

Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project

ROB AGUS

Interviewed by Jayne K. Guberman

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

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

Jayne Guberman (JG): My name is Jayne Guberman, and today is Wednesday, December 14, 2016. I'm here with Rob Agus at his home in Chevy Chase, Maryland, and we're going to record an interview for the Jewish Counterculture Oral History project. Rob, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Robert Agus (RA): Yes, you do.

JG: As you know, today we're going to explore your experiences during the late sixties and early seventies, and in particular your experiences and involvement in Fabrangen, and the impact that the *havurah* has had both on your life and on the larger Jewish community.

I'd like to start by talking about your personal and family background and to flesh out a little bit who you were at the time you got involved in Fabrangen. So let's begin with your family, when you were growing up. You were born in 1945 in Dayton, Ohio.

RA: Correct.

JG: Can you tell me, briefly, about your family when you were growing up? Tell me about your mother and father, who they were.

RA: My father was a rabbi (00:01:00) in Dayton, Ohio. And originally, he was rabbi to three congregations, two of them were Orthodox and one Conservative.

JG: Out there?

RA: Out there. He helped move them forward in their thinking and getting together.

JG: What do you mean thinking? Thinking about what?

RA: Well, at the beginning of his being there, it was one hundred percent Orthodox, and the differences were between Galiciana and Litvashe and Russian. And they all had different ways, and he used to alternate in terms of going to the different places. And not only did it have to be in Yiddish, but there were different tones in Yiddish and different ways of expressing yourself. So he had to get it exactly right, because that's what people want. And he saw an opportunity to create a new (00:02:00) synagogue. So eventually he brought all three together and they formed one synagogue, called Beth Abraham United.

JG: Sounds like quite an accomplishment.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: Well, of course he spoke Yiddish from early days — he was from Poland and went to yeshiva in Bialystock, where he had eating nights at people's homes, the old-fashioned way. His family itself was extremely observant and knowledgeable. And he himself was committed to Jewish learning from a young child. And they continued — then they moved from — Shishlevitch was the name of the town — and moved from Shishlevitch to — and spent a lot of time in Bialystock. So we always had Bialystock bagels, so we remember our heritage, which has gone out of business — you know, bialys. Once they started calling them bialys, that's when it got destroyed. Bialystock is a bagel. Anyway, so the family moved to the United States, but first they moved to Palestine. And they like to tell the story of how, when they got off the ship, they fell to the ground and kissed the earth, the Holy Land.

JG: When are you talking about?

RA: The mid-twenties — 1925. They couldn't get enough visas for the family. Only my *zayde* got his, and he came over. (00:04:00) The others moved into the area around Tel Aviv. And essentially studied at yeshivas — the same yeshiva had a branch.

JG: Why did they go at that point?

RA: Because it had become very difficult to live in that part of Poland by that time, basically. And it was a chance also to be in *kodesh*, to be in the holy place. They were Mizrahi type people. So anyway, my grandfather moved to New York. He came on a passport suggesting that he was a rabbi.

JG: Why did he leave Israel — Palestine — at that time?

RA: Well, the goal was to come to America, after they'd been there a little while [see addendum]. And they realized they were not (00:05:00) people for the earth in the sense of being farmers. It wasn't for them. But it was difficult. You couldn't get a visa right away. You had to meet various conditions. So when conditions were met, they were able to come, move to Brooklyn. And he had a shul that he was the rabbi of for a little while.

JG: What decade are we talking about now?

RA: The late twenties. They came in '27, the family came, which is when, of course, Babe Ruth hit sixty home runs. But my father living there had no idea. Later in life, he would always challenge the members of the congregation to see if they could get something he couldn't answer, and it was always in baseball. [*laughs*] I'm jumping ahead

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

a number of years. (00:06:00) We used to prepare him for this event as much as possible. He did pretty well.

JG: He learned a lot, I'm sure.

RA: And the families of the congregation members were ecstatic — you know, the rabbi knew so much. But he knew about everything, so it was not so unusual to us. The family consisted of four boys, three [see addendum].

JG: Your family you're now talking about —

RA: No, their family. Each did a different thing. You may know about Irving Agus. He was a scholar. To me, the most interesting thing is he was working with the Fischel Institute, Harry Fischel, to see if they could come up with a code of laws that was both acceptable to secular thinking people and to Jewish heritage. (00:07:00) So that's something that he tried to do. And eventually he came to America and stayed here.

JG: So very progressive for someone with his background.

RA: Well, he was hoping to maintain Orthodoxy, and this was a way to try to do that. Anyway, the family was very close, and they lived in Borough Park. It wasn't the Borough Park of today. It was the Borough Park of then, which was still very Orthodox, but not everybody. And different degrees. It wasn't a hasidic place it was a *Litvishe*. We'll do more about him in the course — my life was very much focused on —

JG: So when did he go to Dayton, Ohio?

RA: Dayton, Ohio, he went in 1940. (00:08:00) He had spent a few years in Chicago. He graduated Yeshiva [University], and his first position was in Norfolk, Virginia, which was a strange place to be. He was not married at the time and had never, of course, cooked or anything like that. But he was there for a few years. It was a regular synagogue, and he was the rabbi.

JG: And he was married by then?

RA: No, he wasn't married yet. He decided to pursue a Ph.D. in History and Philosophy of Religion at Harvard. His teachers were Harry Wolfson, I don't know if you know, and William Hawking, quite a guy. His learning, going back to the yeshiva and so forth as it comes together, was in Bialystock, as I mentioned. (00:09:00) The teachers who were most important to him were — the Soloveichik family lived there and came over before

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

his family did, so when he got to the yeshiva here, his teacher was Moshe Soloveichik. And he received his — [*gestures to his father's certificate of smicha*]

JG: What are you pointing to?

RA: I'm pointing to the graduations — to speak, in Jewish learning, that he was a *rav*. That he was a serious one, he both a *yoreh yoreh*, that he really knew the law [see addendum]. But he became friends with Yosef Soloveichik, and they used to get together. The two of them both studied Rambam, both from a religious perspective and (00:10:00) a philosophical perspective. And then he eventually met my mother. She came from a similar background.

JG: Grew up in Boston?

RA: In Boston. She was born in Boston — my father was obviously not born in Boston — but she was born in Boston. Her father was a *Litvishe* person of great standing in morality and learning. They met. She was a beautiful woman who was absolutely convinced she was not going to marry a rabbi. She was the belle of this community. She didn't want to be a rabbi's wife because it was a very difficult world for the rabbi in those days. Anyway she just didn't want it. So she met him at a party, and they started talking about what he was doing at the time. He was then learning about Hermann Cohen, (00:11:00) and she was fascinated by it, so they would go take rides on the streetcars, talking about Hermann Cohen. So that's pretty unusual.

JG: So that's how she got smitten.

RA: Smitten, yep. And he was smitten, too. So they married in 1940. At the time, then he went off, got his Ph.D. from Harvard. And he was very close with the Yeshiva University rabbi, and they picked a place for him to go, which was in Chicago, at an Orthodox synagogue in Chicago. He was there a few years, and she came and met him there, came back, they got married. (00:12:00) Their *mesader kidushin* was Yosef Soloveichik, which he didn't [normally] do — he was not that kind of rabbi — but this was somebody special. So they lived in Chicago for a few years. Life was a little difficult. The particular shul they had, they had a few members who were very tough to live with. So the opportunity came to build a new synagogue in Dayton, and that's where they went, and then to Baltimore in 1950.

JG: So let's get to Baltimore, because that's where you grew up, essentially. You were five when you came to Baltimore?

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: No — yes, I was five.

JG: And you have older siblings —

RA: I have an older brother, older sister, and a younger sister.

JG: What do you remember about Baltimore as a young child? It was a Southern city. Segregation officially lasted (00:13:00) there until 1954. Do you remember being aware of the segregation?

RA: Oh, yeah. Very aware. Many things about it were shocking to us.

JG: As children?

RA: As children.

JG: Can you give me a few examples?

RA: One I like to cite is, we wanted to go to a particular movie downtown. The big movies were downtown, the other ones were neighborhood ones. This was going to be our first time going to a fancy-schmancy movie theater. It was *Gone with the Wind*.

JG: How old were you, more or less?

RA: Eight, maybe. And we got down there, and our maid — everybody had a maid, of our stage [see addendum] — she agreed to go with us because our parents wouldn't let us go by ourselves.

JG: Who was your maid? Tell us about your maid. (00:14:00)

RA: Mabel. And she was a classic woman. She was born in North Carolina. There was a difference between — you were from North Carolina, one part, or the south part; they were all different. She was from North Carolina, a very religious woman. And she used to walk around the house singing, you know, gospel type music.

JG: African-American, you're saying? She was African-American.

RA: Yeah. And had a beautiful voice, and I think all of us liked hearing that she sang that, but nobody would admit it. But she was a very wonderful woman. So anyway, she said she'd be willing to take us there. We get there, and the people at the door said,

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

“Everybody can come in except for her.” And pointed a finger at Mabel. (00:15:00) Why can't she go? Because black people, colored people aren't allowed in. And we were all shocked. We knew her — we all knew her as a person, not as a black woman, but as a person. Anyway, so we thought about it, and we decided, we the kids, that if she couldn't go, we wouldn't go. It was a big deal, because we wanted to see that movie, *Gone with The Wind*.

JG: How did she respond when you children decided that?

RA: She was unhappy, because she wanted us to be happy. But we told her, We're not going to go without you. But that was the first time, and I remember a lot after Brown v. Board of Education.

JG: So the fifties.

RA: Yeah. Unlike other places — so the Supreme Court made its decision, let's say on a Monday. (00:16:00) By Wednesday, the schools were desegregated. It was right away. There was no resistance, formally. Informally, there were these [white] guys from the hills of West Virginia, who had family come up to Baltimore, and they chased her, chased black people — not her, but other [black] kids, back and forth. Back and forth, they chased the kids, back and forth, yelling, screaming.

JG: Back and forth where? In front of the school?

RA: In the yard of the school, yeah. Again, something unimaginable to us.

JG: Was there discussion about it in your home?

RA: Yeah. And my father explained, this is historically what happened, and so forth We don't treat people that way, but that's the way it is. So, yeah.

JG: What was it like (00:17:00) — can you describe the Jewish community a little bit, in Baltimore at the time?

RA: Well, the Jewish community — Baltimore had a strong Jewish community. The strongest part, at one point, had been Reform Jews actually. But that wasn't the case when I was there. There were several large Reform synagogues — temples, they called them. We didn't really know people that went there. It was a very selective community. We knew certain people. We didn't know other people. And there was also a shul called

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

[unintelligible], the Remnant of the Destruction, the people who came from the Holocaust.

JG: What was it called?

RA: Its real name, I don't — in fact, I didn't know anything about it, except it was these very odd-looking people who were very deeply engaged in what they were doing. They weren't interested in talking to us. (00:18:00) We weren't interested in talking to them, but for the rest of the community, there was a lot of back and forth.

JG: And your father's synagogue at that point was Conservative, is that correct?

RA: Yeah, it was a new synagogue, a new community. There was one large, officially Conservative congregation, Chizuk Amuno. The best things about Chizuk Amuno was when they announced what days things were closed because of a snowstorm or something like that, the radio guys would say Chica Mongago — it was nothing close to Chizuk Amuno. My father founded Beth El Congregation, it was called. He didn't found it, but when he got there, there were fifty families. And over the years it grew, and he was no longer the rabbi, there were 1,500 or 1,600 families. (00:19:00)

JG: That's substantial. So your family moved into a neighborhood where restrictive covenants had earlier prohibited Jews from living, correct?

RA: Yes.

JG: What do you remember about the character of your community, and the impact of such legal impediments and restrictions on Jewish life?

RA: Well, things moved quickly. And so by the time we were there, or at least that I was old enough to see who the neighbors were, it had become largely Jewish.

JG: What part of town did you live in?

RA: It was called Ashburton. I don't know if you saw — remember the movie *Liberty Heights*? That's the street we lived right off of.

JG: So Jews were in a complicated environment at this time in terms of their own acceptance in the broader community. (00:20:00) All these things were changing — restrictive covenants, et cetera, and they were, in your words, of mixed opinions regarding racial segregation.

RA: Well, there were some people whose whole family was from Baltimore, and in that sense, Baltimore is still kind of a Southern place. And then there were other people like us, from New York or here or there, who didn't imagine that you'd live in a place like that.

JG: Would you say that the growing awareness of the Holocaust and what had happened to East European Jewry affected Jewish attitudes towards the rights of people of — blacks and others during this time?

RA: I'd like to say that. I don't think that had anything to do with anything.

JG: Not quite, not yet. So as you were saying, your father was an Orthodox ordained rabbi, with some, in a sense, unorthodox ideas (00:21:00) about Halachah and Jewish practice, and he actually went on to serve both Orthodox and Conservative synagogues in his career. How would you describe the Jewish environment in your own home when you were growing up?

RA: Well, we certainly knew we were Jewish, very much. It was important to him and to my mother that we learn secular material as well, view ourselves as Americans. We did. We certainly saw ourselves that way. But at the same time, we were obviously Jewish. Those are the people we knew. We didn't know non-Jews. As kids, we didn't know them. The city itself, it wasn't a problem, and it wasn't a problem for us. It was what it was. And we actually liked it. You were safe everywhere, knew most of the people from the shul. (00:22:00) And the kind of Judaism that we learned was very intellectual as well as the normal practice of being a mensch. But people were menschen in different ways. There was one guy who owned a business that had smoked fish and we knew that when he had to visit — a couple times a year, he would invite my father to come down to the — and they would talk Torah. And my father would come back, my mother would grab the suit that he was wearing and throw it into the — it had a big smell! And to this day, I dream of those kinds of fish. There was one fish, it was called everywhere in the world except Baltimore at that time — I don't know why — called sable, which was a very strong, (00:23:00) but in Baltimore, in the Jewish part, it was called "revelation" — revelation fish, revelation. I thought that was so fantastic, and made in my mind the whole concept that, we're eating this fish, and we're becoming closer to God from this fish, and the herring, and the smoked — so things like that made you feel very happy. It was a happy life. In that sense, you would go to different bakeries for different types of bread. My son is following those habits. He's very oriented to different opportunities for tasting things. And we all did. My mother was a wonderful cook. But there was one night a week when Mabel, the maid, would cook some fried chicken. It was very good.

