down on the floor, (02:25:00) and everybody was supposed to position themselves on the floor where they thought they were vis-à-vis Art. Let’s see what it looks like. How do you envisage who’s in and who’s out? Okay, so we did that. Then, you know, in the name of openness, things were said which should never have been said. And the person who was hurt the most, was the woman I was married to at the time, Dina, who is probably the only one in the room who knew how these groups worked, because she had been Abraham Maslow’s last student at Brandeis and had written her master’s thesis on these kinds of group dynamics and group therapy. (02:26:00)

JG: What are encounter groups? Can you just describe what that is, what it was meant to be?

DR: Well, it’s supposed to be a controlled environment where you let your unspoken feelings out. And because it’s controlled, the anger and resentments then are supposed to be rechanneled, and at the end of the day, the group will come back together again. But unless you articulate, or, as I just mentioned, you actually physically embody what the problems are, and you see that some people see themselves as insiders and outsiders, unless you actually see it, in fact you can’t call it anything and you don’t even know what the issues are. So it’s a very sixties kind of model. It’s also kind of group process, but it’s supposed to be much more controlled and (02:27:00) manageable. Well, Dina ended up provoking people, asking them about what they thought about her. And so all the bad things that they thought about her came out. Well, she never came back for the afternoon
session, and that was almost — that was almost close to the breaking point, where we ended up leaving the havurah much earlier than I had intended. It had other far-reaching repercussions which I would only understand much later. It was very unfortunate. She should have come back. The things that were said shouldn’t have been said. If we had to do it over again, I would rewind the whole thing and maybe never have had the whole damn thing to begin with. Yes, if I had to live my whole life over again, it would have been better if we hadn’t had this (02:28:00) because people who came back in the afternoon said that. Yeah, the group did reconstitute itself. There were good feelings at the end of the day. It was never repeated. We never had another encounter group, so obviously people felt it wasn’t a good idea, and whatever differences people had we should resolve in a different way. But it’s an index of how much tension there was that we turned to kind of desperate measures. And to bring in someone from the outside was a pretty radical thing to do. My fond memories of the Wednesday nights around the campfire, so to speak, is that you could also let your hair down. That’s one of the sources of entertainment which I remember is those who (02:29:00) were seminary graduates regaling us with stories about their teachers at JTS and what a horrific place it was. And it was hilarious, because they used to do riffs on their teachers. And they were so successful, that when I ended up joining the seminary faculty, I recognized all of the people by the parodies that had been made of them around the fireplace at Havurat Shalom. I knew exactly who each person was because they got it exactly right. So it wasn’t all just tedium. Also, remember this. We were catapulted to fame instantaneously. The Jewish community thought that we were the answer, and seized upon the havurah as something extraordinary. So people kept flocking to us, to meet us, and to visit the havurah. (02:30:00)

JG: How did they know about the havurah?

DR: It was in the paper. I think even Time Magazine had something about us. We were in the news. Shabtai Teveth, who was the leading journalist from Ha’aretz came and did this huge article about us in Ha’aretz. So some of these meetings — one I remember in particular, Richard Rubinstein, very noted theologian came to visit, just because he wanted to see who we were. At the end of which, he said — this is what I remember him saying, “You know, these hasidim that you’re so enamored of, they did observe all the mitzvot. I just want you to remember, they really were observant Jews, for all the things that you ascribe to them. Don’t forget!” [laughs] (02:31:00) So I remember thinking, he’s right. They weren’t all sitting around smoking pot all the time and doing these crazy things, even though we imagine ourselves in their image. So meetings, it was an unfortunate but necessary part of belonging. And they were very long and repetitive, and —
JG: Would you say overall that the meetings did succeed in bringing people closer as a community, in creating community?

DR: The meetings? No, the meetings were never that. What brought us together was going out on retreats, was doing other stuff together. Prayer. Thank goodness that we had all the other activities. Meetings, I — (02:32:00) I don’t remember leaving a meeting with a good feeling and saying, Ah, now I feel a sense of relief and now we’ll forge ahead. Certain things needed to be discussed. We created a Lehrhaus. You had to meet in order to decide what was our idea of outreach. Because this was very solipsistic. We were doing all of this for ourselves. We were hoarding all of this. And we understood, we owed something to the community at large. So what could we give back? This is what we could give back. In my time, anyway. This is the program of the first year of courses. (02:33:00) And the preamble was written by Joel Rosenberg, and it’s all based on Franz Rosenzweig and the Lehrhaus. Because among the models of the useable past was not just hasidism, but also Franz Rosenzweig and the German Lehrhaus. So I’ll come back to that in a second. Here are the courses: Joey Reimer’s “Ethical Issues in the Biblical Narrative;” Art Green, “God and Man in Classical Judaism;” Seymour Epstein, “Ways into a Jewish Text;” Everett Gendler, “Three Seasonal Scrolls.” That’s very interesting. I never thought of that before, but he was our nature man, so it stands to reason that he would teach a course on three seasonal scrolls. That’s funny. David Roskies, “Yiddish Literature in Translation,” my first bonafide course in Yiddish that I ever taught — to a general public — was at the havurah. And Joel Rosenberg, “Modern Jewish Thought, the Self-Image.” (03:34:00)

JG: So the Lehrhaus was for the public —

DR: Yes, not for us, not for us. Although I remember haverim being part of my Yiddish literature course.

JG: So this was in addition to the courses —

DR: Yes, this was in addition. This was in addition. This was an add-on.

JG: What year was this, do you know?

DR: I left in ’71, so it was probably ’70, ’71. It says right here, yes, ’70-’71.

JG: So this was your second year. Your second year.

DR: Yeah.
JG: The third year.

DR: Yeah. And there is a fifty-dollar tuition per person. Okay, so we charged money, but it was obviously not a money-making venture. (02:35:00) So this was our outreach, so obviously you needed a meeting to vote on whether you were going to do this, and what constituted outreach. And to plan retreats, and when are we going to go out on retreat. Remember, going out on retreat meant that we left the place high and dry. There was not going to be a service for anyone to go to. There’s no backup. When the havurah leaves, it leaves. There’s nothing there. The room is empty.

JG: So those kinds of communal decisions also got made there.

DR: Yeah.

JG: Let’s come back to tefilah, which again was absolutely central to what was positive and uplifting for most people in their time in the havurah. (02:36:00) I’d like you to talk a little bit about the silence and the role of silence in the service when you first came, and how you personally encountered it and felt about it.

