

**Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project**

**ZEV and LESLIE SHANKEN**

**Interviewed by Jayne K. Guberman**

**October 18, 2017**

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

Jayne Guberman (JG): My name is Jayne Guberman. Today is Friday, March 24, 2017, and I'm here with Zev and Leslie Shanken here at their home in Teaneck, New Jersey. We're going to record an interview for the Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project. Zev and Leslie, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Zev Shanken (ZS): Yes.

Leslie Shanken (LS): Yes.

JG: I'd like to start by talking with each of you about your personal and family background, and to flesh out a bit who you were at the time that you first got involved with the New York Havurah. So, Zev, we'll start with you. Can you tell us a little bit about your family when you were growing up? You were born in 1945 in San Antonio.

ZS: Right, yes. I was born there because my father was in the Army Air Corps. My father is from San Antonio, and my mother was from Laredo. By coincidence, it's also a big Air Force base, so that's where he was stationed. He had already completed his missions in Europe, fifty-four missions. He came back and he was stationed in San Antonio being trained to go over to Japan. Anyway, I was born in 1945.

JG: What had brought your family — briefly — to Texas?

ZS: Well, my father's family went to San Antonio from Chicago, because my father's older sister had asthma and the doctors said they needed a dry climate. My father's father had distant business connections — or, actually, the person he was working for had a distant relative, the Korach brothers — they had a relative who was in San Antonio. So, he took the family to San Antonio. He was a traveling salesman, my father's father. My mother was born and raised in Laredo, Texas. Her father was an immigrant from Russia. She was born there, and then she went to college in San Antonio.

JG: What did your parents do?

ZS: My father was a rabbi in the Northeast. He went to the JIR [Jewish Institute of Religion] before it merged with HUC [Hebrew Union College]. After the war, he went to college and then to rabbinical school. He was a rabbi until the late seventies. When I grew up, he was a rabbi, and then he went to Israel for a few years, and then came back and went back into the rabbinate, and then retired again. Now he lives in Florida with his second wife.

JG: What did your mom do when you were growing up?

ZS: She was a schoolteacher. Her training was in, I think, history, but she knew Spanish well, and so she was a Spanish teacher at Rathway High School from about the time I was ten years old to when she retired.

JG: You have a younger sister?

ZS: I have a younger sister, yes — Olivia, nine years younger. (00:03:00) She lives in New York City.

JG: So, where did you live when you were growing up?

ZS: In the Northeast. A number of towns — Pittston, Pennsylvania; Bridgeton, New Jersey; Dobbs Ferry, New York. And then Cranford from '57 to '63, I guess.

JG: Following your father's pulpits?

ZS: Yes, of course.

JG: What was the Jewish community like?

ZS: Well, my father's pulpits were in Conservative synagogues.

JG: But he was ordained Reform —

ZS: Well, at that time, JIR was an independent rabbinical institution. Stephen S. Wise was the main charismatic leader of it, and when he died they couldn't really hold it together on their own. So then they merged with HUC. But there were a number of JIR graduates who joined the Rabbinical Assembly, which was originally just like the alumni institution from the seminary, but then became part of the official union and I suppose ideological angle for the rabbis. When my father applied — I think he was the first, actually, JIR graduate to apply, because he believed very much in Conservative Judaism, not Reform. He didn't want a Reform synagogue. His first shul was in Pittston, Pennsylvania, and I think that officially was Orthodox. The second was Bridgeton, New Jersey. Now, these are not — the thing is, in the fifties, there was not a Solomon Schechter kind of school. So, you either went to an Orthodox school, if there was one in the area, or you had to have home tutoring. I had a kind of combination of that. In Bridgeton, I really had nothing except for my father tutoring me. There was a local Hebrew school, which I was in, but I didn't get as much Jewish education, what you call

academic stuff, as I wished I'd had, as they could have given me. As far as the family goes, we were very involved in Jewishness.

JG: How would you describe the Jewish environment in your home? You were the son of a rabbi, or the children of a rabbi.

ZS: We were very conscious of our Judaism: kosher, Shabbat, synagogue. Often my father would talk about Jewish ideas. At the table we would talk about ideas, and a lot of them were Jewish, high level. There are other aspects, but you're asking about the Jewish part. I think it was pretty — (00:06:00) I was observant in those communities, even having to explain it to my non-Jewish friends in the neighborhood. That's the other thing. I've talked to other rabbis' kids over the years in the same age group, my cohort level, and they all have similar experiences. A lot of them are born in faraway places, especially if they're firstborns, because that's when their father is getting started. Also, a lot of them have experiences with non-Jewish kids, because often they can't afford the Jewish neighborhoods, because the synagogue can't afford it. We never lived in a Jewish neighborhood, because the synagogue was paying. The synagogue would pay for the house, so it was never particularly — it was usually a lower middle-class neighborhood. I would have to walk when I lived in Cranford. I'd walk about ten blocks on Shabbos to play with my Jewish friends.

JG: You said that it was expected that your observance would represent the standards of the Conservative Movement — you, as the children of the rabbi.

ZS: I said that in the pre-interview, right. I had written that. We were, what do they call it? — in the fishbowl or something like that. We were observant, yes, and although it was often claimed that it wasn't the case, it was. I remember riding my bike on Shabbos. That was a big issue, because it seems that the Orthodox — I didn't know that because now I still see it, very Orthodox kids ride their bikes on Shabbos — for some reason, there were some *chnyucks* [see addendum] in one of the congregations that thought it was really not proper that the rabbi's son ride his bike on Shabbos. I had forgotten that till now, but that was the story. There was that kind of pressure. But I didn't reject it. I enjoyed it. There was a lot of positive stuff about being Jewish that I got from my mother and my father. My mother, too, was very much in love with Jewishness. Neither my father nor my mother were raised in an observant way. My father had a kind of calling after his bar mitzvah. He got very interested in it, and then he decided to be a rabbi. His parents were nationalistic Jewish, but they didn't keep a kosher home. There were stories about when my father decided to keep kosher as a high school kid, and he would get furious if they would serve *treif* in his house. There were fights in the family that you hear about in other families too in that situation.

JG: You mentioned just now a sort of nationalistic part of identity, and a key element in your family of Jewish identity was their relationship to Israel.

ZS: Yes.

JG: What were your parents' relationship to Israel, and what are your thoughts on it? You were born in 1945, just before the State, and you sort of grew up during the early years of (00:09:00) Israel's existence.

ZS: It was one of the main dreams of my father to someday go to Israel. When he was overseas, he was in Italy, and he had the opportunity to go AWOL and go to visit Palestine — just for a few days, not permanently. He didn't, and a friend of his did, and got caught. It wasn't too dangerous, just a little discipline, but that friend actually made aliyah later on. The thing is is that it was always a dream of my father, and in the family it was often a big part of Judaism — Israel. He was fascinated by the ability of Jews to have their own country and revive everything, their culture. He had been a bombardier navigator in World War Two, so when he was in rabbinical school, he was approached by some Zionist to go over and fight in the liberation war, because he knew — he didn't know how to fly, although he probably could have figured it out, but he was a navigator. He really planned to go over. The family story is that my mother's father, who had a bad heart condition and had had a heart attack, said on his deathbed that he didn't want his daughter to die in Israel, in Palestine. So they were pleading with him not to go, and he didn't go. He already had a son, so he didn't go. But that's a family story. As far as ideology and politics are concerned, it was very strongly in favor of Israel and very proud of what was done there. I have a memory of being awakened when I was, I guess, three years old — I was still in a crib. I had a grogger that played *Hatikvah*, with a Jewish flag on it — I think it was the night in '48, the independence — when the UN — because I remember where I was living. My father was in Pleasantville at that time, Pleasantville Cottage School. He was going to rabbinical school, and he had a congregation. He was the rabbi of, well, its orphans basically — a Jewish orphanage in Pleasantville. That's where he was in '48, so I think that's what happened. It was a big deal.

JG: Did you ever go?

ZS: Yes. His first time in Israel was my first time, in 1958. He took me for my bar mitzvah, my bar mitzvah trip to Israel. He got the job to be the counselor of the group.

JG: What group was it?

ZS: It was a group that was put together by the Jewish Agency. A lot of it was — we stayed at Havat Ha-Noar Ha-Tzioni, the Goldstein Village. It was a (00:12:00) composite group of a number of different youth movements, and just in general, people who wanted to go to Israel. It wasn't a very well-organized trip. This was 1958. I've since taken a lot of trips with kids to Israel, and the Jewish Agency is really now a very well-oiled machine as far as kids going and as far as doing a program. In those days, it was not.

JG: Were you the only kid on the trip?

ZS: No. I was the only rabbi's son on the trip, the only son of the director. He was the director. He had never been to Israel, but he was the director of the trip. He did not understand that. He got the job thinking that he was going to be the sort of spiritual leader, but when he got there, they said, You are the director of the Americans. There was a woman who was the director of the Jewish Agency groups, but she didn't do any of the scheduling of the trips. She didn't do any of the — I still remember this; I was thirteen — I just remember because my father really didn't know what he was doing, but they managed to work it out. It's not that hard. I've seen what good directors do since then. Anyway, that was his first time in Israel, and he loved it. *[laughs]*

JG: How about you? Do you remember it?

ZS: I remember it, yeah. I haven't thought about it in a long time. One problem is, I was the youngest kid there. The second is, I was the director's son. It was an awkward position, more I think because I was the youngest than because I was the director's son, because they squeezed me in. Most of the kids there were sixteen and seventeen and I was thirteen, so it was an awkward thing. But we went to a lot of nice places. The biggest thing, of course — there and also when I was back in '65 — it was before the Six Day War, so you would go up and you could see into Jordan, where the Old City is, where the Wall is, the Kotel. That was one of the interesting things about that.

JG: You started to talk earlier a little bit about your Jewish education, and how uneven it was. Can you tell us a little bit more about what your education actually consisted of?

ZS: How much detail should I go into, Leslie?

LS: I think you're going into way too much detail, quite frankly.

ZS: Yeah, okay. So in fifth and sixth grade, I was in the Akiva Hebrew Academy. In seventh and eighth grade, I was at a strong yeshiva, a very Orthodox yeshiva, in Elizabeth. Then in high school I went to the Prozdor Seminary. Then I took Hebrew

courses at college, and I took courses on my own at the seminary when I was in college.  
(00:15:00)

JG: Were you interested in your Jewish education when you were a kid?

ZS: Yeah.

JG: And you were also actively involved in USY as a teenager.

ZS: Yes.

JG: What kind of experience was that for you?

ZS: A lot of fun.

JG: How did it impact your identity, would you say?

ZS: It was fun because, now that I look back — one of the fun things was it was with *Amcha* [see addendum]. It was kind of like being with Jews who had fun being Jewish. They weren't particularly educated, Jewishly educated, but they were nice people. It was my primary social group, and I loved it.

JG: When did you graduate high school?

ZS: Sixty-three.

JG: Sixty-three. So, it was after that that you spent a year in Israel at the Machon L'Madrichim.

ZS: That's right, yes.

JG: So that was a World Zionist Organization that had been founded in '46 to —

ZS: What, the Machon? It's an institute for youth leaders who are brought — it's like a program for people from different youth movements. They would come for a year and learn how to be better, more educated youth leaders, and then they would go back to their different youth movements. This is based upon the European idea of a youth movement, which doesn't really fit into the American model. But in Europe, if you were Zionist, you had a youth movement that had a certain ideology, and that ideology was what was informing your desire to go to Israel. When you got to Israel, that's why there are so

many parties, because all of the different youth movements became different political parties. So, they had an institute in Israel, under the Sochnut, the Jewish Agency's auspices, that was educating all the youth leaders from abroad into Zionism, so that they go back to their local countries. They're committed for two years to then work in that movement, if it was *chalutzik* [see addendum] they're supposed to make *aliyah*.

JG: Were you unusual as an American in that context?

ZS: No, there were a lot of Americans. What was unusual was that we didn't really — well, some of us did, but USY doesn't really fit into the model of a youth movement in the Zionist way. It's not a Zionist youth movement, but it fit in. There were also a lot of Young Judaea kids. That's a Zionist movement in America. There were lots of Americans there.

JG: Have you ever been involved with Young Judaea?

ZS: No. It just wasn't what we were doing in our synagogue.

JG: So, how did you end up at this Machon?

ZS: USY, the United Synagogue, decided that it would be very good to have its youth — see, at that time, USY is for high school kids. I was in college. (00:18:00) But I was learning how to be a good, effective, Jewishly-educated, Zionist-educated youth leader. And then I did go back, and I worked as the advisor for a youth movement, for USY. I think that's a little bit off the track. It's not that much of a big deal, except I spent a year in Israel at the Machon L'Madrachim.

JG: Were you at all interested in making aliyah at that point?

ZS: Yeah, I thought about it, but not that seriously.

JG: Let's talk about your undergraduate and graduate education a little bit. You went to Long Island University, and then to Seton Hall University.

ZS: I have a Master's from Seton Hall University, yes.

JG: What were you studying during that period?

ZS: English.

JG: English. What was driving you to study English?

ZS: I liked literature and I liked poetry, and I wanted to learn more about it. I started out in freshman year — I think my major was political science, but I soon got more interested in literature. When I was in Israel it was fun because we didn't have television, so we'd read a lot. You'd go to Steimatzky's, which is the foreign language bookstore, and you'd meet a lot of people there. I guess there I became more aware of English as my language, so I became more sensitive to it. Maybe that was it.

JG: Were you fluent in Hebrew?

ZS: Sort of. [*laughs*]

JG: So, these were years — your college years, and then later into your graduate school years — were years of tremendous social foment in the United States and among American youth generally, with the development of a counterculture, anti-war actions, the Civil Rights Movement. To what extent, if at all, were you involved with or influenced by these larger movements?

ZS: The Civil Rights Movement I was very involved with.

JG: How so?

ZS: I participated in de-segregating activities with SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, in Cambridge, Maryland. I would go down there on weekends when I was in college, and I spent two weeks down there, I think maybe during spring break, and a little bit in the beginning of that summer. That was 1965. Yeah, we worked on desegregating activities and voter registration, so we would go to black neighborhoods. We stayed in a black neighborhood, home hospitality, and we would get in our cars and go out to the areas. Sometimes we would go to desegregate, so we would go in a mixed group to a lunch counter, for instance, and sit down and wait to be served, (00:21:00) or wait to be admitted. One time in Cambridge, Maryland, I filed a suit. I sued this store for not allowing me in, and we won. About three months later I got a letter from the capital of Maryland — Baltimore, I guess. I don't remember now — but saying that I had won the suit. I should have saved it. It would have been a great souvenir. But we did de-segregate that store. Fiesefeld's, that was the name of the store. It was a Jewish name, but he didn't look Jewish.

JG: Were you down there with a college group?

ZS: I was down there with NYU Friends of SNCC. That was the group. Then that summer, I went down with — this is more interesting, because this was with some kids I had known from USY. Micky Shur, who became very *frum* later on, and Peter Geffen, who you may be interviewing actually as one of the people who was a founder of the *havurah*. He was down there. He told me about it, and so I went down there. A lot of them were Columbia students.

JG: Where?

ZS: That was Orangeburg, South Carolina. I was there for, I think, three weeks. Then we went to cotton fields, and we went to churches. Micky Shur, now Moshe Shur, he was very dynamic, and Sunday mornings we would go to churches, black churches. They allowed us to speak, to tell them that they should go and register to vote, because this was unknown to a lot of them about voter registration, about how to vote. And they were afraid, too. I only spoke once, a very little bit, but Micky had such fire. He was really great. I mean, he became a rabbi. He was very dynamic and beautiful.

LS: I want to interject one thing — that Zev's father, who was a rabbi, was a Freedom Rider.

ZS: Oh, yeah.

LS: So that's in his background, too. It was a very important influence for this involvement.

ZS: Yeah, that's true.

JG: Do you want to say a few words about that?

ZS: My father was a Freedom Rider earlier, when I was in high school. The Freedom Riders were the beginning of the desegregation movement. That was in the early sixties, I think '60, '61. I think I was a sophomore in high school at that time.

JG: He went down during Freedom Summer?

ZS: Freedom Summer was a little later. This was before Freedom Summer. I was a year after Freedom Summer. I was '65, and the famous Freedom Summer I think is '64. You can check that. We were following heroes that we had known about. My father was (00:24:00) asked to go, and he went a number of times. Freedom Riding meant you went

on busses in a mixed group, and you would go to the lunch counters at those restaurants that belonged to the bus terminal. That was the legal issue. That was the big deal, because then it becomes interstate commerce, and so the states rights issues could be — That's why — he would go there, and then at night he would make sermons. He would speak at the churches.

JG: Did you ever go with him?

ZS: No. I was too young. But he also went down to Selma, Alabama —

JG: Was this part the rabbinic delegation?

ZS: Yes

LS: Yeah.

ZS: Yes, he was.

JG: So he must have been a big influence on you, in supporting your participation.

ZS: Yes, yes, he was.

JG: How did you feel as a Jew participating in the Civil Rights Movement?

ZS: I felt great about it. I was very proud that a lot of other Jews were doing it. I saw what would then become a greater tension, particularly in Orangeburg. We were college kids, so we had a real sense of how to organize stuff. I mean, just like daily organization. We have so many cars, we have so many people, the thing is this far away, we have these jobs to do. And we were middle class kids working with working class kids. So there was a tension because often it was white Jewish guys giving the black kids orders. Not always, but — and there was a slight tension about it, that then became —

JG: It was palpable. You were aware of it.

ZS: It was palpable, because, I mean, it was, okay, you're going to do it? Alright, do it. It's really the day-to-day life of an organization, like being an office manager. It's a really hard job. And often we were older than the black kids we were working with. So, we were college kids working with kids maybe three or four years younger than us. That's just the way it usually happened. I don't know why. Some of them were our age, but most of them seemed to be younger. It's a long time ago. I don't remember it that well. But,

thank you, Leslie for pointing out my father was in it, too. What other things about the sixties, the foment, influence —

JG: What about the anti-war movement? Were you involved at all? Was your dad involved? Was your mom?