JG: (00:24:00) Did Mabel cook sort of Jewish dishes as well?

RA: No.

JG: So your mother cooked that. And Friday night, what was Friday night like in your home?

RA: Friday night — Friday night would begin Friday morning with the cleaning of the chicken. It also had a special smell. We used to come right out, heading to school, and the smell in each of the houses was chicken soup. At least it felt like it was everybody, it seemed that way. And it was a unifying force to know that you were going to have chicken that night, with the soup, and the kneidlach, everything, the kugel.

JG: What did you mean when you said that you grew up with a very intellectual Judaism as well?

RA: My father was exceptionally focused on the nature of God and human beings, and the ability for us to be (00:25:00) in a holy place in our lives, from little kids to big kids. And at the same time learning, later, philosophy, but earlier in economics, mathematics, was important. But most important was to recognize the presence of God in our lives. And the challenge we had to be, to take, to grow, to learn, to experience the world in a positive way, knowing that not everything is positive. There would occasionally be survivors who came to the house asking for money, and they always got money. There was this one guy who used to sell knives that you could cut meat with. And he would come on a regular basis, and on a regular basis my mother would buy another knife — (00:26:00) totally unnecessary. Or there was a time — my brother was older, and he had a car at one time — but to buy [sell] it, he was going to make a deal with this guy and the guy really needed the money [car, see addendum], so my brother dropped the price a little bit — oh raised the price a little bit — because he could see. So the person came to the house, and my father said, “So what did my son agree with?” And he said, he told him, “What do you think?” The guy said, “I can’t afford that much money for a car, but we really need a car.” And my father said, “Okay.” And he dropped the price further. My brother came home and my father said, “You have a chance to do a great mitzvah. I knew you’d want it.” (00:27:00) So that was that. There were no discussions. He was the rabbi for us as well as in the community.

JG: Your parents also hosted a variety of people, intellectuals and others, who came through? Do you have memories of those occasions, were you present as children?

RA: Yep, we all sat at the same table and learned from the people. We were encouraged to ask questions, and I remember particularly Mordechai Kaplan, who was a big guy — he was tall and athletic looking. And he would say something, and then I would say, I'd raise questions, and he'd say, "Well, that's the way it is in the world." And I said, "No, you'd have to change the world." [*laughs*] So, he enjoyed that. In later years, I met (00:28:00) him and he remembered those times.

JG: And you certainly do.

RA: Yes, they're all characters. It was when Rabbi Heschel — we had relationships with him, were interesting. He clearly came out of a tough life and was trying to sort out how he would make it in America, in the Jewish community, (00:29:00) because where he got hired was by the HUC, Hebrew Union College hired him. He wasn't at the seminary. He was later at the seminary, but — and he was from a hasidic background as well, but he also came from philosophical schools of thought as well, so he and my father had many things in common. Now for a number of years, the B'nai B'rith had adult education orientation, and the two of them were a team. They would go to various places — the B'nai B'rith had camps, and sometimes families would come, and the adults would come for lectures — and the two of them would give lectures and study things. One time I was getting bored — I sat through most of those things, and we're talking, ten years old, (00:30:00) maybe something like that. And I left from the room where they were, and it was kind of a dark night, and I decided I should go back, but I was lost. It was all dark. So I looked more and more — I was younger than that, actually five, six, seven, something like that. Anyway, so I was looking, looking, looking, lost, and then they realized that I wasn't there, and everybody went out — there were no lights or anything, so I started to scream, and eventually they decided to divide up, and he came by where I was, Heschel. And I don't remember, I don't know if you knew, he had this big hair. And so he was standing, and the light was coming from the moon. And I really started to scream now! And of course he felt terrible — the more he did to get close to me the more I — [*laughs*] He never forgot. Every time I saw him later on he did it. We had Fabrangen for a period of time, and I ran into him at one occasion, and he said, (00:31:00) "It's a good thing that you're raising questions about the war and things like that. I know your father" — my father was very anti-Vietnam war — and then he said, "But try to remember, the only thing that we have are words. What we have are words," and, "You should listen to your father. Try to get your cohort" — meaning Fabrangen people, Jewish opponents of the war — "even though you're doing a good deed and opposing the war, you have to be careful of the words you use, because that's what our power lies in." And as long as I'm talking about that, one time my father came home from a visit to New York, because he had been told that Heschel was very sick, so he got there to see him,

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

and they talked for a while, (00:32:00) and it was clear that Heschel was in bad shape. So he said he would like to see me before things got further.

JG: Heschel said that?

RA: But I didn't get to see him. I always wonder what he wanted to tell me. But I knew lots of those people came through, so to speak. And it was interesting.

JG: Yeah. What kind of Jewish education did you have when you were young?

RA: So I had a normal after-school Hebrew thing, very limited. And then I attended Baltimore Hebrew College.

JG: Did you go to any Jewish summer camps, for instance?

RA: I went to Camp Ramah for one year.

JG: Which one? Where?

RA: In the Poconos.

JG: How old were you at the time?

RA: Actually, I'd just finished high school, so I was in Mador. (00:33:00)

JG: Did it have any impact on you? Had you ever been in that kind of environment before?

RA: Well, as a family we used to take vacations. I was telling you before, there's our picture of the shul in Loon Lake, New York.

JG: The Adirondacks —

RA: The Adirondacks. And it was a wonderful — it *is* a wonderful and *was* a wonderful place. My father wrote a number of his books sitting on that porch.

JG: So you're saying you experienced Shabbat in that environment?

RA: Yes, in a traditional, very traditional background. We were the only non-Orthodox —

JG: You were the only what?

RA: We were the only non-Orthodox family, so to speak. But everybody took care of everybody. It was wonderful, and it is wonderful. It's still going on. (00:34:00)

JG: So what would you say were the most formative influences on your Jewish identity when you were growing up?

RA: Well, just being in the house was —

JG: Sounds like your father —

RA: My mother was a graduate of the Boston Hebrew Teachers College. She was number one, highest ranking. There were lots of men, not too many women. But she was the person. And my father, of course.

JG: And she went on to teach, is that right, in Jewish schools?

RA: Well she graduated and they got married, basically. So she was the principal of the schools in Chicago and in Dayton, and initially in Baltimore, too.

JG: So you went to high school at Baltimore City College, which was an all-male school, correct? (00:35:00)

RA: Yeah.

JG: And after there you went on to Johns Hopkins. Can you tell us just briefly about this general education and what impact these schools had on your developing interests?

RG: Well, with City College, it was an all-male school, as you said, and they had created a special program. Actually Johns Hopkins had created a special program for the higher ranking students, called the A Course, which meant the advanced (00:36:00) college preparatory school, something like that. Anyway, for example, we took Latin for four years, every day. That just is not done anymore. That's what used to be, you know. That's the kinds of — and we had teachers who taught mainly just in the A-course, and they were all characters. The Latin teacher, Ms. Schiff, was a German Jew, and she was an observant Reform Jew, so she would not be in shul on the first day of *yom tov*, but the second day, she was there. And she said, "That's correct. One day is correct. Two is false.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

And I will accordingly take that into mind when giving you a grade.” [*laughs*] But of course she didn’t really do that. (00:37:00)

JG: Was she the first Reform Jew that you —

RA: That I remember, yeah. There were more, but I don’t —

JG: As you say, an observant Reform Jew.

RA: She was serious. There was another guy — he was not Jewish — Mr. Chubb. But he had been informed about her about this one-day business, so he said to us in class — he was a big guy, very big guy, and he sat behind this desk, which was big like that [*gestures*]. And he said “So, I’m going to be walking through the Jewish neighborhood.” Everything in Baltimore was very divided, our block was ninety-nine percent Jewish — you know, the whole area was like that. He said, “If you’re not in synagogue and you’re not at home studying. Where will you be? In trouble!” And he would pick up his desk like that, and say, “In trouble!” So everybody was kind of a character in those days, it seems like it. Anyway. But they weren’t (00:38:00) — she was a bit of a scholar in her field — and some better than others. But Hopkins had a very small college. It’s a famous place but in those days people just in the college part, not in the medical school or something like that, it was a small school.

JG: You’re talking about the early sixties basically, right?

RA: Right. I graduated high school in ’62. And so we had — the same professor would be teaching graduate people at a very high level was your teacher at a regular level. So it was quite demanding, but it was exciting. Some of the people —

JG: What did you study?

RA: Well, I remember very much the key class was History one-two by a teacher (00:39:00) and he was great. Often when he was finished his lecture, we would rise and clap. And my heart would always beat more, because to have somebody with knowledge of all types, nothing was unknown, because that’s what my father was like. He knew everything. This guy was like that, and knew how to teach, as well. (00:40:00) It was just very, very exciting. The negative part was the teachers we had in, say, chemistry and physics and things like that, were Nobel Prize people, potentially or real. And here I didn’t show anything, because high school in those days was not so great. So anyway, it was a wonderful experience in its own way.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: So this was a period of tremendous social ferment among American youth and in American society.

RA: Yes.

JG: You graduated Hopkins in '65 —

RA: Yeah.

JG: The development of the counterculture happening and growing, opposition to the Vietnam War, activism on behalf of the Civil Rights movement, all of this is sort of bubbling around. And did you notice that? Were you involved in any of these social movements — or aware of them?

RA: (00:41:00) Well, I was certainly aware of them and some things more than others, but — I lived at home, so I didn't have the full experience. We graduated in that program. It was a three-year program, so a lot of work. But I was very much aware of what was happening and started off not being opposed to the war. In those days, you were — the educated people were supporters of presidents and things like that — it was the nice thing to do — but that changed during that period of time. And after Kennedy was assassinated, Lyndon Johnson — we were quite aware of the difference. I remember several times he came to campus to make a presentation in support of the war, in support of this, in support of that, because — Baltimore was the big place that was not Washington. And I remember shaking his hand. He had quite a grip.

JG: And he was a big guy.

RA: He was a big guy. (00:42:00) And we were beginning to become anti-war. By the end, I was part of all kinds of organizations to fight the war.

JG: Such as?

RA: Students against the war.

JG: And were there protests happening already?

RA: Yes. On campus there were. Not so much in town because the local political hacks were — were hacks. They weren't concerned about issues. They were concerned about the city and such. But it wasn't so great. It became a big deal. But the war and things like that were important, yeah.

JG: And were they being discussed within your family?

RA: Yes, yes.

JG: And what was the attitude within your family? (00:43:00)

RA: My father was a leader in the anti-war —

JG: Already. Wow. So after graduating from Hopkins, you went to Yale for law school. How did you decide on law school? What interested you about the law as a career direction?

RA: I wasn't thinking so much of career. I was thinking of learning. And my understanding of law at that point was Jewish law. (00:44:00) It dealt with life, goals, and we talked about before, God's place in our world. But the secular is affected by the religious. Plus, it was well known as the best law school, so I wanted to be at the best. I didn't think I'd get in, but I did. So very exciting.

JG: So when you arrived at Yale, were you already committed to the search for a process for social change?

RA: I was going to see how the law could be a force for change and address issues that were important.

JG: And what did you find?

RA: I found that the world was not just (00:45:00) only little Baltimore or the professors at Hopkins. It was all kinds of people. But I had this wonderful experience where the first day that we were there we were invited to a big dinner, a fancy schmancy dinner, but I couldn't eat anything —

JG: Because it wasn't kosher.

RA: — because it wasn't kosher. And there was no alternative. This is what it was. So I could have water, and, it sounds so pathetic, but I was actually so interested in the fellow people — everybody was fancier than the next, and more interested in this or that. This guy sitting next to me on one side was just first year Yale law like I was, and his father was next to him. And I noticed he had an accent, so I asked where he was from, and he says, "I'm from Poland."

JG: This is the father?

RA: The father was from Poland. He was a Polish count. That doesn't mean that he knows one, two, three. (00:46:00) *[laughs]* It means that he could be king.

JG: Nobility.

RA: Noble. And his son was no longer the count, but full of the same thing. It was just like me, because my father was from Poland —

JG: Different.

RA: — but we felt like we were the noble people as well. Our nobility was studying and learning and things like that. But we had things in common. So he became one of my best friends. And I wasn't eating the steak that they put in front of me, so I gave it to them. They ate it, and they gave me the dessert. I had two desserts, three desserts — baked Alaska, which I thought was the strangest thing. What do you mean, baked Alaska? (00:47:00) It was delicious!

JG: What was it?

RA: It's ice cream covered with meringue and chocolate sauce in addition — something to really dig your teeth into. Anyway, we became close friends, and I helped him through. He was not used to studying. He went to Princeton, but he didn't study the way you had to for law school. Law school was actually pretty easy.

JG: Why do you think?

RA: The idea of competition on an intellectual basis is so close to what we do — (00:48:00) what the kids did in our neighborhood. We all played basketball. We were terrible, but we were used to the banter going back and forth, some of it not to be repeated here. But other than that, it was fun. It was mainly not the physical. It was the academic. That's what we were used to, and that's what you needed in law school, at Yale Law School. That was the difference between Yale and other places — it was very intellectual.

JG: Who were some of the major influences on you and your thinking as they evolved over the course of your law school career?

RA: There were — there was a guy named Alexander Mordechai Bickel whose father was a Yiddishist, Shlomo Bickel. And Alex Beckel was considered to be a future Supreme Court justice — (00:49:00) didn't become; he got sick at the end of his life. But he was sort of on the conservative side, people would say. He really wasn't. He just believed very much in the practice of the law, looking for the truth in it. What will take this further along the path of good deeds and stuff like that, almost like a rabbi. I said that once, and he said, "Don't ever call me that!" But there was a wonderful moment once — when you prepare for Pesach, you bring all the chametz together. You do *bedeikas chametz*, you search for the chametz, that you've already hidden. And then you burn it when you get it. So I decided to do this in the courtyard of the law school, (00:50:00) which is this medieval looking structure. So he was walking by from one building to the next, and I walked over. He looked up at me, and I said, "Alex, it's time for *biur chametz*." And I took the chametz down and I was about to light it, and he took the matches from my hand and lit it and said the formula called the *biur chametz*.