DR: I found it to be very isolating. I felt that it created a spiritual hierarchy — the people who could meditate and the people who couldn’t. And meditation was a very private matter. Some people would actually meditate and cover their heads with a tallis for example, so they were shutting out the world. That wasn’t a viable model for me. That’s not what tefilah was. It seemed inimical. (02:37:00) Look, there were people who had gone and spent time in monasteries, you know, with fathers who had taken vows of silence. And they were very attracted to that as a spiritual model. It wasn’t me. I wasn’t among them. That was not a direction I would have gone. So I didn’t know what to do with the silence. I’d never trained in meditation. I had never done yoga. I wasn’t interested in Eastern religions. I didn’t come to Judaism via Eastern religions. It exerted no interest, even until this day.

JG: How big a factor was silence in the service? When was there silence?

DR: The Shabbos morning began with meditation. Shabbos morning began with meditation. So you could (02:38:00) come at any point, you didn’t have to be there for the meditation, but the first thing you did was to meditate. That’s how it began. And then whoever was the shaliach tzibur would start a niggun, I think, and that would signal that we’re actually beginning. Here’s a good example of something that was very memorable
and meaningful. Richie Siegel came up with this. He was a very big meditator. This was on a retreat where, when we walked in, it was a retreat center we’d never been at. It was carpeted, and we were instructed to lie down on the ground on our backs. (02:39:00)

JG: By Richie?

DR: Yes, he was the shaliach tzibur. He was in charge. And to spread out — there was so much room to spread out — that you could only touch the tips of the fingers of the person next to you. So that you knew there was someone on either side, but that you could just sort of touch them and know that they were there. So you were alone, but not alone. I think you were supposed to close your eyes. So it started with breathing exercises, okay. But then there was a purpose to it. He was going someplace with that. And where we were going was this — was we began humming disparate notes — notes coming from different places in the room — (02:40:00) to see whether the voices could somehow come together. From there, we graduated to syllables. And the syllables were, “neh, neh, neh, sha, sha, sha, ma, ma, ma, ne, sha, ma” which eventually became the first line of the song, “Kol ha’neshama” but the idea was — and he may even have articulated it — was that neshama is the same root as neshima, which is breath. Okay. So that was profound. With each breath we are praising You, oh Lord. Ne-sha-ma. (02:41:00) And our breath, okay. So if one of the ideas of Hasidism, which is very abstract, is avodah b’gashmiyut, that you’re supposed to do the holy work, your avodah, with the whole body — that it must involve the body, it must involve all parts of your body — then that was an object lesson in what that could mean. And I actually have adopted that ever since. Not that we can do breathing exercises in Minyan M’at because people would think that this is totally off the wall, but before Nishmat Kol Chai, I’m still the only one who still does this, I say, “There is a long-standing tradition in the minyan,” and then of course everyone starts laughing, because it’s only long-standing because I keep insisting on doing it. (02:42:00) Is that before we do Nishmat Kol Chai? We take a deep breath. Let’s all take a deep breath, because Nishmat Kol Chai and neshima are one and the same. And this all goes back to that breathing exercise that Richie Siegel did on a retreat. So I was with him, completely, from beginning to end. The havurah is the only place on earth that I think that idea would have happened. Certainly the only place on earth that I, Dovid Roskies, would have participated in that kind of tefilah. And it was meaningful. I learned something about davening from that.

JG: Can you describe your own debut as the baal tefilah?

DR: (02:43:00) Yeah. It wasn’t great. I was on a very steep learning curve.

JG: This was your first year?
DR: Yeah, yeah. And I think it was Rosh Chodesh, or even Sukkos or something, because I didn’t realize there were changes that had to be made. It was probably — it was during Sukkos or something. So Larry Laufman taught me the ropes. And I remember sitting with him. It was very technical — where do you sign off, really the basics. I hardly knew anything. The other thing I should also mention is that I was really faking it because I had not learned havara ashkenazit (02:44:00) I went to a school where we learned Hebrew havara sefaridit. It’s the only Hebrew I knew. I knew the Hebrew that was merged into Yiddish, but there are lots of words of Hebrew extraction that you pronounce differently in Yiddish. But that’s not the same as knowing how to daven ashkenazit. So I made it up, and I didn’t really know what I was doing. So I would constantly be putting the accent in the wrong places. But it sounded — it felt to me like this is what I needed to do, because if Hasidism was the master metaphor, then davening Sephardic was inauthentic.

JG: Was there a general consensus on which way to daven?

DR: I don’t know. Where did I pick this up? I don’t know. (02:45:00) Certainly Mike Swirsky wouldn’t daven that way. Ashkenaz, no. He would have davened Sephardic, the same way he did it all his life. He wouldn’t have switched. Maybe I picked it up from Art. Maybe Reb Zalman, certainly, because that’s the way he spoke English. He spoke Ashkenazic English! [laughs] I mean, his own language was Ashkenaz. Did Art daven that way? I don’t remember, but I certainly got it from Reb Zalman. And maybe that’s where I decided, okay, to be authentically Yiddish and to be Hasidic, this is what I have to do. So that was fake. And I didn’t pull it off very well, because I was making it up and I didn’t even know what the rules were. (02:46:00) So I was very nervous, and I sort of got through it. Look, the important thing is there was an amazing tolerance level. I have to say, today — the person I am today would not tolerate the person that I was then. No way would I have been able to sit in a room with me as a twenty-year-old leading the davening. I’d say, “What is he doing? He doesn’t know what he’s doing. How could he get up? What chutzpah!” But the ethos was really followed and, with the one exception of Art getting up and walking out on Mike Swirsky because he didn’t like it. It’s not that he was davening wrong. It just wasn’t sufficiently spiritual. I’ll give you another example.