ZS: My dad was late to the anti-war movement. My dad, you see, is very mixed, because he was very pro-Zionist. He understood what it was like to be a minority from his Jewish experience, but he also understood what it's like to be a soldier. (00:27:00) He was late to being in opposition to the war in Vietnam. I was a lot earlier. He finally did come around, but much later.

JG: When did you start to become —

ZS: Almost from the beginning. I went to a teach-in when I was a sophomore. That's when I became aware of it. That was, what, '64? That's when everybody really started realizing what was going on, and I realized it too. I think I did argue with my dad. We would have arguments about it.

JG: So, were you involved in anti-war demonstrations?

ZS: Yeah, but it was a different kind of thing from Civil Rights. Civil Rights, you de-segregate, you do a demonstration, you do a direct action. But the anti-war movement — you mean like burning draft cards and things like that? No, I didn't do that. I mean, I would go to demonstrations, but I feel I put my body on the line for Civil Rights a lot more than I did for the peace movement.

JG: So then, going back to Israel for a minute, you were still an undergraduate when the Six Day War happened?

ZS: Yes. I was on the Machon for a year, and then I came back to America, and then the Six Day War broke out in June of '67.

JG: So, you were at the Machon in the middle of your college years?

ZS: That's right, yeah. It's like junior year abroad. My junior year abroad was Machon L'Madrichim. Then I came back to America for what should have been my senior year. But then, when the Six Day War broke out, it was the end of that year, so I went over there as a volunteer. The idea was to volunteer. We would do the work that was mostly on the kibbutz. But really, that's another thing we need to talk about. It was all really —

kibbutz was the thing. Send somebody to Israel in the sixties, they come back a socialist. Send somebody to Israel now, they come back *frum*. Right?

JG: Right.

ZS: So, I mean, if you're a Zionist in our time, it meant you could still, certainly in the early sixties, find a marriage between Zionism and Civil Rights, and perhaps even the peace movement, if you look for a more idealistic Zionism.

JG: Can you elaborate on what you mean by that?

ZS: I meant that there were considerations in the beginning of the issue about, what is our Jewish presence going to be here? Some felt that it should be a kibbutz, that we should all be socialists. Some felt that we don't have to have actually a state with sovereignty, when we could be an entity, we could have a Jewish culture, that there should be a state where we can have inter-relations with the Arabs. There were all these kinds of things. The form that it took — now we look back, and, of course, it always looks inevitable, but it didn't have to be so. We looked a little bit to those writers, and to those thinkers, and that thought process, to think that (00:30:00) it might still be possible to have this marriage of Civil Rights and upper middle-class Jews identifying with the socialists, with workers of the world.

JG: How did the Six Day War affect you personally? Did it have an impact on your sense of Jewish identity, on your ideas about Israel?

ZS: Yeah. I was very proud the first few days, and I remember, I was over there like the last plane out of America. We got there and everything was dark. It was a blackout. We drove up to — they took us to a kibbutz, where we did the work, because the soldiers — the *kibbutznikim* — were all in the field.

JG: Are you talking about June, or was it later than that?

ZS: I'm talking about right before the Six Day War — June. The day before the Six Day War, I got there. There was a blackout at night. We were driving carefully, because we didn't want to put our headlights on. A cab, a *sherut*, took me and about four other American volunteers up to a kibbutz in the Galil. No lights. In fact, the guy next to me said, "This is really the wilderness." He had never been to Israel. We got there, the kibbutz was basically like, What are you doing here? We said, The Sochnut sent us. We're supposed to volunteer. They said, Okay, good, good. So they gave us jam, and they

put us up in a cabin, and the next day we dug trenches. Then there was an air raid, and we went to the shelter.

JG: What kibbutz were you on?

ZS: HaSolelim. There were a lot of Americans there, which is probably why they sent us there. The thing is, after — there's an interesting story about it. One of the Americans, a guy named David — this is about the fifth day of the war. We already knew that we had won. It was I think a Friday night and the lights went out. Oh yeah, we were at the *heder ochel* and it was all dark, because it was a blackout in the Galil and they didn't want any of the Syrians to see it. Then somebody came in and turned the lights on, and everybody realized what that meant. There was no more danger that we would be attacked by Syria. So there was great applause, great applause and cheer. The next day, David's daughter and he were arguing because he had heard that there was looting.

JG: In Jerusalem? Where?

ZS: No. He had heard that the Jewish soldiers were looting in connection — (00:33:00) and he was outraged. And she said, "They would have done way worse to us." And this is all in Hebrew. He went off on her like, "Where's your Jewish ethics? How could you do this?" And she was all, "Pshh." But it was also interesting because he had such a thick American accent, and she had a real Israeli accent. And she was saying, "They would have done way worse to us. What's the big deal if you take a television?" And he said, "No, we are not supposed to loot. This isn't what Jewish soldiers do." So, a few days later, I said to him, "What would you do with the territories?" He said, "Well, the former Greater Israel." In other words, he was that — what's the word — casual? unaware? split? schizoid? — about it, that on one hand he was outraged about the looting, and on the other hand, the territories? "Former Greater Israel," he said with a kind of wink. "Now we'll be an empire." I understood both sides, but I saw in him that kind of conflict, and the conflict with his daughter. The difference between her good Israeli accent — she was a sabra — and his sensibilities, outraged at the looting but then saying "former Greater Israel." It was strange. I don't know what happened to him, but that really was a tearing apart, a conflict. From the beginning, it was an issue, I remember. So, I figured that I might as well finish college in Israel, so I enrolled in Hebrew University, and I remember on the campus there were big arguments, debates about what to do. One guy said, We fought this war, and we want *ha'pri. ha'pri*. We want the fruits of our victory. And others said, No, we have to give it back. See, there was precedent. Ben Gurion had said we should give it all back right away. Also, he was prime minister when they gave back Sinai, for the Sinai Campaign in '56. Now it may seem outlandish to give it back, but it seemed then, a lot of people wanted to give it back. But a lot of people in Labor, too,

wanted to colonize it. People came up to me — I still remember this, I was just talking about it, right Leslie? — asking, because they wanted to go to the army. We were idealists, right? So they would approach us — this is when we were watching debates on the campus, on the grass — they said, Come join us. We're going to form a *garin* the West Bank, and you can still go to college, commute. It won't be that far. You don't have to live there. Just say it's your residence so when we have to give it back, they won't be able to give it back, because it will say that you're settled there. In other words, from the very start, at least a number of people felt the reason for the settlements was deliberately to be an obstacle to giving it back, (00:36:00) echoing what happened back in the Mandate days when they decided the Jewish lines would go according to Jewish settlements. That's where the borders were. So I was disheartened, and I had a feeling that it wasn't going to be good. On the other hand, it was really thrilling to be there in Israel — to be a young man in Israel, a healthy young man in Israel without much money problems. It was just a great time. I wouldn't have traded it for anything in the world. We're talking politics. I don't know if we should. There are other things to talk about too.

JG: So you came back, however, at the end of that, at the end of that year. What did that feel like?

ZS: I didn't see a real future for me in Israel at the time. I didn't see it. I mean, I had bit off more than I could chew as far as majoring was concerned. It was a different college system. I wasn't on a program. Some people at Hebrew University are on programs. It's all pre-determined. I made up my own program, with an advisor who didn't really care much. Basically, I said, "Can I take these twenty courses?" and he said, "You can take them, yeah." I didn't feel the semester, the year, was successful as far as any future was concerned, and I decided to cut my losses and go back to America and finish up college, and that's what I did.

JG: So you came back and finished college. So you graduated in —

ZS: I graduated in, I think, '70.

JG: So you had to make up time.

ZS: Yeah. And then we got married. And that brings us to Leslie. Your turn.

JG: So Leslie, let's now turn to you and your family and background, to the point that you both got involved in the *havurah*. You were born in 1945.

LS: Also, in Albany, New York.

JG: Tell us about your family.

LS: My father was a kosher butcher. He took over the business from my maternal grandfather, who was a kosher butcher. My father grew up in New York. My mother grew up in Albany. They met at a dance at the Ninety-second Street Y when my mother was in school in New York. She was at Parsons School of Design. She wanted to be a fashion designer. She then quit her job at the beginning of the war, went back to Albany, and polished guns in a gun factory for the duration of the war.

JG: So she went back in order to be part of the war effort.

LS: Exactly. And my father enlisted, and he was also in the Army Air Corps, and he was also a navigator. But he never saw action. He just kept on getting trained on different planes throughout the United States. They'd get trained and they'd think they were going overseas, but (00:39:00) twenty-four hours later, they were being transferred to another airfield to train on a different plane. So, he was lucky. He wasn't wounded. He didn't see action. I was born in Albany while my father was still in the army.

JG: Actually in Albany itself?

LS: In Albany itself. He came home. We were with my grandparents, and he came home when I was fourteen months old.

JG: So, he came home somewhere in there.

LS: Well, they got married in Sioux City, Iowa.

JG: He was based there?

LS: He was based there and my mother went out there, and they got married. My mother got pregnant. She came home to Albany.

JG: What was it like growing up in Albany? What kind of neighborhood did you live in?

LS: I lived in a Catholic neighborhood actually for most of my life, but the Jewish community in Albany was a very strong, tight community. The convergence of personalities in that community in the fifties made it a very unique experience. The rabbi — I don't know if you've ever heard of him — his name was Herman Kieval. He was one of the bright lights of the Conservative Movement. We had a Hebrew school which was

run by a very unusual educator named Phillip Arian. He was so charismatic that you wanted to go to Hebrew school. You wanted to go to services Friday night and Saturday. It was your whole life.

JG: So, this was true for lots of kids, you're saying, in this congregation?

LS: Yeah. This congregation (00:41:00) happened to have produced some young people who went very far in academia. I mentioned them in that questionnaire. One was Robert Alter, who I don't know if you've heard of.

JG: Yes.

LS: The other was Bob Chazan, who was a professor for a long time in Indiana, and his younger brother Barry. These were the role models that I had as a kid. Then, when I was nine years old, I went to Camp Ramah. They were already there.

JG: How did you end up going to Ramah? It was because of this congregation?

LS: It was because of this congregation and the role model of all the kids before me who went. (00:42:08)

JG: Tell us a little bit more about the environment in which you were growing up.

LS: So, everybody was Catholic. Most families had five or six kids in them. I had a neighbor who would sit on my front steps with me, and we would talk about whether the Jews really killed Jesus or not. This was a conversation that we would have over and over and over again. On this street, there were probably upwards of thirty kids in elementary school. At that point, I was the only Jewish kid, and there was one other kid down the street who was Protestant. So, when we would play games, all the Catholic kids went first, then the Protestant kid, and then I was last.

JG: How did that affect you?

LS: Well, if you wanted to play, that's what you did. As I got older and I had more and more activities off the street, it became a non-issue actually.

JG: How did your family end up living in such a Catholic neighborhood?

LS: Well, Albany had a strong Jewish community, but it wasn't a lot of people. The house that we lived in at that point, which we moved into when I was eight — let me give you

some background. I lived with my grandparents until I was fourteen months old. Then my parents and I moved into a G.I. housing project, lots of families in these small apartments. Then, when I was, I guess, about four and a half, (00:44:00) we moved into a two-family house. We had the bottom flat, and there were people upstairs who owned the house. Then when I was eight, we moved to this other house which was a duplex. It was an enormous house, both of them connected on the corner, which my grandparents owned. So we moved in, my parents paid rent, and eventually my parents bought it from my grandparents. This was the neighborhood I grew up in, and I used to walk to shul every Saturday morning.

JG: So it wasn't that far from the shul?

LS: Well, it was a good twenty blocks away. It was a hike. I went to public school, and I went to Hebrew school three times a week. It was a given that I would go to Hebrew high school. It wasn't a question, should she or shouldn't she?

ZS: An after school Hebrew high school.

LS: Yeah, yeah.

JG: Most of the kids in your shul did the same?

LS: I would say fifty percent of them continued on into Hebrew high school. And in Hebrew high school, the courses we took were so interesting that it made you want to learn. It was a very unusual situation. Some of the teachers were immigrants from Europe, some of them were American-born, some of them were Israeli. While that was going on, my mother was chairman of the youth commission of the shul, which oversaw all the youth activities in the shul, and my father ended up being the vice president of the shul. So we lived there, basically.

JG: Was that your primary social environment, the shul?

LS: Yeah. My parents belonged to a group that they called the Cousins Club. My grandparents by that point had moved to Florida, so my parents had no relatives in Albany. These other four families also didn't have any relatives in Albany. That was the criteria for becoming part of this group, which would then celebrate holidays together.

JG: Sort of a proto-*havurah*.

LS: Exactly. Like a proto-*havurah*, exactly. And Bob Alter's parents were part of this group, so I was this little kid looking up to these guys.

JG: But you also got involved in USY.

LS: I got very involved in USY. We also had a different group called LTF, Leaders Training Fellowship. You had to be going to Hebrew school three times a week to participate in that group. That group was a little less social, and a little more educational.

JG: So it's people who are fairly serious (00:47:00) about their Jewish identity and Jewish education.

LS: Yeah, exactly. So, if USY had a dance on a Saturday night, LTF would stay up all night on Shavuot studying, often in my basement. Then, when I was nine and a half, I went to Ramah for the first time.

JG: So, prompted by these —

LS: — by this environment, exactly, and all these kids who were there before me. Ramah wasn't very old in 1954. It was a pretty new camp. It was in Connecticut. When my parents came up to visit me on visiting day, their jaws dropped at the conditions in the camp. They couldn't believe that anybody would allow their children to be —

JG: What were the conditions like?

LS: It was a broken-down camp that the seminary bought that had been built in the twenties. It was literally big log cabins. Now, as an adult, when I look back, I can see why they eventually sold it as soon as they could and bought Ramah in the Berkshires, in Palmer.

JG: What did you feel about it?

LS: I loved it. I absolutely loved it. The only problem I had was, they didn't allow you to talk to your parents on the phone. So I figured out how to sneak a collect call every week. I wasn't homesick, but I had to talk to my parents every week. I figured out the best time to sneak a phone call was during Havdalah, because the entire camp was gathered together for Havdalah. It was dark. Nobody would notice if a kid was gone. So, I would sneak up to the pay phone in the office and make a collect call, every Saturday night.

JG: And nobody every figured it out.

LS: Nobody ever figured it out.

JG: What did you take from your experiences with Ramah?

LS: It made living a Jewish life — it normalized it. That's probably the best way to put it. You were with all Jewish people in an all-Jewish environment learning about Jewish things, and then learning about other things too. Like when Zev mentioned when he became aware of the war in Vietnam. I remember very clearly. It was 1964. I was in camp. Somebody decided that we had to talk about Vietnam. That was pretty early.

JG: It was, and you were young.

LS: And we were young. In 1964 I was eighteen.

JG: And you were a camper or a counselor, or —

LS: I went to Ramah as a camper. Then I spent a summer in (00:50:00) the Poconos on a special program called Mador, which was a counselor training program. You could be a C.I.T., a junior counselor, and then a counselor, or you could go to Mador for a summer, and go from that to being a full counselor. You made a commitment of two years.

JG: How old were you when you participated in Mador?

LS: Seventeen? I guess seventeen, about to turn eighteen. It was between high school and my freshman year of college.

JG: Tell us a little bit about that program. What did they do? What was it like for you?

LS: I learned about things that I never had encountered before. I learned about the Sumerians. How many kids learn about the Sumerians and Gilgamesh and its connection to creation stories in the Bible when they're seventeen years old?

JG: And why was that?

LS: Why did they decide? They decided it was educational — *hinuchi*, that was the code word for anything they wanted us to do. It was *hinuchi*, therefore it was considered appropriate to do. We learned, in a way, how to be counselors. The idea was to attempt to professionalize us. Do I remember exactly what else we studied? I don't, but we were put in bunks with campers. We were all spread out into different bunks with campers.

Ironically, one of the campers in that bunk ended up in the *havurah* years later, and we became friends. We were peers at that point.

JG: Who was that?

LS: Her name is Adina Greenberg. I don't know if you've run into that name. Her older sister Shira, *alev ha-shalom*, was married to John Ruskay. She passed away. They were in the *havurah* together, and Adina also came into the *havurah*. It was a very encompassing, intense summer experience, and then I went back as a full counselor to Ramah in Connecticut.

JG: In Connecticut.

LS: In Connecticut. That was the first Ramah. They sold Connecticut after my first year there, and then I was a counselor in Palmer, Massachusetts.

JG: What year was that?

LS: Sixty-four. After that, I did not go back to Ramah. I got this very cool job in the city working for the Commission on Human Rights, which was in the mayor's office, and I investigated discrimination cases all summer. Remember that? (00:53:00)

ZS: I do, but I think that your last summer was '65, not '64.

LS: You're right, it was. It was '65.

ZS: Because we met at the Newport Folk Festival.

LS: Yeah, it was '65.

ZS: She came down on the bus. Tell the story.

LS: Okay. First I'll tell you how I met him. I had this intense Ramah background, and I'm a student in college in New York in the joint program between the seminary and Columbia. One of the people in my program was going to have a party. Now, I say it was February. He says it wasn't. But I go to this party. I'm crashing this party. It's a party of people who went to Ramah in Nyack. My roommate, one of them, had gone to Nyack, so she was invited to the party, and I tagged along. I get to this party in Brooklyn, and there's this guy on the other side of the room who is so good looking my jaw drops. I said to myself, I have to meet this guy. And then he went home with my roommate.

ZS: [*throws up hands apologetically.*]

JG: Why did you do that, Zev?

ZS: She was an English major.

LS: And she was blonde, and she was 5'6".

ZS: [*laughs*]

LS: So that's how we actually met. Then, as Zev rightly pointed out, in 1965, you get a day off from camp. So, what did you do on your day off? You go someplace. One day off we went to the Newport Folk Festival, where Bob Dylan played.

ZS: That's when he went electric. Famous night.

LS: That's when he went electric.

ZS: Like the most famous night of the sixties.

LS: And he was there.

ZS: I was there.