JG: Wow.

RA: It was great. [*laughs*] And when I graduated, my parents came for the graduation, and we were walking up the steps to see the library, and Bickel and — he had two daughters — was coming down the steps. He had married a non-Jewish woman. And we're going up, and we stopped, and he said, "Oh, who's this?" And he said, "Oh, I've heard of you," because I'd told him about him [Rochelle's father]. He said he'd heard, but maybe he had, because he went to Harvard, which is full of Jewish people. Anyway, he introduced his daughters. Then he said to me, "Make sure you don't forget what you were raised to be." (00:51:00) Then he said, "And it was a mistake that I made." And he began to almost cry, because he was thinking, on the verge of tears, and my father said, "And I've heard of you, and you have honor and glory that you bring to this school. I wanted to ask you about —" And he asked him about a case. Bickel smiled. He was at home. So he was a fun person. And very different from him was a guy called Charles Reich — he wrote a book called *The Greening of America*, which was a bestseller, considered a big deal. And he was a liberal, very much a liberal. And Bickel was the conservative. So those were my two advisors. (00:52:00) And one of them was involved in what became Fabbrangon in that I wrote a thesis called "The New Community" —

JG: At Yale?

RA: Yes, in the law school — about how the whole idea was to bring values to the table, (00:53:00) make everything unified in terms of a common concept of what the world could be and isn't. And talked about many different fields. He was a genius.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: And who was your advisor for that?

RA: Charles Reich.

JG: That was Charles Reich.

RA: Were you already then grappling with the interaction between Torah and midrash very specifically in terms of its relationship to change, and visions for change?

RA: Yeah.

JG: Can you talk about that a little bit? What were you grappling with?

RA: Well on the one hand, the Halachah is theoretically straightforward. You just have to learn it, and the changes that will occur will be quite limited. Women were not yet given all the rights, responsibilities for example. But midrash is more free-flowing (00:54:00) and can lead you down the path of change that you wouldn't think you would do, that comes back into Halachah. At least I claimed that was the case. So I began to think about that. That was part of my new community.

JG: Part of your?

RA: New community concept. At first I was going to make it general, but then I thought I'd start with a Jewish neighborhood, a new Jewish neighborhood kind of thing. And then that evolved and evolved into Fabringen.

JG: So we're going to come to that any second. While you were at Yale, you also continued your involvement in Jewish life.

RA: Yeah, we had the Yale Kosher Kitchen. This is pretty funny. First we got to Yale, and we thought that there was a regular kosher kitchen, which would mean for every night. But that wasn't the case. They only mainly had during the week day, and nothing on Shabbos. They would all go back to their New York homes. There were all these Orthodox kids, and their parents had agreed they could go away to Yale, a million miles away — (00:55:00) it was only ninety, but it felt like a million miles away — and as long as they would come back for Shabbos, it'd be okay. But they had to come back for Shabbos. So the kitchen was open for Shabbos, but not for the week. No, the other way around. It wasn't open for Shabbos because they were all in New York, and they weren't interested in the — the Hillel rabbi was a Reform rabbi, but an unusual Reform rabbi.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: Dick Israel?

RA: Yeah. So, but he supported this approach, and he said he doesn't support having the kitchen be open on the weekend.

JG: He supported it *not* being open?

RA: Not being open. So I went to William Sloane Coffin, who is the chaplain for the university. He said, "So, Dick, I understand that —" (00:56:00) "Yes, I was kind of surprised to hear that, and I'd hate to have to go to the president with this." So we got the kitchen, and it became a focal point for community for Jewish people, but non-Jews too came. My friend, the Polish —

JG: Anybody could come?

RA: And it was wonderful. It was very observant. All the energy that used to go to the train going back for Shabbos was now into singing. One thing, my father was not a singer, so we didn't have — we had, my mother was a beautiful singer. But there, everyone was singing. We were in the basement level of the Yale Kosher Kitchen place. Dick and his family lived above, and we made a racket because of the singing, and he complained. And we said, "You don't really want to complain." Anyway, to his credit, he changed over the course of the time we were there.

JG: Did you develop a relationship with him?

RA: Yeah, (00:57:00) because we started a Shabbos morning service, and he came and helped us.

JG: What kind of service was that? How would you characterize it?

RA: Traditional.

JG: Traditional service. You said that the Yale Kosher Kitchen was not formally a *havurah*, but it had some characteristics of it.

RA: The question in that — sort of put it — it didn't say anything about anything that wasn't a normal way of considering prayer, but this was a community building structure. And people helped each other and became like family and were challenged by the place. Those who came from an Orthodox background were clearly challenged by thoughts of

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

whether women should participate, and if everyone participated what did it mean to be Jewish —

JG: So all these questions were on the table, essentially — (00:58:00) literally and figuratively.

RA: So to speak, yes.

JG: Yeah. So when you look back on that experience, does it feel to you like a first experience of *havurah* style Judaism?

RA: Yeah. I didn't know much about *havurah* Jews, although my cousin was involved in the Boston Havurah —

JG: Your cousin Janet.

RA: Yeah.

JG: Janet Wolfe was involved in Havurat Shalom, which was just starting also.

RA: Yes.

JG: So your kosher kitchen was founded when?

RA: Well, if you take my theory, it was in the late sixties.

JG: Late sixties. And Havurat Shalom was founded in '68.

RA: Right.

JG: Right, so it sounds like it may have even predated Havurat Shalom slightly.

RA: I don't know the formal — but I did go visit there and was very impressed by it. (00:59:00)

JG: You went to visit Havurat Shalom?

RA: I was very interested in the organizational structure. They had one person who was clearly equal above all other equals.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: Meaning Art.

RA: Art Green. He was clearly a figure of some importance. But on the other hand, the negative of someone dominating in a certain sense. Not intentionally — it was just the structure they had come up with at that particular time. I'm sure things changed over the course of time.

JG: They certainly did, and he was only there for a certain number of years as well. You were also exposed to non-Jews, and non-Jewish religion, to an extent, when you were at Yale.

RA: Yes, my Polish count friend was very Catholic and he used to (01:00:00) talk about it. He would come to the kosher kitchen, and I would go there. And I remember one particular time they had outdoor *davening* on Easter.

JG: I'm confused. Who had outdoor *davening*?

RA: The Catholic. The Catholics.

JG: They had an outdoor service.

RA: They had like a *havurah*. They had a group of people who took their stuff more seriously than the rest, and certainly the priest and all that. They had this — they didn't call it formally a mass, but it was an exciting thing, because when the sun rises, it's Jesus and all that stuff. And there's a great deal of history where Polish Jews were in trouble because of Easter and there was usually a battle, physical. (01:01:00) So I woke up, so to speak, from a dream, and there they were. But it was beautiful, with guitars, where I saw the first time the use of guitars in a liturgical environment. And that was something I had in mind, so when I had a chance, I encouraged it.

JG: Later, this is later. What about Eastern religions, did you have any exposure to Eastern religions or practices during that time?

RA: Not too much. I heard some things that people said were great. They didn't seem like much to me. And of course, the translations were terrible, but necessary.

JG: Did you have any other experiences of going to non-Jewish services during this period?

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: I went to some of the other stuff they had on campus, but it was really the informal formal that was most attractive. (01:02:00)

JG: I wanted to get your reaction to something that Rabbi Ben-Zion Gold said. He was the director of Harvard Hillel during this same period, and he was talking about the role of religion on campus in the sixties. And he said that faith in what he was calling civic religion was really shattered during that decade — because of the Vietnam War, because of the Civil Rights Movement, the counterculture. But also the things that were happening in American society — several key assassinations of key people, Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King. But he said at the same time he found that this period was also witnessing a new pride in diversity (01:03:00) that celebrated different lifestyles and religions. So I'm curious how you respond to that and how that resonates in terms of your experience of the role of religion and religious life at Yale at this time.

RA: Well, it was interesting to me that things could change, felt at home with the environment. I was interested in what other religious people were thinking — that the limitations on formal religious things were evident, that it was questionable, and so forth. But at the same time, there were people from the South who had greater *niggunim* and concern (01:04:00) about making the world better. Yale went through a big process of change. The year after me there was a whole big to-do. But we had a group that was fighting the war. We had protest movements.

JG: And who's the "we," when you say "we had"?

RA: People who had come together, who had religious orientation and also the desire for change.

JG: Not necessarily only Jews.

RA: No. However, there was a time, the last year I was there maybe, and President Johnson had taken a Yale Law professor and made him one of the Assistant Secretaries of State. And I wrote him a letter.

JG: What was his name?

RA: His name was Rostow. (01:05:00) Eugene Victor Rostow. Eugene Victor, if you know American political history, sounds like Eugene Victor Debs, who was a pacifist, almost, and a person who dealt with problems in a real sense, sort of as a political thing. Anyway, Eugene Victor Rostow, or Dean Rostow as he was called, was very well-known because he was one of the first Jewish people to be Dean of the Law School. And then

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

they had nothing but Jewish people. But he went for two terms, and he was nominated to be Assistant Secretary or Secretary of the State Department. And it was clear it was just cover for the president. He wasn't interested in what Eugene (01:06:00) Victor Rostow had to say, or Whitman — his brother — Rostow. You could see the father was a bit socialist. So I wrote him a letter.

JG: Rostow?

RA: Rostow. Which was Erev Yom Kippur, and also *erev* him becoming this new position in the government. So I said, this was an opportunity to make teshuvah, for you and for the president, and change the orientation, and stop the stupid war, killing people and things like that. And I showed it to a friend of mine there, and he said it was great, and I said, "Aw." Anyways, I came back a couple hours later into this community room, and I saw up on the wall something everybody was looking at and signing, and I went over to see and it was my letter — but in handwriting, because I was a terrible typist. (01:07:00) And it became — everybody came by just to sign it — they heard about it. So a day or two later, the *New York Times* had an article about it on the front page: "Yale Law School Says 'Stop War.'" We didn't stop the war, but we did affect a lot of people. A lot of people remember that.

JG: Yeah, you found a vehicle and a voice for your position. So you graduated in '68. Is that right?

RA: Yeah.

JG: This was a period when activity was coming to a head on many campuses, and it was also a period when anxiety about the draft was rising exponentially. '69 was when the first lottery took place, December '69. (01:08:00) And that was the year — six months, a year after you had graduated from law school. What was your personal situation regarding the draft, and how did you feel about it?

RA: When I was seven years old, I had an accident and pushed some parts of my body in the wrong place. It wasn't recognized as what it was, and later I had an operation on my back to straighten the spine.

JG: So you weren't concerned.

RA: No way was I going to — *[laughs]*

JG: So that wasn't a personal concern.

RA: Well, the funny thing is about it, I did get the notice to appear before the draft board and to take the test. And they told you when you got there that if you didn't do (01:09:00) very well on the test, it would prove that you did this deliberately, and you'll be taken to Building D and sent immediately to Vietnam — which is a joke in some sense, but not much of a sense! And I knew, there was no way, no possible way, I was 4F, one hundred percent. But it's amazing how your body and your mind take hold of it. Anyway, I knew I was not going to — I just knew it. But they said, You go over here. So I go over there, nobody else is going there. It was the people who were going to be 4F. And the doctor closes the door, and he says, "Congratulations." Anyway, so I knew I wasn't going. But even then it was frightening. (01:10:00)

JG: For sure. I just wanted to ask you whether there were, outside of your school environments, whether there were people or events that you consider to be particularly formative influences on you during the sixties? You mentioned Heschel, but other figures or political leaders you feel made a particular impression on you.

RA: Well, as I mentioned, in the law school, it was the two professors, very different. Charles Reich's *The Greening of America* was a bestseller, and it —

JG: What about political figures? Were there any who made particular impressions on you? (01:11:00) Bobby Kennedy?

RA: I worked for McCarthy first, Senator McCarthy, and then when Bobby Kennedy announced, I changed my support to him, mainly because I thought he would win, whereas McCarthy was too full of himself. So I was glad that Bobby Kennedy entered into it. I knew some people who were involved in that, and I was on target to work for him for his election. But of course he was —

JG: Assassinated.

RA: Assassinated. And I was watching it —

JG: That was just as you were graduating.

RA: A year after I graduated. So that was a big shock (01:12:00) and a terrible thing. And I was watching him get ready to give his talk in Los Angeles. They had the cameras, important guy. And then all of a sudden, he's shot. You saw it on the TV, happening. It was quite something. But life goes on.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: Indeed. So let's turn now to focus on how you became involved as one of the founders of Fabrangen and your experience as a member. So in 1970, you headed to Washington, for a job.

RA: Yeah, I got a job — my first job out of law school was in Baltimore. A professor who became an activist in (01:13:00) the government — his job was head of what was called Housing and Community Development, and I was the special assistant. So this was a very quiet, little, nothing project. But we both came at it to change Baltimore, which was a sleepy, southern, white town. Not totally, but enough. And the political structure was pro-war, and black people didn't have much opportunity. And the housing was terrible for poor people. So we had a lot to do, and it was exciting. It wasn't exciting after work. There was nothing to do —

JG: In Baltimore.

RA: — in Baltimore. (01:14:00) It was not yet all that — people say Baltimore now, oh wow! It's true. But it wasn't true then. So we worked on a lot of things. One was kind of funny, funny but the law was in those days that if you complained about your housing, the landlord could kick you out. What kind of a democracy is that? So this guy I was working with, his name is Bob Embry.

JG: Embry?

RA: Embry. Bob Embry. Graduated from Harvard Law. And he said, "What are we going to do?" I said, "Might as well write a law prohibiting it." And he says, "Well, you might as well write it." So this was my first year out of law school, I write a piece of legislation. (01:15:00) called "Against Retaliatory Evictions." And the property owners of Baltimore, which had about twenty-one members — twenty of which were Jewish, and eighteen or twenty were from my shul, my father's shul, which, by chance, I didn't realize it. It just happened, and there they were. They were on the wrong side. So I went up to them and spoke to them, and they said, Well, we're not going to stand for this. To oppose something that I'm doing, but it's going to be defeated anyway, so I'm not worried. So we went to Mayor D'Alesandro — he's the brother of, what's her name, (01:16:00) the Speaker of the House.