JG: In your case, though, Art actually intervened. (02:47:00)

DR: He did. With the singsong, he said, “You know, on Yom Tov you should do it this way. You were really supposed to have started here. But alright, we’ll cut you a little bit of slack.” And that was wonderful. It was really beautiful. And I did amazingly funny
things. We davened from the Birnbaum siddur which was nusach sefarad. Why? For two reasons. One is we got them for free from a shul that no longer needed them. Two, Hasidim davened nusach sefarad. So it served a double purpose, because they all did, you know, going back to the Baal Shem Tov, but probably going back even earlier. The Kabbalists would daven nusach sefarad. So I once sang the footnotes. I chanted the footnotes. (02:48:00) [laughs] I figured, if we — Zalman taught us that you can daven in English, and that you could chant in English. That was a major breakthrough. He was the great innovator. Whatever we learned, we learned from him, not from Art. Zalman was the master. You could chant in English. You could daven in English. So I thought, okay, if you can chant in English, then everything is holy. Then the footnotes are holy, so let’s chant the footnotes. So I did. You could do that! You could do whatever you wanted. You could do the whole thing in silence. I remember on Bach’s birthday, we played the Brandenburg Concerto instead of davening Shacharis. It was fantastic. And you had to trust the baal tefilah. So when the group was still small enough, it was obeyed. (02:49:00) Strictly obeyed. The first woman — and I would like to go on record, because this is not written down anywhere — the first woman who led a service at the havurah was my former wife, Dina. She, too, was not at all prepared for the task, but she wanted to do it. She did some very interesting things with movement and body. Her Hebrew wasn’t very good. She made a lot of mistakes. But I have to hand it to her, it was very gutsy to get in front of that group and lead a service and try to do something feminine as well. Remember, also — the whole feminist thing was just, just beginning to surface. We weren’t all that — we weren’t (02:50:00) that ahead of the game there. We needed a lot of prompting.

JG: Art Green called it a pre-feminist moment.

DR: I think I would say that was exactly right.

JG: Do you recall women wearing tallisim?

DR: There were the imahot, I would call them. I mean, Janet Holtz was already someone who was very spiritual. And you could see there was a special aura about her. Some of the other women were simply spouses. Bella Savran wasn’t interested in prayer per se. It wasn’t her thing, it was George’s thing. Eva Epstein, absolutely not for her. She made it clear that she thought we were a bunch of babies. We were just play-acting. And she let us know it in no uncertain terms. (02:51:00) I think there were already women davening in tallisim. I did tell this story, but I heard secondhand — I don’t remember it myself — of how women were counted in the minyan. Do you have that on tape?

JG: Just tell us the story.
DR: I think it’s actually quite interesting. It happened ad hoc. It happened at a Sukkos retreat, so it must have been very early on. We were about to go home, and Epi said he had yorzeit the next day, for his mother. He wanted to organize a minyan. Were there ten people who could raise their hands who he could count on to have a morning minyan the next day? And nine haverim raised their hand. And (02:52:00) either Mona raised her hand or asked whether she could raise her hand. Anyway, it was Mona Fishbane who called the question, “Will you accept me for the minyan, or will you not accept?” Let’s say that there are ten hands, and one of them was a woman, and he said, “Well, we don’t have a minyan.” I’m making this up, but let’s say that she said, “Well, why don’t you want to count me in the minyan?” At which point, he said, “You’re right.” And that’s when it was decided, and the precedent was created then.

JG: With discussion, or —?

DR: No. And that’s very havurah. That’s an authentic moment. Without a discussion. That’s real. That’s a real moment. Where the precedent happened, halachah l’ma’aseh and it makes perfect sense. (02:53:00) I also — I actually researched this — there’s a backstory. The earliest time where a woman was actually called up to the Torah was for an aufruf, which must have been really at the very beginning, probably still in Cambridge, where whoever was the shliach tzibur decided, if there’s an aufruf, they should both be called up.

JG: And whose was it? Do your remember?

DR: No, I wasn’t there. Someone will remember. Maybe Stef will remember. Somebody, if you jog their memories. So that’s the first time that a woman was called up to the Torah, which broke certain taboos. A woman counted for the minyan — that was the first time, and it was Mona who called the question. And it was interesting because, you know — Epi was not a radical. (02:54:00) But that was an authentic response. Once you were a member of this group, that was the right thing to do. If he had remained what he had been, if he wasn’t open to change, he had no business being there.

JG: Had there been dissent — had certain members dissented, even without saying anything in that moment, would the issue of women’s status and roles been discussed?

DR: Definitely. We had a discussion whether women — yes, it was on a Wednesday. It was a meeting, an agenda item — whether women individually could become members, not as spouses. And it was voted, and the answer was yes. I was there for that.
JG: Do you know when —

DR: I would have to go through my notes. But yes, that happened very early on (02:55:00) where there was a case of somebody who wanted to apply for membership as a single woman, not as anybody’s spouse. And we had to decide whether to consider it, and it was voted on. So this contradicts what I said before, that no decisions were ever made. Yes, decisions were made.

JG: What about women’s roles in public worship?

DR: So I just said, there was never a vote.

JG: On that or any —

DR: No, Dina got up one Shabbos morning and led the service. Period. That’s it. There was never a discussion about whether she could, or she couldn’t. She was a member. If she wanted to do it, it was her right to do it. Based on the principle that wherever the shaliach tzibur took you, that’s where you had to be willing to go.

JG: So was she a member by virtue of the fact that she was your wife?

DR: Yes, yes.

JG: She was a member, but in this singular status that women had?

DR: Yes, yeah, she snuck in through the back door. She didn’t have to go through the whole rigmarole (02:56:00) that I did. Which — okay.

JG: Yeah, okay. Let’s turn to study and learning.