LS: So we basically spent the evening together. Then he was back and forth to Israel and I was in New York. I saw him right before he left. I remember saying this to you — I don't know if you remember my saying it. I told him that altruism is the obverse of extreme egocentrism. Now, where did I get that from? I got that from Camus, which I had been reading that spring semester, and it just rang true. So every one of my good friends that was going to Israel to fight in the war, this is what I told them in an attempt to get them to not go.

ZS: Altruism is the obverse —

LS: Of extreme egocentrism.

ZS: Mhm. No, I think you mean it's another form.

LS: No. It's the obverse.

ZS: Not the opposite. It's the obverse. Okay.

LS: Right, anyway. He went anyway, and then it was the fall of 1967 at Columbia, and the spring (00:56:00) of 1968, at which point I was working in the Dean's Office at Columbia College, which was the epicenter of the student rebellion. So, I would work during the day, and I'd go sleep in the building at night.

JG: You'd go sleep in the building, oh —

LS: Yeah, as part of the demonstrators. So I was doing both. That ended in the spring of '68, and I was so disillusioned that I quit my job —

JG: Disillusioned with —

LS: With the administration, with the police, with the status quo, with organized everything. I was just totally disillusioned, and my boss was disillusioned. He quit his job. He was the Dean of Students at the college. He quit his job, I quit my job, and probably within forty-eight hours, I was on a flight to Israel, looking for him. [*Gestures to ZS*] I get to Israel, and guess what happens? Our planes crossed. I get to Israel. He's back in New York. But I found all of his friends, so I had a great summer.

JG: So you stayed.

LS: I stayed.

JG: What were you doing there?

LS: Just having a good time, wandering around. Just getting New York, Robert Kennedy's assassination out of my head. Martin Luther King's assassination out of my head. Just really trying to distance myself from everything in New York, and America. And then in the fall I decided to go home, because I really finally decided I couldn't make aliyah. I couldn't live in Israel for the rest of my life, because I didn't have family. Maybe if I had family there, I would have been more inclined to stay, but being there alone —

JG: Were you feeling really caught up in all the exultation and fervor of the victory of the Six Day War?

LS: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. It made you so proud to be Jewish, and then to be in Israel and then to witness what had happened, and the attitude of the people around you, it was a very positive experience.

JG: Had you graduated college at that point?

LS: Yes. I graduated in '68.

JG: So you had just graduated.

LS: Yeah, but graduation was just, like, immaterial. In the spring of 1968, nobody went to graduation as a small protest.

JG: Right. The strike had just started.

LS: Yeah, exactly.

JG: Had you been involved in the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-war demonstrations in the sixties?

LS: I was a little (00:59:00) involved, not as involved as Zev was. I was a little involved. I went to some demonstrations. I was very involved in the student strike. That was very meaningful to me.

JG: How had you gotten involved? What had brought you in?

LS: What they were fighting for. What they were fighting against.

JG: Which was —

LS: Which was just the sense that the administration of the university was uncompromising and unwilling to acknowledge its role in the neighborhood that it was located in.

JG: So it was partly the issues around Morningside Park.

LS: Yeah, yeah. That was a very big one. And the way there was no student representation on campus in any of the forums where decisions were made. A lot of people were feeling very alienated at that point. Now, I started, as I said, in the joint program. I stayed there for two years. I felt that that was pretty limiting, too, and I wasn't

too happy with the way the seminary treated women, but it was pre-dating the women's movement, so there was nothing to really hang on except to feel like you were extraneous. But I want to tell you something else, okay? When I was thirteen, I had a bat mitzvah, and you prepare for a bat mitzvah, in advance.

JG: This was in 1958?

LS: Yeah, 1958. So I announced to the rabbi and the cantor that I wanted my haftorah to be *Shirat Devorah*. My bat mitzvah, by the way, was Thanksgiving weekend. *Shirat Devorah* was not the haftorah for that part of it. It's way later in the script. But they said okay. What I didn't know for years is that the reason they said okay was that it didn't count. It didn't count. If I counted, I would have had to do the haftorah for that Shabbat, for that portion. But it didn't count, so they let me do whatever I wanted.

JG: Were women having bat mitzvahs at your synagogue?

LS: Yes. At my synagogue, it was a regular phenomenon. There were so many baby boomers that every weekend, every Friday night there was a bat mitzvah, and every Saturday morning there was a bar mitzvah, because there were so many kids.

JG: What did one do for a bat mitzvah in those days?

LS: Well, you read the haftorah, and you did parts of the service on Friday night, and you gave a speech.

JG: There was no Torah reading.

LS: (01:02:00) No Torah reading, but you did have to learn the trope for the haftorah.

ZS: But you did it without the *brachas*.

LS: No, we did it with the *brachas*.

ZS: Oh.

LS: We did the whole thing.

JG: You didn't learn it from the record?

LS: No. You learned the trope, and then you learned your haftorah. No record, no tape, no nothing. I didn't even know those things existed. And the parts of the service that you did, you also learned how to do it. We had an unbelievable junior congregation, so I really could lead services from start to finish by the time I was thirteen years old.

JG: And did they let you?

LS: Yeah, yeah.

ZS: In junior congregation they let you.

LS: In junior congregation.

JG: But did they let you do it for the main service?

LS: On Friday night they did, because it didn't count. First of all, what I didn't realize at the time was that actually, the evening service on Friday night is right at sundown, just like it is every other night of the week. But this Friday night service was at eight fifteen in the evening, so it didn't count either.

JG: So there was an earlier service then.

LS: Of course there was an earlier service.

JG: So, this was for the girls.

LS: Well —

ZS: Well, they also had always, excuse me —

LS: It was for the congregation, because a lot of people couldn't get to a service at five thirty, six o'clock. So this was a way to encourage families to come to services on Friday nights. There was a service, and there was always an Oneg Shabbat afterward, with a lot of Israeli dancing. The service was at eight. How long was that service? Until nine? You didn't leave the synagogue until ten thirty or eleven at night on Friday nights.

JG: Would your parents go to this, too?

LS: Oh, yeah.

JG: So this was a family activity.

LS: Right.

JG: How did you come to the realization that it didn't count and that's why they let you do that? When did you actually — (01:04:13)

LS: Realize?

JG: — realize. What made you realize?

LS: I don't think I realized it until I was an adult living in New Jersey, and we picked my son's bar mitzvah date based on the parashah, which was *Bereishit*. That's when it really hit me that it goes together with a particular date, and there had to be only one reason in the world why they let me do that. The only reason I came up with was, it didn't count.

JG: What had you gone to Columbia to study? How had you decided on the Columbia joint program? (01:05:00)

LS: Because I wanted to do all things Jewish. That was my mentality.

JG: What were you studying at Columbia?

LS: Well, I couldn't make up my mind at Columbia what to major in.

JG: You were at Columbia, not Barnard?

LS: At Columbia, not Barnard. That's what the joint program was with. It was with Columbia, with the School of General Studies at Columbia. I just kept taking required courses and courses that I was interested in, and I kept changing my major every year. Then finally, when I was a senior, I realized that I had to officially declare a major, so I counted up the number of credits I had in different disciplines, and I happened to have nine in history. You needed thirty-six for a major, so I took them all in one year.

JG: So you majored in history.

LS: History, yeah.

JG: American history, or —?

LS: Yeah, American history.

JG: And you did the joint program throughout?

LS: No. I only did the joint program for two years.

JG: What was the position of women as students in the joint program?

LS: I can't say they were discriminated against.

JG: First, just how many women were there, relative to men?

LS: I would say, forty-sixty?

JG: So, substantial.

LS: A substantial number of women. I just found my studies at Columbia to be more interesting and more meaningful, which is why I left the joint program and just stayed at Columbia.

JG: What was uninteresting to you, or not fulfilling enough for you to stay at JTS? You had come with such enthusiasm.

LS: Right, but academically, learning Gemara just didn't turn me on. It was that simple. The Hebrew literature courses — the Hebrew was very hard. It's very hard to read novels in Hebrew if you're not a native speaker. It took so much effort to get through it, it just didn't seem like it was important enough. I can't think of another way to put it.

JG: So, when you graduated and went to Israel in 1968, what were you thinking? Where were you in terms of what you were thinking —

LS: My future?

JG: Your future, but also your Jewish identity. Those two.

LS: My Jewish identity was strong. My Jewish observance was weak. (01:08:00) I didn't go to shul, because that was boring and I couldn't relate to it anymore. I'd come home to Albany for a vacation and I wouldn't go to shul. I'd just hang out at home.

JG: What had happened? It had been so central just a few years earlier.

LS: What I now see is that I was reacting to what I now call top-down Judaism. It was not participatory. You were a voyeur basically. I got turned off, like a lot of people just got turned off. Contrast that with services at Ramah, let's say. That was very participatory, and there was nobody standing on the *bimah* talking at you.

JG: So Ramah offered you a real alternative that was very engaging.

LS: Yeah. That's right.

JG: It helped shift, it sounds, how you felt about what a service was.

LS: Right, exactly, and what being observant meant. But I wasn't observant at all until Zev and I got together and decided to get married in 1969. That's when things really changed.

JG: So, when did you actually reconnect? You were in Israel. You had come back from Israel.

LS: Right, and then when I came back to the States —

JG: Which was at the end of the summer?

LS: Which was after the summer. It was October twenty-sixth, and I decided to see if I could get home to Albany, New York in less than twenty-four hours. My birthday is October twenty-seventh. With no reservations, mind you, and I did it. I got to Kennedy, I called my parents, and I said, "Pick me up at the Albany Airport. I'll be there in two hours."

JG: And they didn't know you were coming.

LS: They didn't know I was coming. So, my parents had a discussion while they were waiting for me. My mother was convinced that I was coming home because I was broke, and my father said, "That's not the reason. If she needed money, she just would have let us know she needed money. That's not the reason." So I come home. I am in Albany for less than twenty-four hours. On the way home from the airport in the car, my mother says to me, "Oh, your friend Zev called yesterday." So, I get home, and I pick up the phone and I call him back, and the next day I was on the bus and went back to New York, where he was. Right?

ZS: That's right.

JG: So, you were in graduate school.

LS: No, he was still in undergraduate. (01:11:00)

JG: He was finishing his undergraduate. And what did you decide to do?

LS: Right, and I had to get a job. I had been working in the Dean's Office at Columbia College. I had to get another job, so I got a job working for the Jewish chaplain on campus. Right? That was that job, the next job I had.

ZS: I thought there was one a little bit before, but that's fine. Anyway, this is what's more important is A. Bruce Goldman.

LS: Right, A. Bruce Goldman. He was the Jewish chaplain on campus. I started taking courses, just for the heck of it because they were free. Eventually, I guess after a year or two, I got a job working in the Dean's Office at the School of General Studies. I was a student advisor. Then, I became the Director of Admissions at the School of General Studies. I was twenty-three, right? Yeah, I was pretty young. Then we got married in 1970. So, I'm the Dean of Admissions, and I'm looking out my window. I don't know if you've ever been to the Columbia campus. It's these old buildings with windows that were practically a story high. It's late at night and the campus is dark and I'm looking out my window to see who else is working in their offices, because you could see in different buildings which lights were on. And I realized that I was the only person of my rank in the university who didn't have a PhD. So, I needed to get one of those. I went and saw my old art history professor, and I said to him, "I think I want to get a PhD in art history. What do you think of that idea?" So he said, "It's a great idea. Take the summer and learn French or German so you can pass the comprehensives. Then we can admit you." So, I went home and I thought about whether I could possibly learn French or German, concluded that that really was a bad idea, and then I thought about, well, what do I like about my job? What I really liked about my job was the student advising part of it, so I decided. Okay, I'll get a degree in psychology. I presented myself. I had never taken an undergraduate course in psychology, but they let me take a couple of graduate courses as a special student, and then after that they admitted me. (01:14:00) I worked, and I went to school, and eventually I quit my job to get an internship, and then I got a degree in psychology.

JG: And ever since then, you've been in psychology.

LS: Right, right. I also had fantasies of being the first lady president of Columbia, I must confess, and you definitely need a Ph.D. for that. But once I got into graduate school and really into psychology, I realized that I didn't want to work for the university anymore.

JG: So, it was a good choice for you.

LS: It was a very good choice.

JG: So, let's turn to the New York Havurah.

LS: So, we got married. I wanted to get married on March seventh, which was Purim, and Zev said, "Don't make a joke of this. We can't get married on Purim." So we got married on March fifteenth, the Ides of March, instead. I'm sorry, I got it wrong. We got married on the Ides of March, which was the fifteenth. Purim was the next Saturday night — the next Sunday night, actually. And so, we got married. We went to Cape Cod for our honeymoon, which was like four days long, and then we came back, and the very first thing we did was go to the *havurah* for Purim.

JG: What do you know about the beginnings of the *havurah*? The *havurah* was new, new-ish — it was just a few months old at that point. It started the previous fall.

LS: Right, 1969.

JG: Zev, you said you had known people who had been involved--

ZS: Right, so did Leslie. We both knew people, but I had gone there to the *havurah* a little bit beforehand. John Ruskay and Peter Geffen were friends of mine from before.

JG: How did you know them?

ZS: I knew Peter from USY. He was a big guy in METNY [Metropolitan New York USY] — that was the region, and then he was president of USY, national president. He was a friend of mine from USY, and we kept in touch. We also took courses at the seminary together, the School of Informal Education, I think it was. I went to a service, was the first time. They were sitting in a circle on the floor, and they were doing just a few of the prayers that they wanted to do, and one guy was a poet and he read some poems, and that was the service. I wasn't there with John. John had told me about it, I think. Murray Pomerantz was the kid who was reading the poems. Then I think I had been to some other occasion, too. There were a few people I had known. (01:17:00) When we got married, we wanted to check out synagogues. There was a synagogue

across the street which was this old Orthodox shul, which was really dying, but I did go there for an aliyah one time, and they actually *schnoored*. It was like the first time — I had heard about it, but never done it before. But they have people — you get up and do a *Misheberach* and then they pause. Fortunately, I had remembered from some short story that's when you're supposed to sandwich what you're doing, right? [*laughs*] So I said, "*Chamishah*," and "*Chamisha*." [*minyan noises*] Anyway, that wasn't for us. That became Ramat Orah, which became — now it's a real place. A lot of people go there. It's on 110th Street. So, when we went there to the *havurah*, it was already like we were interested. Peter came up and congratulated me right away, congratulated us right away, for getting married.

LS: When we walked into the room —

ZS: Right, there were a lot of people we knew. We have to explain, the *havurah* rented an apartment in the Upper West Side. That was the base dues — it was to pay the rent.

JG: So this was the Ninety-ninth Street —

LS: Nighty-eighth Street —

ZS: Yes, that's right. So that's where we went. We went into the *havurah*. It was that apartment building, and it was Purim.

LS: So we walk in, and all these people I know from Ramah are there, and then all these people I know from USY, and a couple of people who were in college with me. So it felt like we came home.

ZS: Yeah.

LS: It's the best way to describe it. We came home.

JG: What happened that night? Can you describe what happened during Purim celebrations?

ZS: I remember Phyllis announced that she was pregnant.

JG: Right, that was the major — Phyllis Sperling announced that she was pregnant. That was like the major event because I knew Phyllis when we were kids in camp. When I was a counselor she was the *omanut* counselor, arts and crafts. She's an architect by training.

ZS: The kitchen you were in was designed by her and her second husband. [laughs]

LS: Yeah.

ZS: The kitchen you were in.

LS: As well as our basement and our attic. Okay, so it was a very fun Purim, you know? It just, it felt right.

JG: Can you sort of describe what felt right about it?

LS: Everybody was participating. Everybody knew everything. It wasn't this voyeuristic experience. You know, when you're a little kid and it's Purim or Simchat Torah and you're running around wild because that's what kids are allowed to do, that's one thing. They have a lot of fun. But once you get old enough to not be able to do that, it's a big bore. At least it is for me. Purim in a regular synagogue to me is just noise. (01:20:00) But this wasn't just noise. This was very participatory and fun. I can't think of another word to describe it, and it was the informal quality, I think, that made it so much fun.

ZS: Also, it was fun, but also the educated quality of it.

LS: Everybody knew everything.

ZS: Yeah. That's one of the things that I think made it work. We all had a certain level of knowledge that we didn't need somebody to tell us what to do, so sometimes we didn't want someone to tell us what to do. We all had a high level of Jewish knowledge, so we could be creative with it. The Purim things were fun later on because we would do new interpretations of the *Megillah*. We would do a Purim *shpiel* that would really go into what is this story about? We had some real high-power academics in the New York Havurah who would know, like, when was the *Megillah* written? What's this all about? So these kinds of bringing to bear a lot of the academic issues that we were getting in college onto our Judaism, and that's sort of following through on what the Conservative Movement was all about. In some ways, I think the *havurah* movement, at least ours, did come out of the Conservative Movement, because USY and Ramah, these are two Conservative programs —

LS: And, many of the — sorry —

ZS: Yeah.

LS: Sorry for interrupting you. Many of the early members were rabbinical students at the seminary.

ZS: Or, former.

LS: Or they left, yeah.

ZS: The political issue you'll probably get better when you talk to John and Peter, but there was a big issue with the seminary. They dropped out of the seminary as rabbinical students for reasons we shouldn't go into, because you'll get it from them better. The fact is, it is one of the impetuses. The official name of the *havurah* was the Havurah Community Seminary, and it was a registered seminary in the State of New York that would give draft deferments.

JG: When you got involved, it was still registered as a seminary?

ZS: Yes.

LS: Yes.

ZG: Yes, I don't know, maybe that's since fallen by the wayside. But I remember that Peter did it. I think it was an actual document. I don't know if it was — maybe it was used for Burton Weiss to get his deferment. I don't remember. I'm not sure. We also really did take the idea of learning seriously. Participatory wasn't only in services but also, we all had knowledge that we wanted to share. So, programs on retreats, sometimes you'd have people reading a *d'var Torah*, *divrei Torah*, and they would share that. The idea was that everybody has something to contribute. Some of these people were really strong academics, but other people were not. They had like, one was a dance therapist who would do stuff like that. It didn't really last. [to LS] I'm thinking of Josh's first wife. (01:23:00)

LS: And Lynn, who was into hearing impaired, and she would —

ZG: Yes.

LS: She would do sign language services.

ZS: But she was a rabbi.

