

**Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project**

**ALAN MINTZ**

**Interviewed by Jayne K. Guberman**

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

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Jayne Guberman (JG): My name is Jayne Guberman and today is Thursday, March 23, 2017. I'm here with Alan Mintz at his home in New York City, and we're going to record an interview for the Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project. Alan, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Alan Mintz (AM): You do.

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

So I'd like to start by talking about your personal family background and to flesh out a bit who you were at the time that you got involved in the *havurah*. So let's begin with your family when you were growing up. You were born in 1947 in Worcester, Massachusetts.

AM: Correct.

JG: Can you tell us briefly about your family when you were growing up?

AM: My mother, my father. I have a brother who's two years younger than I am. My father was born in Worcester. His father came there from Lithuania at the end of the nineteenth century and died when my father was nine years old in the influenza of 1918. My father was one of a very large number of children on the lower side. He returned to Worcester after World War II after meeting my mother in Portland, Maine, and bringing her to Worcester, and establishing a life there as — he had a law degree but he was an insurance broker. And, you know, very modest but, I think, came up a little bit with the wave of post-war prosperity. So he moved into a house in a nicer part of town, and my mother did not work outside the home.

JG: She was homemaker throughout your childhood?

AM: Yes, that's right. She'd worked beforehand, but not afterwards, which I've come to understand was very much the aspiration of anyone who could afford to do that. And so we lived in a residential part of Worcester, not really the suburbs, within Worcester, in a mixed neighborhood. But my life was quite Jewish. We were members of a Conservative synagogue and my brother and I were sent to Hebrew school, which was a serious undertaking in those days — junior congregation on Saturday mornings. Public schools all along. There was one small elementary yeshiva run by Lubavitch in Worcester but that was it. I would say we were differentiated from my father's siblings, from others, in some kind of tendency towards more traditionalism.

JG: All within Worcester? Living in Worcester?

AM: Some yes, some no. Some (00:03:00) moved to New York or lived elsewhere. So I think we were the one or two kosher homes among my father's extended family. The decision to send us to the Hebrew school that was more Hebraist in orientation. It's interesting because my father himself was sent for several years to a new kind of Hebrew school in Worcester called the Ivria School.

JG: Called the what school?

AM: Ivria. From *ivrit*, from Hebrew at the time. So the role of Hebrew as something which was an educational ideal in the community was perhaps special to New England. It seems like places like Springfield and Hartford and Boston, here's a lot of immigrants from Lithuania who were very Zionist and connected to Hebrew within a synagogue orientation. That's not true everywhere, but it was characteristic of the New England Jewish educational scene.

JG: What kind of Hebrew education did you actually get as a child?

AM: We went to afternoon Hebrew school. That was, I think, three times a week, maybe four. I'm not sure. It was a Hebraist curriculum that was coordinated from the Board of Education in Boston which emphasized Bible, Jewish history, Siddur, and Hebrew language. It was conducted in Hebrew most of the time as well. That was until sixth grade —

JG: You're talking basically about the fifties, right — as the time that you were in this school?

AM: That's right. And then coming up, let's say, to the end of grade six, grade seven, those who wanted to, were motivated, went on to a high school program that was an extension of Prozdor (00:05:13) of the Hebrew College in Boston, called the Hebrew Teachers College at the time. And that was more ambitious. That was four days a week. It was a curriculum set by Boston. We were taught at Worcester, but we were sent exams by Boston. And that was more ambitious in terms of Hebrew acquisition, history. There was some Talmud that was done but not a great deal.

JG: Any emphasis on modern Hebrew?

AM: Yes, yes. And Bible. And Bible. And with the Israeli pronunciation. Also there were other schools. Like my friend Barry Holtz, who was educated at Kehilath Israel, they were educated in Ashkenazis, not in Sefardit in Hebrew, right. Although Bnei Moshe, at the time, (00:06:00) was the Hebrew, the Israeli pronunciation, so these were differences in the community at the time.

JG: And how did you feel about your Hebrew education at the time?

AM: It was part of my life. I think, when I got into junior high school, I began to experience it as a resource. I mean, if you looked around at other kids growing up, when our class was — these are the years when middle schools and high schools were sectioned. What's the word for it?

JG: Tracked.

AM: Tracked. So we were in the college track, which had a lot of Jews but a lot of other folks. There was no other heritage immigrant group in America that had a connection to any other language. Even the kids who were Catholics, by that time, really weren't learning Latin. So I felt proud and somewhat unique in knowing this classical language, and it became something that was an asset for me when I went into my high school years and I became involved in youth group activities, having this kind of literacy set me apart from others, and gave me something that was my own. So it had more meaning to me as time went on. It's also that during my junior high school years, toward the end of it, I decided to become more observant. We had a home where we kept kosher in the home but we ate *traif* outside. We had a Friday night dinner but then my father took my brother and me to the YMCA to go swimming afterwards. We went to junior congregation Shabbos morning but often went bowling afterwards. It's kind of very traditional but loosey-goosey. In no sense halachic in the sense of — and at a certain point, I made a decision that I wanted to be consistent about certain things.

JG: Was that fairly common in the congregation of the community that you were living in? That sort of more loosey-goosey mode?

AM: Yes. I think so.

JG: Even among your friends?

AM: That's yes. Yes.

JG: So what motivated you to become more interested in being more observant, more traditional?

AM: A number of factors. I think part of it was getting exposed to something beyond Worcester through the Conservative movement's youth organization, the United Synagogue Youth, USY, in which Jewish observance and knowledge of Hebrew was an asset that made you attractive to become a leader, and I wanted that kind of importance or self-exposure. But I think it's something also that was part of a family dynamic (00:09:00) as well. That this was the basis in which I could differentiate myself from my father, who had an interest in this and valued it, but I could take it much more seriously, know more, and in a sense outpace him, or do an end-run around his authority by being more knowledgeable about things that he valued. And I think it also connected to an adolescent sensitivity, and a disposition to religious experiences — that it connected to that and gave me a way of deepening those experiences.

JG: What kinds of activities were you involved in in USY? What really drew you to being so involved in the youth movement — because you were involved, not only locally, but nationally?

AM: Yes. You know, it's a difficult question to answer because it's not like a sport, where there is an activity that you do or a hobby. This was having meetings, and it was a way of connecting with other kids. So you'd go to meetings and conferences in other towns. And this was a way of being in other people's homes and visiting. For me it was kind of a combination of validating this Jewish-Hebraic thing that was important to me. And not just validating it but allowing it to distinguish me and make me important. And I think I had a need to — maybe it came from a lack of social — a sense of inner security. So this is what would distinguish me and put me in a position of being admired or esteemed by other people. I emphasize that because I eventually did become the national or international president, which was a big deal. I mean, when I was a senior in high school, every weekend I traveled to a different part of the country. As the president, I visited the conferences. When I came, I was adulated. I realized afterwards, it was more my need for importance than it was anything that had inherent value in it. When I stepped back from it, when I arrived at college, I was extremely critical of the organization for replicating what I thought was the worst aspects of adult behavior: hierarchy and regalia and the petty importance of offices, and things like that. (00:12:00) At the time, I didn't own up to the fact that these were my issues and things that I needed. But I felt traduced by adult culture — that they were vicariously living off of us teenagers and it was kind of the worst parts of suburban and congregational Jewish life. At the time I had another model, which was beginning to be Camp Ramah and things relating to JTS [Jewish Theological Seminary]. There was a definition of Judaism that was more substantive and less social in

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this way. It's also the culture of USY was about observing the mitzvot. It wasn't about knowledge. It wasn't really about intellectual engagement. I went to Israel for the first time between tenth and eleventh grade with USY Pilgrimage.

JG: This was '63?

AM: Sixty-three? Exactly. It was a wonderful summer. A lot of people — John Ruskay was there and others. But I resented the fact that— this group of 120 of us, they made us *daven* three times a day. It was always public. It was to show off that, even though we were Conservative Jews, we prayed three times a day and so forth. The kind of piety for show or the emphasis on observance as a token of Jewishness was striking me, by that time already, as misplaced emphasis.

JG: Did it feel somehow devoid of a real spiritual dimension?

AM: And an intellectual dimension. Both.

JG: Both those two.

AM: When I came to Colombia after high school, and in my sophomore year, I and a group of other people whom I had met the summer before in this counselor training program at Ramah started a magazine called *Response Magazine*.

JG: This was sixty —?

AM: I think '67.

JG: Sixty-seven, I think.

AM: Right. I was the chair of the board. In the first issue, it was important to me to write a critique of USY, and it's along these lines, and that's an important part of my differentiation. A kind of splitting whereby on the one hand was the culture of Conservative congregations — rabbis that would declaim oratory, a big gap between the bimah and the pews, (00:15:00) this non-intellectual emphasis on observances and so forth — and a different kind of substantive Judaism that I was seeing more in Ramah and figures aligned there. I also took courses with JTS [Jewish Theological Seminary] when I was at Columbia —

JG: In a sense, Ramah was a Conservative movement camp —

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AM: That was the inner kind of cleavage within the Conservative movement. They had their own youth group called LTF, Leaders Training Fellowship or something.

JG: Who had?

AM: The Conservative movement.

JG: This was the elite of USY?

AM: Yes. It was not — yes, I think it existed just in a few places. Not something that was ever available to me. For me, the fact that there was another track that was a serious non-Orthodox form of Judaism that was not the congregational youth movement model enabled me, in a sense, to stay within something vaguely connected to the Conservative movement. Although I never would want to have been associated with the movement *per se*: Conservative with a capital “C.” By the time this leads into the *havurah*, there was no desire to be affiliated.

JG: Before we move to that though I wanted to ask you about your experiences in Jewish camps before Ramah, because you went to Young Judea earlier. Is that right?

AM: Yes. It should be noted, that there were a number of Young Judea camps. This was not Tel Yehuda, which is the major movement camp for the movement. This was a camp in New Hampshire that had a Zionist curriculum. It was obviously a kosher camp and it was Sabbath observant. But there was emphasis on Hebrew folk dancing and singing, and, you know, a kind of nationalist interpretation of some of the holidays. It was basic for me because many of my friends and their families — the kids were being sent to a YMCA camp near Worcester. Even my friend, Eric Yoffie, who became head of the Reform movement, who was part of my class all along, and, I think, was sent to Camp Morgan, which is the YMCA camp. Obviously he survived it, but that was very formative, I think.

JG: How did your parents decide to send you to this Young Judea camp? And what kind of relationship did they have with Israel?