DR: All right. Wait, I want to back up. I’m not finished yet with this hasidic thing, because there’s one more crucial story to go. And that’s Kotzk, I have to memorialize the story of Kotzk — how this song became the anthem of Havurat Shalom. And it is. It’s the closest thing we have to an anthem. So I mentioned earlier that records, mechanical means of reproduction, were our source for a lot of stuff, because where else would we learn it. None of us grew up in a hasidic home. If we went, let’s say, to the Bostoner Rebbe or something like that, or spent a weekend with the Lubavitcher on (02:57:00) Eastern Parkway, but basically no one really knew what Hasidism was other than through reading. But we had these records. And the records were the first — that was extremely important. And Ben Zion Shenker, who just died, was writing new melodies all the time.
so it wasn’t just archival. The hasidic revival was happening on our beat, and new records and new niggunim were coming to the surface and being written. Okay. So I knew this song from a record. I knew this song from a record, a Ruth Rubin record. And it’s funny, I mention this because I could have learned it from its source. The source was a man named Jacob Zipper, (02:58:00) whom I knew. He was the principal of the rival Yiddish school, called the Peretz School, not the one that I went to. I went to the folkshule. He ran the Peretz School. He came from a town called Tishevitz which was a hasidic town. Ruth Rubin, one of the earliest ethnomusicologists was also a Montrealer, and she recorded this song from him, of him singing it. I never heard that recording, but on one of her records, one of my favorites, which I would listen to over and over again, she sings it a cappella. And I’ll sing it at the end when I finish the story. So I loved this song, and you know, it’s probably one of the conduits that through this song is also, come to think of it, how I ended up in Havurat Shalom, because all of these things create a longing (02:59:00) for something. You want to be inside that material, like watching The Dybbuk, which I saw over and over again. I wanted to be in that movie. I wanted to be there, among them. I didn’t want to be watching that movie. I wanted to be in it. I wanted to be those people, and the song always spoke to me. So the first winter of the havurah — so this must be already December; I joined in August, so it must have been December ’69, pretty early — my parents went off to Israel because my brother went on aliyah. And they left the house to me — a very big house in Montreal, a thirteen-room house on a hill. So I issued an open invitation, which I still have, to (03:00:00) all haverim who wanted to spend their winter vacation in Montreal, and I gave them driving instructions. The only person, I think, who took me up on it was Joel Rosenberg, who ended up driving up to Montreal, and joining me. And according to his journal, I even left him there. I went to the annual Yugentruf conference in New York, and he basically lived in the house all by himself. So he must have been the only person who took me up on it. Okay, so he arrives, and there’s this fantastic snowstorm. I mean, historic blizzard! And he’s from California. He’d never seen so much snow in his entire life. He wasn’t dressed for it, but he was just exhilarated. And we were homebound. There was no place to go. They hadn’t cleaned the streets yet! So I was thinking, “What the hell are we going to do?” This was before DVDs, before anything. (03:01:00) You know, we have a whole night ahead of us! So I said, “You know what, you’re interested in Yiddish.” And he was. He was writing poetry in Yiddish. We were discovering Yiddish poetry together. He was not only my haver, but he was also my talmid. I said, “You know, a very famous Yiddish poet lives not too far away. Her name is Rokhl Korn. I’ll call her up, and if she’s home, we’ll walk over.” So I called her up, and I said, “Rokhl, I have somebody I’d really like to introduce you to. He’s studying Yiddish. He’s a poet. Would you like to meet him?” She said “Of course. Come on over.” So, if it hadn’t been snowing, it would have been a fifteen-minute walk. This was a half an hour, forty-minute walk. We were trudging up. And as we were walking up the hill, at the beginning, we had just started trekking through, there was no
traffic. All the streets were closed. It was feets of snow (03:02:00) and the snow was still coming down. I thought, “What this occasion needs is a pilgrimage song!” So I said, “I’m going to sing you a song, invana devoma something about Kotzk, about — you don’t drive to Kotsk. You go on foot because Kotzk iz dokh bimkoym, Kotzk is in place of the mikdash, in place of the beis ha-mikdash, you have to go on foot. And the way that I remembered the song is very easy to remember, because every stanza plays on the meaning of regel. So the first stanza says “regel iz dokh der taytsh: a fis,” which means, “you have to go by foot.” Regel means l’hitragel, you have to get into the habit of going to Kotzk. And regel means holiday. Whenever you go to Kotsk, it’s a holiday. So I sang him the song.

Kayn kotsk furt men nisht,
Kayn kotsk gayt men;
Vayl kotsk iz dokh bimkoym-hamikdesh,
Kayn kotsk darf men oyle-regl zayn.

“So let me read you Joel Rosenberg’s absolutely brilliant translation of the Kotzk Song, which appears at the very end of my chapter called “Kotzk,” the chapter I wrote about Havurat Shalom. So this is Joel’s translation:

To Kotzk one does not ride, to Kotzk one goes on foot. (03:04:00)
For Kotzk is now in place of the Temple.
Kotzk is now in place of the Temple.
To Kotzk one must make a pilgrimage, make a pilgrimage.

*Regel*, you know, is the word for foot.
To Kotzk one must travel on foot, singing out and dancing about.
And when hasidim go forth to Kotzk, they go there with a dance.
And when hasidim go forth to Kotzk, they go there with a dance.

*Regel*, you know, is the word for habit.
One must make a habit of going to Kotzk,
Singing out and dancing about.
And when hasidim go forth to Kotzk, they go there with a dance.
And when hasidim go forth to Kotzk, they go there with a dance.

And then the resounding last stanza —

*Regel* you know is the word for *Yom Tov*,
*Good Yom Tov*, good *Yom Tov*, good *Yom Tov*!
Singing out and dancing about.
And when hasidim go forth to Kotzk, they go there with a dance.
And when hasidim go forth to Kotzk, it’s a major *Yom Tov*.

So I can’t tell you with any degree of precision when we brought this back to the group. (03:05:00) It could have been, most likely, for a *Seudah Shlishit* soon thereafter. *[pause]*
And we always sing this song when we get together.

JG: To this day.

DR: Yeah. And George Savran will do the — well, a couple people can do the harmony, but George is very good at the harmony. Art will sing off-key, because that’s his wont, but with a great deal of passion. So why did this become — let’s just stop for a minute. Why did this become the anthem? Here are my thoughts on this. It’s a hasidic song, and it’s a real authentic pilgrimage song. And the (03:06:00) reason I underscore that is that most of the Yiddish songs that are supposedly hasidic are really anti-hasidic. They’re spoofs. They’re parodies. But they were so good at parodying that people have forgotten they were created to make fun of the whole movement. This is not one of them. It’s the real thing. Secondly, it’s who we are. This group, we were pilgrims. We were all pilgrims, we were on a journey. Thirdly, it has this very radical refrain. very radical, which is — there are two ways of reading it. But either way. Kotzk, why are we going on
a pilgrimage to Kotzk? Because Kotzk is *bimkoym hamikeish*, which either means “the place of the Temple” or “in place of the Temple.” Because *bimkoym* (03:07:00) could be — to replace the Temple.” But let’s even allow that it is, “the place of a Temple,” not to replace it. That means that where the *rebbe* is, is our temple. There is no question that for me and for many of my *haverim* that’s what the *havurah* was. That’s what 113 College Ave was. It was our temple. And it was the most sacred place, while we were there and while we were creating this thing called the *havurah*. It was the spiritual center of our lives. So why not sing about it? Why not sing about it? And then the question comes up, what about Israel? We haven’t talked about Israel. Many of us (03:08:00) spent time in Israel, would end up going to Israel, moving to Israel, trying to live in Israel, coming back from Israel. So can one say that this ramshackle wooden building in Somerville, Massachusetts is in place of all of that? And the answer is yes, as strange as it may seem, yes. Because that spiritual business becomes the end all and be all. You’re willing to give it anything. And it’s transformed your whole understanding of your place in the world. And you take that with you. It’s a moveable temple. You don’t have to be in that place after all. You can create other *havurot*. But that’s the moment. Kotzk represents that (03:09:00) possibility in your life. Kotzk represents that possibility of creating a utopian space, which is the sum total of all your aspirations, of everything that you would want life to be, your future to look like. And it’s not sustainable. But if you’ve lived it, even for a year, or in my case two years, it creates a hunger that will never leave you. You’re always looking for it again. That, to me, is the core of it. That once you’ve been in that place, you’re going to want to recreate it. And no place will ever measure up to it, because you’re never that young again. You’re never that unencumbered again. And, you know, the stars (03:10:00) will never be perfectly aligned again. But since you’ve already been there once, you’re always hoping that you can recapture that again. And that’s very powerful, that spiritual hunger that never leaves you. I hope I don’t lose that. That’s what I learned in those two years. And that’s what the Kotzk Song represents to me. It could mean something very different to other people who sing it, but that’s what it means. I was there, I was in Kotzk. And look, even the pilgrims have to go home. They visit with the rebe and then they have to go home. They visited the rebbe, and here’s the song to prove it. Here’s the song to prove it! We were there.