JG: Lynn Gottlieb?

LS: Yes.

ZS: Yes. She was later, I think. She joined later, but yes.

JG: Were you aware of the early discussions, or did you have any role in the early discussions about actually forming the *havurah*, in the pre-period before it actually got off the ground?

ZS: When we got there, the nucleus was already there. We were like the Madisons, not the Hamiltons. [*laughs*] Or, I don't know, wrong analogy.

LS: The second generation.

ZS: Well, not quite.

LS: Not quite.

ZS: It's just that, you know, we're not the founding generation, but —

LS: We're on the cusp.

ZS: The cusp, yeah. The cusp. [*laughs*]

JG: At the point that you got involved, was there any kind of formal or even informal admissions process?

ZS: We spent a lot of time talking about that. We spent a lot of time. One of the things, like I said before, we were always having problems, but what did we do? So, we would meet every Thursday night, and then we'd have trouble with programming. Once a month we'd have Friday night meals, and that was easy, because you have Shabbos. You do *Maariv* and then you sing, and that was beautiful. And we knew how — we had the program. A few times a year, we would go on retreats —

LS: Once a month we had them.

ZS: Once a month we went on retreats, and there the programming is — but we wanted to meet every Thursday night, too, and sometimes — so, often we were talking about ourselves, and one thing we were talking about was admissions, you know? Do we have

criteria? Should it be a secret? Should we recruit people? Should people come to us? It was really every possible concept we would go into.

LS: When we formally joined, we were interviewed. That process of interviewing people continued.

JG: Who did the interviewing?

LS: I don't know. Who did the interviewing?

ZS: Alan Mintz. He was one of the early members.

JG: Were you interviewed separately or together?

ZS: Oh, separately. I remember I was interviewed separately.

LS: I must have been interviewed separately.

ZS: I mean, because he asked me about you.

LS: Oh yeah?

ZS: Yeah.

LS: What did he ask you? I'm afraid to ask what he asked you.

ZS: [*laughs*] Oh, this is *lashon hara*.

LS: What'd he say?

ZS: It's not really *lashon hara*, but, he said, "I understand you want to be in, okay, but what about Leslie? Is she interested in this?" I said, "Yeah! Of course she is." That was basically it, you know. But see, the question is, are we a group of snobs, or are we open to everybody? Because the great movement, the great idea, is democracy, right? — and being inclusive. (01:26:00) But a lot of the fun is knowing the Judaism well enough to really have somebody who can interact on a fun level. Part of the movement came about with *davening*. They would have West Side Minyan, which was open to everybody, but there were some people called Minyan M'at, which would be people who really knew the prayers and could really participate and —

LS: But that was later, much later.

ZS: I know, but the philosophy is the same, you see. On membership, it's the same idea. Should we be open to anybody who wants to join, or should we be very selective and find out if somebody is really like minded, basically of the Conservative-Ramah-USY-LTF —

LS: In a nutshell, we wanted to make sure that people were “at the right address.”

ZS: That was the phrase we used.

LS: That was the phrase we used. And what that meant was that people who shared the same level of observance, the same knowledge, more or less, of Judaica, and the same commitment that we had.

ZS: Or, searching for the right commitment. Another way we defined ourselves was as searchers, seekers. We all loved Judaism. We were trying to figure out the way to express that.

JG: So, ultimately, because this was one of the critiques that was leveled at the early *havurah*, of this so-called elitism —

LS: Right.

ZS: Yeah.

JG: — this process, and the attitude toward who was in and who was out that was embodied in the admissions process.

ZS: What I would say to that is that if you want a structure that's hierarchical, with the people with knowledge on top and everybody else participating but really observing, that's a traditional synagogue. What this was was that everybody was equal in their ability to participate, to the degree in which they chose to. So, I don't think of it as being elitist. It was a careful selection process to make sure that nobody would ever feel like a second-class citizen — my words, not theirs.

JG: Would it be fair to say that it was a matching process?

LS: Perfect. That's the same idea “at the right address.” It was a matching process, exactly.

JG: So, were there ever any articulated criteria, or was it more the sense of the people who were doing the interviews in the group? How did it work? Someone interviewed you, and then how was the decision made?

LS: (0:1:29:00) And then we interviewed people, and we would go back to the group and say, I met this person and I really think this person would be a good fit with our group, for instance. Right?

ZS: Yeah. I was always for being as inclusive as possible.

JG: What about the people who you didn't feel would make a good match?

ZS: I would feel we — I remember who we interviewed. I mean, funny who we interviewed. We interviewed Paula Hyman, right? So, what are we going to say? She doesn't belong with us? And who were we to do it?

LS: There were one or two people who we did not want to be part of the group.

JG: Based on what?

ZS: Gross personality defects.

LS: Right, which was another phrase of ours. This was way before I went to graduate school. But yeah, "gross personality defects."

JG: People who you didn't feel like their personality fit.

LS: Yeah, yeah.

ZS: It was complicated, because a lot of people like us can be pretty obnoxious. *[laughs]*

LS: And there were people who we could say to ourselves — who were members of the group — I don't particularly like that person, but they still belong in the group. They're not going to be my new best friend, but they still belong. There were people like that.

ZS: But there were times when someone was considered to be so divisive, not just obnoxious, but —

RS: Divisive.

ZS: A pernicious element because of his or her personality that we really felt they shouldn't be in. I don't want to name names for this, but there are examples. There's one example I could think of, but I won't mention it. Basically, I think we were accused of being elitist, and I think we're trying to get around it, but it's complicated.

JG: In terms of admissions, if it was conceived of as a seminary originally, as Havurat Shalom was in Boston, what that translated to is that the members in the early years, in the very early years, were men — exclusively men, because it was a seminary.

ZS: Oh, I see.

LS: Oh, no.

JG: This was pre — I mean, Sally Priesand wasn't ordained until 1972. So 1968, this was, as Art Green said, a pre-feminist moment.

ZS: Yeah. We had the naming for that child — the woman I spoke of before, Phyllis.

JG: Phyllis Sperling.

ZS: Yeah, Phyllis Sperling. When her daughter was born, we had a minyan at the *havurah* apartment [*whispers*] without her — without the baby, but without her either. I remember it. David Sperling was there, I was there. Martha Acklesberg was there, and a few others. I guess we had an actual minyan, and then we did learning in the name of Sharon. Shifra, I think is her Hebrew name. I still remember, Shifra Sperling. Just like you would have at an Orthodox naming, we did a *shiur* in her honor, and then (01:32:00) we did *Rabbanan* She was not there. But I think we counted Martha in the minyan. That's the point I'm trying to make.

JG: So what was the policy towards admitting women or not?

ZS: It was completely equal. Women were admitted.

LS: Yeah, women were admitted. It wasn't a question.

JG: So why wasn't Phyllis —

ZS: I'm just showing you the mentality, you know?

LS: Was it that Phyllis — well, Phyllis and David both came from Borough Park, and I think that the naming was an “Orthodox” minyan because of that.

ZS: But I think we counted Martha.

LS: I don't remember, but I know by the time the next —

JG: Were you there?

LS: I don't remember if I was there.

ZS: You were not there.

LS: By the time the next baby was born, who was Ilana — she became Ilana Ruskay — that was a lot more of an egalitarian naming. Everybody was there, including the baby, including her mother. That was a year and a half later, when Ilana was born?

ZS: Yeah. I remember that one. I remember them all. I think John Ruskay was also at the naming. You can ask him. I just think it's significant.

JG: So, basically what you're saying, just to recap, is that women and men became members equally essentially —

LS: Equally.

ZS: Oh, yeah.

JG: And women applied to become members.

LS: Yes, and some members were single women. I mean, I came attached, but Liz Koltun was a full member and she was a single woman. There were other women like that.

ZS: This was a whole aspect that we haven't talked about yet, but a single woman joining a congregation was kind of a big deal. Even a single man under thirty — I mean, what are you joining a congregation for? There was this void in Judaism between the graduation from college and when you have kids. What are you going to do in the synagogue? What do you need the synagogue for?

JG: You at least were married.

LS: Right.

ZS: Yeah, so, for some women, they saw it that way, and of course, there was the feminism. The feminism in an explicit way came about a few years later.

JS: We're back from lunch, and we had left off talking about the admissions process, essentially, at the New York Havurah. So, I want to turn now to talking about some particular aspects of life within the *havurah*, and sort of delve into the whole thing a little more deeply. We want to start with the whole idea of community, of a vision for community, that the *havurah* put forward. In the brochure for the *havurah*, this is what was said about it: "These young people see themselves as Jews, but they are seeking to clarify and deepen beyond current formulations the meaning of being Jewish in twentieth century America. They are seeking (01:35:00) to address the wisdom and challenge of Jewish tradition to their own lives and to the problems of the society they live in."

ZS: What brochure?

JG: The New York Havurah brochure.

ZS: That's the one we joked about, right? Did we ever come out with it? I didn't know that.

LS: Evidently.

ZS: One guy wanted to do a brochure. We thought it was so funny. He was into PR at the time. Alan Sugarman — he was the guy.

LS: Who'd you get this brochure from?

JG: It's been written about in various histories of the *havurah*.

ZS: Well, that's probably where they got it from, yeah.

LS: So, you never physically saw a copy?

JG: I never physically saw it, no.

LS: Now I'm really curious.

JG: Yeah, we'll have to find out where exactly it came from. What's the story that you know?

ZS: That Alan Sugarman one time said we needed a brochure. You see, in some ways we were very interested in not being self-conscious, and not seeing ourselves as some cutting-edge thing. So, we didn't want to have a brochure that would explain us. We wanted to keep it fluid. We didn't want to become a cliché that touches all the bases, and it's really almost embarrassing. It just really doesn't get it at all. It's a brochure, it's a PR brochure.

JG: So, it doesn't capture —

ZS: Nah.

LS: How could it?

ZS: Read it again. I mean, you can't argue with anything, but read it again. Go ahead, it'll be fun.

LS: Does it say anything?

JS: I'll read it one more time, and then you tell me what you think.

ZS: I'll say, "Jargon, cliché."

JS: But then the question is, what were they trying to get to? So here's what it says. "These young people see themselves as Jews, but they are seeking to clarify and deepen beyond current formulations the meaning of being Jewish in twentieth century America."

ZS: I agree. That's what we were trying to do, no problem.

LS: I agree with it, except I don't think that could have been written by a member of the *havurah*, because a member of the *havurah* would never have said the first —

JG: "Beyond current formulations?"

LS: No, no no. The beginning.

JG: "These young people view themselves" —

LS: Somebody who was a member of the *havurah* would have said, "We see ourselves." That's why I'm a little suspicious as to where that came from, and frankly, I think you ought to check out the source.

ZS: It's right, but it's — we wanted to be authentic, you see. This is, I guess, the essence of the counterculture — to be authentic, to be yourself, and not to be television jargon. That's what that is. That's what you use in a PBS special, a *Frontline*. That's exactly the bullshit jargon that we were against. That was the inauthentic thing. That was why the underclass was so appealing in some ways — because there was this myth, of course, that suburban people have that the underclass, they're more authentic, (01:38:00) so their language is more authentic.

JG: Another question is, in this very early period of the *havurah*, how would the New York Havurah even envision using a brochure? For what?

ZS: That's why we thought it was so funny.

LS: That's why it was funny that he said, "Let's do a brochure." But on the other hand, it had no utility. At least I don't think so.

JG: Do you think there was a shared vision?

LS: Oh, absolutely. I think it was a shared vision of a Jewish community, and I think that the word community has to be stressed. In fact, my parents referred to the New York Havurah as my other family, because they felt the connection was as strong between the members of the New York Havurah as they are in a family.

LS: What I was saying is that the *havurah* gave people a strong sense of community. And particularly, I think, in larger cities, like Boston, like New York, even Philadelphia, you need a tight knit community in order, in my case, to function, to feel comfortable with the people around you, feel comfortable inside. The *havurah* also gave us a way to express being Jewish in a way that countered the alienation that I know I felt in a traditional synagogue, and I'm pretty sure most other people felt that way too, who were in the *havurah*.

JG: Your comments made me think of the idea of feeling at home in a community. I'm wondering how important you feel the actual apartment was in the creation of community for the *havurah*.

LS: It was a central location where there were activities going on a lot of the time. We usually had a bedroom rented out to a member.

JG: Gerry Serotta lived there.

LS: Yeah. So, that supplemented the cost of the apartment, of running the apartment. When groups meet in different people's houses — and I know some minyans do that — I think it conveys a very transient quality to the group, to the mentality of the group. But if you have a place, a locus, I think it gives it more permanence and more stability.

JG: The apartment was paid for through — essentially — dues to the minyan?

LS: Yeah.

JG: It also gave people a financial stake and commitment to giving — (01:41:00)

LS: In maintaining it? I don't know that that was consciously part of anybody's thought process, frankly. We were all young. We didn't think about stuff like that.

ZS: And rents were cheaper, too.

LS: And rents were a lot cheaper.

ZS: I mean, I wonder how much that would go for now.

LS: I can't even remember what we paid in dues, but —

ZS: Sixty dollars.

LS: That's what we paid?

ZS: Yeah. All the members. He divided up the annual rent, and I think it came to sixty dollars a person. That's what it was. [*laughs*]

LS: Okay.

ZS: Pretty good. It was like a clubhouse. On one level, it was like a clubhouse.

JG: So the clubhouse was used — this house was used for classes, for the weekly communal meal on Thursday evenings, followed by a program of some kind —

LS: Or a meeting.

JG: Or a meeting. And for services when services were held, which was not every week.

ZS: Yeah, but Friday night and Shabbat a lot of times. Then, after a while, the Shabbat morning thing moved over to the West Side Minyan and Minyan M'at, but that's —

LS: Much later, much later.

JG: Quite a bit later.

ZS: Quite a bit? Okay.

JG: So, the New York Havurah has been described by some as the *havurah* with “the really good food.”

ZS: [*laughs*]

JG: It looks like it rings right. What role do you think the weekly meals had in —

LS: Well, what do meals do for people? Meals bring people. Meals allow people to share ideas. That's what those meals did, whether it was on a Thursday night or a Shabbat meal or a meal at a retreat. We did take those meals very seriously in terms of how they were planned and what the menus were.

JG: How did that get decided? What do you mean, you took it seriously?

LS: We would talk to one another about what we were going to make. A lot of places have — like, we're going tonight to a potluck dinner at our very small synagogue, which is very much like a *havurah*. Their idea of a potluck dinner is bring whatever you want. That's not the way we operated in the New York Havurah.

ZS: Much more controlling. We were much more controlling, the freedom guys. [*laughs*]

LS: We were much more controlled, much more controlled. You had to have a starch, you had to have a vegetable, you had to have some kind of protein, you had to have dessert. Everybody couldn't bring pasta.

JG: So how did that get decided?

ZS: And some wannabe professor of any field would do one of the dishes because he or she was slumming it and really wanted to take the food seriously.

LS: Yeah, we had a lot of would-be gourmets at that time. Two people would be in charge of the food for retreat, and those people would make up a menu and then make phone calls and say, "You're making salad. You're bringing a green vegetable. You're bringing dessert. You're bringing wine or paper goods." (01:44:00)

JG: The meals at the *havurah*, they were kosher.

LS: Correct.

JG: Was meat served?

LS: Yes.

JG: It was.

ZS: But there was always a vegetarian option. I'm sorry, I'm interrupting you.

LS: We catered to the highest level of observance, so if we were having a meat meal, let's say, it was absolutely understood that there would be no dairy products, that only meat dishes would be used, etcetera etcetera.

JG: But people would cook in their own homes.

LS: Yeah, because the people who cooked were people who kept kosher.

JG: So that was understood also.

LS: That was also understood. The people who didn't keep kosher would buy wine or buy challah or whatever.

ZS: Sometimes, if I may, it became an interesting problem. I can think of two cases. It's a broader question about the most extreme form of observance. So, with retreats, does the food have to arrive before Shabbat?

LS: Right, that was a big issue, and the resolution was, it did have to arrive before Shabbat —

JG: — so that everybody would be comfortable.

LS: Right.

ZS: But more interesting — and this I remember we spent a lot of time on — we would go to retreat centers. They were often winterized summer camps, but one of them had a fireplace. Now, can you start the fire on Shabbat? Of course, you can't, but I'm doing it. What do you care? You keep Shabbat? I'm doing it. But you're getting *hana'ah*, you're getting pleasure from my breaking Shabbos, a fellow Jew breaking Shabbos and starting the fire.

JG: So there was no Shabbos goy. If there had been a Shabbos goy, it would have been fine.

ZS: It would have been fine.

LS: It would have been fine.

ZS: But the problem was, this was a big issue. We really talked about this for a long time. What's interesting is what was considered legitimate evidence to bring into the conversation. So, in one way, it was a sort of traditional halachic discussion. But then there was also the way I feel. I don't feel comfortable. Now all that jargon is from another world.

LS: Right, the sixties.

ZS: We were blending those things. Your particular problem with, for example, my starting the fire — it may not be your problem for halachic reasons, but you don't like to see a fellow Jew break Shabbos, you see. There's a different sense of what's admissible evidence in a conversation, what you can talk about and what's legitimate to bring to the conversation.

JG: Did that mean that in most instances the observance was actually much more on the (01:47:00) observant end, on the more *frum* end, because —

LS: *Frum* is the wrong —

JG: — it would make people on that end more comfortable.

LS: *Frum* is the wrong word, I think. I think it's a question of observance, which is different from the mentality of *frumkeit*. I see there's a difference. There are and were many, many Jews who belong to Conservative synagogues, whose observance was high, shall we say. They were shomer shabbat, they kept kosher inside and outside. That's a level of observance. That's not philosophical, and that's not *frumkeit*, at least not in that mind.

JG: How does that interface with this issue?

LS: With this kind of an issue, first of all, these decisions were never made by majority. They were only made by consensus, which meant that some of these discussions went on forever. But when there was finally a resolution, everybody was comfortable with the decision.

JG: Could you always get to a resolution by consensus?

LS: Yeah, if you take a long time. That was the sixties and the seventies, when people had the time to sit around and just keep discussing something.