AM: It's a good question. I wish they were (00:18:00) still around to ask them. I'm not sure. I think it was some traditionalist instinct. Maybe an identification on my father's part with some of his education from when he was a child. I'm not quite sure. We have a branch of our family in Israel. One of my father's older sisters married a Zionist, and they established themselves in Israel and there are several families, and so forth. Some other

cousins who have immigrated as well. So there's a connection there. Although my parents did not visit until they were advanced middle-age, I think.

JG: So they'd been by that time on USY Pilgrimage?

AM: I believe so, but I'm not sure. I can't quite remember.

JG: So looking back, as you're coming into college, what would you say were the most formative influences on your sense of Jewish identity at that point? And how would you have described who you were?

AM: Well, I've mentioned Hebrew which, I think, is very important because it gave me a key to unlock a lot of Jewish texts that other people could access only in translation and only through various mediations. The question of my feeling self-important is that I could do that. Aside from the access that gave me. Another is when I was in high school, I could read hasidic stories and texts, and Bible, and simple poetry. So that direct connection both to Israel and to Jewish culture was very important. I think Heschel — reading his books, *The Sabbath* and the *Earth is the Lord's* was important. I read Mordechai Kaplan as well, and his *Introduction to Jewish Peoplehood* was important to me, even though I was not close to a kind of a nationalist Zionist orientation. But it gave me a language for talking about the Jewish people changing over time, facing different challenges in developing their institutions, and also a non-supernaturalist language as well. So, I mean, I grew up, eighth, ninth, tenth grade, already knowing about the various positions on revelation, and how you could talk about revelation in a way that was not simply God giving the Torah to Moses at (00:21:00) Sinai. It was part of that culture, in my own reading of a variety of theological options that were rather evolved at that time. It's also that I think it was sometime in early high school that I met Art Green. I met Art Green at a USY encampment that was at the end of the summer. There was a month after the regular summer camps had ended, USY would go to one of these camps and have a week-long thing. I met Art Green for the first time. He was a year out of Brandeis. He had spent a year in Israel teaching English in tough neighborhoods, teaching Shakespeare and translations and so forth. That's when I first met him. I think he was about to go into rabbinical school. He's about five years older than I am, or five years difference in school.

JG: He was born in about '42 or '43.

AM: Right. So that was a connection. We'll get to the differences between my relationship to what Art and the *havurah* represented, but there were models around at that time. Also there were other models through Ramah. The director of the New England camp, Ray Arzt —



JG: The camp in Palmer (00:22:40)

AM: The camp in Palmer, right. He was a progressive thinker, and somebody who read a lot of theology, anthropology. I don't think he's a great administrator, but he was a very good kind of thought stimulator for other people and very encouraging as well.

JG: Are you talking about — you first went to Ramah the summer before your senior year in high school?

AM: That's right.

JG: And at that camp what was your status there?

AM: Well, it wasn't at that camp. It was in the day camp in Nyack that was being used at the time for seminar for kids going from their junior to senior years who didn't go to Israel. In the Ramah system, that was the year you went on Ramah Seminar to Israel. I had been the year before through USY. So this was for kids who weren't going to Israel. So that was my first experience, so as a camper, but it was more as a participant in the seminar. And the seminar was very weighted on study. Avram Holtz was the director of the camp. David Gordis was there. One of the Friedman brothers. not Shamma Friedman. There's a serious — Jacob Milgrom was there. It was like a heavy-duty thing.

JG: What was your response to it?

AM: (00:24:00) It was great for me. I really — I was really very receptive to it. I met a lot of great people. And then the next summer was a counselor training program in the Poconos camp called Mador.

JG: So this is already after your first year college?

AM: No, but it was between senior and —

JG: Before. Between high school and —

AM: Then, after that, I became a staff member at the Palmer camp. Ray Arzt, Bob Abramson and others. I was part of a number of people who were involved in the *havurah* later: Richard Siegel, Joe Reimer, Gail Reimer, others.

JG: Do you want to say anything else about the impact of Ramah on your own thinking, your feeling?

AM: Yeah, I would. I mean, again, it's prefaced by the fact that I was not a raw camper. I came into it already when I was on my way to college essentially. It was really at a kind of apex of the counterculture. Here we were, a bunch of nineteen, twenty, twenty-one-year-old people and this particular camp was receptive to all sorts of experimental things. By experimental, I'm not talking about, you know, drugs and sex, but particularly more in terms of educational techniques. We tried very hard to make prayer meaningful. We would meet and have all sorts of — come up with all sorts of ideas about how to make it alive for the campers.

JG: And was that in and of itself a kind of radical idea? As opposed to just — I mean, given what you had grown up with in terms of what your education had been about?

AM: Yes. Well, going back to this kind of status quo consensual thing of the synagogues wanting the show to go on, this was trying to look at it what does it mean. Radical in the sense of going back to the roots and trying to take it apart. So for example, what we tried to do with the prayers with the children is to look at the components of the statutory morning service and get to the experiences behind them. So, if there were the two blessings before the Shema, the first one has to do with creation, the second one has to do with love and learning. So we would do exercises where the children, campers — trying to get them to kind of focus on notions of nature, creation and the wonder, and so forth, so they could see that there was some experiential base that connected to the words of the liturgy. So that was it. (00:27:00) It was interesting in the sense that the ultimate goal was to make the traditional formula relevant and usable, but by kind of taking it apart and trying to try to come at it from a more experiential way.

JG: You graduated high school in 1965 and then went on to your undergraduate years at Columbia. How did you decide on Columbia and what were you interested in studying?

AM: I think the idea of coming to New York was enormously attractive to me. I also was accepted at the University of Chicago, and that had no connections to me. In other words, it was not the magnet. Because things were here. JTS was here. The idea of being in the city and being liberated from the provinces was a big draw. What's interesting also is that in those days it was easier to get into Columbia. Columbia today is much more selective than it was then. In part because the fortunes of New York City at that time — New York City, especially the Upper West Side, was kind of a grungy and somewhat crime-ridden

place to come. Now, getting into Columbia in terms of selectivity is there with the best Ivies. Not at the time.

JG: It sounds like JTS was a draw for you?

AM: I think so, yeah. Again, because, not so much because I was a Conservative movement Jew, but because of the learning that seemed to be centered there. It represented something that was serious and substantive, rather than this kind of empty rabbinical fluff that seemed to be what constituted Jewish life in most places.

JG: Were you enrolled in the joint program?

AM: No, that was a big thing. In other words, I went to the training program in Ramah with a lot of students who went to the joint program. I wanted Columbia. It was different. Columbia was an Ivy League school and you took the core curriculum there.

JG: They had a real core.

AM: Yes. And it was a matter of pride and wanting to identify with Columbia. So I didn't consider the joint program even though, when I was at Columbia, on Sundays and Wednesdays I would take like two courses a semester at JTS during my first two or three years.

JG: Did you go to Columbia knowing that you wanted to major in English literature?

AM: Not necessarily. (00:30:00) That was just more of a natural thing that I did. Vocationally when I entered, I think I thought that I wanted to become perhaps a rabbi or Jewish educator. That seemed to be the coolest thing to be. But that fell by the wayside very quickly.

JG: Why?

AM: Why?

JG: So much in your life seems to actually —

AM: Yeah, well it wasn't — it was not that I was such a cool person, but I was not cool, and the literature at Columbia — there was a whole mystique around literature circles at Columbia — and short stories and the poetry being written by young writers. I was very aware that a number of my teachers were New York intellectuals who were writing for

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*Commentary* and for *Partisan Review*. (00:30:58) When we started *Response Magazine*, we were very aware of Norman Podhoretz and *Commentary*. At that time *Commentary* was still liberal left and switched, but Podhoretz had come to Columbia, he had just published the book, *Making It*. There was piece in the *Times's* "Metropolitan" section last week about him and that whole — he's now eighty-eight or something like that — it was reflecting on that. So there was kind of mystique of the great culture that became more attractive, and the idea of a life of a rabbi began to seem very parochial. One interesting thing this week: The day before yesterday, Robert Silvers died. Robert Silvers was the longtime editor of the *New York Review of Books*. His partner — not life partner, but partner in editing — was Barbara Epstein, who died in 2007 or nine or something like that. That started during, I think, my freshman year of college, during the great press strike, where all the newspapers were closed and the *New York Review of Books* stepped in. And it always seemed like the great life. When in 1968, during the disturbances at Columbia when —

JG: The Great Strike.

AM: Pardon?

JG: Great strike.

AM: Great strike. I was taking a Shakespeare class and we didn't boycott the buildings but our professor, Fred Dupee, took us to Barbara Epstein's apartment for the class, where a group of actors acted some scenes from the plays that they were studying and I remember that to be a very important nexus, not about that incident, but the idea that there could be some (00:33:00) connections, some permeability, between the world that I was inhabiting at Columbia and this world of Irving Howe and Trilling and others. So that seemed to me the magnet, and so I wanted to do that but in some Jewish way, which I didn't know how or — but it was it was one of the models.

JG: So as you just mentioned, this was also a time of tremendous social ferment among American youth. Columbia was the site of a great deal of protest and principled action.

AM: Occupations of buildings.

JG: The occupation of the building, the Great Strike in the spring of '68. You were a junior that year, is that right?

AM: Right.

JG: How, if at all, did the mood on the campus and the strike affect you personally?

AM: I was very, very confused. Because I joined others in thinking the war in Vietnam was a terrible thing. I joined others — stuff at Columbia was not just about Vietnam but it's also about the community. Columbia at that time was going to be taking a piece of Morningside Park and building a gym there without consulting the community and so forth. So that was part of what was going on. So I felt those issues.

JG: Morningside Park — was that part of the African-American community?

AM: Yes. Because now the whole neighborhood's very gentrified around there, but that was a tough place to be. You wouldn't go to Morningside Park. Columbia was going to build this gym there. My feeling was that this journalist student sensibility — of feeling kidnapped by SDS, Students for a Democratic Society, in order to make the University the proxy for the U.S. government, and to hold up, to extort the university for what were essentially the sins of the government, whereas the university was the agent of reason and not the enemy. So I felt, as a liberal, kind of mugged by the Left and being forced into this kind of either-or.

JG: Had you been involved with the Left at all in any kind of activity? (00:36:00)

AM: Not in formal activities. Particularly in *Response Magazine* we had discussed the war and I'd written an article about how, you know, the sons and daughters of Jewish suburbia could use their bona fides there to go back to their communities to speak about the war. But I was not directly involved. In general, when it came to the counterculture, both the political and cultural side of it, I was looking for ways in which this could be authentically connected to the Jewish experiences and values that I felt were crucial. I was looking for bridges all the time. In other words, ways in which the good things, the enduring parts of the counterculture, could be appropriated and brought in to democratize, to improve core Jewish institutions.

JG: So your primary lens for engaging with this seems to have been still with a Jewish frame?