JG: Pelosi.

RA: Pelosi. She's from Baltimore. Political family. She was the sister of the mayor of Baltimore. Anyway, we got together, and he yelled and screamed at me, I was going to ruin his whole career. I said, "Oh, it's going to make your career." Neither one was right.

He got re-elected and the law was passed. Now they couldn't do retaliatory evictions, but we still had crummy housing, so we created the Department of Housing and Community Development for the State of Maryland. So that created money flowing into building better housing in Baltimore. So far, a lot of accomplishment, but it was limited and there wasn't a large movement of support for this yet. (01:17:00) Actually, Bob Kowski who was just beginning — but then I got an offer to — ultimately end up in San Francisco, doing nationwide work on something called Model Cities. Model Cities was, I'm going to show you how the life in the cities could be good, better, and political things. And the president was then Nixon, and it was his legislation. So I thought maybe that could be good. Maybe he could be different than he was. I remember my maid, she said of him, "He's a mean man, a mean man." And I remember my father came out and said, "You know, she's right. He's a mean man." Anyway, sounded like something worth doing. (01:18:00) Turned out the position in San Francisco had to wait, and I had to start in Washington. So I took the position in Washington. What I did was go around to cities and teach them how to create these model cities. It was clear that they did not intend for it to be anything meaningful, just sort of wedding cake stuff. But we didn't have to do it that way. We created a whole program. But I wanted to be in a place where there were young people and Jewish people and so forth. And Washington didn't have a lot going on in the Jewish world, but it had a lot of people, a lot of intelligent people, a whole range of people. And so I had written this thing about new communities, and now I'd been talking about model cities, (01:19:00) although it wasn't real, it was still an idea. So I put them together, and I wanted to do a new community again, in reality, and start off with a Jewish core — just because it was easier to do that.

JG: So, you were living in D.C. at this point?

RA: Mhm.

JG: Had you been involved with, or were you aware of, Jews for Justice?

RA: Yes. Jews for Justice had already developed. But it was very disappointing to me, first of all, that people didn't have any idea about Jewish stuff. They were Jewish, but they didn't really know anything.

JG: They didn't know much Jewish learning, you're saying.

RA: No. And they didn't have — the *ahavas Yisrael*, the love of Israel, meaning the people, that I was accustomed to. (01:20:00) But they were full of — some were full of criticism.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: Of the Jewish community.

RA: Yeah, which I thought was misplaced. So anyway, I spent about a year with them. Also, they had no religious component.

JG: So how would you characterize what JJJ was involved in?

RA: It was mainly political. Doing the right things, sort of the — one of the people who was active in it, sort of the leader in it, I guess — so the community there had moved the Jewish Community Center there from the heart of the city to the suburbs — because it was not safe was one reason it was done, but also they wanted a new building, (01:21:00) everything. So, whatever, that wasn't something that interested me, but that's what they wanted to do, so they did. So this guy handed out flyers saying "Wake up, you're on the bus to Auschwitz." [laughs] It was just stupid, and offensive, horribly offensive.

JG: Why? Why was that his message?

RA: Because he didn't want them moving to the suburbs — the suburbs were all white. Instead of working with the local — what you should have done was work with the black community and the liberal community and stayed there. But they went — it was dumb, it was very offensive to somebody — we all had people who were killed, (01:22:00) and misuse of the — so, that's basically. And a few other people had the same problem.

JG: People with JJJ?

RA: Yeah. Or on the verge of JJJ. So I decided to take a shot. And a lot of different people who went through different changes in their life — Arthur Waskow was certainly such a person. We became close, very close. But this was an example actually — he did a modern seder, to use the term. The kids called it the Freedom Seder, which people thought was great in certain ways. And at first I thought it was wonderful.

JG: This was '69, '70.

RA: Yeah. But then I read it more carefully, and it was, I thought, not what could be done.

JG: The Freedom Haggadah that he wrote that became used for the Freedom Seder?

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: Yeah. (01:23:00) It had a lot of wonderful things, but some offensive things. And I pointed them out to him, and he wanted to learn. And he and I did something called the Shalom Seder.

JG: What were the kinds of things that you found offensive?

RA: Some people were called “judge” — the characters who were involved, both in the anti-war, and more particularly in black and white relations, were all figures — were perfect. And the really bad, horrible people were the ones who weren’t. People aren’t —

JG: They’re caricatures.

RA: Caricatures, with touches of meanness, you know.

JG: You didn’t feel were accurate, it sounds like, either.

RA: (01:24:00) No, nobody’s like that. Nor was it accurate either. It mixed reality.

JG: What happened differently when you created the Freedom Seders? What were the Freedom Seders?

RA: What were the Freedom Seders?

JG: What were they — was it Haggadot, basically?

RA: Oh, the Freedom Seder itself was a reality. They held it.

JG: Right. The first one being, I think, on the anniversary of Martin Luther King’s assassination.

RA: So there’s a lot to be good about it. But not enough real *yiddiskeit*. So, you know, he changed. And other people came from different, other places. And we wanted to try out this Jewish community business. And we went to the local UJA and said, (01:25:00) We need some money to do this. And no question, largely, because of my father’s presence, they took it seriously, and they gave us \$15,000 for the first six months.

JG: Who were some of the other people who were involved in this early stage?

RA: David Shneyer, very much so. One of the good things he did — he did a lot of things, but one is he brought Shlomo Carlebach to the table. Shlomo I had met in Yale.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

He was brought down by the Hillel to do something around Lag B'Omer. And by the time he got there — he was supposed to get there at a certain time, he got there a few hours later, and it was raining, it was cold, it was miserable — and he started (01:26:00) with ten people, maybe. But he did it in the courtyard of the residential part of Yale. And he encouraged people to come down, lights came on, windows opened up, people flowed down, Jewish, non-Jewish. And he just kept it up until the sun came down the next day.

JG: Wow. Vintage Carlebach.

RA: Yeah, vintage. And so he agreed to come four times to Fabrangen in a couple month period to help us get started. And David put together a band — the Fabrangen Fiddlers it was called. And there were other people. Arthur was a big part.

JG: Arthur Waskow — Paul Rutkay.

JG: That's Paul right there [*points to poster*]. (01:27:00)

RA: He did that. It was used as an advertisement to get people to come to Fabrangen, and it has all the events that took place there.

JG: It's a poster.

RA: A poster. What do they call that, a type of —

JG: A lithograph?

RA: Something like that. He was an interesting guy. He is an interesting guy. He did work in the space area, but also in the Pentagon.

JG: Who are we talking about?

RA: Paul. And then he got involved in Fabrangen, and his whole life changed. This was his effort to help move people to see that art and culture were part of the religious experience. The sad thing is, he married a young lady a few years after this, (01:28:00) and she had many children. They became very Orthodox, and she was sick, and the doctor said, "You cannot have any more children." She said, "I'll do what the rabbi says I should do." The rebbe says. He said, "You have to have — whatever God does is going to be for good." She had another child, and she died. Anyway, he — went into art stuff, did that.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: So you were involved in writing the concept paper. That's what you were starting to describe before.

RA: I wrote it.

JG: Can you flesh out a little bit what your thinking was, what you were trying to express (01:29:00) in the concept paper?

RA: I was trying to get people to think of religion, of Judaism, as a total way of life, not just a prayer here or there, but a whole cultural experience. And from a religious point of view, the midrashic core of Judaism is as important as the halachic external, and that we move in both directions. And so that people set up a class, a series of classes. And for the first time people were really, as adults, approaching Jewish life, and took it very seriously.

JG: You're talking about once Fabrangen —

RA: Right —

JG: So, this paper was circulated in the community (01:30:00) and to UJA?

RA: Yeah. And the UJA took a real shot in the dark. They knew Agus, but they didn't know me.

JG: So what did they decide to do?

RA: They gave us \$15,000, and that was for six months, with the clear understanding that we could get more. And then we needed a building, so it's on Florida Avenue, 2158 Florida.

JG: It's on the poster.

RA: Yep, it's on the poster. And that building was used by Roman Catholic sisters. That's where they had lived for a while, for their mission. It was right in the heart of Dupont Circle, which was the center of creative and cultural life. And they were so happy (01:31:00) to be doing this; they thought it was thrilling that we were making use of this facility. It was a perfect facility for us. But there were people who opposed Fabrangen once they found out what it was.

JG: Can you go back just for a minute and talk about the name, the choice of the name.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: Yeah.

JG: Fabrangen, before we move forward. So in the first place, what does it mean?

RA: It means “coming together.”

JG: In —

RA: In Yiddish. So why that? One thing, we’re clearly a community. Community and Fabrangen are the same thing, in a sense. Fabrangen makes you smile.

JG: It is true.

RA: And instead of a *havurah* — *havurah*, one of the things about them that was important is that it’s focused on particular people, and it’s limited.

JG: And by *havurah* (01:32:00) at that point, during the 1970s, there were basically the New York Havurah, which had started in ’69, and Havurat Shalom, in ’68. And those were the two models that were out there, essentially.

RA: Right. And I thought they were too exclusive.

JG: They were membership organizations.

RA: Right. And they only let certain people become members. Not everybody could become a member. Which was, okay. But it didn’t have the chance of being a core for a major — and also, they were a little bit too narrowly Jewish in certain things, from my perspective.

JG: We’re going to talk about that in a minute. Before we get off the word Fabrangen —

RA: Yeah, and it’s also the name in Yiddish for the gatherings that the Lubavitch did. The Rebbe had a number of *farbrangens*, you saw that in the — (01:33:00) We had to come up with a name quickly. It was a real thing, so it was a 501 c(3) corporation and you had to get the papers and so forth. In those days it wasn’t as easy to get as it was, then.

JG: Say that again? Those days?

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: In those days, it was not as easy to get a 501 c(3) status that was anti-government because Nixon was in charge of such things. So we met — Sheldon Cohen was his name. He had been the immediate past head of the IRS. He got us — even though for him, it took a couple of months of effort, and so on and so forth.

JG: And the spelling? You lost the “R.”

RA: We lost the “R” because I called my mother from the downtown and said, Can you spell Fabrangen, whatever? And I thought she said “F A” without the “R.”

JG: F A B?

RA: F A B. (01:34:00) But incorrect. But it really wasn't incorrect, because what we were saying — we were going to do this without relying on a rebbe. There was no *raish* in the name, in that sense. And it means coming together, it sounds good in English and in Yiddish, and it was not a *havurah*. I didn't like the concept of the *havurah*, which was the only alternative.

JG: And the concept you were objecting to had to do with the sort of exclusivity? That was the problem?

RA: Yes. Another cousin of mine wanted to be a member of their group, mainly to avoid the draft. And they didn't allow.

JG: They rejected him? It's an issue, for them. So who did the Fabrangen intend to reach? Who was your target?

RA: Everybody.

JG: Everybody and anybody?

RA: Everybody, everybody. (01:35:00) We had non-Jews, a few non-Jews. They were not members. The rule was that you had to be Jewish.

JG: What did membership mean?

RA: It didn't mean much. It means you could come to all the events for free. Also, it was a free community — toward creating a Jewish counterculture.

JG: Fabrangen Jewish Free Culture Center.

RA: So the idea there was the programs we gave were as important as the learning, and it was all as important as the political. It all came together.

JG: What about the religion? Fabrangen Jewish Free Culture Center.

RA: So. Everything has a bit of a compromise to it. And we didn't want to get into an issue of whether this is Conservative, or this is this — names that meant nothing to ninety percent (01:36:00) of the young people in D.C. at the time. They had no interest in whether it was Reform or whether it was Conservative, one, two, three, four. They didn't care. They wanted a place where they could express themselves, where their feelings and their minds could come together to change some reality. So that's why we didn't want to get into that, we didn't have to get into that, and we had all types.

JG: Describe some of the types.

RA: Some of the people were whacked out of their minds from drugs and things like that. And we agreed to try to reach them and would not have been to say there are no such thing as drugs. It would have been — you have to try to make intelligent use of such things, and it's not necessary for an experience of God to have drugs. In fact, it's counter to it. (01:37:00) You do what you do, but our role was to provide medical help as well as cultural help.

JG: So this was part of the activism, essentially, of Fabrangen.

RA: Mhm.

JG: What were some kinds of the activities that Fabrangen initiated in those six months?

RA: So we did set up a clinic, I don't know if we want to call it that. People came with their problems. And their problems could be financial, they could be army, draft counseling, and drug counseling.

JG: Were there people with any particular expertise as staff?

RA: Yes, we worked with the Jewish Social Service Agency — JSSA. They had a person who was young and with it and so forth, but aware of (01:38:00) the problems. Of course Jewish education was a part of it. And we had real people in that as well. My father gave a whole series of lectures about Martin Buber. He was the first person to write about Martin Buber.

JG: Were those classes or were those more sort of public lecture type things?

RA: Lectures, with a group that would discuss, who wanted to discuss in greater detail. Taking it from the college — you have a lecture, and then you have a study group.

JG: Discussion section, so to speak.

RA: Yeah, and people loved it. A lot of education courses, and a lot of emphasis on music, and the arts in general.

JG: Right from the beginning. (01:39:00) What did that mean in practical terms, emphasis on the arts, in those first six months?

RA: Somebody who had all of this in his heart, hadn't yet learned to do it, we helped find somebody and — he took off. But he was not the only person. David Shneyer had the same experience.

JG: With music.

RA: Music. And *davening*. Our *davening* was similar to Havurat Shalom's.

JG: I want to get into that in some depth shortly, but the first service was in February of '71, I think. Were you at that service?

RA: Fabrangen was me.

JG: It was you. So you were definitely there. What do you remember about that first service?

RA: It was great. All these people who had limited Jewish experience, or a lot of Jewish experience, but it wasn't opening, it wasn't a liberating experience [see addendum]. (01:40:00) This was liberating. People could sing and dance. And I insisted on explaining what the words were. It wasn't just — and it meant more different things to different people. I found myself —

JG: Who came to that?