JG: So, besides the meals, obviously the community meetings, weekly meetings or programs, were a regular practice.

LS: Yes.

JG: Communal life, so to speak. What other kinds of issues can you remember being discussed at the meetings, part one? Part two of that question is, did most of these discussions take place actually within the context of a meeting, or did it also sort of continue to play itself out in informal conversation that was happening?

LS: I would say — and I don't know if this is everyone would agree with this — but I would say that the majority of them took place within the context of a meeting.

JG: So this kind of Shabbat observance and kashrut-related questions, that was one kind of issue. Were there other kinds of issues that took a lot of talking and feeling your way through it?

LS: What kind of services we were going to have. I remember long discussions about Rosh Hashanah services, whether we were including absolutely everything, every psalm in the *machzor*, or are we going to pick and choose? Do you remember those discussions?

ZS: I remember the first time we decided to do Yom Kippur ourselves. We were into it for years. (01:50:00) We did have enough people that had the skills, but this seemed to be a major step. I remember talking with Ruthie Hundert about it like somehow this was a major step. First of all, we weren't going home for Yom Kippur, but second of all, it meant that we were actually going to do it ourselves. This is like the real thing. We were going to do our own *Kol Nidre*.

LS: It was a big deal.

ZS: It was a big deal. I think it was, yeah.

JG: What was the discussion? Whether to do it or not?

LS: What to do.

ZS: Who's going to do it. What to do. There were also issues sometimes with the actual words of the *tefilah*.

LS: This was before *tefilot* were gender neutral, shall we say. It was all male. So we talked about that, too.

JG: I actually wanted to talk about that.

ZS: Right, we can talk about that, but there were other issues. Should you pray that the Temple be rebuilt, for example? These are regular theological discussions, but we felt that they were okay to talk about.

JG: *Musaf*? Was that an issue?

ZS: Yeah, *Musaf* was an issue. We were also honest. Sometimes *Musaf* is an issue because enough already. [*laughs*] But there is a theological — I go to Romemu, for example, in the Upper West Side that has a really nice service. It's like grandchildren of the *havurah*. They don't even talk about *Musaf*. They make their own siddur. It's not even there. But yes, the gender issues is a whole thing.

JG: Any other sort of major thematic issues that would come up?

ZS: Yes. What we're going to do with our lives. There were discussions like that. This was not necessarily Jewish based, but here we were in our twenties, most of us in graduate school or some sort of post-graduate training.

LS: In the beginning, I was the only person who actually had a job.

ZS: [*laughs*] Right, right. The first time we had to use a credit card —

LS: I had a job. I had a credit card. I had hours I had to be at work. Nobody else had that in the beginning.

ZS: We didn't know what it was like.

JG: And nobody had children.

LS: Nobody, until Sharon Sperling was born nine months later. That was the first child.

ZS: And still the mentality was not that we had kids. The mentality is that we didn't yet have kids. Most of us weren't married. Which is another issue. I was just thinking, when we talk about other people's religious observance, did it ever occur to us that a boyfriend and girlfriend who weren't married were sleeping together on a retreat? Was that ever a question?

LS: No, it was never a question.

ZS: So, even from the beginning, there was already that liberal attitude toward sex.

JG: The sexual revolution was happening.

ZS: Yeah, but this was 1970. We're still —

LS: It happened already.

ZS: When we were — before we were married, when I slept at your house, we did not sleep in the same (01:53:00) bed, and same when you slept at my house.

LS: I assume that for every single person in that group, when they went home to their parents, nobody slept together.

ZS: I know. That's the point I'm making. But any other synagogue, any other synagogue retreat — In other words, the sexual revolution came into it almost automatically. It wasn't even a question. I'm not talking about the feminist issue.

JG: Birth control had just recently become widely available.

LS: Yeah, it was. In the sixties it was widely available.

ZS: Birth control is '63, and this is '71, so —

JG: Late sixties.

LS: Yeah.

ZS: Anyway, the sexual revolution — it was already assumed. And that's a big deal. Socially, that's a big deal.

JG: In addition to the meals that took place at the *havurah* itself, at the apartment, was it a community in the sense that people also invited each other to their homes.

LS: Absolutely. We used to have a giant New Year's Eve party every year in our apartment. Friday night dinners — most of the time you invited other people if you were making dinner. They were more often than not members of the *havurah*.

ZS: Or the Upper West Side Jewish circle.

LS: Yeah, because they were our friends. It's a social group.

ZS: They were.

JG: Were there some people who were more the inviters and some people who were more the invitees?

ZS: Yeah.

LS: Yeah, of course. Some people liked to cook, and some people liked just to eat.

ZS: Mostly single guys. They would not usually cook for others. Some did. One *havurah* guy had a married *havurah* couple down the hall, so he would use their kitchen so he

could fix up nice stuff, because they didn't like to cook. They were all through the *havurah*.

JG: Okay, so we've talked a little bit about retreats. Can you describe somewhat more fully the atmosphere of these retreats? What was different in what was happening on the retreats from what was happening on just a week-to-week basis at the *havurah* apartment?

LS: Well, we were together for forty-eight hours for starters. That's a much more intense environment. Not going home, per se, at the end of a meeting. You're staying up and schmoozing and eventually just going into a room and going to sleep, and then the next morning getting up, and there's your group again — so the continuity. I would imagine that's what it's like on a kibbutz, that continuity. You leave, you go to sleep, but then you come back. You eat communally. All your activities are communal.

JG: (01:56:00) Was there a difference in the kind of services that took place, or religious observance that took place?

LS: It was the same.

ZS: It could be more leisurely. I remember Friday night we would do — what's the opening hymn that we'd do on Friday night?

LS: In the *Kabbalat Shabbat*?

ZS: Yeah.

LS: *Lecha Dodi*?

ZS: No. Steve Asher used to do it all the time. It was so beautiful. I remember at his funeral, at his shiva, we used to sing it. Anyway, it would be slow. The whole week would fall off our shoulders. Sometimes we would sing it as long as we wanted, over and over. It was quite beautiful. Also, sports. That's a part of the thing, too. Somebody would bring a football and we'd play touch football a lot, and volleyball. We'd play volleyball. We'd go for long nature walks. It was also the lack of structure. People could hang out, do things that you want. Make conversation. Go off and talk to people you hadn't talked to in awhile.

LS: Very much like camp. That was the kind of environment it felt like to me. It was very much like being at Ramah.

JG: Do you think that was a general perception? Many people came with Ramah backgrounds, and this was an opportunity to create that sort of —

LS: I would imagine that it was, but it wasn't conscious. It was a state of being that people were individually comfortable with, so they brought that state of being into this group simultaneously.

JG: In some of our conversations with people at Havurat Shalom, there was some conversation about consciously not re-creating some pieces of peoples' prior experiences that were rooted in camp, particularly Ramah. Like pounding on the table during *Birkat* — those kinds of camp experiences. Does that ring a bell at all?

LS: No, not at all. Does it ring a bell with you?

ZS: I didn't have a Ramah experience. I was a counselor once, but I can't speak to that. Of course, I had friends who went there. I think what those people mean is that they didn't want to give the impression that they were behaving like kids in camp. But there is that community, that communal feeling that isn't necessarily for children. Grown-ups can have it, too. Maybe the outward manifestation —

JG: They're talking about particular behaviors, not —

LS: I don't remember any discussion like that. I also don't remember a lot of table banging.

ZS: No. I remember we were doing *niggunim* sometimes, you know, sing. Also I remember Adina particularly, but a few others would dance. (01:59:00) At the table, right? We would do a lot of *zemirot*, and wine. [*laughs*]

LS: Yeah, we did drink a lot of wine, in the days before we knew what good was.

ZS: Yeah, Chablis Almaden.

LS: Almaden Chablis, in the big bottle.

ZS: Yeah, right. But we would drink it, and we would sing and sing and dance. It was really quite beautiful.

JG: Did you participate in Weiss's Farm retreats once they got going?

LS: Sure.

ZS: You mean, did we, you and me?

LS: Yeah, we went to Weiss's Farm.

ZS: I've never been to Weiss's Farm.

LS: Where did we go?

ZS: Weiss's Farm is a special thing. Mark Weiner used to go to that, and a few others.

LS: But we did go with people from other *havurot*. Where did we go?

ZS: I don't want to argue with you on camera, or at all. [*laughs*]

LS: I'm trying to remember the name of the camp.

ZS: Weiss's Farm, that's the point.

LS: Kutz Camp is what I have in my head.

JG: What's Kutz Camp?

LS: Kutz Camp is another retreat center where many *havurot* members gathered together a few times. Right?

JG: From the three *havurot*?

LS: Yeah. It was in Pennsylvania. Kutz Camp was in Pennsylvania. There were people from Philadelphia, people from Boston, and people from New York. But that was much later.

JG: I was going to say, that's —

LS: Yeah, I confused — you're right. We never did go to Weiss's Farm.

JG: You did start to tell us earlier about Beit Havurah, which was also a little bit later. Could you tell us what that was?

ZS: There were three *havurot*. There was one in Boston, Havurat Shalom, and us, the New York Havurah, and in Washington D.C., Fabrangen. There was an idea that we could have a common retreat center. We looked around. We met a few times, and we decided on a place in —

LS: Norfolk.

ZS: Norfolk, Connecticut. We called it Beit Havurah. It was going to be our retreat center. It was a serious thing. We all made investments in it. We became members of a corporation. It was a legal thing, drawn up. Then the neighbors — because what was this house? It was huge. It was a mansion that the family had decided to sell.

LS: It was a big, rambling Victorian, with lots and lots of bedrooms.

ZS: Lots of rooms, yes.

LS: It was on three floors.

ZS: The locals got angry because they thought we were going to maybe tear it down, develop it. Maybe break up the property, and everything like that. So, there was a town council meeting, and we had to hire lawyers. There was a claim it was anti-Semitic, and we even had an ADL lawyer come and defend us. My memory of it is kind of murky. We went there a few times, and we'd spend weekends there. This — for the record, I don't want to give misinformation, but it's something worth pursuing. You can talk (02:02:00) to — off camera, I can tell you the names of the people, or I can tell you now, if you want — some of the people who would know more about it.

JG: Yeah, go ahead.

ZS: Who would know? Steve Cohen.

LS: The other Steve Cohen.

ZS: Yeah, the sociologist. He would know. He was one of the active members of it. Jay Greenspan would know something about it, because he actually lived there for a year. He was like the —

LS: Caretaker?

ZS: Well, I'm trying to figure out a nicer word for it. He was the executive director.  
[laughs]

LS: He was a *shamus*.

ZS: You know who was also active in the Beit Havurah? Everett Fox.

LS: Yeah.

ZS: His marriage was up there. His wedding was up there even.

LS: Did you know that?

JG: I do, I just saw it.

ZS: Ask Cherie and Everett about Beit Havurah.

LS: Cherie will know a lot about it.

ZS: That's where their wedding was. We have pictures to prove it.

JG: Do you remember what year approximately Beit Havurah was started?

LS: It was before 1980.

ZG: Oh, yeah. '74, '75.

LS: My guess would be '76.

JG: It sounds like this is after the period of Weiss's Farm essentially.

ZG: Maybe, yeah. Maybe some of the Weiss's Farm people went to it, because they were missing it from Weiss's Farm, so they joined that thing.

JG: Weiss's Farm were the early meetings of the three *havurot*.

ZG: Yeah.

LS: Was Aliya involved in the Beit Havurah?

ZG: No.

LS: No? Okay.

ZG: The Moskowitz's were.

LS: Yeah, the Moskowitz's were.

JG: I wanted to move toward the question of *tefilah* within the *havurah*. How would you describe the attitude toward *tefilah*? What role did *tefilah* as a communal activity and area of focus play within the priorities of the *havurah*?

LS: I would divide it. I would say that there were three priorities. One was *tefilah*, one was community, and one was food. I think that they each got equal play, a third, a third, and a third.

ZG: [laughs]

LS: I really think so. I remember we moved to New Jersey, and Zev went more than I did to the Teaneck *havurah*. All they had was Shabbat services and a little food afterward. My feeling was they took themselves way too seriously, and they didn't eat well. Do you remember that?

ZS: Yeah, they were more of a minyan. That's like all these other different groups. Some people organize around a minyan now. Some people organize around the community aspect. One thing about the *havurah* was — I know you want to talk about *tefilah*, but — I (02:05:00) got this idea that I wanted to say earlier. In some ways, it was like a cauldron for a lot of other ideas and movements that came out of it. For example, the *Jewish Catalog* came out of the *havurah*, both in Boston and the New York *Havurah*. It was called the “Jewish Whole Earth Catalogue” at the beginning, and most of the writers were somehow affiliated. Richie's and Strassfeld's contacts were through the *havurah*.

JG: So, you were talking about the *Jewish Catalog*.

ZS: Yes, the *Jewish Catalog* is one thing that came out of it. Of course, *Ezrat Nashim* came out of it. Then there were false starts. There were two people, two guys at the beginning, who were gay. One was openly gay, but he didn't feel that he had to — in other words, other gay people didn't come in and he didn't form a kind of gay Judaism out of it. So, that was one thing that didn't work. Later on lesbianism came, but at that point we only had one member who was outwardly gay. That was something that was also

growing in the early seventies, as I'm pointing out, that did not happen in the *havurah*. So, it was a cauldron of some things that were coming in, but some things were not. The anti-war movement, of course, was a big deal. Our *tefilah* took the form of trying to incorporate those things. There was a lot of group activities like singing and chanting and things like that. We incorporated modes of worship — sitting on the floor, sitting in a circle.

LS: Like, today people have Carlebach minyans, which have a lot of singing in them. In the early days of the *havurah*, there was a conscious effort to put more singing and less shuckling, if you will, into *tefilah*. It worked. People really got into singing the prayers as opposed to just racing through them. Does that sound fair?

ZS: Yeah. Some people were really into *tefilah*, too. Richie Siegel used to do a great minyan. Noam — I think his name was Noam, do you remember? — Sachs. Noam Sachs.

LS: Yeah, Noam Sachs.

ZS: Noam Sachs, who made aliyah, did a great *tefilah*. Chash Bordowitz, who was an opera singer, did a great *tefilah*. Some people loved doing it.

LS: And there were women —

ZS: Arlene Agus.

LS: — who led services.

ZS: Leora Fishman, Arlene Agus. You know Leora, probably, from Boston. Singing was a big part of it, and singing well.

JG: What kinds of things were sung? For instance, Havurat Shalom was very into *niggunim*, and they could sing for hours. What kinds of (02:08:00) music was being sung here?

LS: *Niggunim*, but also melodies that had been composed for particular prayers that different people found and taught the group. I can't think of anything off the top of my head. A new melody for *Lecha Dodi*, for instance.

JG: New as in “new”?

LS: New to us.

JG: New to you. So someone had learned it somewhere.

LS: Right. There were many songs, if you will, that are embedded in the repetitions of the *Amidah* that people would bring to the group to teach them to sing. They would be incorporated as a regular part of the *tefilah* that way.

ZS: We also were not that strict about the rituals of *tefilah*. You could skip something you didn't want. We wouldn't say you're not *yotzei* if you don't do this or that in the service. Often it was somebody that was in charge of the service, so we would just do what that person did. That person would plan it, and that person was not being led necessarily by halachic considerations about what would be a kosher service that would make you *yotzei*. One time, one person took newspapers, and he felt that one way to really explore God's presence in the world is by reading the newspaper in a *tefilah* context. So he actually gave us all articles from the daily newspaper that we read out loud at certain points to kind of bring that into the thought on Shabbat — the thought of the distance, and how we're involved in the world, and how we're not involved in the world. I thought it was really good stuff.

JG: Did you ever experiment with chanting in English, using the *Musaf*, for instance.

ZS: Like Art Waskow used to do a lot.

JG: They did a lot of that at Havurat Shalom also.

ZS: Reb Zalman used to do that.

LS: I don't remember that, do you?

ZS: When we were doing it, it was doing it like Reb Zalman does it, but it was never — no, I don't remember that being done much. I liked when he did it and listening to him do it.

JG: Did Zalman come ever to the New York Havurah to *daven* with you?

ZS: No. We had some people who got *smicha* from him or were studying with him. We had other visitors though. We had some good visitors.

LS: Oh, we did.

ZS: One time, Shlomo Carlebach came. He just wanted to see what we were like.

JG: He came to an actual service, or to a meeting?

ZS: Yeah, I think Thursday night we walked in — it wasn't Shabbos; it was Thursday night, and we walked in, and there he was sitting there. He wanted to ask us about us and everything, and we talked. He told us a lot about the House of Love and Prayer. I think he was trying to find recruits.

JG: Would you say Reb Zalman was much of an influence on the New York Havurah?

LS: No.

ZS: Well — (02:11:00)

LS: You thought so? I don't think so.

ZS: Indirectly, Richie Siegel was a Zalman hasid. Lynn Gottlieb at least started to study with him, and there were others. Yes, I think his presence was an influence. Not directly, but his attitude bringing to bear into Judaism religious ideas from other contexts wouldn't have been looked down upon. There was one person, maybe it was Noam Sachs, who did a whole thing before the *Shema*, if you do it by yourself — *El Melech Ne'aman. El Melech Ne'aman*. He wanted to make that into a chant by repeating it over and over: *El Melech Ne'aman, El Melech Ne'aman, El Melech Ne'aman*. So, you could say that was in the air, Zalman stuff in the air, making *El Melech Ne'aman* into a mantra.

JG: Many people have pointed to this tension between tradition and innovation that was emblematic of what *tefilah* was like in many of the early havurot. For one thing —

ZS: The *dvar torah*. The *dvar torah*. Sometimes we had scholars who really knew, like David Sperling, for example. He's now a bible professor at HUC-JIR. So he would sometimes be kind of iconoclastic in a way you might not expect at a service, especially after here we were singing about the spirituality of God's presence everywhere, and then we'd have a very scientific, dry sermon pointing out that none of these things really happened, that this is a contradiction with this. But I loved it.

JG: David would give that kind of *d'var*?

LS: Yes.