JG: Okay, we’re going to spend the last segment of our time together basically reflecting on the meaning of the *havurah* as you’ve just started to talk about it, with the Kotzk Song, (03:11:00) both in your own life, but in a larger way on American Jewry and Jewry in general. So I want to start by asking you — you were actively engaged as a member of Havurat Shalom from 1969 to ’71. Why did you decide to leave at that point, and to do what?
DR: It had to do with Israel. It had to do with deciding that there was an alternative to Kotzk, and that was the State of Israel. That was the other, more compelling experiment that was happening out there. It had to do with the fact that in 1971, my wife and I were sent to the Soviet Union as part of this extraordinary organized effort on the part of Israel, a secret arm of the Israeli government, to send American Jews, European Jews, but primarily American Jews to the Soviet Union, to keep up the contact. Dina and I were there for a month in ’71, and that was life-changing. That was absolutely a transformative event. The Jews of Silence had already come out of Elie Wiesel, but to step back into that world and to meet the people, the first refuseniks, what was happening, the revival of Jewish life in the Soviet Union, the beginning of hope of aliyah to Israel — we were just on fire. This was my world, after all. This was Eastern Europe. These were the Jews I knew about, but we had written them off. It was like walking into history, literally walking into history. So we came back and we threw all our energies into the Soviet Jewry Movement. And the havurah wasn’t with us. They weren’t with us. This was not their thing, not their thing.

JG: Was it painful?

DR: Yes, yes. It was. So that’s when I began to realize that my — I was going to leave sooner or later. We had already made plans to go on aliyah. I mentioned earlier that these were speeded up because of what had happened, and we decided we’d rather leave now than wait out the whole calendar year. So we left in the middle of the year, but it was already in our — the plan was to move to Israel. And it seemed like an either/or proposition. You could either stay in the havurah and build your spiritual life here or go to Israel and start over again. So I was still in the middle of writing my — I’d just begun work on my dissertation. I could do that anywhere. In fact, it’d be easier for me to be working at the Hebrew University Library than anywhere else, so we left. It was very abrupt, very abrupt. And it was kind of, for me personally, an open wound that didn’t heal for a long, long, long time. I wasn’t ready to leave yet. I had not finished what I had started out to do, but that’s what happened.

JG: So what was your involvement with the development of havurot and the havurah movement over the ensuing years?

DR: I spent the rest of my life looking for surrogates. So, Israel — it didn’t last. We didn’t even last the full three years. We came back, and pretty soon after returning to New York, well, I came back. The irony of history is that I was offered a job by the very same Jewish Theological Seminary that we had spent our evenings making fun of. And that’s because of an extraordinary individual named Gerson D. Cohen, who is on the greatest hiring spree in the history of higher Jewish education, reinventing the seminary
and turning it into a university, a Jewish university. And my resume landed on his desk at just the right time. (03:16:00) He wanted to expand in all areas, and one of the areas that was lacking was my area of expertise, Yiddish literature. There was nobody he could have hired among his own students, for the simple reason that Yiddish was anathema at the seminary. It was not taught. It was considered beyond the pale. And he wanted that. And basically, he hired me, and I’ve been there ever since. And within two years of being here, I bump into Alan Mintz, and he says, “You know, there’s this minyan that’s been created. It’s a floating minyan. It meets in private homes. It’s a very small group. And pretty soon, we’re going to close the membership, so if you want in, now’s the time!” [laughs] (03:17:00) So — I was interested! Because he said, “You’ll know everybody. It’ll be like old times.” And I was looking — I had been going to a shibl, trying the other route, trying to pretend that I was really a hasid.

JG: In Jerusalem?

DR: No, here in New York, on the Upper West Side. I went to a hasidic shibl and I thought that would be my shul, because they spoke Yiddish. And it was not successful. It was not at all successful. So the timing was just right. I was looking for something else, and I joined this thing that was really Minyan M’at. It was very, very small. It was barely twenty people at the time. Then I’ve been part of all the permutations of the group and active in it (03:18:00) until now. And I must also say, apropos the hunger, stilling one’s spiritual hunger, the minyan that I have found that is closest on the face of this earth, closest to Havurat Shalom as I remember it, is a minyan in Jerusalem called the Leader Minyan, named after the family Leader, That’s a family name. They only meet once a month on Shabbos Mevorchim, and the service lasts five hours. And it’s amazing.

JG: What is amazing about it?

DR: What is amazing is that you sing every word — Pesukei D’zimrah takes two and a half hours. That it’s — these are not born again hasidim, but they’re new age hasidim, but they really are very knowledgeable and they know exactly what they’re doing. (03:19:00)

JG: Do you know who started it?

DR: This one family called the Leaders. One of them is actually — Ebn is in Boston and teaches — is a mainstay of the Hebrew College —

JG: Rabbinical School.
DR: Rabbinical School, right. And his uncle is the one who leads the Leader Minyan in Jerusalem. And as soon as I walked in there, I knew I was home, and this was what I was missing — a level of intensity where *davening* is the most important thing you could possibly do in your whole life. You wouldn’t want to do anything else but *daven*.

JG: A little over a year ago, fall of 2015, you gave a lecture — the Simon Rawidowicz Memorial Lecture — in which you describe the *havurah* as, quote, “a combination ashram, monastery, *shtibl* (03:20:00) Lehrhaus, an urban kibbutz that drew its inspiration from far and wide.” Why, when looking back and on all the things we discussed, do you see the change in the way Jews related to *davening* as the most profound change brought by the *havurah*?