RA: All kinds of people. Overwhelmingly Jewish. And women, women could participate from the beginning. No question about it.

JG: So right from the beginning?

RA: Right from the beginning. And non-Jewish people, if they had an interest in becoming Jewish, which they did.

JG: People came.

RA: People came who had never been to a service or never been to one they found meaningful.

JG: Sounds like you were tapping into a real thirst that was out there.

RA: Yeah. (01:41:00) And the people who were doing it were doing it for themselves. So that there wasn't a class of people — there were maybe some people who were able to provide things that other people couldn't, but they didn't see themselves as being a controlling force. They saw it as an opening force.

JG: Yeah. So let's go back and just look at the context a little bit more closely. How would you describe the relationship between Fabrangen and JUJ — and both of them, and the Jewish establishment, the larger Jewish world, at the very beginning?

RA: So, JUJ had about ten members or something. It was not a large organization.

JG: It was tiny.

RA: Tiny. (01:42:00) And as they say, I think it had some very good ideas, some people did. Some were much too critical of the Jewish community in general, were having a war against — from my point of view, we were not having a war against them. They were funding us, because they wanted to. No one was making them. It was a big effort! And people are people, and if you talk to them as people and not as things, you can make a lot of progress. So we did. And some of the people on the UJA, on the staff, I remember, came from a background of being very activist socialist types, Jewish socialists. And you could see them sitting there — they stopped coming just as staff of the UJA. They came out of love of *yiddishkeit* (01:43:00) and wanting to express their soul. You saw them sitting on the floor — we also sat on the floor — I got that from the *havurah* — and they were there on the floor. Those guys were in their fifties and sixties, and they had smiles a mile wide. And everybody saw it.

JG: They were being moved, it sounds like.

RA: Yeah, all types, from the wealthy main givers to the staff. No opposition. In other words, there were a couple of people who were very powerful in the Jewish community who opposed it, and they opposed it on the grounds that Arthur and people like that were involved.

JG: And what was their objection?

RA: Oh, they were just doing this, we were just doing this — I am a naïve young man, (01:44:00) wonderful person, comes from a good family, but I'm wrong. Others are evil, trying to capture my mind and the minds of other people. It was so wrong. Even if I hadn't cared about it, I would have thought — but it was just wrong, it was just wrong. But they never gave in. The other two or three people who opposed it were right-wing Zionists, to the extent they were Zionists, or had —

JG: And this was — you think they started out opposing it, or —?

RA: Oh yeah, they opposed it from —

JG: From the beginning.

RA: Yeah. But there were enough people who cared about me, personally, and this whole world out there that they were willing to try something. Some young people with money.

JG: Michael Staub writes in *Torn at the Roots* (01:45:00) that most people at the time accepted the idea that Fabranken was the non-political arm of JUJ, and others felt that JUJ had basically become Fabranken.

RA: JUJ, as I say, was a very small group. That's one thing I saw right off the bat. And so there were some people — everybody's a variety of things. As I said, some things they did were just silly or dumb or offensive, and a couple of people were promoting that. They actually became members of Fabranken, but they didn't fit in.

JG: Do you think that the UJA money, as you look back on it, came with real strings attached?

RA: I didn't.

JG: You didn't?

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: No. I told them, if you want to come see what's going on, come see what's going on.

JG: And were there internal tensions (01:46:00) within Fabrangen about the place of political activism in the community?

RA: Yeah, it was a very active place, [*laughs*] with people given the freedom to do what they want. So there were, yeah, there was a lot. The people who came didn't have negative views about the people they disagree with. They just disagreed with them, *nisht gefערlach*. But the others — there were, as I say, a few people, but a powerful few [of the federation leadership]. They were wrong, too. They thought that a couple particular people were running the place. Those people were not running the place. If anybody was running the place, it was me. There was never —

JG: But there were others — and there were attempts, as I understand it — to limit the roles of certain key people. (01:47:00) That's what you're talking about.

RA: Yeah, and I told them, "That's not going to happen."

JG: So why and how did the federation decide to cut off the funding after the first six months? What happened?

RA: They were afraid — well, it was six months, so we had to go through the — so there was some opposition. Mainly people were uninformed, but some informed. They just disagreed. And the UJA is in the business of raising money, not losing money. So they were afraid they might lose some money, even though by now we had some wealthy people who were in the community who came and saw and heard.

JG: What do you mean they were afraid they might lose the money? Might lose donors?

RA: Yeah. So they set up a committee to look into it, just to see what's happening. (01:48:00) The committee came back with glowing terms. These guys were — stodgy. They knew, it was like they were reborn. I was afraid they were going to have a heart attack! They loved it. They set up an evening, and about fifty people from Fabrangen came, in a broad sense. Each one told a story more moving than the next. It was really something to see. So they recommended the funding continue. But money talks, and the fear of losing it was a mistake. It was a big mistake, and it really stops it to some degree.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: Why did the federation accuse Fabrangen of being anti-Israel, essentially? And what role did that have in the decisions, the ultimate decision to withhold the funding?
(01:49:00)

RA: Well, it's the same people. They made up a whole thing about that. First of all, that was when Palestinians and Jews were beginning to talk to each other in Israel. And some of those people came back from their experience in Israel and said, "Hey, you had this. Why can't you do it?" But there were no Palestinians in Washington, at that time in any case. So this is where opposition is most — most possible. And there were people who were on the margin, you know. But you have to have it, if you're trying to build something that's true to truth. Truth is expansive, not closed, and you're going to have some people that you don't agree with. But at the beginning, and they kept — (01:50:00) their support, actually, were rabbis such as the rabbis of Adas Israel and Washington Hebrew, the two big Conservative and Reform. They were in favor.

JG: They were in favor of continuing the support. Where did this inflammatory article come from that appeared in the *Jewish Week*?

RA: We don't know. We never got to know. They made up the name.

JG: They made up what name?

RA: The name of the article, the by such-and-such.

JG: You mean whoever — supposedly the journalist who wrote it.

RA: Whoever they were, I don't know if they were journalists or not journalists. But most likely they were people connected to the Jewish Community Council. He was opposed, the head of that. And this is an aside — he was very Jewishly involved. He's the head of it and had done a lot of good things. (01:51:00) But he was losing his position. He was, like, "Mr. Social Action," but they weren't really doing that much in social action, nothing like what we were doing. And he was afraid of losing his status, I don't know. And he knew how to get to the people who were running things. As it was, it came down to the line.

JG: How so?

RA: This event that I described brought a lot of support. And actually what they said was, you know, any new money I'd have to agree to remain as the director of it.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: You'd have to agree to what?

RA: To remain as the director.

JG: You'd have to?

RA: I'd have to, right. And this was already a lot of effort. (01:52:00) And all the forces were, you know, working on me.

JG: And you were opposed to there being a rebbe figure, a central figure, in a sense, it sounds like.

RA: Yeah. Right. So I didn't want to do that. I was afraid it would become too much me. But in addition, it was so wrong, it was just wrong. Not a lot of money would have allowed us to continue. The sisters were so sorry. *[laughs]* I thought they were going to testify, which worried me, of course, because one of the accusations was that we weren't being Jewish.

JG: So as a result you did have to leave that building?

RA: Mhm. We moved to another place, (01:53:00) and then another place.

JG: So what would you say was the impact on the community and the directions it took moving forward as all of this was ongoing and Fabrangen members were processing what was happening?

RA: Well, so there was all this energy wasted on these issues. And they weren't real, and if they had been real, anyway they were very small. And there were all kinds of people who were involved. But we had to waste all this time and energy. And it encouraged — if people don't like each other, it spreads like a plague. As it was, we continued. And Fabrangen is still in existence, and still has for High Holidays — we were faced with what to do about the High Holidays (01:54:00) way back. And I said, Let's go with it. Whatever people want to come, we'll find room for them. And we had, the first time, a hundred people. Then two hundred people, then three hundred people, then five hundred people. Churches. And they still get around three hundred, four hundred people. There's no question it doesn't have the dynamism it had, but it did for a while.

JG: So let's delve into some of the key components of it, as it was moving into this next phase, which is what really became Fabrangen. So many people point to community as the heart of the *havurah* endeavor. And yet, as we've been saying, definitions of the ideal

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

community (01:55:00) differed among these first three early *havurot*. So how would you describe Fabrangen's notion of community? What were you trying to create?

RA: We were trying to create a place that would help people, as individuals, feel, as I've said before — it's me speaking here, because not everybody was quote-unquote "religious," who came. But in my mind, Judaism is a religious culture. Otherwise, it's not real. It's fine, but it's not — I made it clear that that's what the leadership felt. Including people who came back to something they hadn't been in in thirty years. It wasn't just young people. There were a lot of young people, but it wasn't just young people by any means. (01:56:00) And at the same time, everything else can be made to be more than it is — because of the core. So we had classes and everything. We set up the summer institute. We got a hundred people.

JG: The study institute thing?

RA: Yeah, for the summer.

JG: Right in the beginning. Right from the beginning.

RA: That would be June, July, August, after February. But it was after we'd been told that we were not going to be re-funded. It didn't kill the organization. In fact, some of the best stuff was after.

JG: Right, right. Can you just describe — so the community moved from this place on Florida Avenue to Twenty-first street.

RA: Mhm.

JG: Can you just describe it? Describe this place. What did it feel like? What does it look like?

RA: Which place? (01:57:00)

JG: The second. So this is now, you're moving into your new home.

RA: The main thing that it didn't have was as much space as the other one had. But otherwise, it was very similar. It had an area outside, over a garage, which could be this ugly thing, but it was actually quite nice. And people were always doing things to improve the environment. And it was, you know, for example, when we had the building on Florida, I could cook Shabbos meals. This is the evil — I'm actually creating meals.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

That's what the people wanted; that's what they wanted — Shabbos meals. So we did it, Shabbos meals.

JG: And in the new place?

RA: We had a kitchen, but it was nowhere near (01:58:00) the size or the niceness. The building was fine.

JG: What did it look like? Can you describe the aesthetics of it?

RA: It looked like — the area generally has row houses, townhouses actually. So it had — inside had several rooms. And it had this outside area on top of this big garage. So it was nice.

JG: And in terms of the furnishings, just the general décor and ambiance, what was it like?

RA: It didn't have much. But it didn't matter because it was so full of people all the time, that — the first building, we had people live there. David lived there, which made it nice — it didn't have that, (01:59:00) it didn't affect much. We always were crowded, which was a plus and a minus. And we quickly realized that in those days — in those days, services also happened in the Religious Action Center — the Reform Movement had a building on Massachusetts Avenue nearby. And the head of that organization was — David Saperstein was his name. He was very supportive. He himself was not into it, but he was very supportive.

JG: So outside of classes and religious services, which we're going to come back to in more detail, what were the other occasions when the community came together — for instance, communal meals and meetings?

RA: Well, meals we had for Shabbos or other such events. People brought —

JG: They were potluck, in that sense? (02:00:00)

RA: And —

JG: Where would the meals take place?

RA: In the space, in the building. You know, you make do. It wasn't a problem. What was your —?

JG: Were there generally agreed upon policies on, let's say, Kashrut, or not really?

RA: Yes. But they were more open than would — if we were a Conservative shul, everything would have to have a UO on it, or something like that. We didn't require that. It didn't have any *chazer* in it, or whatever it is. It was kosher, but it wasn't a challenge.

JG: You weren't looking for particular hechshers or anything like that.

RA: No.

JG: So people could bring cheese?

RA: Whatever they want. (02:00:00)

JG: So it was dairy?

RA: Meat for the public meeting. It was basically dairy, although we tried to do the Shabbos like a Shabbos because I find that meaningful itself.

JG: So which Shabbos meals would have a communal meal?

RA: Friday night. Saturday — Saturday was an interesting thing from the beginning. This Paul had set up a Shabbos morning study session, and what it consisted of was reading the parashah of the week word by word, and comments word by vowel — very, very detailed and very, very long. About three hours or so, or more, you know. And —

JG: And who would lead this?

RA: They would do it themselves. And then when I showed up on the (02:02:00) scene, it was everybody and me. But I usually went to the shul in Georgetown before I'd go to an Orthodox shul for Shabbos service, and then I'd walk over to where they were, which was in his apartment, and for hours —

JG: So this study session took place in his apartment rather than in Fabrangen?

RA: Fabrangen didn't exist. So when we created Fabrangen, this is a piece of it that we just brought over. So the *davening* and the communal thing at its height was a Friday night thing. And there was the study group, which grew, so they both grew. The first couple of years, the Friday night was the main gathering point.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: For the community.

RA: Yes. and there wasn't as much Torah study. But (02:03:00) combine the two, so they both —

JG: So what was the feel of those Friday night gatherings?

RA: They were great.

JG: Tell me about them.

RA: They were emotional, energetic, open.

JG: Singing? A lot of singing?

RA: We had the Fabrangen Fiddlers that David put together played at these events. And you know, it's just great. Shlomo Carlebach, I mentioned, came four times, and he loved it. He said this is the greatest — it was a very meaningful, touching kind of thing.

JG: Had you ever been in an environment really like that before? (02:04:00)

RA: Well, that's why I called the Kosher Kitchen the *havurah*. It wasn't, in its own way, but in its own way it was. Yeah, but that was limited — college kids. So for adults, this was —

JG: Really something.

RA: I did get a lot of concept from the Havurat Shalom. They were open to — in a sense, I could go all the time there and be treated as a quasi-member.

JG: On Shabbat mornings?

RA: Yeah, and we could see how things could happen.

JG: Did Fabrangen become an inviting community the way Havurat Shalom did, where people (02:05:00) invited other members and members of the community for Shabbos or holiday meals?

RA: Yeah, it became the community that we thought it would be, and that's it's...

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: I guess what I'm asking here is, is that piece an important part of it? Becoming an inviting community as well?

RA: Yes, very much so.

JG: So how did that happen?

RA: Not everybody liked every part. The community meetings were held every so often and were often quite emotional.

JG: Let's talk about the role of community meetings in working out communal issues and policies. How often did they happen to start with?

RA: Well, in the beginning, they happened a lot.

JG: Meaning —

RA: Might be every day an issue might come up.