AM: Yes. I was not quite aware of it at the time, but I was very much a Jewish nationalist, in the sense of identifying myself with the fortunes of the Jewish people.

JG: So at the same time, the Six Day War had taken place — it must have been the end of your sophomore year.

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AM: Right.

JG: And you had spent time obviously in Israel. All of this had catapulted Israel to the forefront of American Jewish consciousness.

AM: But not to my consciousness.

JG: Not to yours. Why was that?

AM: Not yet, at least. Because the kind of congregational Judaism that I'd been involved in really it was about mitzvot as, you know, symbolic affirmations of different values. It was about prayer, about Torah study. The visceral connection to Israel and to the Jewish people is not there. Not there at least in the way in which I drank it in.

JG: Do you have any recollections of the way you felt in the aftermath of the war or during the war?

AM: It kind of washed over me because I was involved in my own personal romantic breakups. We marked it certainly at Ramah that summer. (00:39:00) I had a roommate who went to Israel and volunteered. It never occurred to me to do that. That would have required a kind of readiness to leave the frameworks that were comfortable to me. Part of the big growth of my Jewishness from around that time on — maybe between '67 and '73 — was making that connection and experiencing myself not simply as somebody who had a particular variety of religious Jewish identity in connection to Jewish texts, but also as somebody who was a citizen of the Jewish people and identified with its history. I began to have much more connections with Russian Jewry. Not that I was so active, but it wasn't so much on my screen. Israel as well was there. Connected family in Israel but not — I met people later from the Zionist youth movements for whom this was their end-all and be-all. For me, it was an encounter with something that was not me, that became very interesting.

JG: Rabbi Ben Zion Gold who, as we were talking earlier, was the director of Harvard Hillel at this time, in an article on religion on campus in the sixties, wrote that faith in what he called a “civic religion” was shattered during that decade, during the sixties, because of the Vietnam War, because of the Civil Rights Movement, the counterculture movement in general. At the same time, he found that this period also saw the new pride in diversity that celebrated different lifestyles and religions and he wasn't alone in this. But I'm curious how you would describe what it was like being a Jew at Columbia during this period. And to what extent were you involved in Jewish life on campus, to the extent there was Jewish life on campus?

AM: Well, the answer is that I was something of a marrano. In other words, my Jewish life was lived through my associations with people whom I knew through Ramah — over Shabbat we'd get together, and through the summers, and of course at JTS. But it was highly bifurcated. In other words, my connection to Columbia in my studies had very little demonstrably Jewish about me in that. And that had to do with my own inhibitions. In other words, kids I knew who grew up in the boroughs in New York — I was not a New York kid, and for me to meet them was very different — who were recognizably ethnic and that was part of them, (00:42:00) I admired that. They had an easier time because they were who they were. But especially because of this kind of aspiration to be involved in literature in English and things like that, the norms there were very Anglo-Saxon, WASPy on the one hand, and, the very degree to which it was New York, worldly, cosmopolitan. So I was uncomfortable with my Jewishness in that setting. I did, when I got older — I went on for an MA-Ph.D. in English at Columbia and I was going through a lot of changes at that time, but for me the two were experienced separately, and ultimately that became unacceptable to me. But it was the norm for a long time.

JG: Did your involvement in *Response Magazine* affect how you experienced yourself as a Jew and interacted with all these many different types of experiences?

AM: It was not a Columbia thing. In other words, it was people from various campuses, so it didn't contribute to a kind of integration there. It was important as the beginnings of creating a Jewish counterculture that was very attentive to what was happening in the enlarged culture. I was always trying to understand what does this mean for us. But I didn't put them together in my life until much later.

JG: Yeah. So you graduated from Columbia in '69 for your undergraduate degree, but at that point it sounds like you decided to go on in English —

AM: Right.

JG: I guess being a rabbi had long since vanished —

AM: Right, right. For the time, yes.

JG: How would you describe your Jewish identity at that point?

AM: Well, for me, from junior high school onward, the decision to observe Shabbat was really foundational in terms of how my time was structured and who I spent time with as well. So I observed Shabbat.

JG: Throughout this whole period you observed Shabbat?

AM: Yeah. Sometimes more passively than actively, but I never felt it as a big renunciation. I felt that I gained, that something was — I'm actually trying to think about like my junior, senior year. It's less distinct to me than (00:45:00) earlier times. I wasn't so much taking courses at the Seminary at that time. I was involved with *Response*. It was the events at Columbia in '68 took up a lot of oxygen in the atmosphere. Then, during my senior year, these ideas about starting the *havurah* were percolating already, and I think I was poised in that direction.

JG: Before we get to that, I wanted to just ask you about your relationship to the draft. '69 was — many things were happening. The lottery was instituted in December of '69, so this was just after you graduated and many young men were very anxious.

AM: I'm glad you asked about it. I, like everybody else, was very anxious about it. I had begun to see a psychotherapist through the Columbia counseling services when I was a senior because of a bad romantic breakup, and I asked the therapist I eventually saw to write something about me that would have the possibility of getting me some kind of psychiatric deferment.

JG: For that purpose? With that in mind?

AM: Yeah. Yes. There was no other reason for it. And the note he wrote made me sound as if I were suicidal. He cranked it up to do the job. I had, the month or so after I graduated college, gone back to Worcester and I was called to induction. Worcester didn't have its own induction center. I had to go to Springfield on some bus. It was a very surreal experience because all these kids I hadn't seen since high school — I went to a general high school with college tracking, so all of these, you know, Armenian, Polish, Greek kids, and Irish, are on the bus. I don't know who they were. We left at six in the morning, and they couldn't take the toll road, the Mass Pike. It had to go on Route 20, through all of Springfield. And I had stayed up the night before so that I would seem like really sleep deprived, and I went through it and I got the deferment. It turned out that I had a very, very high draft number in the 300s, so it was —

JG: You would have been okay anyway.

AM: Yes. But that's the story.

JG: Okay, so now let's turn to how you became involved in the New York Havurah and



your experience there in the early years. So, as you were starting to say, it was founded in the fall of '69. Can you tell me (00:48:00) when and how the ideas for this new community started to take shape?

AM: I remember the presence of a man named Eugene Weiner being important. Gene Weiner was — he had gone to Columbia. He was a native of Florida. He was a rabbi from the seminary who had a congregation in Canada and then came back to New York to get a doctorate in sociology and worked at JTS as the director of the Lieberman Center or something like that.

JG: Was that the Ethics Center or something like that?

AM: Right. He was doing that because he wanted to make aliyah and, with an academic degree, to begin a job teaching sociology there. He was friendly — I'm not sure from where, I think maybe from USY or something — with Peter Geffen and John Ruskay. I knew them from USY. I think they were — they each spent a year in rabbinical school at JTS around that time. So we began talking about these things and Gene, who was about to go to Israel the next year, was always a big thinker, and a big talker as well. We also read, as a text that inspired us, a book by Jacob Neusner that was about early rabbinic fellowship. We're talking about the end of the Second Temple period. The Temple was destroyed in seventy CE, and the early Pharisees, the *Perushim*, before the Temple was destroyed, wanted to have rituals of holiness, not just in the Temple but also in ordinary daily life for their home. So they began to have fellowships in which they would eat together, and teach and recite blessings. And Neusner wrote about this and he used the term "*havurah*."

JG: Where did that term come?

AM: I think —

JG: From these early writings?

AM: Yeah, I think that's where it came from. I don't know how Art got to it, whether there are parallels or similar things or, you know — I also had some involvement with Art Green, who started a group in Boston. I don't remember how that happened so much. It's just that I knew him and I was friendly with him.

JG: Had you been to visit Havurat Shalom, which had just been founded the year before?

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AM: Yes, I had been. (00:51:00) Yeah, but it was still Cambridge, before it moved to Somerville. I think Art had just got married also during that year. I remember going up for that reason. There are people who say that I was in some way important to the idea of the *havurah* in Boston. I don't remember how.

JG: Yes. Because you and Barry Holtz had a conversation.

AM: Yeah. I don't quite remember that.

JG: It's an origin story. It's one of the origin stories.

AM: Right, right. But I remember being very aware of what Art was doing and trying to think about what part of that we wanted and what part of it we didn't.

JG: Here's an interesting piece — and I do want to hear more about that — in the Havurat Shalom origin story you, at least in this version, you suggested to — I think it was to Barry — that he talk to his good friend Art Green about starting a seminary because Barry was about to graduate from college and needed —

AM: Uh-huh.

JG: A deferment.

AM: That's probably what happened. I thank you for reminding me of it. But it's not sharp in my mind.

JG: In the thinking about the New York Havurah, was there consideration in any way of starting an alternative seminary or was that not part of it?

AM: I think it was. I think that people will remember that better. But yes, there was, and also that it was going to help people with deferments. In the end, I think only one or two people availed themselves of that, and they were people who didn't stay with the group. It was more of opportunism on their part.

JG: So what kinds of ideas were being floated around in the early thinking?

AM: I think it had to do with some idea of kind of total community. What should a community be? A community of people who shared your values, who you had prayer with, that you engaged in study with, and in which you also engaged in political action. And the key thing was face-to-face interaction in small settings, as opposed to the

congregation we knew. A community which would be truly egalitarian, and speaking not so much in terms of gender, as in terms of rabbi, non-rabbi, you know, lay.

JG: Those status issues that you were talking about. Hierarchy.

AM: Yes, yes. Very much so. That it would be a community of people engaged in discussing (00:54:00) the things that are really important to them and Jewish things and other things. Where friendship, worship, study, some kind of social action, would be all kind of constellated in a community with responsibility for each other.

JG: Was this meant to take place largely in New York City? Was there talk, I understand, about the possibility of purchasing a more rural property?

AM: There was at the beginning. I remember driving around with Gene and Peter someplace in Westchester. I think maybe in Goldens Bridge (00:54:51) or someplace where there were camps or large houses or estates that were being de-accessioned or something like that. Yeah. Or some kind of multi-level brownstone in New York, as well. Those were very ambitious plans that never happened.

JG: Why did it never happen? Was it basically financial or something else?

AM: I don't know. I assumed, when push came to shove, there would have been big real estate things and nobody was in that position. But I don't remember.

JG: Ultimately the group rented an apartment on W. Ninety-ninth Street, I understand?

AM: Yes, I think that was the first. Probably, yeah. And people lived there also. That was the Strassfelds' apartment. That's what it was. It was the Strassfelds' (00:56:10) apartment. They moved to 101st Street, and I think we took over that apartment. Gerry Serotta lived there for some time. I don't know if anybody else did. I can't remember.