DR: That was the most neglected area. It’s the bane of everyone’s existence. It’s the one thing that American Judaism did not — it ran up against a brick wall. So we started over, and we started small. I think that was a key insight. A key insight. You can’t *daven* in a temple. (03:21:00) It’s not a place for *davening*. It’s for something else. It’s for worship. You can bring sacrifices in a temple, but you certainly can’t *daven*. You need a small, intimate space. So, literally, we had to begin at the beginning — in a room, a crowded space, bring people into that space, and to rethink what a sacred space is. Remember, so, sitting on the floor might seem very hokey. But if that’s a spiritual language, then you have to try it. You have to try whatever works. See, you know, try different ways of expressing your religious personality. So the pieces are actually — (03:22:00) they’re moveable parts. The *tefilah* is one of them. The *d’var torah* is also. We haven’t even spoken about that, a whole new — the *havurah* developed a whole new paradigm for what it is to give a *d’var torah*. How you can make the texts, the Torah, your own? What do you do, what are the interpretive tools, what are the limits? So we learned from the masters. People like Art, who lives inside these texts, but speaks with real moral passion, and can use the language in a way that’s real. So (03:23:00) we learned the hard way, through these endless Torah discussions, okay — which is not a model that I would subscribe to anymore because it just goes on and on. But I will say this. These open-ended Torah discussions teach you one thing. It empowers you to say, “Well, my voice also matters here. I —” and if I don’t have the answers, I have some interesting questions to ask. There’s a barrier that has to be crossed. It’s like when you’re learning a foreign language, and the first time you actually begin speaking it outside the classroom, right? It’s same kind of thing. The first time you give a *d’var torah*, and you put yourself into it, not as a scripted thing, but you’re using the Torah in a way to express something (03:24:00) of your own. And how do you balance that? We figured out a new way of doing that. I can’t exactly articulate it, but I certainly know the difference between a good *d’var torah*, a *d’var torah* that comes out of that ethos, that they don’t teach you in rabbinical school, even to this day. Even to this day homiletics is not very successful at
JTS, and I speak from many years of experience. They did not learn the lesson of the havurah. We have a lot to teach them about a d’var torah. And this is something that even a place like Minyan M’at has developed rather successfully. It’s very different from the traditional model. So what happens in shul has changed — (03:25:00) that davening can transport you. That davening can be edgy. That davening can surprise, the elements of surprise. That a d’var torah can come from, and use, and draw on sources far and wide. What happens in that space, in shul, I think we really redefined the whole nature of it. And of course, the use of niggunim. To flash forward to the present, I actually think that where the havurah model is now percolating most profoundly is in Israel. And not just in Israel, but particularly in Yerushalayim, (03:26:00) which has now become a kind of magnet and flashpoint for all kinds of innovative minyanim. I and Shana go to these places, and it’s déjà vu all over again. They don’t know where all this is coming from. It’s forty years later, and I understand why it took Israel forty years to catch up, because they had other things on their mind, wars to fight, all kinds of other things that preoccupied them. So now the moment has come. It’s not just the Leader Minyan. There are new minyanim sprouting here, independent minyanim, opening up all the time. We were there at the very beginning, and a lot of the things they think they’re innovating, we came up with by ourselves. They didn’t learn it from us, but somehow or other process did develop. I have in my notes (03:27:00) I went to a conference two years ago organized by Shira Hadasha, which was the first of these, which was actually a spinoff of the Leader Minyan, of seventeen independent minyanim — the first time that they had met.

JG: In Yerushalayim.

DR: Well, they came from all over Israel — some in the Negev, some in Haifa, some in Tel Aviv. So Shira Hadasha was celebrating its bar mitzvah and decided that on that occasion – so there were already seventeen groups. By now, two years later, there could have been three times as many groups. So I think the transformative power went way beyond just America.

JG: When did you come up with the phrase homo davenus?

DR: Davenus? I don’t know, it came up as a joke I think.

JG: A long time ago?

DR: Yeah, a long time ago. (03:28:00) I had to describe what happened to me. I needed a language to express the fact that I had learned a new language. I’d learned a new language. And learning a new language is not easy. It’s not just the skills and learning the
facility with it. To learn a language was to make it your own. So homo davenus means that davening becomes — you own it, as a means of self-expression. It’s one of the ways in which you express who you are, through your davening. It’s not that you’ve memorized it, or you know the words or what the words mean. It goes way beyond that. So I was looking for a phrase that would convey that next level of ownership. And I thought, well, davening is not to pray. Davening is (03:29:00) the business of prayer. It’s to be at prayer. “Yidn davenen” doesn’t mean “Jews praying,” it means “Jews at prayer.” It’s much — it’s very physical. It’s your whole body. It’s everything. It’s everything around you. So the person doing that is a different kind of person. It’s not your normal self. So I thought, okay, that’s what I’m going to call it.

JG: Do you see the independent minyanim, and other independent havurot that have developed, but particularly the independent minyanim, as sort of the living the legacy also of the original —

DR: Yeah, because —

JG: Though many of them consciously do not call themselves havurot.

DR: Of course not, of course not. And anyway, the liberties we took, halachic liberties, most of these independent minyanim wouldn’t even consider. (03:30:00) For them, pushing the envelope means egalitarianism and involving women. They’re coming from a very traditional place. I once actually gave a lecture at Machon Hartman and told them the story of the havurah. They were all Israelis, and they were sitting there open-mouthed. They could hardly believe what I was telling them, the kind of radical experimentations that we did, and what we got away with in the name of, you know, religious — well, it’s a kind of a religious syncretism. Remember that we’re in America. America is a place of radical experimentation. This couldn’t have happened in Israel. It’s just built differently. America’s open in that way. And that’s also, remember, (03:31:00) the conversion experience. Obama also went through a religious conversion experience around the same time that I did. And guess what? More than half the American population has a religious conversion experience in their twenties. I don’t know if there are other countries like that in the world where this is very common. So we were part of something much larger than ourselves, and there was a lot of support in the zeitgeist. When you’re turning twenty in Israel, you’re still in the army. You’re still a year or two away from going off to India.