JG: And so there would be, like, an informal meeting.

RA: Right.

JG: Was it ever institutionalized?

RA: Oh yeah, we had on a regular basis — (02:06:00) I don't remember now, monthly or weekly.

JG: What were some of the sort of major issues or themes that would be discussed at these meetings?

RA: What should the *davening* consist of? Generally left open, considerably, but still with certain things that should be required.

JG: Such as?

RA: The *Amidah* is the *amidah* — I mean, certain —

JG: So, pieces of the traditional liturgy.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: And other stuff, non-traditional. But not that much, not crazy. People didn't dance around nude or anything. And of course that women could participate in anything, not only could, but did. (02:07:00) We started the classes specifically to help them catch up, so to speak, bat mitzvah kind of thing.

JG: So these things would be discussed?

RA: Yeah.

JG: So why did they get to be so emotionally heated, which everybody talks about?

RA: Well everything — every issue seemed like an issue because we were saying that everybody had to contribute or could contribute. So people did. You know, certain people have different psychological makeups, too. So people who don't like that don't want that in their shul, so to speak. But also there's politics.

JG: Excuse me?

RA: There also was some concern over politics. Some people would be (02:08:00) prohibited from coming, and vice versa.

JG: For instance?

RA: That maybe they were too maybe pro-Vietnam War. We wouldn't kick somebody out, but they may feel that they weren't welcome. That's not the — you'll see when you meet George. But —

JG: What was the issue around that? Are you saying that the group would become aware, for instance, that someone was pro-Vietnam War?

RA: They would not be comfortable.

JG: They would not be comfortable. The person, him or herself, but what about the group?

RA: The group wouldn't —

JG: Why would it come up in the discussion?

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: Well, it would come up because it would come up. Somebody would raise the issue. So it had to be discussed. But, I mean, by and large people would know that (02:09:00) you may have been in the war, but you didn't run the war. You didn't have a captain, military people — although there were a couple of people with serious army experience. But they had given it up. So I wouldn't say it would be a place that you would not be comfortable if you really thought the North Vietnamese would be killed, or something like that. It certainly would be if you manifested some dislike of black people.

JG: So were the discussions that took place in these communal meetings —

RA: They were not about these things. But those things might affect your view of somebody. And it may take several occasions before it comes out what that concern is. But I don't think that was a big — but I'll admit, now, I don't remember. [*laughs*] (02:10:00)

JG: So was there a basic principle that decisions were made essentially by consensus

RA: Yes.

JG: Was there a form of leadership in these meetings? How did the group arrive at consensus?

RA: Well, they talked. They talked and they talked and they talked and they talked.

JG: And eventually, typically, you would arrive at consensus?

RA: We would arrive. But a lot of effort, for some things, although some things wouldn't matter. Although let's say there was some person who suddenly appears and is questionable — does he really care? Is he really a person sent by the other side of the Jewish community?

JG: Right.

RA: If there were, there were minuscule numbers of people. (02:11:00)

JG: Right, so those weren't issues that were taking over —

RA: They became an issue because, Oh, how can you say you keep anybody out? Nobody was kept out, but they might not have felt wanted. Well, that's a true feeling.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: So there was some self-selection.

RA: Yes, but not much.

JG: Did the emotional intensity of these meetings affect you personally? How did you deal with it?

RA: It did not make me happy, [*laughs*] but life goes on. Sometimes worse than others, you know. And the other thing is — very really personal is that I got married to my first wife in March or so. I don't remember exactly. (02:12:00) And her mother had a heart problem, a serious heart problem, so she had to go visit her — her family lived in, was now living in Israel. Her father, mother. But the mother needed more care than that, so either I was doing business or she was taking care of her mother. And it just made for a — not possible. So.

JG: So there was your own emotional life as well, which suffered.

RA: You know, people were supportive, but it's one thing. There was one woman who came to the community as a non-Jew and wanted to be treated as Jewish — because she wanted to be Jewish. And this was (02:13:00) discussed and there were a group of people who were in favor of that. There was no need to have a category called Jewish, or Christian, or anything. Whatever you can be, you can be. And it shouldn't be a factor in decision-making. So there were people who have that position, and she had that position. And we made it clear that we were happy to convert her.

JG: To actually go through a conversion process, which was not what she had been proposing?

RA: She thought she didn't need to.

JG: So how had that decision been arrived at? The decision to convert her.

RA: The community discussed it, more than once. And she was — she was a very nice person and everything. So I mean, ultimately we said we'd be glad to, (02:14:00) you know, do this. You won't get acceptance elsewhere, perhaps, outside of here, certainly in certain parts of the world. So the actual details we'd work out. So what we ended up doing is she went through a process with, I don't remember, I think an Orthodox rabbi or something, and we incorporated that in a larger thing that more people came to. And everybody was satisfied.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: So in the end, she did formally convert?

RA: Yeah.

JG: By halachic standards as well?

RA: Yeah.

JG: That sounds like an instance where it worked to everybody's satisfaction.

RA: Yeah. There were probably some people who weren't (02:15:00) happy with the final decision.

JG: Because they agreed with her, that she shouldn't —

RA: Either they agreed, or they disagreed. Everybody has different —

JG: As you say, community. There are many versions of community.

RA: No, but she was very happy. I don't remember really what happened to her. I'm pretty sure she married a Jewish guy. She moved away, so that's why I don't know, at some point. But she was there, and she was a good dancer, so she taught people. She added to the value — obviously if you do that, you're going to have an easier time of it. But she, she was fine.

JG: Some observers have pointed to an increased focus on prayer and study as opposed to political activism, as one of the outcomes of UJA's decision to cut off funding after six months. (02:16:00) Can you describe what you think the attitude towards *tefilah* was in the community as a whole?

RA: Was —

JG: At Fabrangen, as it evolved, over those early years? After the first six months?

RA: Whether there was an increase, or —?

JG: Just, where did it figure in people's — what they were looking for from this community. And then I have some more questions about *tefilah* and service more specifically.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: Services in general?

JG: Yeah.

RA: Well, you know, first of all, I'm not a member anymore.

JG: I know, I'm talking about the seventies.

RA: So, (02:17:00) the early seventies was a period when it was being developed.

JG: Exactly.

RA: And I don't know when one would say — that doesn't happen so much anymore.

JG: Would you say, for instance, that if you looked sort of across the membership at people who would come on a regular basis in that early period, where would you put yourself in terms of the importance of *tefilah* in your own life, and the role, the religious piece of what was going on and what you were trying to create within this community — relative to other people?

RA: Ahuh. Well, I could be wrong, shocking though that may be, but I would think that people who were active in the early, earlyish days were very much into (02:18:00) *tefilah*. Maybe they're at the point of learning about it, it's not automatic, but it's a pretty — established community by now.

JG: What do you mean by now?

RA: Well, in the beginning there were a lot of people there who didn't have much experience and/or interest. Although they had interest. They wouldn't be there — by and large — And now I would guess it's even more because most of the other stuff is limited.

JG: Now, meaning 2016? In recent years?

RA: Whatever.

JG: Can you give us an overview? What were Shabbat services like on Shabbat morning at Fabrangen in those early years? (02:19:00) In the first place, where were people sitting? What was the room like? What were the essential components of *tefilah* on Shabbat morning?

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: So *tefilah* had become — after the end of the money and the other building, basically it occurred at the Religious Action Center of the Reform Movement. So what that meant was that was fairly large. And we would come in there and rearrange the furniture, which was a big deal — because a lot of people would come and leave and manage to avoid the work related — so that would create enough space. There weren't chairs, so there were cushions. (02:20:00) Similar to the *havurah*.

JG: When you said rearrange the space in a conference room, was there a big table there?

RA: Uhuh. Did we rely on that? I think we moved that because it took up too much space and had another table or something.

JG: And people were sitting around?

RA: People were sitting around, facing wherever the *aron* was.

JG: Sitting on what?

RA: Cushions.

JG: On the floor.

RA: Uhuh.

JG: So you took the chairs, removed them?

RA: They were certainly in the early days. I don't remember now.

JG: So sitting around, sort of in a circle, facing the *aron*.

RA: Yeah.

JG: And what was the *aron* made of?

RA: Well, there is one now. It's been around a long time, I don't know how long. (02:21:00)

JG: And what is it made of?

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: Wood. I don't think for the first number of years we had — that's the most unusual space because the Torah was given to President Kennedy and then "loaned," quote-unquote, to the Religious Action Center. And they have an *aron*. Whether we used that — we must have used that. Do you remember? Jen? No. No I don't remember. But they have it in a room now.

JG: Many people have described services at Havurat Shalom as neo-hasidic. Do you think that term also applies to —

RA: It applies probably not as constantly as their — (02:22:00)

JG: Were there ideas and practices drawn from the Jewish mystical tradition that were pretty much integrated into the Fabbrangen approach?

RA: Well, I wouldn't say that there was neo-hasidic except for the melodies, which were a big part. And it's been a long time since I've been to Havurat Shalom, so — they had cushions, yeah, somewhat similar. Not as ideological on that point because the leadership is more focused on neo-hasidic stuff, I guess.

JG: There, at Havurat Shalom.

RA: Yeah.

JG: Did a Shabbat service follow a pretty traditional liturgy?

RA: With one exception. This was not when I was — well, it was a point of my thinking this is not for me. (02:23:00) They eliminated — well there are two reasons — *Musaf* was eliminated. That was early on.

JG: By virtue of a communal consensus?

RA: Mhm. The feeling being — Esther Ticktin is the one who pushed this — that our group doesn't *daven* every day. So if you don't, *Musaf* is an additional day, so it'd be running counter to the practice that we're otherwise doing. I think that's, quote unquote, "silly." You may not want to do it for other reasons. It takes up a lot of time. The time spent on Torah services is much (02:24:00) greater than normal, because of the discussion stuff.

JG: Right, which we'll come back to.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: I mean, they don't do the same thing anymore, but it's still more time on that than you would think.

JG: So, *Musaf* is one thing that is a departure from the traditional liturgy. You said there were a couple of things.

RA: Well, the beginning was left to the *hazan* as to how much of the morning *Shacharis* stuff you want to do, the blessings.

JG: The *Peseukei Dezimra*?

RA: Yeah. Probably would do one or two, three, but not a whole twenty minute — twenty pages or whatever.

JG: So that was another thing. But otherwise it was fairly traditional, you're saying, in terms of the patterns.

RA: Right.

JG: Many people have also pointed to the tension between tradition and innovation in *havurah*-style (02:25:00) services. Was that true at Fabrangen as well? So can you describe some of the innovations?

RA: The elimination of *musaf* with the exception of *yom tov*, and *Pesukei Dezimra* — that kind of thing also. You know, you can say on the one hand, it's not a big deal. It's not a big deal, *Pesukei Dezimra* certainly is not a big deal. But if you were accustomed to doing it, it's a big deal. There were a lot of discussions on the *Musaf* issue. I don't think there were any on the *Pesukei Dezimra* or something like that. That was a number of years ago.

JG: Do you remember any experimentation that had to do with (02:26:00) body movement, for instance?

RA: Yeah, there was a period where people were kind of into that.

JG: What was that?

RA: Cause they were the kind of people who were engaged in body movement.

JG: So what kinds of things would they experiment with?

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: Yeah — you mean include or not include, or methodology?

JG: Either.

RA: I don't think there was much attention paid. By the time you got into a lot of singing, and a long Torah discussion, maybe some other discussion —

JG: So those were the big innovations, you're saying.

RA: Yeah.

JG: Big, lots of emphasis on music, and big Torah discussion. So explain what the role of the Torah discussion was in the Fabrangen service.

RA: So, I think I didn't get to where I started on that, which is with Paul. They used to spend two or three hours (02:27:00) on Torah, I mentioned that —

JG: Before the service? That was —?

RA: That *was* the service.

JG: That was the service.

RA: Pre-Fabrangen. So when Fabrangen came around, we incorporated it into a service concept as well. But still, it was lengthy. So every year for a number of years we would cut some. The ability to cut would increase. Not each year. You would do it gently so the people didn't really —

JG: How long was it when it started? What amounts of time —?

RA: These could be three-hour discussions.

JG: In the middle of a service, actually?

RA: Yeah.

JG: And then it became —

RA: Each word.

JG: Each word.

RA: It's kind of funny when you think back on it, because it's very "religious," quote unquote, in a Jewish sense, study.

JG: Yeah. And did someone lead (02:28:00) that discussion?

RA: No, only lead it in the sense of move it along. Otherwise it'd be even longer!

JG: Did that change at all?

RA: Yeah, yeah. yeah.

JG: So how, how would it change?

RA: They just eliminated — how much would it be? Would it be word by word of the parashah, or would it be just a page, or then the traditional aliyah amount, something like that.

JG: Did people experiment with things like bringing contemporary issues in and trying to relate it to the parashah?

RA: Yeah. And that's left up to the individual. So it's easier in a certain sense just to go right along. But if you're interested in how it relates to issues of the day, that's up to whoever's — I don't think you would establish that that was required, but it was an option. (02:29:00)

JG: But did it happen frequently?

RA: Well, in the beginning, yeah, I'd say. And then things were sort of the same every — like with most places, a certain amount of *Pesukei Dezimra*, certain amount given to the Torah reading. It's not a triennial or anything like that. It's just, you know, move along.

JG: So was the Torah read on the triennial cycle or on the full cycle, or how did that work?

RA: As much as you could stand in the beginning! [*laughs*] And now there must be a system, probably the triennial.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: But your memories of those early years —

RA: The early years were more exciting to somebody like me, who otherwise goes to a place that just reads. I find the *leyning*, just the pure *leyning*, to be not so exciting. (02:30:00) But in a big shul with lots of people it doesn't work to have discussion on every word, that's for sure.

JG: But you found it exciting, when this was happening.

RA: Well, those were small groups and we were all excited —

JG: Motivated.

RA: It was a way for them to learn their *yiddishkeit*. It was the *davening* of the day. And another thing, different from the time, shows that things evolve. In the beginning, Friday evening was the key service, not Saturday. My guess — it did change when the Ticktins came. It was easier to add the Torah service, but she still wanted to keep the not doing *Musaf*. (02:31:00)

JG: Why was it easier to add the Torah service when the Ticktins came?