JG: Yeah. As you were saying a few minutes ago, you were very aware of Havurat Shalom, as were others. To what extent were you all influenced by the ways in which Havurat Shalom was developing its ideas and evolving as you were thinking about and getting the New York Havurah off the ground?

AM: Not so much, is my feeling about it. There weren't that many personal bridges. In other words, my relationship to Art and to Barry and people like that, but John Ruskay, Peter Geffen, and others, I don't think particularly were connected. They [New York Havurah] weren't so much (00:57:00) attracted to the central role of religious experience

that was really at the heart of Havurat Shalom. They each had their own issues with Judaism. They were very much in favor, but, I would say, not interested in, kind of, consistent application nor of a kind of real experiential, countercultural re-understanding of their Judaism. I'm not saying that I was necessarily about all those things, but I don't think Havurat Shalom alone had a kind of shimmer for them. There wasn't a personal connection and there wasn't that kind of religious inwardness. It was not what was being looked for. So you can't really think of the New York Havurah, in my mind, as a delayed offshoot.

JG: Right. So the original descriptive brochure for the New York Havurah stated, quote, "Free from ties with other institutions, the *havurah* will aim to create a new kind of religious leadership for the Jewish community and to serve as a model for a new form of Jewish life." What was driving the desire for a new kind of religious leadership and a vision for a new kind of Jewish life?

AM: You know, it's brochure speak. We have to understand that. I think the desire for a new kind of leadership, a leadership that would be less aloof, and more connected to people, would be much better informed about the sources of Jewish life. I think Jewish leaders — not rabbis so much — organizational leaders — this is a time when most Jewish organizations, especially federations, were completely disconnected from what we think of as Judaism. So that was part of the critique as well. And we should get around to what else was happening in '69/'70 with the occupation of the Federation building here in which I was very important, as not a *havurah* activity but something that was aligned — and I think represented the spirit of the times as well.

JG: Right. We'll get to that in a minute. (00:1:00) So, much of the disenchantment of the original members, many of whom were seminary students and even seminary faculty —

AM: Faculty?

JG: Well, like Rabbi Weiner.

AM: Yeah, but then he left. He was not part of any —

JG: So mainly seminary students, as well as some others, that had to do with the JTS model of rabbinic education. Did you have thoughts about that model of rabbinic education?

AM: Well, not as much as they did because I was not affected by the seminary. In other words, if there were rabbinical students, they were involved in a vocational, professional

setting, where the way they were studying had very a little to do with the kind of Jewish leaders they wanted to become. By which I mean that the courses were highly academic, and many of them were run on more of a nineteenth century model, studying manuscripts and philology, and the science of Judaism, Wissenschaft des Judentums. They weren't answering the deeper existential questions about Judaism. It was very disconnected from what they thought the agenda was. It wasn't so much the case for me. When I took courses as an undergraduate at Columbia, I learned a lot. Courses in Hebrew literature and Jewish history.

JG: At Columbia or you mean at JTS?

AM: Well, remember when I was at Columbia, I took courses in Hebrew literature. For me, JTS was not a professional school that crushed the spirit out of aspiring rabbis. For me, it was more positive than that because I was never in that situation.

JG: So that first fall of '69, when the New York Havurah had just gotten off the ground, many members of the *havurah* took part in the mobilization, the anti-war, anti-Vietnam War demonstration that took place in Washington in November 1969, called the largest student protest — anti-war protest — ever held in the United States. Were you part of that? Did you participate in that?

AM: I think so. I was at a number of big Washington marches. I think I was there for that as well.

JG: Yeah.

AM: Although I don't have that differentiated in my mind from others.

JG: I think it's important to talk about the Federation demonstration.

AM: Just in brief, what it was is that, at the time, the Federation was separate from UJA. The Federation and the UJA was something else that dealt with Israel.

JG: What was the difference at that time?

AM: Needs abroad and needs in New York. (01:03:00) New York Federation was about the needs of New York —

JG: And UJA —

AM: — was about Israel and Jewry abroad as well. So Federation here basically was funding the hospitals and social service networks that once serviced Jews but now it was more of universalist outreach. It had very little connection with Jewish institutions, with Jewish education, with youth on campus, Soviet Jewry. It was a very, kind of, German Jews private affair. So this group — which is very important to me to point out — was a coalition of leaders from a whole bunch of Jewish student groups — from the Zionist youth movements. There was also something called the Jewish Liberation Network or something. There were students from YU [Yeshiva University]. I was from here. And we had a coalition. I think Steven Cohen, the sociologist, was involved in it as well. And our demand was that Federation open its books and become transparent and democratic, but also that it begin to fund Jewish education, it should fund Soviet Jewry efforts. That it should see Jewish students on campus as part of its responsibility as well. In other words, be Jewish. What we did was to get up very early one morning, go into the Federation building on Fifty-ninth Street and took over the building, took over the switchboard, and took it over.

JG: How many people were involved in this?

AM: Maybe twenty or something. I'm not sure. I think I was the chair of it. I think I was the coordinator, because the only time I got my picture in the paper was on the front of the *Morgen Journal* was after that. The police were called in and took us away. It was an important moment. It was important because it had some real symbolic value. The Federation was probably going to be pushed in those directions anyway, but they began to do a lot of things. I'm not saying because of that day — and it was a great deal of fun. It was really a sense of potency, (01:05:45) of being able to do something. The whole notion is by being stronger Jews we could leverage and show this Federation to be (01:06:00) pallid and unserious and so forth. So it wasn't so much of destroying the adults, but it was holding them to account, of what we thought were the core values of what should be the Jewish community.

JG: Did anything change or begin to change as a result?

AM: It did. It did, it did. Again, not necessarily because of that event. But one thing is that the Federation began to establish a large fund for funding Hillels and Jewish activities and established a commission and I was co-opted to be on that for several years. Steve Cohen was as well. Eventually various commissions within Federation were established for Jewish education. So, yes. I mean, it was, you know, a bump in that direction

JG: And it sounds empowering for a group of young people.

AM: Yes. It felt that way. It felt like — I'm trying to get the right register — of being naughty and acting out but, because you're authorized by what are the real values of the community rather than the sham values that were being represented by the organizations.

JG: So I want to transition a little bit to —

AM: Just, the addendum to that is, for me, it was it was important for my Jewish identity because I was branching out beyond this kind of religious synagogue background, and encountering people from the whole range, from the left-wing, Zionist youth movements, the whole spectrum. And their culture was very different and really interesting to me as well. As part of my kind of turning out toward the Jewish world, generally, from what had been a rather cloistered background.

JG: Was that partly through the Network that was Jewish youth organizations?

AM: Yes.

JG: Can you talk about that a little bit?

AM: I'm not a great source for it. I mean it's something. I got to know those people. I hung out with them. They were responsible for a series of conferences that were important. One at Starlight, Pennsylvania — that must have been in the summer of '71 or '72 — that had the effect of broadening the (01:09:00) impact of the Jewish counterculture more broadly. They got connected to the summer *havurah*.

JG: The Institute?

AM: The institutes and things like that.

JG: Later?

AM: Later on, yeah. So I'm saying it's part of that, but the Network thing was more of a Jewish student movement, that would have people loosely affiliated in different campuses.

JG: But, as you say, involved in many aspects of Jewish life. Not just religious.

AM: Right. And for me, that was the important thing that it was a broadening of my horizons.

JG: It's very important. I want to look at the New York Havurah from several different angles. The first being community, as many people point to community as being very heart of what the *havurah* endeavor was about. Can you just try to articulate for a minute what was most appealing to you personally about the vision for community that the *havurah* represented?

AM: Well, I think when you use the word "community," I'll have to think about surrogate family or ersatz family. In other words, I viewed myself as a somewhat representative, generationally, of people who were distant from their parents. I had good relationships with my parents, but I was not close to them, and my desire in high school was to, you know, get to New York and make a life for myself. I do not have a wide family network, but it was part of my life. I moved away from my family geographically. So I wanted to distance myself, but at the same time it meant that the needs for connection were underserved because of the somewhat emotionally isolating path. Again, there are many different people and many different paths, but I think it's true for a certain number of people that they wanted kind of a new kind of family configuration. Again, we were largely unmarried. (01:12:00) There were some married couples. There was also a belief in the possibility of friendship. A friendship that was not simply buddies, but it's a friendship that was somewhat intentional. You're part of a community that brought with it, practically, that you see people on a fixed basis, and you view them as fellows. So it was in part a place for me to be that gave me connection that would have been, maybe, hard for me to make on my own, and which I renounced by distancing myself from my family.

JG: How did the founding group go about identifying and finding new members as the *havurah* was getting started and what was the process of becoming a member?

AM: I don't remember the diffusion or dissemination — how we got this around. What I do remember is a lot of debates about admissions, about selectivity, and what — you had to be admitted.

JG: So one of the primary critiques of the *havurot* in general, but primarily Havurat Shalom and the New York Havurah in those early years was the so-called elitism characteristic of the admissions process. So can you talk about what you recall of what those debates were, what the criteria were, how people got chosen to become part of, or not?

AM: Not really. I'm dredging, or you are dredging things up. I recall —



JG: I'm trying my best.

AM: I know. Stirring the pot. I think it had to do with like-mindedness about Jewish observance and study. But there was also, so what do you do when you don't like somebody? And there was the term, like if there was a gross personality defect or something, should that be a legitimate criterion, if you really felt that somebody was not pleasant to be with? And that being debated. I remember a lot to talk about it, but very little putting it into practice in the end. I think people who really wanted to be were there, and others weren't. But it was people who were doing something, like they were a rabbinical student in HUC, or (01:15:00) they were involved in the Jewish community in some way. But I don't remember a lot more about that. I don't remember it as if people really — The problem was with people who wanted a draft deferment and really didn't buy into the program. There were a couple of people like that. There was tension around that because then you really had to talk to them about the contractual agreement to do this and that. And then they wouldn't do it.

JG: How would you describe the people who were part of the *havurah* in those early days, in terms of who they were, what their backgrounds were?

AM: I think that there were a lot of people who had backgrounds in Ramah and Conservative Judaism of one sort or another. Not everybody. Some through the Reform movement. But I can't think of that many people who weren't really exposed and involved in Jewish life beforehand.

JG: Would you say that there was a certain political orientation that people tended to have?

AM: Well, it was a political orientation that was what grew on the shrubs at the time. In other words, it was anti-establishment, anti-war, but rarely defined in terms of particular politics. John Ruskay, perhaps, was perhaps most political, and he had some involvement with SDS when he was at the University of Pittsburgh and was the veteran of, you know, late-night sessions of sorting out ideological stuff. It's not so much the norm. I don't remember there was anybody who had like a conservative, more right-wing orientation. Not that I can think of. But again, these were the times. This was Columbia, the West Side. You didn't need a Trotskyite cookie-cutter kind of thing. It was not —

JG: Jewish students were certainly disproportionately represented in the Civil Rights Movements and protest movements of the day. People who got involved with the New York Havurah and other *havurot*, would you say it's fair to say that they were looking for

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a way to bring their political activism (01:18:00) and their Jewish identities and activism as Jews together?