JG: You titled your talk at Brandeis “Havurat Shalom: an Utopian Experiment.” I’m curious how closely you think the original havurah came to achieving (03:32:00) its vision. And also what you think its greatest challenges were, as you look back on it.
DR: So, let me use another metaphor, a kabbalistic metaphor to answer your question. The metaphor is tzimtzum. So there’s this really weird idea, the big bang theory, right, that God had to contract God’s presence in order to leave room for the created world, because God was everywhere, so God had to, as it were, contract. And then, out of that contraction came, okay — so I’m interested in the concept of tzimtzum, that in order to create, you have to contract. The core of that utopian moment is this. It was a moment in time (03:33:00) where the brightest and the best that American or North American Jewry had created were in one place. I know this sounds very elitist, but I don’t know how else to say it. It wasn’t an inclusive group. There were those who were in, and those who were out. And the admissions process, which I just pussyfooted around it, was — could be very cruel, could be very cruel, and there are people whom I’ve met in life who are still scarred emotionally, because they were rejected, and didn’t understand why they weren’t admitted into this inner circle. But once you’re in that inner circle, what you experienced was unbelievable. You had people for whom being Jewish, and expressing their Jewishness, was the most important thing in their lives. (03:34:00) And, you know, I brought a whole show and tell. All these books that were created that would never have been created were it not for that confluence. So you have a Stephen Mitchell, who on the verge of converting to Roman Catholicism decides that he wants to be Jewish and then learns Hebrew and sits down and translates the Book of Job. But that’s only act one! That’s only act one. When he’s in the havurah, I introduced him to Ted Carmi, who was my teacher at Brandeis, a Hebrew poet. And he immediately recognized that Stephen Mitchell was an extraordinary talent. So Stephen Mitchell started translating Ted Carmi. From that came this book, you know, Stephen Mitchell’s translations of Dan Pagis — (03:35:00) of Dan Pagis, one of the greatest and most important Hebrew poets. There are no better translations of Dan Pagis into English. And what’s more, there isn’t anyone who could have done a better translation than Stephen Mitchell. Okay, so the stars are beginning to align. Jim Kugel. When I first met Jim Kugel, he was learning aleph bet. Okay, so the stack of books that Jim Kugel has produced is legion. He would not have gone that route, coming where he came from, if it weren’t for the havurah. There’s no way that he would have found his way back to Judaism or doing Bible. Remember, Buzzy Fishbane. We talk a lot about Art, but the intellectual firepower in that room, Buzzy was just — we all call him Buzzy, obviously. (03:36:00) Michael Fishbane was finishing his doctorate. So the first book that he published is very much an academic study of the structure of biblical narrative, and it’s very structuralist. But then, the direction he’s going to take, if it were not for the havurah, he would not write a book about the hermeneutic imagination and works on mysticism. He wouldn’t have blossomed into becoming a theologian. No way! Because we were all together, and we were feeding off of each other. Barry Holtz. Barry Holtz was an English major, okay. So how do you make the quantum leap from being an English major at Tufts to writing Back
to the Sources? Okay, well this is the bible. This is one of our — along with the Jewish Catalog, this is what the havurah stands for. So back to the book. (03:37:00) You know, Barry Holtz put together the book and brought all his friends together to write the chapters, so that becomes the rallying call for American Jews to do just that. And then there’s my own work, if I may. Since I was sixteen years old, I was involved in Holocaust commemoration, something that was extremely important to me. I am not a child of survivors, but I grew up in a survivor community. And for me, Eastern Europe was real. So real, that if I could stretch out, I could almost touch it. So when I was a senior in high school, I organized the first Holocaust commemoration in Montreal run by young people, for young people. Then I went off to Brandeis, and every year at Brandeis I did another (03:38:00) Holocaust Commemoration. It got more and more elaborate. And then I kind of lost — I realized I couldn’t go any further. I joined the havurah, and it’s December. And I’m in a class on liturgy with Burt Jacobson. He’s running a class on liturgy. And I think, What am I going to do for my final? Maybe I’ll do a liturgy for Yom HaShoah this time. I’ve never done a liturgy. I’ve just learned the liturgy. [laughs] That shouldn’t stop me! Okay, maybe I’ve already led a service. Let’s already allow that I’ve already led a service, (03:39:00) but I’m still pretty wet behind the ears. So that’s going to be my assignment. I’m going to write — let me do a liturgy. How do I do that? And the inspiration for doing that was the Shabbat Zachor service led by Zalman in 1969. And it was that moment, at the very end, when he started singing the kaddish to the Partisan’s Hymn that became the creative — that was the moment of inspiration where I realized: to do a Holocaust commemoration, I have to build it around that moment of short-circuiting the most sacred texts in the light of the Holocaust. That’s going to be my liturgy. And as soon as I realized that, (03:40:00) I knew what that moment was. Namely, “U’k’shartem l’ot al yadecha” — that in the Shema, “You shall bind it as a sign on your arms.” What does that mean? Obviously, it means the tattooed numbers on the arm. That’s not the homiletic meaning. That’s the literal meaning. That’s what it meant all along. I’m going to write a liturgy that’s going to show that that’s what it meant — that it’s already there, that that’s what the biblical text is already alluding to, already incorporating that idea. And then all the other counter-counter-commentaries, all the other ideas, fell into place. So I wrote this liturgy. (03:41:00) This is the first edition of Night Words — Nakhtwerter — Night Words: a Midrash on the Holocaust, Mile Lilah: Midrash al ha-Shoah, first read for Yom Ha’Shoah at the havurah. So the first point, the first stage was the conceptual one, which I already had. But then who was going to perform it? Well, that was obvious. I was going to write it for this group. And the model for liturgy, because the model for davening, is in small groups, that if we are going to remember, and we are going to commemorate, the way is not in mass rallies. And it’s not by bringing hundreds of people together in Madison Square Garden. The way to do it is in your own community, within your own sacred space. That’s where commemoration (03:42:00) has to happen. And I am going to write a commemoration for thirty-six
readers. All you need is a quorum of thirty-six, and then you have enough people. And later, it turns out, you can double the roles, you can triple the roles, you can do it with less than thirty-six. But you have to have a minimum of thirty-six readers, and I’m going to write this for thirty-six readers, and we performed it. And there was a discussion, actually, around this, because the ritual of the number, “Ukeshartam l’ot al yadecha,” as I wrote it, has a ritual component. It’s not only that you were going to read the passage, but everybody is going to have a number written on their arms, with a black felt pen. So that was a discussion item. Can we do this? This is pretty radical stuff. “What would happen,” Seymour Epstein asked, (03:43:00) “if a survivor comes? It’s going to be open to the public. How can you do that?” So the decision was made that, if Dovid wants this, we’ll go with it. And guess what happened? A survivor did show up for the first reading of Night Words. And he had his own number on his arm. He didn’t need another number on his arm. And when we debriefed together, after the event, we asked him, “What did you think?” And he said, “I thought this was wonderful. Here was this group of young Jews who wanted to have — who were not afraid of having a number on their arm. I thought that was extraordinary. Kol hakavod. I was very moved by it,” he said. So this is only one of many examples. (03:44:00) I don’t know whether he would admit to this, but Larry Fine’s book, Safed Spirituality, would that have been written without the havurah? We were the Safed. We were them. This is autobiography, as far as I’m concerned. I read this — this is like a blueprint of Havurat Shalom. Why else would he have written this? [laughs] Because he lived it, the way I lived it. And all these other books. The New Jews, Jim Sleeper. So he was a member of our cohort. It’s true he was just passing through, and he went on to other things, but this book is a very interesting document to his time. And it also tells you what the anger was — and what the rebellion against suburban Judaism (03:45:00) and the materialism, and all the excesses of American society which we didn’t talk about. Art Green proclaimed TV dinners to be morally treife. That was his halachah. Not that they’re treife, you want to eat treife, you eat treife. They’re morally treife! The idea of sitting around watching television and eating a meal out of a pre-packaged thing is repugnant. Okay!