ZS: David would, yes. Not always that cynical, but he would try to point out what's really going on with this. We had other scholars, though. We had Bob Goldenberg, another rabbi professor. He would explain Talmudic stuff that I had always thought boring, but he would present what the key issue was and how it expressed itself. In this way, we weren't innovative at all. We were very traditional, because we had some of the top scholars in the country.

LS: Yeah, but what they would talk about in the *dvar torah* was not what you'd find in your run of the mill Conservative synagogue. That's the difference.

ZS: That's what I mean, yeah.

JG: How would they talk differently?

LS: Well, they would question the historical reality of something. You didn't find that in a Conservative synagogue.

JG: Or the spiritual reality of it.

LS: It wasn't exactly *Torah Mi-Sinai* at a Conservative synagogue, but much closer than it was in a *havurah*.

JG: What about contemporary issues? Did those make their way into the *tefilah*, (02:14:00) either through the liturgy, or bringing in additional readings or music?

LS: Like what?

ZS: Music, yes. I adapted some —

JG: Like the war, anti-war stuff. Civil Rights — those kinds of issues.

ZS: Well, yeah. Music I took some popular songs and I would do certain prayers to those songs. And we practiced. Remember Arlene and Rim and I would practice those. We did *Shochen Ad* to, I think, a Dylan song. Stuff like that, if that's what you mean.

JG: It is.

ZS: There were some Civil Rights songs that I would sing.

JG: Such as?

ZS: Such as, "They Will Rule the People." [*sings*] "They will rule the people, they will rule the people."

JG: What is that?

ZS: It's a song that I remember from then — "They Will Rule the People. [*sings*] They will rule the people." I don't remember how it goes now. We did that, and we did "This Little Light of Mine." I think we just sang that. I don't even think we put any Hebrew words to it. "I'm gonna let it shine, this little light of mine. I'm gonna let it shine." You know. I knew a lot of the freedom songs, because I was in the movement.

JG: So, you would bring those into the service?

ZS: Yeah, and we'd sing it in the car going up to the retreat and back. It was part of the stuff, part of what went on.

JG: Did you sing "We Shall Overcome" or any songs that were that basic?

ZS: Yeah, a little more esoteric than that one. It sounds pretty corny, right? "We Shall Overcome." [*laughs.*]

LS: Like beating your swords into ploughshares.

ZS: Okay.

LS: Beating your swords into ploughshares. That kind of music.

ZS: Anyway, there were freedom songs that we would sing. Ask me another question, though. I'm getting a little off track of what the question was.

JG: The question had to do with the kinds of contemporary materials, whether it was poems or songs, or —

ZS: Poems, yes. What I would try to do for holidays is, I would try to find a lot of contemporary poems, and I would make a kind of reading or Haggadah. I would make copies and I would pass it around, and everybody would have maybe fifteen poems, and they would read them in a circle. They would all be somehow related to the service of the holiday. Sometimes, as a refrain, I would put in some of the prayers from that holiday

that were familiar. Everybody would read. They were English poems. Sometimes they would be translations, I did that a few times.

LS: Tell them about *Al Chet*.

ZS: Yeah, *Al Chet*. I wrote a poem where I took the *Al Chet* and I adapted it. I'm a poet, so I did it. That's one thing — there weren't really that many other poets in the *havurah*. There were some people who were involved in the arts, but if there is some area that I think we were not as active in as we could have been, it was the arts. There were more academic people, and more intellectuals in that sense, (02:17:00) than people in the creative arts, as we called it. There was one guy who would graduate Yale School of Drama, and he was interested in theatre for awhile, and he was in the *havurah*. I was interested in poetry. We had people who were literature students, like Alan Mintz, even though he's not a practicing poet. Now he's a good translator of poetry. We had — what other artists did we have? Alan Sugarman was a graphic artist, but not practicing at the time.

JG: Dance?

ZS: With dance, we had a dance therapist.

LS: For a while.

ZS: This was like her profession, dance therapy. We had a lot of people who liked Israeli Dance. *Al Chet* was one example of my taking from the liturgy, and we read it on Yom Kippur.

LS: He took *Al Chet* and reworded it to make it meaningful today. It was quite powerful. How many verses was it?

ZS: It goes on. I think it's the longest poem I've written. It goes on about five pages. It was used twice before. It was used in the Jewish Calendar [see addendum]. Michael Strassfeld excerpted it for the Jewish Calendar. It's a funny story. When he was excerpting it, he called me up about the rights, you know. So, I said, "How did you hear about this poem?" He said, "It was in the *machzor*." I said, "What *machzor*?" It turned out in the United Kingdom, they used the poem in their official *United Kingdom Reform Machzor*. I looked it up, and I wrote them a letter. I finally found out. I had published it in a magazine, *Response*, and they had gotten the rights from *Response*. It was just that *Response* didn't tell me. Steve Cohen was running it. I worked with *Response*, too, for

about five years. I was their literary editor. Anyway, so it had this great success, right?  
[laughs] Thanks for reminding me.

JG: Is it still used?

ZS: If they still use the Machzor there in the Reform congregations —

LS: Or just the poem itself.

ZS: Oh, yeah. People use it still.

JG: Do you have it? It would be wonderful for you to contribute that.

ZS: Yeah. I put a chapbook together. That's the title poem of it, and there are some other poems of that period.

JG: Do you have a —

ZS: I have a copy. I'll give it to you at the end of the thing, sure. It was a chapbook, you know? Like a little book of poems. I made a chapbook out of it.

JG: So, you were actively writing poems during this period?

ZS: Yes.

JG: Did many of them find their way into a service or some other —?

ZS: I would read them at the service sometimes when I did poetry for the group, though most of the time I would take other people's poems and make a little anthology that people would then read, or sometimes I would do a little lesson on a poem. Sometimes it was if two poems reminded me of some theme in the holiday. (02:20:00) I would take from my English training.

JG: Let's turn now to focus on the issue of gender and women's roles within the context of public worship. Art Green called this period at the very beginning of these *havurot* as a "pre-feminist moment." Feminism was beginning to make real changes and inroads in how people felt, but it was just the beginning. The first woman rabbi was ordained in 1972, so it was several years later. How would you describe the attitude toward women in communal worship at the beginning of the New York Havurah, or when you first started in 1970?

ZS: I think there was no difference. I remember from Ramah, I was always used to women praying, girls praying. We were always mixed. I was in Ramah when I'd already graduated high school, but I'd always seen that. Now, I had not seen women lead the service, but sort of integrated and participating, I had always seen it. So I did not find it surprising or something hard to get used to. It seemed natural.

JG: What was your perception at the very beginning, as a woman?

LS: It was very similar. There were women in the *havurah* who learned how to *leyn*.

JG: Learned when?

LS: I would say in the early seventies, there were some who learned.

ZS: Who?

LS: Arlene Agus was *leyning* in the beginning.

ZS: But she always knew. That's the point. No, I thought you meant from the feminist movement. Did they then go on to learn to *leyn*? That has happened —

LS: Well, I'm taking exception to what you're saying, because Arlene grew up in an Orthodox family —

ZS: But she could *leyn*.

LS: — and she learned to *leyn*, and that was a pre-feminist position, because women weren't *leyning* then.

JG: It was unusual.

LS: It was very unusual.

JG: Where did she learn?

LS: I don't know. I don't know if she was self-taught. I have no idea, but she did know how to *leyn*.

JG: Was there anybody else?

LS: Well, that's what I'm trying to think of. Did Lynn Gottlieb learn how to *leyn*? I think so.

JG: She had grown up in the Reform Movement.

LS: Right, right.

ZS: I think Martha knew how to *leyn*, but I'm not sure.

LS: I think maybe Martha knew how to *leyn*.

ZS: I think I remember her doing the *Megillah*.

LS: Yeah, I think you might be right.

ZS: I remember when Phyllis — but that was many years later, because our son was already born.

LS: Phyllis learned how to *leyn*.

ZS: The *Megillah*. I remember she did the *Megillah*.

JG: So, by in large, women were not *leyning* when you first —

LS: Right, because they didn't know.

JG: Because they didn't know. And that was one of the issues, that women had this huge gap in what they were exposed to —

LS: — in learning. Yeah, exactly.

JG: — as children and teenagers.

ZS: Yeah.

LS: Right, right.

JG: So, what roles do you remember women (02:23:00) having? Did they have public roles in the service? If they weren't *leyning*, what were they doing? Were they leading the service?

LS: In the beginning, not much. Not much. I remember thinking about how striking it was when a woman did lead the service, because a woman's voice was just so conducive to prayer. I mean, more so than many men, actually. That I remember thinking.

JG: Were any women wearing tallisim?

LS: No.

JG: *Kippah*?

LS: No, that's much later.

ZS: I remember the first *Kol Nidre* that we did, Aliya did *Kol Nidrei*.

LS: Yeah, Aliya Chekis-Cotel did *Kol Nidre*. I remember that, and that was pretty early.

ZS: Yeah, that you might check. You can ask her.

JG: Leslie, to what extent had you been involved in the women's movement and Second Wave Feminism as it was starting?

LS: Well, let me preface this by saying that had we gotten married six months later, I wouldn't have changed my name. When I got married, March 1970, women were not keeping their maiden names. Six months later, everybody was keeping their name. Then, Ezrat Nashim started. It grew out of the *havurah*, and I was a member of Ezrat Nashim.

JG: Can you talk about the beginnings of Ezrat Nashim? How did Ezrat Nashim emerge, and from where?

LS: I think it was Judith and Martha and Liz —

JG: Could you use last names also?

LS: Okay. Judith Plaskow, Martha Acklesberg, Liz Koltun. I think they were the initiators.

ZS: Paula Hyman.

LS: Paula.

ZS: They did a demonstration at the R.A. [Rabbinical Assembly] convention.

LS: No, that's way later. In the beginning, Ezrat Nashim was a consciousness-raising group. It was a group of women who needed to talk to each other about our roles in the world, and how we functioned.

JG: This was sort of a direct outgrowth of Second Wave Feminism?

LS: Yeah, absolutely. We were reading all the feminist literature at the time, devouring it. I was part of that group.

JG: In the very beginning (02:26:00), was it seen as an activity of the *havurah*? Or it was a group of friends who were in a consciousness-raising group.

LS: No. It was a subset of the *havurah*. Everybody who was in it was from the *havurah* in the very, very beginning, and then there were some other people, some other women who joined. The primary purpose in the beginning was consciousness-raising, which was going on all over the country in small groups. Then, it morphed into, what are we going to do about the Conservative Movement and their archaic attitudes toward women? We used to go to synagogues, two or three of us at a time, and talk to whoever would listen to us. Whether it was a sisterhood group or a congregational group, we would go around the Northeast primarily trying to convince them that women should participate equally in *tefilah*.

JG: When was this? When did the group first start meeting?

LS: I'm going to guess it started around '73 maybe?

JG: It wasn't earlier? '71. '72?

LS: It was '71? See, I don't remember. Then we started visiting synagogues, I'm going to say a year later, but I could be wrong about the dates. And then they went to the R.A. Convention.

JG: At what point did the group name itself Ezrat Nashim?

LS: I don't know.

ZS: Pretty early on, because I remember it was a very clever name, and I remember I think Judith or Martha explaining the name, why they took that name.

JG: Can you say what you remember about that?

ZS: Well, Ezrat Nashim is the section for women in the synagogue, but it also means "women's territory," Ezrat Nashim. So, it's like a good double meaning. It's like sticking it to them, like, this is women's territory? Okay, here's what our territory looks like. It was a very clever name.

LS: Very clever.

JG: So, you went around speaking to other groups and starting to talk about a different role for women.

LS: Right.

JG: And what kind of reception would you get?

LS: Some places neutral, some places positive. Not too much negative stuff that I remember. I remember a lot of curiosity — that this was a weird phenomenon that was occurring and they had a lot of questions to ask us.

JG: In the very early period after the founding of Ezrat Nashim in 1971, (02:29:00) or early 1972, there was also a conference, a Women's Conference that was going to meet in New York.

LS: Yes, and we all went.

JG: You all went? Were you instrumental in —

LS: Some people were. Some people were instrumental in creating that event. I was not a creator. I was an attender.

JG: What do you remember about it?

LS: I remember how pleasantly surprised I was that there were so many people there, that this was important enough to get all these people to gather. And there were Orthodox

women there, too, which also impressed me, not that much was going to happen. I remember Blu Greenberg was there, and the fact that her presence was very meaningful.

ZS: The next year they did the Men and Women's Conference.

JG: Exactly. Did you go to that one?

LS: Yeah.

ZS: Yes. I remember that very well. It was very good, and from that formed the men's group at the *havurah*. It was kind of a reaction — not reaction, but —

JG: Response.

ZS: Yeah, response. But we formed it there.

JG: Before we talk about that, I'm curious what kind of conversation the forming of Ezrat Nashim and this women's consciousness raising group had within the *havurah*. Did it elevate the conversation about women's roles, and did it become an active part of the discussion within the *havurah*, in meetings and elsewhere?

ZS: Interesting you say that, because there was one person, I think it was Lynn Gottlieb, pointing out that there was no discussion, no challenge of it. She took it as a sign that we just were laying down, the men were just laying down. In fact, we all sort of agreed to it. We said, "Yeah, what's the problem? Fine." But she wanted there to be a — I don't know any men in the *havurah* who had any objection. That's why it wasn't discussed in that sense. Now, in men's group, we talked about issues as men, but our response to feminism, everybody just thought it was a great idea.

JG: Would you say, as a man, that it had been in your consciousness before the beginnings of Ezrat Nashim?

ZS: Well, certain things, yes, like the equality in services, and equality in intellectual pursuits. If you're raised in an upper middle-class Jewish environment, you always have girls and boys are equal. Girls are usually smarter. But certainly you never think of that. I don't know any guys who have been in that situation. Now, when it comes to other things, like marriage dynamics, and who cleans up, and that kind of daily stuff, of course — and a lot of other male (02:32:00) traits — but as far as politically, and as far as intellectually, I know I didn't, and I don't think anybody else —

LS: Did what?

ZS: Felt any opposition.

LS: A lot of men at that time were starting to identify themselves as feminists, and maybe that's where this feeling came from. That it's no big deal, that these women are no different than we are.

JG: Some men have said that they weren't really focused on issues of women's roles and status until Ezrat Nashim and the beginnings of Jewish feminism — that it was, at best, in their peripheral vision, but it wasn't —

LS: It wasn't primary.

JG: Does that feel right to you?

ZS: It's hard to remember, because it's such a big issue. I know that intellectually — that is to say, not only mentally but — peripheral vision. I'm thinking of the old joke that the Civil Rights Movement and the peace movement were good because all the men had all the women doing the secretarial work. That was the complaint. I did not notice that in my Civil Rights activity. There were women who were equally active, and I remember walking with them, and that one of the women was one of the chairmen of one of the programs. But socially, take interrupting, things like that. These were things that men were not aware of. It's that kind of thing.

JG: Were women counted in the minyan at the New York Havurah when you were there, as far as you know?

LS: As far as I know, they were. I'm pretty sure they were from the very beginning.

ZS: I think Liz told us one time that there was a discussion at the very beginning, in the founding year, about it.

JG: Before —

ZS: — before our years.

LS: Before we joined.

ZS: This is hearsay evidence, but you can talk. I'm sure you're interviewing at least somebody from the actual first group, so they could tell you. But from our time, women counted, yes. This was not unprecedented. The Reconstructionists were doing it and the Reform were doing it. Some things were not at all radical.

JG: Well, they were radical. They were just being done in other communities.

ZS: Right, well they weren't unheard of.

JG: How did the men's group come to be, and what was its purpose?

ZS: From that conference. It was a great conference. Bella Abzug was there. I remember Martha made a great speech, because there was a question about — let's see if I remember it from years ago — a question about, is there a predisposition to certain activities? (02:35:00) So it might not be, is society prejudiced? But is there a predisposition to certain professions, certain activities, certain roles in life that women have against men? So, she compared it to when you drop those tennis balls down this, it's like a pyramid of nails, and you drop them randomly, but it does seem to follow a natural pattern. She said that may be what there is, but there should be no laws interfering with that kind of thing, and any ball that wants to bounce out of the way should be able to bounce out of the way. I thought it was a great analogy. She, of course, developed it much better. It sort of brought together a reality and an idealism, and a situation and solution very well. I remember also, we formed men's groups. That's how we did it — that was the program. We would be in little groups, and Steve Cohen — the late Steve Cohen who just passed away — he was in my group. That's where I met him. We talked about men's issues. I also talked with Richie Siegel —

JG: What do you mean by men's issues?

ZS: Talking about how we felt about being men and how we felt about our relationships with other men and other women. Did we feel that there was a sexist thing operating on it? Were we sexist when we were dealing with women? The question was power. Here's what came up in the discussion. If it's not for ethical reasons, aside from ethics, why should men give up their power? This is interesting because I was reading recently, they were talking about one of the miracles of civilization is the abolition of slavery. That's a good way of looking at it, right? Because there's always been slavery, so what ethical idealism got into humanity's minds in the late eighteenth, nineteenth century that they decided that slavery was immoral and should be illegal. It was that new consciousness that humanity got. It was a sort of similar issue with this, or maybe there's some analogy, right?

JG: Consciousness-raising.

ZS: Yeah. It's really a matter of consciousness-raising.

LS: Right. What's so interesting to me about this current dialogue —

JG: Current dialogue about what?

LS: About the men's group, is that the men in this group pledged themselves to silence. In other words, whatever was discussed in men's group never left men's group, on pain of death practically.

ZS: [*laughs*]

LS: So, here we are, forty-odd years later, and this is (02:38:00) the first time I ever heard that they talked about power.

JG: That was only in men's group meeting at the hotel.

LS: At the hotel, okay. But the point is that they never, ever talked about what went on in men's group. The women didn't exactly run through the streets with bullhorns, but they just weren't that concerned about it the way these guys were.

ZS: Oh, about being secretive? Yeah.

LS: About being secretive. It was so interesting, such a difference.