AM: I think it's true for the New York Havurah, and not so much for the Boston *havurah*, although there were individuals there. But our personality was more “turned to the world” in that way. But again, it wasn't so much about acting in the outside non-Jewish world. It was more about bringing those values into the Jewish community and its institutions. As can be seen by the subsequent careers of a number of members.

JG: What was the policy towards admission of women in the New York Havurah, at this point, early on?

AM: I don't think there was a separate policy, as far as I remember.

JG: Were women well represented in these early years?

AM: No. I don't — Not on a one-to-one basis, but Paula Hyman, Martha Ackelsberg, Liz Koltun and Leslie Shanken were there from the beginning pretty much. Others as well.

JG: Yeah.

AM: But as you know from doing this, that the group Ezrat Nashim was something of a break off from the New York Havurah, which became its own thing.

JG: As were other things.

AM: Right. I know that subsequently, there were retrospective critiques of the New York Havurah from that perspective.

JG: So when the New York Havurah began and rented this apartment at W. Ninety-ninth, it served as a central meeting place. Can you just describe what that space was like and how the apartment functioned in the life of the community?

AM: It had a central living room, and bedroom on each side, and kitchen, kind of a foyer area.

JG: Small.

AM: Yeah. I think Gerry Serotta lived in one room. The main room was used for our weekly meetings, and for Shabbat morning services episodically, and also for study

groups as well. The key thing — you may want to get into this separately — is what characterized the New York Havurah especially was our monthly retreats.

JG: Right, right.

AM: And that was really different. It was different in part because we were an urban group. Early on, (01:21:00) from the very first year, the idea of spending one Shabbat a month in the country somewhere was pretty strongly rooted and lasted for a long time.

JG: Where would you go? How did you find these places?

AM: Some of it was camps, that weren't being used during the winter. Occasionally some large country house of somebody, if we could get that. But they were more camps. We would use one for a bunch of times until it wasn't available anymore. And they were usually at least two-hour drives.

JG: It's really getting out of the city.

AM: It was in all climates, in winter as well. So there, in a certain way, there was more intense community because it wasn't just — we had a weekly meeting, a meal and meeting together, but this was the whole time together and that was more the crucible of what kind of Jewish community we were going to be.

JG: So what kind of Jewish community was it?

AM: So that's the thing. In other words, the hanging out, a lot of time to be with each other and take walks and so forth. But the question was, what would be the formal Jewish components. Friday night, Saturday morning study, the meals themselves, and the very fact of Sabbath observance. In other words, you can't get during the winter two hours away from New York on the short Friday without leaving early on Friday, and not everybody did. So this was a group in which there was always the Shabbos car that made this a point to get there earlier and set things up. But then in the winter, most people came after Shabbat. So this is, I think, really interesting from my point of view because of the range of practical observance. We get there. I mean, I want a fire in the fireplace — a very serious transgression of Shabbat. So I think things went back and forth. There are people who didn't mind, and people who minded a great deal. Then there's a question of — kashrut was not an issue, kosher. But usually there was chicken and some kind of veggie option. But obviously we had the openness to use the surfaces and kitchen facilities of camps. But it was in part of what about services. It was the idea of having a serious *davening* was something (01:24:00) that raised a lot of ambivalence for a lot of

people. So there was always a tension of — well, Shabbat morning, after people getting up late, there was going to be *davening*. But it was always the core people to whom it was very important trying to involve the people who weren't or being annoyed at they're not participating or talking. This was a source of frustration to me all along, because I had assumed that the social compact in this community was that we were going to be an observant community, and we would not observe things that we decided not to on some kind of principled basis because they're objectionable to us — things having to do with women and so forth. But it took me years to be disabused of the fact that there was no such compact, and that it just wasn't that important to many people.

JG: *Davening*.

AM: Right. To some people it was. Many people it wasn't.

JG: What was important to those other people?

AM: Study was more acceptable and some kind of text study.

JG: Why did you use the word “acceptable?”

AM: I noticed my using that as well. Because it raised fewer hackles in people who had some issues from their childhood or theologically with prayer. Study is study, and it involves discussion. So there was much more buy-in around that.

JG: In terms of who was present at these retreats, was it members only, or members plus their significant others or were there —?

AM: Yeah. Significant others were fine. Occasionally, some outliers who had come: people who weren't formally members. I wanted to go back to the issues of ritual. A very distinct memory I have from the first retreat we had was — I think it was lunch on Shabbat and when we finished eating, and I banged on the table and said, “Let's *bentch*.” And all of a sudden, everyone's looking at me, as if I have presumed to carry over a tradition that I took for granted, rather than opening it up for questioning about whether we should. And I got a bit pounded. But it was an interesting moment. Interesting also divergence, again, between my conception (01:27:00) of what the compact was and —

JG: What it was.

AM: What it was.

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JG: What would happen in an instance like that? What did happen?

AM: We ended up doing *Birkat Hamazon*.

JG: After discussion?

AM: Of some sort, yeah.

JG: Of some sort. Did that discussion affect subsequent retreats and whether you did *Birkat* at subsequent gatherings or communal gatherings, or not?

AM: I'm tentatively remembering. You can check out with other people, but when we had these Thursday evening meals, I don't think we did *Birkat Hamazon*.

JG: During the week?

AM: Yeah.

JG: So just to recap first for a minute. So there were the monthly retreats, which were these really intensive community-building opportunities, as you were saying. In addition to that there were a weekly meal and meeting.

AM: Yeah, that was important as well.

JG: And that was Thursday, the meetings.

AM: Yeah. And people would take responsibility for the meal.

JG: Someone would cook, bring food and cook?

AM: Yeah. And for a program also. It could be an issue. It could be bringing a guest to be with us and such.

JG: Was there also sometimes a meeting to discuss community issues? Or how are we going to deal with this issue or that issue? Kashrut or, I mean, like *bentching*, or any other kinds of issues that might come up?

AM: I remember less of that. I assume it should have.

JG: Do you remember any of the kinds of programs that would take place?

AM: [*pauses*] No, not so much. We had various guests. We had Shlomo Carlebach visit once. We had somebody come and read poetry another time.

JG: Was there really lively conversation?

AM: Yeah.

JG: So discussion was key. Many people remember the New York Havurah as the one with quote “the really good food.” Does that ring a bell?

AM: I think at Havurat Shalom, everything must have been vegetarian all the time.

JG: Largely. Not always, but largely.

AM: Yeah.

JG: Probably because Everett, in the early years.

AM: I remember it [New York Havurah] was more varied. I don't think of it being substantial. It might make it more robust, but not in the *feinschmecker* category.

JG: And within the New York Havurah community, did people also get involved in inviting each other to their homes for Shabbat meals or other meals, or was it mainly the weekly communal meal that was (01:30:00) mainly the glue?

AM: I think it's the second. I think it was socializing. Not everybody did Shabbat meals as a thing.

JG: So you wouldn't necessarily, you're saying, spend Friday night dinner with other members of the *havurah*?

AM: Not necessarily. In the way of branching out and having connections with other people as well.

JG: Why do you think the New York Havurah didn't get involved in doing Shabbat services, for instance, on a more regular basis?

AM: We did have them at the Ninety-ninth Street apartment.

JG: It still sounds like they were more sporadic?

AM: Yes, that's right. It had to do with the interests of individuals. There weren't that many people for whom, you know, being someplace Shabbat morning, *shul*, was really important to them. There was a couple of people, like Sugarman, Alan Sugarman, and this was really minority, who had a serious yeshiva background and were so ambivalent about it that it was very hard for them to relate to it. That was just a few people. One of my issues with the *havurah* all along was along these questions of seriousness about certain ritual things. I was acting on the basis that we were doing the mitzvot except for when we took issue with things, and that there was a basically halachic approach in the sense of a commitment to a set of practices. I always felt like the *frumster* there, which I didn't particularly enjoy being, although I don't know if I would have enjoyed being the liberal outlier in a *frum* group of people doing a lot more than me. I had my own needs to feel that I was upholding the standards rather than — But yeah, I think for many other people the social (01:33:00) solidarity took precedence over any particular Jewish practice.

JG: Yeah. We had just been starting to talk about prayer as a central activity for the *havurah*. As you've been saying, in your personal life, you had a very strong interest in prayer and observance, and that wasn't universally so within the early *havurah*. How would you describe the attitudes towards *tefilah* in general within the *havurah*?

AM: New York Havurah?

JG: Right.

AM: Dutiful, casual. Appropriate on Shabbat when we were together for Shabbat, the idea that there wouldn't be services would — but the desire to intensively participate was not so strong. Here's a good place to contrast us with Havurat Shalom in Boston. Because that was a group, which, it hardly needs saying, was constellated around a central personality for whom spirituality was central — many other things as well — that attracted a kind of like-minded group of people for whom a spiritual practice as a larger category — which involves services, in the sense of statutory prayers, prayers that have to be said at a certain time — was part of the deal, but maybe is a subset of a larger absorption in a spiritual dimension. The individuals involved in the Havurah — it was not part of their repertoire particularly. It just was not so important to them. I want to be clear about my own situation. In other words, I felt that regular prayer is important, and to be done correctly with seriousness, and so forth, but I also didn't share the degree of priority and preciousness that was part of the norm in Havurat Shalom. I would have been something of an outlier there. I often think of it in conventional terms of my being a

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Litvak in origin, from Lithuania. (01:36:00) In other words, there's something temperamentally in me that is consoled and finds meaning in regular prayer, but is not inclined toward mystical absorption.

JG: Do you think of yourself as a spiritual seeker?

AM: I never used that term about myself, no. I found my groove. [laughs] I'd like it to be meaningful and kept relevant and so forth. But for me, the forms of Jewish prayer, the Siddur, are not just spiritual hooks, but rather, they're the real thing. They should be the objects of our making them useful and good to us, but they're not like just stepping stones along the way to some kind of path to enlightenment.

JG: Yet, you described, at least once, the *tefilah* at the New York Havurah as kind of schleppy.

AM: Yes, not so many of us were graced with a large repertoire of skills. We didn't really develop them that much. There were those of us who would have done well if there had been better leaders. Better leaders, in other words, people who could do it better and so forth. We had people like Peter Geffen who had a very good voice and trained in it, but for him it seemed to be associated with his performance as a USYer and things like that. It wasn't something that he wanted to take the lead in, so we didn't do it well, and there wasn't quite enough interest in it.