JG: Where would you put the Jewish Catalog, the original Jewish Catalog and subsequent versions in this canon?

DR: Front and center! I mean that’s the shulchan aruch. I have all three volumes here, yeah. And, you know, that’s a whole other subject, of the evolution of the Catalog from Volume I to Volume III. They’re not cut of the same cloth. (03:46:00) The first one, you know, has all kinds of — let’s say, the order of priorities is rather peculiar. It has more to do with making challah and candles than any involvement in anything real. Soviet Jewry only appears in volume III. And the chapter on Israel is how to schnorr your way through
Israel. Okay, all right, so there’s a lot of youthful excess. But still, the idea is do-it-yourself, do-it-yourself, do-it-yourself.

JG: Own it, own it, own it.

DR: Yeah, absolutely.

JG: Yeah. To go back to your utopian experiment language, let’s say it conveys a sense of impermanence. And indeed almost everybody was gone — the original cohort (03:47:00) was gone by ’74, ’75. Art Green had left even, to go on to Penn at that point. Almost everybody had. Do you think looking back that Havurat Shalom was a sustainable model? And if not, what are the lessons of that for —?

DR: So some of it is, and some of it isn’t. What’s sustainable is the idea that small is beautiful. And I think that was a very powerful corrective.

JG: Corrective to the large synagogues?

DR: Correct. And the fact that there were now haverot that are part of larger synagogues is a very positive development. Because we live this tension in Anshe Chesed. We have this group on the fifth floor, and there’s only room for 150 people, and that’s it. No more can fit in. And then there’s the main sanctuary. And we’re all members of Anshe Chesed. (03:48:00) And we do daven occasionally in the main sanctuary, and it’s not the same thing. But we have to support the shul, and we have to figure out a way of not undermining the viability of the synagogue and realizing that a synagogue represents a capital campaign, and plumbing. If you care about somebody, you care about their plumbing.

JG: So this is Minyan M’at, which began in the Strassfelds’ living room, and moved to other people’s living rooms, and at a certain point became part of Anshe Chesed.

DR: Right, exactly.

JG: What was that transformation about? And that transition?

DR: Well, it had to do, first of all, with saving a piece of real estate. The shul was on the verge of physical collapse and was about to be bought up by rapacious developers. And if we didn’t step in, that would be the end of a proud institution. And we went into it kicking and screaming, because weren’t really (03:49:00) grown up enough to realize, you know, or willing to take the responsibility for the upkeep and everything that entails.
But we had to grow into the role and figure out a way, finding a new model that would preserve our autonomy and still help maintain and sustain an organization. So it’s — we haven’t found the ideal solution — but it’s a completely different model for a shul, where inside the shul there are various independent groups where sometimes we work together, and sometimes we’re separate. So I think that’s all for the best. One of the real problems that we’re still paying the price for is we really did not create an alternative leadership model. I started by saying that, you know, there was supposed to be at the end of the road a haver, and that when you graduated, there will be a haver, and you would be a new type of rabbinic model. Well, show me the haver out there that’s leading the Jewish community. Show me the new leaders out there that we have generated. Yes, so Art created his own rabbinical school —

JG: In recent years.

DR: — in recent years. I’m not sure we succeeded there. I’m not sure that that’s —

JG: Although many, many people from the original cohorts went on to leadership positions.

DR: Well, the easiest direction was into Jewish scholarship. We created the field of Jewish Studies. So the havurah — that was the easiest segue, because we were all trained in education, as educators. So we went into the field of education because that’s what we knew how to do best. The nitty gritty of communal politics, and rabbinic politics, that’s different. Look, Mike Swirsky went on aliya. He left the havurah soon after I did. He founded Pardes. He would never have founded Pardes if it hadn’t been for Havurat Shalom — never, never. It’s a direct segue, and Pardes is, in and of itself, generating so many new models for what a yeshiva — that a yeshiva’s not just a yeshiva anymore. It could be for anyone. So a lot of things came out of that moment in time. So yeah, it wasn’t — but many things percolated. Utopia means that — so it’s a flash in the pan, but it creates a model of what’s possible. So it was possible. We did it once, a confluence of time and place and talent and what have you. And it can be done again, in a different way, in a different guise.

JG: So finally, as the challenges of the twenty-first century American Jewish Community are coming into clearer view, we’re standing at this moment, just before the inauguration of Donald Trump as well. Are there lessons from the havurah experience that you think will help us, or can help us, navigate this new landscape and this new century from the havurah?
DR: Yeah. That we should — that we can continue to reinvent ourselves. Yeah, that we can continue to reinvent ourselves. The past that we have (03:53:00) is so rich. There are so many retrievable parts, or what I call “useable pasts.” So the havurah found in Hasidism its useable past. It’s not the only model! And we also grafted on the Lehrhaus. Okay, so we combined Rosenszweig’s Lehrhaus with the Baal Shem Tov and Reb Nachman, and we created this particular, wonderfully unique amalgam and we called it havurah. I think that is the way to go. Turning back and retrieving a piece of the past that speaks to us, and reinventing it in light of our own needs, sensibilities, intellectual concerns, curiosity, abilities. (03:54:00) That’s going to keep us going. That is a viable model, no matter who’s in power.

JG: From your mouth to God’s ears. Thank you so much Dovid.