RA: Simply because another expert saying we could do this or do that.

JG: So there were some more authoritative voices like that, the Ticktins, you —

RA: Yeah. It's not formal.

JG: No, I understand.

RA: These were discussed by the community as a whole. And then it was a chance for women who didn't have much knowledge to lead the opening and closing of the *aron*.

JG: Right. But I want to go back to what you just said, because I don't think we've made that clear so far, and that is that in the very early periods, it was Friday night services — so it was a *Kabbalat Shabbat* service essentially.

RA: Yes. And we were very creative in the beginning, that instead of doing the *Kabbalat Shabbat* that's presented to us, (02:32:00) we could do something else. And there was a time — what happened to you on Monday, what happened to you on Tuesday, think about it, tell us about it. Or if you needed more organization, organize it around the work

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

week versus Shabbos. What was good for your week, what was not so good for your week, it was very individualized.

JG: Were these things that people would share out loud, or more *kavanot*?

RA: No, somebody would say that, pick something, and that would start a discussion. Or you had the option. You could just bring in something different to read.

JG: What kinds of things would people bring in to read?

RA: Poetry that they were familiar with, or an essay that some guy wrote.

JG: And did those work, in general? To bring in really outside sources?

RA: They did for a time. Because the outside is pretty worked up, too. (02:33:00) Yeah, I'm sure they don't do that — first of all, I don't even know if they have Friday night services.

JG: Was there use of musical instruments?

RA: Yeah.

JG: And that was always the case? Was that ever a point of discussion?

RA: I would guess the amount of it, and whether you do it in *niggunim*. But by and large, it was up to the person leading. It's what they wanted. And if they had the capability of providing music, that's another —

JG: Or if — did they invite someone? Were there people who served as song leaders, music leaders?

RA: In the beginning, it was the band, so to speak. David —

JG: Fabrangen Fiddlers?

RA: Most of whom became Fabrangen Fiddlers. There was a distinction. That went on for quite a while. (02:34:00)

JG: Were there any people outside of that who served as leaders, musical leaders?

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: Yeah, yeah. It's a compact service. But it also took a long time.

JG: Right. Friday night services are typically shorter than the morning services.

RA: Right. I mean, Saturday mornings also, they're more equal these days. I really don't know what they're doing much in terms of Friday night at all.

JG: Now, you mean?

RA: Now.

JG: And what would people do about Shabbat dinner when the main gathering point was a *Kabbalat Shabbat* service that would go on for some time, it seems?

RA: In the beginning, they made a nice meal out of it.

JG: That happened after? Or it was a potluck or communal meal?

RA: It evolved into a potluck. And I don't know what they do. I don't think they have a Friday night (02:35:00) But I could be wrong.

JG: Now, you mean?

RA: Now. Except they have a group that meets in Northern Virginia as well as in D.C. That group is more middle-aged families. They may very well be doing meals, because it's much smaller.

JG: But in these early years, the first few years of Fabbrangen, it was potluck? Or people brought stuff?

RA: Initially a few people, like us, made the food. That may have lasted a year or so. And then potlucks were common. They have that now.

JG: That would be after the service?

RA: Yeah.

JG: So it was a whole evening, basically, of being together. And then on Shabbat morning did anything happen, in the early times? (02:36:00)

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: You mean in terms of food? Like a kiddush or something?

JG: No, service.

RA: Oh, well in the very beginning, the service consisted — remained mainly the reading of the Torah, the study of the Torah. Then that evolved, and to that was added periodically traditional stuff. And as that's added, the other is reduced.

JG: The Torah discussion became reduced? The reading and discussion became reduced.

RA: Yeah.

JG: So was there always something on Saturday morning? There was always at least the Torah discussion.

RA: Once I joined there was always something.

JG: But you were it, right?

RA: Well, I didn't say by myself. There were other people. Just we had to keep the point — it became a practical issue, how much time did you want to do for the whole thing, and how would you cut the time? So that grew to be more the traditional (02:37:00) thing with the exception of *Musaf* and *Pesukei Dezimra*.

JG: Are there any Torah discussions or *d'verei torah* that stand out in your memory as something that sparked really heated or emotional discussion or feeling?

RA: I'm sure there was. I don't remember necessarily. Actually, the one thing I do remember that was off to the side but was very emotional. That is on one Yom Kippur, Chava Weissler was doing something, reading, participating. She was directing it that day. And her parents showed up. They lived there. They lived in Chevy Chase, as (02:38:00) a matter of fact. And everybody but Chava realized they were there for a few minutes. And they had had some problems, you know. And I don't remember exactly how it happened, but somebody said something, and she looked up and saw her parents, and she went over and hugged them. Big deal.

JG: Very emotional.

RA: Every one of us has had trouble with our parents, at some point, everybody. And it really — I remember that very much.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: Let's talk about women. You said from the beginning at Fabrangen, women were able to participate fully in the service?

RA: Yes.

JG: Women were counted in the minyan? (02:39:00)

RA: Yes.

JG: Do you remember women —

RA: There was in fact an interesting discussion about that. One member wanted to require twenty, ten and ten. But reason took place! [*laughs*]

JG: Reason prevails. Do you recall women wearing tallisim?

RA: Pretty much from the beginning.

JG: From the beginning. To what extent would you say you and other people at Fabrangen were aware of the nascent Jewish feminist movement as it was starting to take shape with Ezrat Nashim in '71 and efforts to include women.

RA: Well, we included, as I say, from the beginning. (02:40:00) And started classes soon after the first year so that women could participate knowledgeably.

JG: So there was a lag from when you started to when women started actually leading *davening*, women started *leyning* —

RA: Uhuh. It was a lag —

JG: Partly because it was a knowledge gap.

RA: Yeah, it was a knowledge gap. And individuals moved at different periods. And some knew a lot already, like Chava. Chava is very well-educated. And some people didn't know anything. But it was a step-by-step.

JG: Yeah. And adults bat mitzvahs —

RA: Started way before they did in regular synagogue.

JG: Exactly. '70 — in the early seventies. And a women's group (02:41:00) was established in '73. Do you remember anything about — '73 is when the first adult bat mitzvah took place at Fabrangen, which was early. Do you remember that occasion?

RA: Yes.

JG: Can you describe it?

RA: Again, it was a family actually, that came together, which was nice. They participated. It was otherwise a straightforward — they did as much as they could. So some people, it was a Torah service.

JG: So there were several women who were involved in this —

RA: No, in the first one, first time, it was just like anybody else. Which was, sequential or — particles brought together. But then the classes took place because people didn't have the knowledge, (02:42:00) or feel they had the knowledge. They would have been allowed to do it anyway, or they were allowed to do it anyway, but people wanted more. So it really wasn't coming from the community as such, It was the community was —

JG: Individuals who were interested.

RA: Yeah. But they had classes.

JG: Can you remember — can you describe at all the feel of these bar and bat mitzvahs?

RA: Oh, in the very beginning, it felt — it always felt good, not necessarily relevant to anything. It was assumed. But in the very beginning there was another element of freedom and growth. Very much, yeah. And people were very different in their manner of learning that they were comfortable with.

JG: What do you mean?

RA: They may have wanted to — (02:43:00) some may have said, Oh, I don't know enough to be that. I should take the class. Others might say, I know enough. I can do it in English. It'll be just as good. We didn't dwell on whether they were capable or not. But the tendency, clearly, was the direction of the learning, the group. Some then stayed in the group when they did it, if they didn't feel comfortable. It was a personal thing, but most did something.

JG: Yeah. Okay so is there anything else you want to say about *tefilah* and services?

RA: No, I mean, it was a big part, especially in the beginning. It's a big part, what's even more, when it's not in the beginning, because you have other things. But it was the center of — The Torah service was the reading study that I described, (02:44:00) and the singing at different places were the two important components that changed the feeling of the place.

JG: Coming from such a strong halachic background as you do, did you find the services fulfilling?

RA: Yeah. There's always a lot of accoutrements that are put in, and additions that are put in that are not necessary, and some might argue about which is more important. But the music was very important. And there were other things, there were dances, movements.

JG: As part of the service?

RA: Yeah. Yeah, actually — Rochelle —

JG: Your wife.

RA: My wife. And Arthur — (02:45:00)

JG: Waskow?

RA: — did a lot of movement stuff, together with music. His contribution to the music part was rather limited. [*laughs*] But the idea of somebody getting up and doing that and not worrying about being made a fool was certainly there.

JG: So let's turn to the role of study and learning, which we've talked a little bit about. How did the *havurah* envision the role of teachers and learners?

RA: Flexible.

JG: What does that mean?

RA: Sometimes a person was a student, sometimes they were a teacher. But since Judaism has a core of learning that's in a different language, it's not the same as it would

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

just be if you had an English service or something like that. But we always had classes (02:46:00) outside of the *davening* as well.

JG: From the beginning?

RA: Yeah.

JG: And were people recruited as teachers, or did they volunteer as teachers? How did classes become part of the curriculum that was being taught at any given moment?

RA: Well, again, nobody was required to take it. No such thing as required. But it was made clear that it was desired, to everybody, including the person who was doing it. Although people were different in feeling comfortable, we were not out to make people feel discomfited. But most wanted some degree of education. Certainly to have a bat mitzvah, that required — and most of the times that I've been at such things, (02:47:00) their family comes, their friends come. It's a real adult bat mitzvah. It's real.

JG: Did you get involved in teaching?

RA: I personally?

JG: Yeah.

RA: Yeah.

JG: What kinds of things would you teach?

RA: Well, initially, the structure of the service detail, so that it's more traditional. And then things — ethical issues that might come up, more kind of a Torah discussion focus. Does this feel real to you, or is it just some kind of phoney-baloney thing? History. Then there were plenty of people who could teach in addition, and always did.

JG: And always did. Were there classes that you took as a learner? (02:48:00)

RA: Mhm.

JG: What did you want to study, personally?

RA: Talmud.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: Who was there, for instance, who would teach Talmud?

RA: Max Ticktin, and my cousin Norman Shore. Do you know Norman? He's from Boston.

JG: I know his name.

RA: He was very good.

JG: Was he part of the community?

RA: Yeah. Was and is.

JG: And is! Because he's still in Washington.

RA: Still at Fabringen.

JG: When was the Jewish Study Center launched, and what was its relationship to these early classes?

RA: Well, in the first summer we were there, we had a summer institute.

JG: So, '71, summer of '71.

RA: Yeah. (02:49:00) And then the next step was a — together with other people, with people who are not in Fabringen otherwise, a Jewish Studies Center without capital. It was more based on the Lehrhaus model of Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and so forth. And then that moved into the Jewish Studies Center, which was a series of classes with a monthly kind of structure.

JG: Was it still a Lehrhaus kind of structure?

RA: A little bit more teacher-oriented, a little bit less together. But that's because of who the teachers were. Anyway there was that. That's been for a number of years. And that was set up, the Jewish Studies Center, as something independent of Fabringen.

JG: Always? (02:50:00) It was always independent of Fabringen?

RA: It was intended to be not controlled by Fabringen, but rather this Jewish studies thing. Because that made more people happy to get something.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: Once the Jewish Studies Center was established in '73, did Fabringen continue to also offer other classes?

RA: Not in the beginning so much. Maybe a learning class here or there. But once the Jewish Study Center really got going, its core membership and teachers were from Fabringen. But over time that's changed, and it's become more independent. It also now has much fewer students, partly because the synagogues have increased.

JG: Their adult learning. (02:51:00)

RA: Mhm.

JG: Offerings.

RA: Offerings, yeah.

JG: There was a symposium to study the writings of Martin Buber on his tenth *yahrtzeit* in 1975, that Fabringen was involved in sponsoring.

RA: Yes. And Arthur and I —

JG: Arthur Waskow —

RA: Were staff. I read all the Buber books possible! My God.

JG: That must have been something. Can you tell us a little bit about the symposium?

RA: Well, it was funny, or not so funny, that most of those people had never heard of Martin Buber, or much about him. And here it was — it seemed like until you actually worked on it, Oh, this must have happened thirty years ago, fifty years ago, or a hundred years ago. It was only ten years. (02:52:00) So, and it was relevant. He was asking the same kind of — he was the modern questioner. Does this make sense, is there something that —? There's a whole thing, whether he knew what he was talking about with the hasidim, the *hasidische* stories that he picked, the philosophy. We didn't worry about that. That's for the academic world to argue over such matters. But in general, he was one of the people cited often. Sometimes people would give a small story as the *d'var torah*.

JG: A Buber — some amount of his stories?

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: Yeah.

JG: So, was it well-attended?

RA: What? (02:53:00)

JG: The symposium.

RA: Yes, it was. Actually, to show you how things go, the main speaker about his development in life was my father. Because he wrote a book about Buber — Buber was included in the book. A lot of scholarly people. Esther Ticktin's brother was knowledgeable. He's a psychoanalyst, but he was also a Buberian.

JG: What's his name?

RA: That's a good question.

JG: What about the Fabringen *cheder*? When did that get started, and what was the impetus for getting that children's program going?

RA: Yeah. There were enough kids who weren't getting educated, because it was not the focal point of the — (02:54:00) we couldn't cover all bases. So a number of families that had educable aged children got together. An informal thing we did over the years was the label Fabringen would be used — the Fabringen Cheder, the Fabringen this, the Fabringen that. Which was nice, because on your own — we didn't control the *cheder* at all — but we were saying, they're part of our group, positively part of the group.

JG: A form of branding, almost.

RA: Mhm.

JG: So it was started — was it not by people who were —

RA: Members of Fabringen, but that's not their only life. This was members of Fabringen Cheder. So to this day, if you see something in writing about it, it will say the Fabringen Cheder. (02:55:00) You know Sue Roemer? You know the name Sue Roemer? — so she appeared on the scene — actually it's a good example — she came from a Yiddish background, secular background, secular Yiddish background. And we had a, quote-unquote “coffee house” in the early days. And she showed up and did her Yiddish songs and they were wildly popular. She was a good singer, but it was beyond

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

that. The emotion of Yiddish stuff. Then when her kids got older — she was behind this — she wanted them to have a Jewish education, a traditional Jewish education. So she started that. And Arthur also had younger children.