JG: Many people point to the creative tension between tradition and innovation as being hallmarks of prayer within the early *havurot*. Is that true of the New York Havurah as well?

AM: Yes, to the degree to which we were serious about doing it. There were experiments of having prayer services where certain themes were emphasized, and there would be some kind of preamble or *kavanah* trying to focus people and then —

JG: Can you think of an example or two of a theme?

AM: No. I can't right now. But it didn't go too much beyond that. It wasn't the area in which whatever creativity we had was deeply invested.

JG: Were Reb Zalman or Carlebach and others like that significant within the New York Havurah?

AM: No. (01:39:00)



JG: *Nigguim*?

AM: *Niggunim*. *Niggunim* as a resource. We were aware of them. But I remember we once invited Shlomo Carlebach to come and eat with us on Thursday night. And he did. I think we spent most of our time making fun of him afterwards. Yeah, the kind of self-serious, Yiddishized way of speaking and so forth. He wasn't there as a kind of a teacher-celebrity. It's a more of a curiosity. So the spiritual seeking was not a strong suit for us.

JG: Were there any other significant influences on the style of *davening* or the approach to *davening*? Did the *havurah* attempt to draw on contemporary sources of poetry or music — those kinds of things, to any degree?

AM: You're trying to till a furrow here that I don't think is very deep with us. So not that I recall so much. I'm trying to think whether we did services on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I think we didn't. I'm not sure.

JG: Were a number of people caught up in obligations towards the seminary or HUC? Did that have any role in why people weren't so many interested in being available on Shabbat morning, for instance?

AM: No.

JG: No. That wasn't what it was about?

AM: No. It was just a disinclination to the obligation to show up.

JG: Was there a Torah reading when you would gather?

AM: No, we'd read from the Humash. I don't think we had a Torah scroll of our own, so far as I remember.

JG: Did people chant, or did they read or what was the approach to the parashah?

AM: I think they would read.

JG: They would read.

AM: You're pressing on things I don't remember well, in part because it was the limping aspect of the community.

JG: Yeah.

AM: Havurat Shalom evolved as a liturgical community much more than we did. What happened later on with the community — I'm now involved with Minyan M'at here — is more the serious liturgical side of it. Not abstracted. But this is a community that's not a total community the way the New York Havurah was, but it reflects a number of the practices.

JG: Given all this, (01:42:00) it's worth focusing at least briefly on the issue of gender and the role of Jewish feminism in shaping or having any influence on the directions of prayer and liturgy in the New York Havurah.

AM: It's really interesting. I experienced it as we were totally egalitarian community from the get-go. But that was from my position as a male and the fact that a certain number of the stronger voices were men. So I'm sure —

JG: Voices as in prayer leaders or voices in the community?

AM: In the community. So I was aware in my peripheral vision of a kind of Jewish feminism taking shape. Some of the participants were members of our group that formed Ezrat Nashim. But I thought of our community as kind of as a level playing ground. Although that was my experience.

JG: Did the women who were involved in Ezrat Nashim who were part of the New York Havurah, like Martha Ackelsberg, Liz Koltun, and others, Paula Hyman — did they bring these concerns and issues into the *havurah*? For instance, at discussion, either just general discussion as you were together, or as a topic of conversation at a communal meeting on a Thursday evening, or at retreats?

AM: I think we did. I think they did. But I think the emergence of that separate group became the focus for those discussions.

JG: What do you mean?

AM: In other words, the formation of Ezrat Nashim —

JG: In '71-ish.

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AM: Right — became the forum in which those issues were sorted out, and I think they overflowed into the group as a whole.

JG: That's what I'm trying to get at.

AM: Yeah. I'm not sure I can be more specific about that.

JG: In your mind's eye, as you picture *tefilah* during that period, were women wearing tallisim, for instance?

AM: No, I don't think so.

JG: Were they leaders? Were they serving as *baal tefilah*, or — well, you weren't reading Torah, or leading the *davening*? (01:45:00)

AM: Not so much. But I think because it wasn't such a big deal with us, and or it could be simply that the practice and the background of the experience wasn't secondhand in that way. But we didn't push it, or the group and the women in the group did not establish it as an active area where, you know, women would grow and learn these things.

JG: To what extent do you think these issues were on the minds of the men in the group in general, or was it —?

AM: Well, to put it negatively, it wasn't really put in our face in an aggressive way. So, representing myself, we were allowed to feel that we were not the bad guys because we were participating in an egalitarian community. At the same time, I think, we were only dimly aware of the kinds of discourse we used that probably was experienced as exclusivist. I had an interesting experience — it may have been ten, twelve years ago. There's a guy who writes for the *Times* now, named — I think it's Hoffman. A religion writer, who was finishing a dissertation at Yale about different autonomous religious groups, comparing the *havurah* with other groups. He interviewed me. He told me that Martha Acklesberg remembered some analysis I had done of the prayer on Saturday morning that introduces the morning service, the *Nishmat Kol Chai*. I had described that as a prayer that built to a crescendo that was a kind of orgasm until it's my body, you know — I'm filled with praise until I can't contain myself anymore, and her telling him of her feeling that I was using a very masculinist image about it. Now, I'm sure it's true. I'm sure also that I had no awareness that I was doing so. As an example.

JG: The other area that was really central to the New York Havurah was the dedication to Jewish learning and study. That original brochure, again, said, "Study will be central to

the life of the Havurah. (01:48:00) Study conceived as the locus of engagement by the individual and the group with the basic issues in their own lives and the life of society.” How do you think the *havurah* sought to turn that vision into practice both in terms of the content —?

AM: I can say what there was and what I participated in —

JG: — and I'm also interested in, as you're thinking about it, in terms of the ways in which teaching took place. The kind of pedagogy.

AM: That was clearly part of it. I mean “the way” part had to do with leveling of the classroom experience between teacher and student. In other words, the idea was that there were some of us who were lucky to have kind of a serious academic knowledge of Jewish studies and they were sharing that with others. So they were resource persons in a discussion, and their authority in terms of knowledge was clearly acknowledged. But that was a great difference in pedagogy: that these were voluntary and collaborative enterprises. I had some wonderful experiences during the first two or three years. David Sperling was one of the members. He was married to Phyllis Sperling. They divorced later on. And he was a great student of Hebrew Bible with enormous amount of philological knowledge. I think during the first year, there were seven or eight of us who studied Psalms with him using the Hebrew texts. And it was a schlep. We went down to somebody's apartment — Burton Weiss who was — that name has come up — he lived down in the West Village, East Village someplace. David would know the text, but it was very discussed, and I learned a great deal. I think the next year we did something on the Genesis narratives with David, as well.

JG: What was he doing at that point in his life?

AM: At that point in his life, I think he was finishing his doctorate. He had gone to rabbinical school at the seminary and got a doctorate of Columbia. Then he went to teach at Stonybrook and they moved out there. But I'm not sure where they were living at the time. So that was a very important experience for me. There was a teacher at the seminary, David Wolf Silverman. He did a course in the Holocaust, that didn't last very long, (01:51:00) but it was also important. I think Bob Goldenberg did things, but I can't quite remember what that was. Oh, Gershon Hundert (01:51:20) who is a professor at McGill now, taught a serious course on East European Jewry, Polish Jewry. Taught in his home and a lot of people who were close to him. So there were things like this.

JG: Were the classes for members of the *havurah* or also for —?

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AM: I think, for members of the *havurah*.

JG: So it wasn't open to the public?

AM: No. It wasn't a kind of Lehrhaus (01:51:54) thing so much. I remember another group that wasn't centered around a particular teacher, but it was on Jewish theology. Four or five of us would gather and read Rosensweig. Some of the participants of that were people who were trained in philosophy. So I don't think that continued too much, very long, but when it was going it was very good.

JG: How was the roster of courses decided upon in any given year?

AM: It was really interest. Who was willing to be — if, let's say, David Sperling was willing to do something and people who — there were takers for it. It wasn't, we're going to decide to address these subjects this year. It was more about the availability of people and what certain common interests were.

JG: Would it just bubble up through conversation, or was there actually a moment that people sat around and talked about courses?

AM: I don't remember, but I assume at the beginning of the year there was a business meeting where we sorted that out.

JG: So how much time would you devote, for instance, in the course of the week, to studying in these *havurah* courses?

AM: I would probably typically be involved in two. I think one was often before the meeting Thursday night, like an hour before or something like that. So that didn't involve. I think Gershon's course on Polish Jewry was Sunday afternoons at his house. The ones with David Sperling — that first year with Burton Weiss down in the Village, was the host for it.

JG: What was your response to studying in this informal but serious environment?

AM: Well, to me, it was great. It was great for the reasons indicated. It was really (01:54:00) total *lishma* in the sense that there were no exams or papers that had to be read. You had access to very knowledgeable people. The range of responses that you could have were much wider than you would in a university setting. So you could relate it to your own life or be more imaginative.

JG: Did you teach at all in this context?

AM: I don't think so. Because, don't forget, I was in graduate school in English, but there wasn't so much a Judaic body of knowledge that I had to offer.

JG: So you're saying that people who taught here actually had real expertise, and you were very lucky to have these people —

AM: I would say that for me, that lit a spark about my wanting to be one of those people or making a journey from English Studies into Jewish Studies.

JG: When did that start to happen, that sense that you wanted to start to think about —

AM: It's a very distinct trajectory. In other words, I began graduate school in '69, '70.

JG: With the intention of becoming an English professor?

AM: In those days you just assume that was it; that you didn't think about it that as a professional training school. People who see this in the future should know that there was a time where people went to graduate school *de rigueur*. That's what you did in something-or-other. Very different from now. There's a lot of reasons for that. So I went because I wanted to continue to study. It was really interesting to me. The idea that this was a vocational track toward being an English professor was not conceptualized. But I really liked doing English. It was wonderful. Again, I led a very schizoid life. I thought the Jewish dimension of my life was not in play, and I didn't have a lot of social connections to the students that I was studying with. My social life was more with the *havurah* and people I knew from Jewish circles. Because of that experience of the protests at the Federation, widening my experiences to connect more with Zionism, Soviet Jewry, and the experience of studying Jewish texts, when it came time for my doctoral exams at Columbia, (01:57:00) I was beginning to feel that this was actually real. Like you're supposed to go and do, have a job. Jobs were very scarce at the time. To take a job, I imagined would be going, exiled to some — in a small place, and my connection to Jewish national concerns was growing. So the idea that whatever talent I had, whatever intellectual capital I had, would be going into English literature, which I viewed as pleasant, wonderful, and so forth, but when I thought of what I wanted my life to be worth, I wanted somehow to contribute to the Jewish people, but I wanted it to be in terms in which I'm good at, which has to do with academics and literature and so forth. So I took my orals, the doctoral exams at Columbia, in the spring of my third year there.