ZS: Well, because the women's movement was more of a political movement, whereas the men — we were really talking about our feelings about this, whereas the women really had to change society. We just had to talk about how we felt about it. So, I felt — I was one of the big defenders of it — that we be quiet about it. In fact, there were issues. While the men's group was on, there were strong periods and weak periods, like *Saturday Night Live*. [*laughs*] Some of it was good times. We held some hands of some divorced guys. We talked two guys into getting married, so we're two for two, or two for — I don't know. I think if there hadn't been that sense of secrecy, of quiet —

JG: Confidentiality.

LS: Confidentiality, yeah.

ZS: Confidentiality, I don't know if it would have worked. So there.

LS: And of course, we used to tease them about it.

ZS: Yes, and Bill Aron would always tease me. He said, "I tell Lisa everything." [*laughs*]

LS: Sometimes we didn't even know where they were meeting.

JG: What would you say were the key issues and concerns about this very early Jewish feminism, and what was the vision of change?

LS: So, one of the important visions was that women should be admitted to rabbinical school. The issue of egalitarian services was a moot point for us, because the *havurah* was already egalitarian, but in most of the synagogues in America, that wasn't the case. So, when we did go talk to people in Conservative synagogues, that's one of the things we talked about. How it was important for that change to take place.

JG: Did Sally Priesand's ordination in 1972 have any impact?

LS: It had, I would say, a minor impact, because it was in the Reform Movement. So, they didn't see themselves as halachic to begin with. The issues (02:41:00) were with this concept of halachic Judaism, and then how do you change Halachah, if you can.

JG: So, how did women envision these changes actually taking place?

LS: In the Rabbinical Assembly. That's where it had to take place. The Rabbinical Assembly had to decide that women could go to rabbinical school, and that women could be counted in a minyan.

JG: So, what was going to push that in that direction?

LS: Ezrat Nashim. [*laughs*]

ZS: [*laughs*]

LS: You have enough very vocal women who are academically and intellectually on the same level, and it's pretty hard to ignore that, to not pay attention to it.

JG: Zev, did you want to say something?

ZS: Just that one of the big things in men's response to feminism is whether they were married or not. Feminism, I think, had a bigger impact on the dating scene than it did on marriage life. Although it had an impact on marriage life, just not as much. I think that I'm the wrong male when you're asking about the impact of Ezrat Nashim's feminism.

LS: Why do you think it had more impact on the dating scene?

ZS: Because if you're dating, then I think your relationship with women is much more complicated. Once you're married, there's a certain amount of trust and love and everything else going on. Here there's a lot more cat and mouse stuff going on.

LS: I disagree. I disagree with him.

ZS: All right.

LS: I think that in the context of a marriage, when roles are spelled out based on tradition, and then somebody in that marriage wants to change the roles, that's harder to accomplish because that's already been established.

ZS: Yeah, change is always hard. Okay, okay. Wrong point, okay.

JG: Or children, anyway. Certainly that's where a lot of couples find themselves really up against trying to make decisions.

ZS: Right.

LS: About kids.

JG: About kids and who's going to take care of them.

LS: I have to tell you a very funny story. I had a friend in graduate school who had a daughter who was a month older than our son, and both mothers saw themselves as feminists. We had a boy, she had a girl. We wanted them to be gender neutral, these kids, in terms of their activities. So, she kept giving her daughter trucks, and I kept giving my son dolls, in the hopes that it would have an impact on their attitudes toward gender roles later on in their life.

JG: How did that work?

LS: Well —

JG: At the time, I mean.

LS: At the time, my son loved his dolls. He had one doll (02:44:00) that he called Baby Billy who was so lifelike that people would sort of have heart attacks when they saw him carrying Baby Billy by his foot down the street.

ZS: The other thing is, with our daughter we gave her carpenter stuff and everything like that, but then for her first birthday, my father got her a doll and a baby carriage.

LS: It was over.

ZS: Immediately she knew what to do with it. Immediately she took the doll in the carriage.

LS: It was over. It was over.

ZS: It was so funny. [*laughs*] Of course, if you give it to a son, a boy, he might also know what to do with it immediately. We didn't do a scientific test.

LS: Well, we gave our son a shopping cart.

ZS: Yeah.

LS: Now, boys didn't push shopping carts back then, only girls did. And he pushed his shopping cart.

ZS: Right. [*laughs*] He put all the guns in there.

LS: Right.

JG: To what extent, if at all, would you say that differences between the Conservative and Reform Movements, in regard to their interpretation regarding their relationship to halachah or practices regarding women's status and roles had an impact on the *havurah*? Did the fact that the Reform Movement had already made a lot of these changes have an impact?

LS: I don't think it had any impact. I don't think that most of us paid most attention to what went on in the Reform Movement. The only credence, if you will, that we gave to

the Reform Movement was based on the fact that some of our members went to Reform rabbinical schools. But even for those members, they were way more observant than the people they went to school with. The Reform Movement and the changes within the Reform Movement I don't think had much of an impact at all.

JG: Would you say the same in regard to the Reconstructionist Movement?

LS: Reconstructionists were different because they were like us. They were like cousins, sort of. So, I think we paid a little more attention to them. Would you agree with that? Some of our members felt comfortable enough that when the *havurah* finally saw its regular demise — in other words, no longer an apartment, no longer retreats and services all the time — many people joined the Reconstructionist Movement.

JG: When was that, just to place that in time?

LS: I'm going to say the early eighties. Does that make sense?

ZS: Right, but we can't place the year. It's someplace in the early eighties.

JG: Are there any instances that you remember that illustrate how change actually came about in the services? You've mentioned that already, which is women learning to *leyn*.

LS: Right.

JG: So, that was (02:47:00) one. Are there other things that you can think of?

ZS: Yeah. There's the naming of Sarah Nachama Meirowitz. Remember? Because it was on Shavuot, and there was a woman *leyning*, and I think it was a woman who did the naming. Well, Rim was a rabbi, so he must have done the naming. But Judy, I think, did equal — remember? Tell the story. There was something about it.

LS: The other thing that was significant was that traditionally you named a baby girl in a synagogue in a service. The counter to that was a bris, which was a big simchah. So, baby namings became big simchahs.

ZS: For girls.

LS: For girls, right, and they did not occur in synagogues.

JG: They were done on a specific date, eight days after the birth?

LS: Exactly. That was significant. Would you agree with that?

ZS: Yeah, but what was the significance of Sarah Nachama's — besides that it's a photograph by Bill Aron, who's quite famous — I think you have a woman *leyning* the Torah. I think Judy *leyned* the Torah for her own daughter's — because it was Shavuot. There was some significance to it.

LS: Maybe, maybe. I don't remember, but now that I'm thinking about it —

ZS: Telling moments, yeah.

LS: Ilana Ruskay was not named in shul either. She was named in their apartment.

ZS: Yeah, and a rabbi participated, her father.

LS: Her grandfather.

ZS: Her grandfather, yeah. Shira's father. I don't know if that's the traditional —

LS: That was the big difference. I think maybe the *havurot* were the first ones to start naming baby girls outside of synagogues, and that has caught on. Almost everybody does that now.

JG: That was the period when Simchat Bat ceremonies were handed around.

LS: Right, right.

ZS: That's right. We have —

LS: When our daughter was named, I got multiple copies from different people, and we just took them all and made our own.

JG: Do you remember when women started wearing tallit, or *kipot*?

LS: I don't know why I think this, and I could be dead wrong, but I have a feeling that started at Schechter. I don't know if I'm right. Maybe that's just when I became aware of it, that girls who went to Schechter and had bat mitzvahs wore tallises. It seemed to me that that's where it came from, but I don't know if I'm right.

JG: Any other thoughts, Zev?

ZS: I'm trying to think of telling moments that really showed the difference. As far as women wearing *kippot*, (02:50:00) I don't think of any particular one time. Even now, though, I think it's optional. One thing was women wearing tallisim that looked like a women's garment instead of — and then the men picked up on that. There are men now who have very decorative tallisim too, and that's perhaps a sign of the time. You were looking for that kind of stuff, I guess?

JG: How about adult b'not mitzvah?

LS: I think that's much later.

JG: So this wasn't happening at all.

LS: No. Much, much later.

ZS: What, a bat mitzvah?

LS: Adult bat mitzvahs.

ZS: Oh, I see. I see what you mean now.

JG: Okay. So, I want to talk a little bit more about social activism, particularly how it led to Breira and Jewish activism in that sense. As we've noted, the Mobilization in Washington in November 1969, just before you joined the *havurah*, was an activity that many people from the *havurah* took part in together, going down together, and it was a real bonding activity for people who were involved in those first few months. Was anti-war activism and other kinds of general social movement activism a part of the *havurah* in that early period when you got involved?

ZS: Yes.

LS: Well, it was, because the *havurah* was a sanctuary. Right?

ZS: Well, we're using sanctuary as a technical word now.

LS: Yeah, I know. Wasn't it?

ZS: I don't remember that. I know that it was legally a seminary so you could get a draft deferment, which they may have actually used for Burton Weiss, but which I don't know. That's the story that you'll check out in more detail — that it was, in fact, a sanctuary. I don't know.

JG: What do you mean by sanctuary?

LS: That if you were not going to participate in this war, even though you had been drafted, if you were part of the New York Havurah, you could avoid conviction.

ZS: But that's not sanctuary. That's draft deferment.

LS: Well —

ZS: No, Burton Weiss sought sanctuary at the seminary. He wanted the seminary to stand up against the war and on those grounds. Let's not talk about it, because we don't know the details.

LS: Yeah, we don't know.

ZS: I know that I did go, that we did go together, in a bus, or somehow.

LS: We drove down to Washington —

ZS: But we slept at Fabrangen on the floor one time. It was an anti-war thing and it was Art Waskow's. That's where we met Art. We slept on the floor there, and that was a *havurah* activity. I think we were in different cars. That was it, wasn't it? Okay, the big one, the Mobilization in '69 we went to.

LS: Right. (02:53:00)

ZS: But that was not with the *havurah*. That was with, I think the bus from Columbia went down there.

JG: A number of people did come down as the *havurah*.

ZS: Right.

LS: But we didn't.

ZS: Not that time. We did it later.

LS: And then we went down to Washington another time and slept in Art Waskow's apartment for a demonstration.

ZS: Yes, right. And one time we went just for Shabbat. He invited us down to the Fabrangen. That was years later. I mean, we were friends with him, so we went down there.

JG: So you continued to participate as the *havurah*.

LS: Yeah, but not in a big way.

ZS: What, the peace movement?

LS: Yeah, not in a big way. You know, there was a demonstration every other week in Manhattan, and we weren't running to every demonstration. That's what I mean by that, in a big way.

ZS: There was also, I remember with Breira, it would be a discussion on Israel. It was, like, okay guys, listen. We've got to really start facing facts about this. Some people in graduate school were studying this and debunking some of the propaganda that we had been raised with.

JG: Are you talking about Israel now?

ZS: I'm talking about Israel and Breira. I thought that's what you wanted to talk about.

JG: I just wanted to finish one last thing about the anti-war movement here. Some members created an organization called Jews for Peace. Were you aware of that?

ZS: I was aware of it, but I wasn't a member.

JG: So, there were some activities going on, but not everybody was involved.

LS: Right.

ZS: The very political — Gerry Serotta, John Ruskay. Peter Geffen a little less, I think, or maybe a little more. Any other people very involved in politics? Martha was a political scientist, but I don't think she participated in a lot of things.

LS: I don't think she participated. But the other thing that you could consider social action was the Soviet Jews.

JG: Was that an activity of the *havurah* that you would participate in?

LS: Yes.

ZS: Yeah. There was —

LS: People went to the Soviet Union.

ZS: Yeah, I was invited to go. I didn't go. People would sneak in. I did do, with Arlene Agus. She was a part of the *havurah* bigger world. I don't think she was officially a member. But she was working for Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, and we recorded the Pesach service all night long on tape, and then they were smuggled in. I used to tell my son that everyone in the Soviet Union is —

LS: Listening to your voice.

ZS: [*laughs*] They're making the same Hebrew mistakes I'm making. Also, one time we (02:56:00) demonstrated against the Bolshoi Ballet. Which I did with — not really *havurah* — it was the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry. But also with Arlene Agus and Debbie Ugoretz. I think she was working at the time. What we did was, we all had front row seats to the Bolshoi Ballet, and then in the middle of Act I, we stood up with a huge poster that said "Free Soviet Jewry."

LS: I wasn't there.

ZS: No. And then we were escorted out, not violently but very sternly.

LS: Hastily.

ZS: I had never seen the Bolshoi Ballet, certainly not in the first row. It is fantastic [*laughs*]. But it was worth it. Look what we did. We'd go to the UN and have a lot of demonstrations there for Soviet Jewry. I believed in it strongly. I don't remember it as a specific *havurah* activity.

LS: It wasn't, but there were many *havurah* members who were involved.

JS: So, as we discussed, you had both spent time in Israel, lived in Israel. You were part of the Machon. What was your take on the situation in the early seventies, before the 1973 war?

LS: The situation in Israel?

JG: The situation in Israel.

ZS: I still, I think, believed more in the Labor line then. I believed Israel was a lot more innocent. Then in some of the lectures and some of the readings I did, I started to realize that it was different and more complicated than that, much more complicated. This is when Breira was starting, and then there was the Yom Kippur War, and that set Breira back quite a bit.

JG: What's your recollection of how Breira was actually founded? How did it come to be?

ZS: I think it was John —

JG: John Ruskay.

ZS: — John Ruskay and Gerry Serotta. Sometimes on the Thursday nights they would talk about issues, about Israel, about the wars, about Palestinians, about the *matzav*, the situation. They would show different perspectives, and we started realizing that the idea of "*ain breira*," there is no choice — there really was a choice. There may have been a choice. There may have been a better choice, and there's a certain degree of misinformation that we're being given. I moved more to the left and more hostile to the — I mean, I was always against Likud, but then I started questioning even the Labor policies, (02:59:00) and I'm still on that side of challenging a lot of the government positions.

JG: Were you involved at all in this?

LS: No.

JG: Zev, were you involved in any activities related to Breira early on?

ZS: Yeah. One time I demonstrated and tried to disrupt a meeting, I think, of Likud, on behalf of Breira. They, like, pushed me out. I was trying to interfere with some conference I think at the Waldorf, and they pushed me out, and I'm holding up a sign.

There are times when, "Would you have gone to jail for that?" they asked me later. And I said, "Well, I guess I would have." But that was just aggressively demonstrating against it, because we wanted to challenge some of the things that the Likud — you know, these are the right wing — that they were saying. The times I've been to Israel since then I have not demonstrated or anything like that, but I make my positions pretty clear. I've written poems that are clearly on that side, of the left, of challenging things.

JG: Were you doing that then?

ZS: Yes. When I was with *Response*, I published some poems that were pretty challenging in Israel. One month after the Six Day War, I remember a pretty powerful one, which I did not put in my anthology, my collected works, but —

JG: What was the relationship? How would you describe the relationship between Breira and the New York Havurah, and other *havurot*?

ZS: We let Breira have its office, it's New York office, in our apartment.

JG: That was the office at that time.

ZS: It was the New York headquarters, yeah. I stuffed envelopes for them. I forgot that part. I'd go over sometime in the afternoon and I'd stuff envelopes. They hired this guy to run it, a red headed guy — a tall red headed guy with a beard, I remember. I don't remember his name, do you? He didn't have much of a Jewish background. He came more into it from the left. I think there was some feeling that he wasn't quite getting it, or he wasn't going to convince the people who he wanted to convince because he was coming in too much from the left. That's a whole thing to explore, you know? Our relationship to the political left, because there's been a — well, anyway, you want to ask about the early *havurah* days, so, I think I've answered all the ones I have to say about it, unless you have a more direct question.

JG: Breira only existed for about four years, because it disbanded in 1977.

ZS: Yeah, then it became pretty much Peace Now, I think. That's where a lot of the people went. I got active in Peace Now, and I did some coordination (03:02:00) for them and their visits to New York, some of the early leaders. I was the staff person who picked them up at the airport and brought them to the conference, and there was this conference, or lecture, I guess, at SAJ (Society for the Advancement of Judaism), and I ran the PR for it. So, I sent out envelopes and mailings and I did the press releases, and we got a good

attendance. I picked them up at the airport, and I staffed it, basically. I did that activity with it.

JG: Do you have any sense of, or, what is your sense of what led to the demise —?

ZS: Of Shalom Achshav?

JG: No, of Breira.

ZS: I can't — I don't know.

JG: So you weren't involved to that extent.

ZS: I was not involved to that extent.

JG: You weren't in the middle of it all.

ZS: Right. There may be *havurah* people who know, but I would not be able to give that answer. I know that the Yom Kippur War set us back, because then people could say, see, you can't trust the Arabs. How are you going to say there was a choice? There was no choice. That kind of thing. Every time there's a war it sets us back, because then also the left says, If we wouldn't have been like this, then there wouldn't have even been a need for the war. It's a very complicated issue. If I were in charge, I don't know what I'd do, but I do know that for myself, my voice had to be heard.

JG: So, we've just talked about two examples of organizations, important organizations in the Jewish community in the seventies that were related somewhat, somehow to the *havurah*, both Ezrat Nashim and Breira, which had close associations and tremendous overlap of people. But am I correct that they were not viewed as *havurah* activities? They were not *of* the *havurah* in that sense?

ZS: I would put it on the same level as the *Jewish Catalog*, in that there were a lot of activities, a lot of movements, a lot of product that came out of the *havurah* years. But the *havurah* would not say that they owned any of it or stood for it, right?

LS: Yeah, I think he's right. It engendered a lot of —

ZS: Engendered.

LS: — activities.

JG: How would you describe the role and relationship of *Response* magazine to the *havurah*? You were responsible for it, as you said, as the literary editor for three years?

ZS: Yeah, three or four years. But, it was *Commentary* for teens. [laughs] That's how we called it. It saw itself as the intellectual organ of the Havurah Movement.

JG: So, very related.

ZS: Very related.

LS: But not sponsored by.

ZS: Correct.

LS: You see, that's what I think is key.

ZS: Well, that's the engendered idea.

LS: Ezrat Nashim wasn't "sponsored by," Breira wasn't "sponsored by," *Response* wasn't "sponsored by." Nothing was "sponsored by."

JG: As a matter of fact (03:05:00) *Response* predated the *havurot* in terms of when they started, by a couple of years.