JG: So seventy —

AM: Seventy-three, right. I decided to take a year off to figure out what I wanted to do. '69, '70, '71 — spring of '72, it must have been. During that time, I came up with many ideas. I had a very formative conversation with Arthur Cohen who was an important Jewish theologian, a novelist, and a publisher. I told him, I think I'd really like to do something else, like Midrash or something, but I don't have the training. He essentially said to me, why not? If you really want to do it, why not do it? You're not too old. And it was a kind of like, you know, Zen koan (01:59:00) kind of thing of being clomped in the head and coming out of that saying, maybe I can. And that began a very deep change in me, where I decided that I wanted to take up a life in Jewish Studies. I just didn't know what area of Jewish studies. My initial assumption was that would be something classical. I thought it'd be Midrash. I went to the Hebrew University for a year, and the idea was that I was going to kind of dispatch my dissertation in English. So I was going to write about *Middlemarch*, George Eliot's novel and get that done, and at the same time begin this conversion to the Jewish Studies.

JG: Meaning, you were so close to being done with that, that you might as well?

AM: Right. Then I have to have a second doctorate or whatever. I wanted to do that. So I spent a year at the university as a visiting student, taking a lot of classes in Bible and Midrash. And then I (02:00:00) spent the next year as a special student at Harvard with the late Professor Twersky, studying medieval texts. I thought at the time that maybe I wanted to study the medieval Hebrew poetry. Then the year after that, he was on leave. I got a post-doc. I finished the dissertation on George Eliot. I got a post-doc at the Hebrew University. And that was the crucial year for me when I decided that I was really a modern person and I wanted to do modern Hebrew literature, and I could build on the background I had in Hebrew to make this transition. So I really reoriented myself at that time and never went back to English. It was, for me, a very demanding part of my life, because when you're studying English, you have a lot of arrogance about the past, because people have only been writing literary criticism for a hundred years. A lot of it was very impressionistic, and it's only gotten serious recently, so we felt we were at the top of the wave. When you go to Jewish Studies, it's kind of like, there's Maimonides and who are you? And the sense of being submerged in terms of your self-importance. It took me a long time to climb back to feeling a sense of real citizenship in Jewish Studies. That's a whole story unto itself.

JG: You mentioned being in Israel several times during the course of this transition. Where were you in terms of your feelings about Israel, Zionism?

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AM: Well, speaking of spin-offs from the New York Havurah, one of them was a group called Breira which, I think, must have started around —

JG: Seventy-three.

AM: Okay. Well, no. It started before the '73 war. Maybe by about nine months or something like that. Because I went to Israel on the eve of Yom Kippur of '73, the war, and I was involved with it, with the starting of Breira, which was about the affirmation of Zionism and against the settlement

JG: Winter, spring before.

AM: Right. I was there for the year. I experienced the aftermath of the '73 war as a very difficult trauma for Israeli society. All the young men that were lost. The loss of the sense of invulnerability. The beginnings more of an association, identification with Diaspora history. But my colleagues in New York (02:03:00) viewed the '73 war as a gigantic opportunity to advance that agenda. They thought it was the kind of like, break up the log jam, and now the peace process could just go forward. I wrote —

JG: Just to go back for a minute. Earlier you said that the Six Day War hadn't really —

AM: A lot changed in my own view since '67. That was in the years — when you're that age, those are many dog years, you know. So by the early seventies, I was much more engaged in the world and not just in Jewish ritual things.

JG: And had ideas about Israel?

AM: Yes, together with my contemporaries. So I was involved with this Breira, and I grew up with them during that year. I wrote an article in *Response* called "A Demurrer on Breira," in which I essentially said that I thought that Breira lacked a sense of a love of the Jewish people and a sense of empathy with Israel. So that was really coming to blows with some of the people. I remember Peter Geffen calling me to his office at Park Avenue Synagogue, and pointing, every line, saying how wrong I was.

JG: You were saying a minute ago that you had been involved with the founding of Breira?

AM: I was, but the experience of being in Israel for the war and for the aftermath of the war gave me a different dimension of experience.



JG: How would you describe what those people who are involved in founding Breira were thinking? What were their goals and how were they going about it. What was that process?

AM: What I engaged in was a protest against the American Jewish community's vicarious triumphalism with the easy victory of '67, and the assumption that the territories could be held onto. I continue to believe that. I did not move to the right, but I felt the '73 war changed things. And that had been my first immersive experience of Israel. I really hadn't been there since I was in high school. Being there, being part of things, was different from being in New York and engaging it more from a template of American politics.

JG: Had you sought out in Israel (02:06:00) the beginnings of peace movement activity there?

AM: I wasn't in those circles. I was in the Hebrew University and I was not involved politically. I was an observer and involved with people's lives, but not — And look, I want to just, straight for the record, I'm not such a political person. In other words, my locus has always been writing and literature and so forth. There are people who really, fundamentally, are political people, and that's never been my temperament.

JG: When you came back and heard the response of Peter Geffen and others here to your *Response* article, did it change your mind at all about what you had been feeling and trying to articulate in this article? Did you get drawn back in?

AM: No, not so much. I was deeply involved in this kind of vocational shift in my life, which took an enormous amount out of me, to be able to establish myself in Jewish Studies. I'd been engaged to a young woman during that year of the '73 war, and disengaged, unengaged in that spring. And I was living in Cambridge, in Boston. I did come back to New York and I did have some involvement with the *havurah* in '76, '77, '78, but it was not so important to me at that time.

JG: One of the most appealing aspects of the *havurah* vision for you was what you called as a "laboratory" for creating a nexus between religious concerns and observance and the social political issues of the day. And yet many commentators have noted that political activism as a communal activity faded somewhat over time. Bill Novak wrote about this early on. He really decried the inability, at least in his view, of the *havurah* to unite for joint political activity. I'm curious whether you agree that it faded, and, if so, what your thoughts are on what caused that shift.

AM: I think the fading maybe had more to do with the professionalization (02:09:00) of individuals involved. That people — not the same as they just pursued their careers, but many of the careers became entangled in the Jewish community. People became leaders of various sorts and were channeling their concerns into newly available institutional channels. I speak for myself, who was not the biggest political social mover, but, for me, becoming a professional student of Jewish texts and Jewish literature was an important resolution of my Jewish identity. Because I looked at myself and I did not have the capacity to be a religious innovator, given my temperament and so forth. So this is what I had to offer. I was not built for institutional and political work. So this is the group that I found where I could take the gifts I had and offer them in a direction I went. I think this is true for other people as well, in different ways, who became leaders of organizations of various sorts.

JG: Can you say a few words about the field that you got involved in as a Jewish scholar?

AM: Well, it was part of something that began to happen in seventies, which was the establishment of Jewish Studies in universities, and the Jewish community raising money for Jewish studies positions and universities in the mode of ethnic politics, wanting the Jews to become supporters of universities and accepting the money or, in some cases, matching it. A lot of people were coming out of graduate school at that time. So it was a time when there were opportunities that were open. Also, there was a little bit of messianic fervor about what Jewish Studies within the university could do in terms of presenting the Jewish people to the world, and also the effect that would have on Jewish students, which turned out to be pretty much mistaken.

JG: What do you mean?

AM: Well, it means that we thought that Jewish students coming through campus would really be hungry for self-reflectiveness, reflecting on their Jewish experience courses with serious academic backbone to them. (02:12:00) In other words, that they would they would welcome the discourses of the university, the academia, as a way for understanding their experience. It's turned out that some Jewish students really want Jewish identity, and that's available. What they really want more is Jewish community rather than Jewish knowledge of an academic sort. The growth of Orthodoxy, the kinds of study that are offered by the university are not so important, and with the spread of Chabad on campuses — that speaks to a certain kind of Jewish identity. So for example, my own daughter, who went to Modern Orthodox Jewish day school and spent a year studying in a women's yeshiva in Israel, when she went to college had a Jewish identity fulfilled in ways other than taking Jewish Studies courses. She took a Hebrew course or two or something like that. She was exactly what I was complaining about for so long,

until I saw that this is her way as well. So Jewish Studies is in trouble in general. It's over-produced, and the demand of students on campuses is moderating. Interest in Hebrew is less. The hunger is less. Jewish identity is more diffuse. It's an aspect of Jewish students. It's not a hunger for many of them. And for those who are serious about it on a religious basis, the academic study does not satisfy that need. So in the seventies and eighties the sense of promise of this, of the funders in the community, that Jewish Studies are going to really shore up the identity of Jewish students, prevent intermarriage and so forth, was a very useful ambition and desire at the time. Not that anybody's pulling the wool over anybody's eyes, but it's turned out not to be the vehicle that people hoped. And for those of us involved in the profession, the disappointment has been that what we represent is a historical understanding of the experience of the Jewish people using the tools of academy. The disappointment is that there aren't as many takers for that even though we believe that that builds Jewish identity rather than eroding it.

JG: And your own field of Hebrew culture, (02:15:00) how does that fit into the overall picture? How did you come to that?

AM: Well, it's two things. It's about Hebrew and Hebrew culture — it's about Israel and Hebrew literature. And for me, I was grateful to the Hebraist beginnings I had back in Massachusetts where that was part of the educational culture. I connected with it and felt proud of having that, so that years later, toward the end of a graduate degree in English, I could brush it off enough to be able to make it the basis of a second career or a second —

JG: Did it exist as another field at that point?

AM: It began to be. I mean, it was. There were a couple of professors, but also there was a lot of interest in teaching Hebrew language. And there was government support for it. The State Department was also funding in a language study of languages that were thought to be strategically important, like Russian, Arabic, and Hebrew was somehow in that as well. Books could be bought, and instructorship lines could be could be subsidized. For me, the real hook was the moment of Hebrew literature at the beginning of the twentieth century. Figures like Bialik and Agnon who looked to Hebrew literature and language as a kind of inner Jewish revolution. That this is a way to modernize the Jewish people, but to stay within its central cultural asset. I was most attracted to them also because they were all from a very religious background, and they were trying to find connections between that heritage and their being citizens of modernity. My problem has been that Israeli literature put that behind them a long time ago, put those concerns. So I love Israeli literature, I'm involved in it, I write about it a lot. But on the level of Judaic satisfaction, it's remote from that now. That's why, for a number of years now, my focus is the works of S.Y. Agnon, who is the great writer of the twentieth century for whom

that is his main focus. Just one more thing — that's the Hebrew literature part. The language part is a very deep conviction that Hebrew is fundamental to Jewish identity, and it's something that can be a bridge between religious Jews and secular Jews, and also between Israel and the Diaspora. There was a great moment in American Jewish life (02:18:00) in the first part of the twentieth century where there was an attempt to develop a real Hebraist culture here. It didn't work for many reasons. For many years I thought that I could wage a battle to put this on the agenda of the American Jewish community. And you could say, "Well how did that go? How did that work out?"

JG: How did that work out for you?

AM: Not very well. I still believe that, but I see now that it's tilting with windmills to some degree.

JG: A piece of it is political context, where we are today, where American Jews are today, and changing relationships —?

AM: To Israel at that time? Not really. The degree to which that is a piece of Jewishness being demoted to an aspect of people's identity, that's one module, put together with other modules. But I think the greatest thing is not a Jewish thing, but it's the power of English. The arrogance of American culture, where we believe that if there's anything of really enduring importance in the world, it will come to us in translation. And the difficulty the Jewish leaders have with acknowledging a weakness or shortcoming, which has to do with language, with Hebrew language. The defensiveness they feel, as if you don't really need Hebrew to be an authentic Jew. So there's a lot of factors that I think are not just about the slipping or attenuated relations with Israel because Hebrew isn't just about Israel. It's the language of the prayer book, the language of the great foundational stories of the Bible, and of everything. It's really tragic in a truly Greek sense because it's a renunciation without the awareness of what's being renounced. I could go on. But you got the idea.

JG: So let's turn now to some reflections on how this period of your involvement in the New York Havurah, its founding period, affected you over the course of your life and its broader impact on the American Jewish community. So you were a member of the New York Havurah from its inception until about 1980 with some periods of being away. Do you have a sense of what the most significant ways that the New York Havurah itself changed or evolved over that period of time (02:21:00) from these very first few years that we've concentrated on?

AM: Well, the big change is the lowering of the intensity of communal interaction and over time backing away from the notion of this being a total community, which involves a serious commitment on everybody's part, and the expectation that people will be involved in each other's lives, and that everybody would be doing study and prayer and this and that, to a lower intensity social Jewish group. But at the same time, what's happening is that that model is seeding many changes in the Jewish community more broadly. For example, the egalitarian independent *minyanim* was very much an outgrowth of the *havurot*.

JG: The independent *minyanim* are recent. When do you trace it back to?

AM: Well, the group that I'm part of, Minyan M'at, which was at first entirely independent and then became part of the Ansche Chesed community.

JG: It started when?

AM: It began in the mid to late seventies. So you can think of that as a kind of — the baton handed over and some of the people — it's interesting that it got started because alumni of the Boston Havurah found themselves living in New York and wanted something.

JG: This is (02:22:53) Strassfeld.

AM: Right. Sharon Strassfeld. Barry —

JG: Sharon Strassfeld, Barry Holtz.

AM: Richard Siegel.

JG: Richard Siegel.

AM: But the model that they wanted was something that was not as totalistic. They were not aiming for the kind of deeply engaging on all levels — they wanted basically a liturgical community that would have some activities, but it was about Shabbos morning *davening* as the signature activity. So it was a kind of a new notion of a congregation. From what I can see, that is what has been picked off in many of the independent *minyanim*, which all have communal meals and so forth.

JG: But the celebration of life cycle, and year cycle events.

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AM: (02:24:07) But the key transfers are the anti-clericalism. There's no rabbi, no leader in most cases and the egalitarianism, clearly, and the collaborative governance and providence, and, you know, the use of *niggunim*. The more experimental dimensions have quieted down.

JG: You lived in Washington D.C. for a period, and presumably in the Boston area for a period, and yet you didn't get particularly involved with either Havurot Shalom or Fabrangen there.

AM: Correct.

JG: Why? Why not?

AM: Because I didn't like the experimental mode in services. The Newton Minyan [Newton Center Minyan] was something different, but Fabrangen was too loosey-goosey for me. It's also that I had — it's a parallel discussion — but I had come to terms with the fact that the New York Havurah world was not going to be a halachic community and I wanted to be with people who had some kind of commitment along those lines. I was more comfortable, in terms of my prayer experience, being in a situation which did not call for a lot of self-consciousness — this week it would be this way; next week it's going to be that way. I wanted to be consoled by competent performance of the liturgy and the Torah reading, rather than having to be annoyed by illiteracy. That's my temperament.

JG: So by the time you got involved with Minyan M'at, as it was named, here in New York, what was the status of the New York Havurah?

AM: You know, it's a good question. I think it existed vestigially. I'm not the right person to ask because I wasn't really a participant by that time.

JG: Some people say, when asked, when were you — like on the pre-interview questionnaire — what is the period of your involvement, they'll say, 1979 to the present. What do they mean when they say "to the present?" Is there a New York Havurah that's functioning?

AM: I think there's a list and there is, as far as I know, a lunch on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, here. I'm not aware of other activities. But again —

JG: Basically it's a friendship group at some point?

AM: Yeah, I think so. (02:27:00)

JG: They meet at some specific times during the year, but not very often?

AM: Yes, but I would call those more reunion functions and it's not the primary community. I mean, maybe people who aren't attached to other communities also or —

JG: Are there ways in which you would say your Jewish life and ideas about spirituality and observance have diverged from what you were thinking during the time you were involved with the New York Havurah?

AM: [pause] It's a hard question to answer because the answer may look like I've just become less open, experimental. And I don't view it that way. I view it as my coming to terms with the nature of my temperament as a Jew. Knowing what's important to me. Wanting to be in a community where that's held in some way. And it's acknowledgement also that the principal Jewish contribution or product of my life, in terms of my creative investment, doesn't occur in my synagogue community, but in the cultural work that I do, the academic work that I do. So for me that's the front line of what challenges me and makes me develop, and where I experiment and try to be the best I can be and so forth. Whereas the communal life, especially having children, has been more about creating a rich and consistent, nurturing community that has a level of literacy that I'm comfortable with.

JG: So pretty consistent, as you say, in terms of your feelings about it over time?

AM: I guess so. I was — it's just that the years of the *havurah*, I had that feeling, but felt that I was the odd man out.

JG: You've come to peace with it?

AM: (02:30:00) Yeah, I think so. I think so.

JG: Did you ever get involved in *havurah* activities at the national level, like the Havurah Summer Institute?

AM: No. I participated in one or two, maybe three. And I guess I gave classes. I think so. But it was never a magnet for me.

JG: Any sense of why not?

AM: Well, for the very reason that what I had wanted was not a movement, but a community. And to go back to the elitism canard or charge or true description, whichever, I always believed in the creative contribution of intense communities. I think that it was borne out also by we were — whatever product that we produced in this hothouse, laboratory — became used and valuable to other people later on, but it was in the nature of the protection of the discourse. So what was your question? I know that I —

JG: It had to do with the institute. Why?

AM: Right. So the broadening out from the intense community to some kind of organization, I always perceived the Havurah Institutes as basically a way for people who did not live in these communities to have access to them — as a way for them to get something of that, and to be participants.

JG: It didn't have the intensity of —

AM: Pardon?

JG: It didn't have the intensity of week to week, or regularly. But the Havurah Institute has certainly created a community.

AM: No. It's something that I affirm and so forth, but it wasn't the role for me.

JG: You said some things about the relationship between involvement in the *havurah* and one's occupational choice. Is there anything else you want to say about that in terms of the impact of the *havurah* on American Jewish life?

AM: Well, look, there are major American Jewish institutions that are headed by people who were involved in *havurot*, but in the New York Havurah in particular. I mean, there's no *havurah* brand per se, but I really believe that (02:33:00) they inform things we were doing in the *havurah*, and the *havurah* informed them, but that certain basic values and styles were infused or disseminated into important venues in American Jewish life.

JG: So looking back at the *havurah*'s vision — holistic vision, really — regarding community and social justice and prayer and learning, what would you say were its greatest strengths? What were its greatest weaknesses? And to what extent do you see those having been infused into a larger community and its institutions, as we are here now in the second decade of the twenty-first century?



AM: Well, the things I was going to cite, I just want to hasten to mention that they're not *havurah* branded innovations, but the things that were kind of cultivated there. So I think there's — we've seen an enormous change in what prayer is about and the liturgy. You are here on West End Avenue, two floors above the apartment of Debbie Friedman, who lived here.

JG: Who —?

AM: She was not part of the *havurah* per se.

JG: Who is Debbie Friedman?

AM: Debbie Friedman is a Jewish folk singer who also entered the area of Jewish prayer and became really foundational to changing the norms in the Reform movement for what constitutes prayer service. So, that is a kind of parallel, somewhat later development. But the idea of prayer being responsibility of the individual. The use of melody, of *niggun*. The way in which the *havurah*, especially Havurat Shalom, appropriated from the repertoire of Hasidism into making that available as a style of worship in rather cold and remote congregations. The closing of the space between worshipers and religious leaders, even physically in terms of how synagogues are designed today, constituted the changed role of rabbis and cantors as being not remote and orators, but facilitators whose role it is to stimulate other people to teach Torah. We haven't talked about the *Jewish Catalogue*, but the aspect of the counterculture reflected in that was of (02:36:00) urging the individual to appropriate Jewish ritual life in the senses, hands-on, textural hand, do-it-yourself way, which I think was a great democratization of Jewish experience, and a very interesting example of the intersection between waves of changes in American culture and the impact. I mean, who, before that had their own *ketubot* written? Or when I grew up in my Conservative congregation, the only place that there was a *sukkah* was the *shul*. Things have changed very much. Or the idea of people owning, you know, beautiful *Havdalah* sets. All these things were a way in which that tactile dimension of life was moved into the home. So the idea of the empowerment of laity is also fundamental in this way. So these are all together with more collaborative styles. Those are very important. I think also within large institutions, like large synagogues, the recognition that there have to be smaller modules. So many synagogues have appropriated the *havurah* idea to enable young families to meet Friday nights and that it won't just be in the synagogue, but in people's homes as well.

JG: Do you see the *havurah* and the offshoots that it has spawned as continuing to have an influence and an impact on how we conceptualize Jewish life and the strength of Jewish life throughout this century?

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AM: I don't know, I think the ideas have been disseminated and have a life of their own. Such as which I didn't mention before, gender, which has its own momentum, even if it began not in Boston at all but in New York Havurah, Ezrat Nashim. So I don't think they'll be marked as *havurah* distillates so much in the future, but it's part of the chain of how those things got going.

JG: Do you think of yourself as a quote "*Havurah Jew*"?

AM: No, not as a present identity. At one time, but not now.

JG: Okay. Well, is there anything else you'd like to add?

AM: I guess not.

JG: Thank you very much, Alan. We really appreciate it. (02:39:00)