ZS: Yeah, but it really comes out of the same —

LS: Mentality.

JG: Sort of Jewish countercultural —

ZS: I don't want to say milieu, because that's every cliché in the book —

LS: Mentality.

ZS: Mentality, right. Okay, yeah.

JG: So, you were the literary editor.

ZS: Yeah.

JG: How did you see your role? What were you looking for?

ZS: I was looking for poets and writers who could show the beauty of Judaism and being a Jew with new metaphors. See, it's really easy to be a bad Jewish poet, because it's a language so rich in imagery and symbolism and narrative. So, you can be a bad one because you can copy theirs, right? Or you can copy in a clever way, and that's called midrash. But if you really want to be a poet, and make your own, figure out new images, new symbols in Judaism, that's what I thought the poet should do. So, I was pretty ambitious about this kind of thing. But I also wanted to give a voice to the Jewish counterculture in literature. Also, I wanted to celebrate Jewish literary scholarship, so in *Response* we published Everett Fox's "Genesis." We also published David Rosenberg's experimental poetic translations of the Psalms, "Blues for the Sky." We published some of his Isaiah. I also commissioned a few translators to translate the same psalm, so we could put them side by side as a kind of synoptic text, different ways of seeing the same psalm. So, I wanted it to be erudite as far as Hebrew knowledge is concerned. These people really have to be Hebrew translators to translate the Psalms well. I also wanted it to be open and very democratic. I would get a lot of stuff over the transom, you know, and I would read every poem. Short stories I would skim usually, but I read every poem. I would work with another editor who would joke with me all the time, but I would read it all sometimes two or three times. I tried to publish unknown people who had just got here, and then there were some famous poets who would submit things that I didn't like, and I rejected those. We also, at *Response*, we saw ourselves that--I was the literary editor, but all the editors had a portfolio. We were all in charge of all of it. In other words, we all voted on all of the articles. It was a lot of fun, because I got to read the other articles, and I saw how a lot of the deep questioning that we were doing was being done on this level. I'm trying to think of some great essays that we published, and I actually can't remember any. [laughs] I can't remember any.

JG: I was just intrigued when you said new images for Jewish expression.

ZS: Yeah, well I had this whole thing. I put a solicitation in *Poets & Writers* magazine for (03:08:00) aspiring poets and writers, and I said, "*Response* is looking for Jewish poems that aren't about the Wailing Wall, the Friday night Sabbath, and grandmothers." Something like that. I listed about five or six clichés, because almost all of the poems were all having this stuff in them, and the idea of poetry is to refresh the language.

JG: And did you get many that were what you considered to be new images?

ZS: Yes, I thought so, and we published a lot of them. I can't think of the specific image, but a lot of times a poem would be working on a new level, seem to be showing something new about the Jewish life, the Jewish world. Marcia Falk was doing a lot of great work. I published her. So, there were people out there. We were trying to publish them. Marcia Falk tried to, like — you know Marcia Falk. She's done a lot of great stuff trying to find new imagery in Judaism on a feminist side, but the poetic energy is still there. She's focusing it on that, but that's what I was looking for. That kind of thing. Do it with other things.

JG: Okay, so I want to move into the concluding section here. I just want to spend a little bit of time reflecting upon the impact the *havurah* has had on your own lives, and/or the larger Jewish community. So, you said you've been members of the New York Havurah since its inception until today. What would you say have been the most significant ways that the *havurah* has evolved, changed, over time — the New York Havurah.

LS: Well, it's evolved into something that's less than it was, and part of that is because a lot of the energy left town. Academics have to go where they're hired. So, Bob Goldenberg goes to Wichita, Kansas for God knows how many years. Gershon Hundert goes to Montreal, and he never comes back.

ZS: Montreal is not the end of the earth. It's not Wichita. [*laughs*]

LS: Well, no, but it's not New York. It's not New York. So, a lot of energy was lost that way, and as people's lives got more complicated, personally and professionally, they didn't have the same kind of time they had to devote to the *havurah*.

JG: Some have said that the *havurah* was a young person's —

LS: Yeah.

ZS: Who said that?

JG: — institution in its earliest conceptions.

LS: Yeah. Now, in fact the *havurah* had tremendous influence, in that the word "*havurah*" is used all over the country to describe small groups of Jews getting together, whether (03:11:00) whether independent of a synagogue or in a synagogue. So, that makes it a very important phenomenon, I think, in the development of Jewish communal life. So, we don't have an apartment. We still get together the second day of Rosh Hashanah. Some people actually go to *tashlich*. Most of us just eat and catch up.

JG: Back as the *havurah* with the good food?

LS: Right, right.

JG: So, right now would you describe it mainly as a friendship group?

LS: Yeah, yeah.

JG: It's that community aspect of it that has endured over the years.

LS: That has endured. Exactly, exactly.

ZS: Fourth of July, we still have our barbeque here.

LS: We used to have New Year's Eve. Now we have a Fourth of July barbecue, which, if it's on Shabbos, turns into a Fifth of July barbecue.

JG: Have you been involved at all in *havurah* movement activities as they have developed in the eighties and beyond? The Havurah Institute, the Summer Institute, or those kinds of things?

LS: Not really.

ZS: Not really.

LS: No.

ZG: No.

JG: Any sense of why not?

LS: Your lives change when you move out of New York. That's what I think. And you have to make connections, particularly when you have children, so that they can have connections. So, it gets diluted. The ties get diluted. Now, the synagogue we belong to now is probably the closest thing to a *havurah* that you could have that's called a synagogue.

JG: So this is not the Teaneck Havurah.

LS: No. Teaneck Havurah disappeared a long time ago.

JG: That was something that you were involved in briefly.

LS: Briefly.

JG: What was that?

LS: It was a group that got together on Shabbos, and had services, and ate a little, and took themselves too seriously.

ZS: *[laughs]*

LS: We belong to a very small synagogue that has maybe fifty members — that rent space in the church, that doesn't want to have a building fund, doesn't want to have to worry about the roof and the electricity and the plumbing. So, the focus is all on communal activities and services. Usually, once every other month, there's a potluck Friday night dinner. Once a month, or every other month, there's a lunch and learn. So, it's the same kind of energy, communal energy.

JG: Still focused on the food?

LS: Yeah, but they don't focus right on the food, in my humble opinion. They end up with too much pasta.

ZS: *[laughs]* There's something else I would like to add about the Havurah Institute and why it didn't appeal to me, is because it seemed like just another institute. The thing about the *havurah*, one of the aspects of the *havurah* that was appealing, was its anarchy, it's non-formal aspect. (03:14:00) Once you make an institute, and it has a director, and an executive director, and it has this sort of leadership structure, it loses something. Now, a lot is also gained, and a lot of good ideas, and I'm not against it. Just, what I want to particularly participate in is something that is much less structured.

LS: Yeah.

ZS: In some ways I think this is, overall, a lot of this is a matter of disposition more than ideology or philosophy, when you get right down to it. I mean, at least from my way of thinking, I don't like, particularly, having somebody — I don't like the structure that much, and I feel more comfortable spiritually in a more loose environment.

LS: We also both, I think, share an aversion to talk-down Judaism.

ZS: Yeah, that's right — the talk-down stuff. That's really an important factor here.

JG: So, that's been an enduring sort of —

LS: Yeah, even though we both grew up in traditional Conservative synagogues.

JG: Or perhaps because you did.

LS: Or maybe because.

ZS: Take CAJE for example. That's the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education. That came somewhat out of the *havurah* movement, because Cherie and Everett were active there, and a lot of the people who they hired. They did try to capture some of that *havurah* idea, in that anybody who wanted to teach a course basically could. It was a wonderful system. Then, a few years before he died — and I'm not making a causal relationship, although I am — they got much more strict about who could make presentations. A lot of the weird stuff was lost, but a lot of the good stuff was also lost. I went to some stuff at CAJE that I walked out of, some third-rate pseudo-intellectual, but there was some stuff there that was so good, done by really good scholars.

LS: And the music that came out of CAJE.

ZS: Oh, right! The music was so much fun.

LS: The music.

ZS: You have all these — where are they going to go? These Jewish-American folk singers in the Shlomo Carlebach tradition, although often singing in English, in the Springsteen/Carlebach tradition. There were hundreds of them all around. Where were they going to go? They'd go to the CAJE Conference. It was great for that, too. We'd always come back with one or two CDs. But that might be a matter of disposition. I learned a lot from the weird places, some of whom were good, at CAJE, I'm thinking. I'm just sharing about disposition, I think. It's a matter of personality.

JG: One of the things that's striking to me in listening to you talk about your *havurah* — I mean, your synagogue today, your *havurah*-like synagogue today, is that the piece that seems to be not at all foregrounded in how you described it is political activism, social activism.

ZS: They do it.

LS: Well, there's a lot in our synagogue. There's a lot of *tikkun olam*. There's a lot of volunteering (03:17:00) stuff. There's a great emphasis on it.

ZS: And soup kitchens.

LS: They go feed people in soup kitchens. They sleep overnight in shelters. A couple of months ago, I donated an entire trunk full of clothing that will be distributed in the city.

ZS: Actor's Home.

LS: They go to the Actor's Home in —

ZS: The Actor's Home in Englewood.

LS: They do services —

ZS: For the Actor's Home, and in hospitals, Englewood Hospital.

LS: There's a lot. In this particular synagogue, there's a major emphasis on *tikkun olam*.

ZS: But you are right in picking up that we don't do it.

LS: We do a little.

ZS: We do a little, yeah.

LS: Every year, I get a list. I get a family, a poor family, and they list the ages of the parents and the ages of the kids, and what they want for Christmas. Then I go shopping, and I usually spend around three times more than what they recommend. Then you wrap everything in Christmas paper, and then it gets distributed family by family. It's a very good feeling.

JG: Zev, you mentioned that for you and Leslie, much of the *havurah* was what you felt a time in your life. Can you elaborate?

ZS: Well, we moved out of New York, and a lot of the issues that we had in our early years, we weren't having anymore. I think that's what I meant. We used to make jokes in the seventies about how there would be a *havurah* old age home.

LS: And then, one of our members died and was buried in a cemetery in New Jersey — our friend Phyllis's husband. And I immediately said, "I want to be buried next to Herman, and I want us all to be buried next to Herman." It's not going to happen, but until that point, if someone said, "Where do you want to be buried?" my response was "I don't care," or "I don't know." One of the two.

ZS: Surprise me.

LS: Well, his father said, "Surprise me."

ZS: [*laughs*]

LS: But once Herman was buried in the cemetery, and it's near a tree and it's just beautiful, it just felt like that's a very peaceful place to die.

JG: It also sounds like you're saying it feels like family, significant family.

LS: Yeah.

JG: You want to be with them —

LS: Forever.

JG: Linked with them for eternity.

LS: Right, right.

JG: Zev, over the course of your career you've worked in publishing, you've been a Jewish professional. You recently retired from thirty years as a teacher. You've been a psychologist (03:20:00) Would you say there are ways in which your *havurah* experience helped shape your vision for yourself in terms of your professional life in any way?

LS: That's a hard one.

ZS: It's a long one.

LS: For me, I think it was independent. I don't feel a connection. Maybe the only connection I feel is that because I have a practice in Teaneck, New Jersey, which has a very, very large Orthodox population, and I have Orthodox patients, I think I can be of value to them because even though I don't practice the way they practice, I know what they know. In some cases I know more. So when they share issues in their family life or religious life even, I know what they're talking about, so I can talk the same language. In that way, I'm sure that the *havurah* has influenced me.

JG: What about you, Zev?

ZS: Well, in publishing I don't think there was any spillover between my *havurah* experience and publishing. When I was trying to be a Jewish professional, I think there was. I think there was a lot of feeling that I had that it could be done a different way, it could be done a better way. It didn't have to be done this way, because I'd seen other models. I'd think out of the box. In teaching, I think my *havurah* experience was vital. A lot of ways of relating to kids in an inner-city high school, I think I brought with me an attitude toward authority, an attitude toward knowledge, and an attitude toward fellow human beings that I think I owe to my comfort with the left generally, but specifically the *havurah*. I found also I could work in group environments better, thanks to the way that we would carry on meetings in the *havurah*. I found even a discomfort in kind of formal things. Sometimes, once in awhile, I'll still find myself in a meeting where I move, I make a motion, these kinds of things. When we joined a formal synagogue, it's just not the way I see people thinking, and I think I owe that somewhat to the *havurah*. I sought different models, and I'm grateful. I think the *havurah* did make me a better teacher.

JG: Is there anything in the pedagogic model that the *havurah* worked with and experimented with about the relationship between teacher and learner that has made its (03:23:00) way into your relationships with your students?

ZS: I'd like to say yes, and I still look for it, but no, because I was teaching high school and teaching undergraduates, and I think in that kind of relationship, the learner has to be — unless, really spiritually, I can learn from the way my fifteen year old ties his shoes — [*laughs*] no, not that way, but a sense of equality of all human beings, and that I'm no real bigshot just because I'm the teacher. It makes me a lot less pompous, I think, the *havurah* experience.

LS: It's a leveling experience.

ZS: Leveling, and one's attitude towards authority. A teacher does have a lot of authority, but the attitude toward authority, how to handle authority, I think I became sensitive to.

There's a matter of disposition, of temperament, I think, and that's why I liked the *havurah*, because of my temperament, as far as that goes. It may not be causal, but I think the same kind of person who is pretty successful as an inner-city teacher is the kind of person who would join the *havurah*.

LS: That's fair.

JG: You still write poetry.

ZS: Yes. More than ever now. That's another thing. I found a *havurah* of poets. That's something that also came into my life. I'd been looking all my life, and about five years ago this online group — they'd been sending around poems every few weeks to each other, and then we talk about them online, and then we meet once a year and put together a little magazine. It has been such a great experience, along with committees and subcommittees, and I remember not only the *havurah* but what, in some ways, I wanted the *havurah* to be — that kind of thing where people were sharing. Of course, we're all focused on poetry and the *havurah* was focused on a lot more, different things. But the relationship I have to my fellow poets is something I brought from my *havurah* experience. I was looking for it in the *havurah*, but they weren't poets, so I didn't find it. But that kind of relationship —

JG: Exactly.

ZS: I'm very proud of it.

JG: How about for whom you write poetry? Does the *havurah* figure in any way into who you conceive of as your audience, or who you want to reach or touch with your poetry?

ZS: Yeah. A number of the people that I send my poems to first, before I even send them to my group, are *havurah* members.

LS: That's because those are the people he's known longest, the people he trusts the most.

JG: It's a friendship.

LS: Yeah, and that friendship group was the New York Havurah.

ZS: And they're not poets.

LS: You know, what's really telling for me is, we've lived in New Jersey now for thirty-six years. And yet, when there's an important life cycle event, that's who we go to, our New York friends.

JG: So finally, we're now just almost at the half-century mark (03:26:00) since the beginning of the first *havurah* in American Jewish life. What would you say have been the *havurah*'s most important contributions in terms of impact?

ZS: Hmm. Impact?

JG: Yeah.

LS: Changing the way that people think about Judaism.

JG: That's big.

LS: That organized Jewish expression isn't the only way to be Jewish, and I think it's had a profound effect on Jews throughout the country, Jews in synagogues throughout the country.

ZS: Yes, I think it is the Protestantization of the Jewish community.

JG: What do you mean by that?

ZS: We're Protestant.

LS: Oh, come on.

ZS: Look, Catholic is top-down. Protestants, it's a congregation. It's a group, and they relate to one another, and nobody can say that one person has it better than the other, and they're reading texts, and they develop their faith through the community. I think that Protestantism is what's seeping through into our way of looking at religion, and I think that's what the *havurah* stands for.

LS: Have you ever been to a mass?

ZS: [*laughs*] It's top-down. It's top-down.

LS: First of all, it's top-down, but besides that it's like a Jewish service. They just lifted it, nuts and bolts.

ZS: It's like a sacrifice.

LS: That too.

ZS: Well it's formal, but there's that informality. Think of New England where they're all sitting down and there's the minister. That minister, he had authority, but theologically he's no higher than the others. He's not like a priest, who is higher than the others. With a priest, you really perform miracles every week. That's a miracle. A minister can't do that. It's a big difference. The democratization of Judaism, I think it is a Protestant influence. I think I'm getting this from Kaplan, really. *[laughs]* I'm not inventing it.

LS: You could be right.

ZS: But it is a radical Americanization.

JG: I like that, radical Americanization.

ZS: Of Judaism, through Kaplan, but we've gone one step beyond.

LS: Or even look at Kol HaNeshama in Israel. That's another expression of the same feelings, basically. Slightly different than what we have here, but the mentality is similar — participation of women, looking at the community in a different way, stronger community feelings than there used to be.

JG: Any final words, Zev?

ZS: No. I'm happy about this. Thanks a lot for the chance to talk about it and remember some stuff from fifty years (03:29:00) ago.

LS: Did you ever see — it's on Netflix now — it's an Israel television program called *Srugim*.

JG: I haven't.

LS: You know what *srugim* are?

JG: Mhm.

LS: They're knit yarmulkes. So, this is about a young Orthodox community in Jerusalem, and how young Orthodox Jews try to negotiate the dating world while still being Orthodox. It's very interesting. One of the things that really struck me is that when these young people meet each other for the first time, one of the first things out of their mouths is, What synagogue do you belong to? Which, my translation is, What's your community?

ZS: Yeah.

LS: Who are you connected to? And by knowing who you're connected to, I know whether I'm going to be comfortable with you. Anyway, I've seen only a couple of episodes, but there are four seasons of it if you get a chance to watch it.

JG: That sounds great. I want to thank you both very much. It's been really wonderful to talk to you today. Thank you so much for taking the time and sharing your memories and your reflections.

ZS: Thank you.

LS: You're welcome.

## **Addendum**

Pg. 3: Yiddish for holier than thou know-it-alls.

Pg. 6: Used as affectionate Hebrew word referring to the masses of the Jewish people.

Pg. 6: Hebrew for socialist pioneers.

Pg. 59: This was a series of books developed by Richard Siegel and Michael Strassfeld, a spiral-bound Jewish calendar for the year.