JG: Who did?

RA: Arthur. And other people like that. So it was a mixture of adults studying and children. (02:56:00) And the role of Fabrangen, by and large, was to help provide teachers, and help with money stuff. But again, no effort to control.

JG: After the initial period of Fabrangen, and once the federation had stopped its funding, how did the place of political activism evolve as a focus for communal activity and interest?

RA: For social activity? Well, it had always been there, and it didn't change. That part didn't change. I thought you were asking about payment, raising money or things like that. No, no, that was just the normal.

JG: So, I guess, let me try to clarify what I was asking. Social activism, anti-war activities, all of those kinds of varieties of activism (02:57:00) had been really central in the very beginning, alongside of these other things. Did that change, did the place of social activism change? And how so?

RA: Yes, yes. Well, it wasn't so much the role of the organization itself, but of people who were interested in various things. So for example, there were "Trees for Vietnam."

JG: What are "Trees for Vietnam?"

RA: "Trees for Vietnam" are — the trees that Israel —

JG: Jewish National Fund.

RA: But also the rebirth of vegetation as the war was being attacked and reduced. So it served a political point as well as a social good activity.

JG: The trees were being planted where?

RA: In Vietnam, in areas where there had been trees. (02:58:00) It was a good idea.

JG: Was it a successful program?

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: For the first couple of years. Then it got to be old hat already. It didn't attract a gazillion people. There was one woman — what's her name — she's little, good voice. Pam. Pam Hoffman. Her parents were members of the Havurat Shalom, or at least they were friendly with Arthur Green. But in any case, she was the staff person for that. Got paid. Not a lot of money, but.

JG: Tensions over varying attitudes towards Israel and Palestine and Israel's policies (02:59:00) were clearly central in the early months of Fabrangen's existence. But once UJA declined to continue the funding, what role did Israel and its role in Jewish life play in Fabrangen as it moved forward?

RA: Celebrating thirty-six years, in 2007. One of the anniversaries of Fabrangen was, I think, the thirty-sixth anniversary. This is what it is. [*holds up and looks through a book*] So rabbi — who'd become rabbis and cantors, you turn to page 12 — current and former Fabrangen-ers —

JG: Current and former Fabrangen-ers who are rabbis, (03:00:00) are cantors, and have settled permanently in Israel.

RA: Isn't that something? It's just to show you that a lot had been accomplished in a period of time, without any money and without this and without that. And here's all the members for that time period. Thirty-sixth anniversary fund, if you gave a little money — this is a Jewish group, after all, you get your name in this. This is from '71 to 2000. That's the various people who have given. We didn't have real members. It's the list of members. Anyway, a lot of people who became rabbis and cantors.

JG: How many people do you think were on that list, more or less, who actually made aliyah (03:01:00) and moved to Israel?

RA: Twenty or so.

JG: Twenty.

RA: And that was a while ago.

JG: Thirty-six. We're maybe forty-five or so, now, years —

RA: Forty-eight was —

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: We're talking about Fabrangen, so '71.

RA: Right.

JG: So you were a member of Breira, is that correct, during this period?

RA: Mhm.

JG: What drew you to that organization and how were you involved in it?

RA: Well, its goals seemed to be good to me. The goals seemed to be good to me. Honest and virtuous and worth a try. I'm not anti-Israel by any remote way of (03:02:00) determining it, but that doesn't mean that I don't think that without dealing with the Palestinians at some level that there will ever be a peace. I think it's possible it can be accomplished. So "*yesh breira*" is, there is an alternative. The opposite is, there is no. There is a choice, it will be hard to do, but worthy of trying.

JG: Would you say that different responses to Israel caused tensions within the community during those early years, or no?

RA: No. People accepted variety. There were about seventy people who in some form or another spent significant time.

JG: In Israel?

RA: In Israel. Actually, one of my friends from law school, Louis Lainer, L A I N E R, he's from California. (03:03:00) And he was president for one, or the leader or whatever, of Israel — what is?

JG: New Israel Fund?

RA: He has family money and has used it. He's done a few other things, too. So he's a good example, because he's very pro-Israel, but he's very pro coming up with some kind of solution.

JG: So Fabrangen — you and later your family, together with you, were involved with Fabrangen for a period of about fifteen years, right?

RA: Yeah.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: And it continued to spawn offshoots and to develop programs in the larger Jewish community. I just want to touch briefly on the ones that you think were significant, most significant, just to get a sense of (03:04:00) how Fabringen continued to evolve. Because this project is mostly focused on those very early years, but Fabringen actually started three years later than Havurat Shalom, and its continuing development through the Seventies and Eighties are something I want to at least mention. So you mentioned Fabringen Fiddlers. What about the coffee house? You just alluded to it a minute ago. Tzedek Tzedek Coffee House?

RA: Was it?

JG: That's what I've read.

RA: Well, if you read it, it must be accurate.

JG: What about the Tzedakah Collective?

RA: That's an interesting model, because it still lives. It started off with everybody would commit to contributing, but also to analyzing different groups that could use the money well, fairly, properly, and so forth. So many people came up that two had to be established.

JG: Two, two collectives? (03:05:00)

RA: Because one of the points is you get together with people and hash it out. You can't have too many people or it doesn't work. So for a number of years it was two. Then they lost some members and maintained one, but they're still in business.

JG: How many people were in the sort of ideal number? What was the ideal number in a tzedakah collective?

RA: There were around twenty-five.

JG: Around twenty-five. And so they would go through a process of making decisions, having educated themselves about potential recipients.

RA: Then there was an offshoot of that There was a woman named Rita Porstsky. She was a Fabringen person from early on and has had a fair amount of money, a couple million. And she became ill. And both she and her mother had the same illness. (03:06:00) some kind of cancer of the uterus or something. But she didn't have any

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

children. In any case, she set up a charitable trust, and that increased the amount of money that could be given. It's not officially through the tzedakah collectives, but by providing information about projects.

JG: She can at least have a voice in that. Very nice. What can you tell us about Fabrangen's role in co-sponsoring the Jewish Folk Arts Festival?

RA: So, Shneyer is the key person here. He was active in Fabrangen at the time, so he actually came to the community at a community meeting and asked for support, mainly financial support, and then people to help with logistics. It was universally supported. (03:07:00) And we have a record here somewhere of Rochelle Helzner [see addendum].

JG: Your wife.

RA: Self-serving things.

JG: Yes, indeed, indeed. Are there any other significant programs you want to mention? Otherwise I want to move to the question of retreats.

RA: Retreats? We never retreat! Okay.

JG: So, Weiss's Farm. Outside of the sort of immediate Fabrangen family there were gatherings of Jews involved in the early *havurot* that started taking place early in the Seventies also.

RA: Only. It was the three groups who we're now talking about.

JG: Havurat Shalom, New York Havurah, and Fabrangen.

RA: Right. I don't remember, Michael and I both said at the same time (03:08:00) that this was something to do.

JG: Michael Strassfeld?

RA: Strassfeld. So we did. And some outsiders came, but basically the idea was three times in the year to have a retreat.

JG: Coinciding with —

RA: Shalosh Regalim. Of America and Israel.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: What do you mean, America and Israel?

RA: Well, it was easy to pick the one for the summer and the fall —

JG: Meaning Shavuot and Sukkot.

RA: Yeah. We could have done Pesach, whatever. But we made one that was — well, maybe we did that. No, I don't think we did. Because of the seder, hard to do Pesach. So we did it around the wintertime. Anyway. And the American holidays are things like Labor Day, Columbus Day. But it worked out. (03:09:00) It was great it actually worked out. And there was a moment which was very important. Some guy, I don't remember his name, got up at some point and accused — he wouldn't give names — but one group does not follow the practice of mainly relying on experts in terms of Judaism, to teach Torah. In other words, what did Rashi have to say.

JG: One of the groups meaning one of these three *havurot*?

RA: So I was about to get up and defend. But it wasn't necessary. Everybody said, No. It's great to have Rashi, but it's not the end of the world. And it's legitimate what people have to say. One of the key points of the *havurah* movement is that it's legitimate to say things (03:10:00) that sound outrageous otherwise. So it was a great moment. That person was kind of shouted down by the other people, and there was just — really, an example of a moment when things could have been limited, or bifurcated and destroyed or building multiple centers, different but committed to helping each other as well.

JG: And yet, each of these *havurot* had developed independently. Did you learn things from each other's experiences and models that you wanted to take back and try and innovate and experiment with within your own community at Fabbrangen?

RA: Yeah.

JG: What, for instance?

RA: Well, the emphasis on singing in the service was a little bit more than (03:11:00) there. The authenticity of the sense of the spirit within you is something that they contributed to us or from getting from us [see addendum].

JG: Can you clarify that?

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: They felt — the people at least who spoke to us [*laughs*] and said, “Fabringen is fantastic.” I remember what’s his name, who’s now both at Fabringen and the New York Havurah. He does interfaith work.

JG: Oh, Gerry Serotta.

RA: Yes, Gerry Serotta. So he was in the New York Havurah, hadn’t yet appeared on the D.C. arena. But he said, “These people speak of God. It’s really an integral part of who they are. We don’t.” And he sat down. (03:12:00) That kind of thing. And we helped — you know, they’re exclusive, but that helps them bring out this. You know, that Havurat Shalom, it’s not the model of Fabringen. With us, the more that come, the merrier. In their case, still, I think, you have to be admitted.

JG: No, it hasn’t been for years.

RA: Oh, okay, well I keep up. Anyway, it’s that kind of thing. Plus the Weisses themselves are a unique —

JG: Weisses of Weiss’s Farm. Who are the Weisses and what, in fact, was Weiss’s Farm?

RA: They were both survivors, had lost a lot of family members.

JG: A couple.

RA: They are a couple. And they’re committed to making sure that young Jewish people have Jewish experiences and joy in their life. (03:13:00) And they were just great, funny, involved. You know, since we’re there three times in the year, it’s enough time to keep up with somebody. And their *matzo brei* — he’s famous for his *matzo brei*.

JG: Really? Maybe you were there for Passover.

RA: I missed it, but I was there. Now, anyway. And they have a son who’s a real nice guy. Made aliyah.

JG: Some people have mentioned the retreats at Weiss’s Farm as incubators, essentially, of interesting ideas that percolated and were discussed within this group of membership from all the *havurot* that then really took on a life of their own. I was wondering, I think it was Sharon Strassfeld who mentioned the idea of tzedakah (03:14:00) collectives as something that was incubated in conversations at the retreats at Weiss’s Farm, which then

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

were also established in New York City. Does that resonate for you, the idea of Weiss's Farm as a place of incubating?

RA: Yeah, it was one of the things that did. Yeah.

JG: How important was the idea of sort of creating a sense of fellowship among members of the different *havurot* in terms of building a larger sense of community?

RA: Well, I think the extension of who they were and what we are was certainly useful to everybody in the first number of years. You know, the first one unintentionally was involved with the end of the Yom Kippur War.

JG: That was the first one? (03:15:00)

RA: I think so. But it was one of them if it wasn't the first one, but I think it was the first one. The challenge is pretty great to hold together, but I think it succeeded.

JG: Why, why?

RA: Well, people were in a very emotional state. And all of us had been charged at different times with not being Jewish enough, etcetera, etcetera.

JG: So I want to move into the sort of last reflection section where I'd like to focus more on your thoughts on how this period of your involvement with Fabrangen affected your own life moving forward and also your reflections of the broader impact of the *havurah* on American Jewish life. So you and your family were active in Fabrangen from its inception in '71 for about fifteen years, and then you moved to a new community. (03:16:00) Was that for work? Why did you move?

RA: We moved here. The reason was Rochelle is the cantor, but that cantor is in Rockville. So we kind of compromised, we came up to here from downtown, but that still gave her a chance to get —

JG: What did you do about finding a Jewish community for yourselves and for your family at that point?

RA: Well, that was a compromise as well. In selecting the neighborhood, we required one that we could walk to, which wasn't so easy, but Ohr Chodesh was such a place. (03:17:00) It's about a mile away. Walking there was generally easy.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

OS: And biking.

JG: What kind of community is Ohr Chodesh?

RA: It's a middle of the road Conservative synagogue. But that's the one I was telling you about — the little effort used to get the acceptance of women.

JG: Can you tell us about that? What were some of the —?

RA: Well, for years it was a rightwing, Conservative synagogue, in particular on women's issues. They thought if they gave somebody the right to speak on behalf of a committee that that was — that's not true. The point is women couldn't really do it. And there was a great deal of interest in their moving. (03:18:00) So I met the rabbi at an event elsewhere, and he said, "We're going to change this very quickly." So after ten or so years — whatever it was. It seemed like the end of the world. He said, he took serious thought of it, but holding to his position. So the building underwent a period of being fixed and upgraded, all that kind of stuff. And people were out of there for a period of time, for about a year, because there was too much stuff. So they were *davening* in a trailer. Well, you can't have certain things in a trailer, one of them being a *mechitzah*. Not that we had a *mechitzah* here, but — So things began to change. (03:19:00) And basically he gave in, or advanced to, but the role of women became normative.

JG: I understand that when you first left Fabringen, because of this move, that you were involved in starting a sort of informal *havurah*, egalitarian *havurah*-style minyan that met in people's homes.

RA: Met in our home.

JG: Met in your home. What happened with that effort?

RA: Oh, Jonah's sister was born, [*laughs*] and it was just too much. My father died, she was born. Not to be.

JG: So that's when you actually explored joining Ohr Chodesh and became members.

RA: Then I had to put time into that aspect of it. Energy. (03:20:00)

JG: So this sounds like it was a challenging period.

RA: Yes, that particular issue.

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

JG: That particular issue. What would you say have been the enduring aspects of the Fabbrangen vision that have continued to motivate you and your own Jewish journey?

RA: Well, it's a very different place. It can be good and not be the same. And it can be only fair and not be the same.

JG: What's the "it"?

RA: It is the style of community-building. There's a lot of teaching that goes on. In fact, a guy named Richard Friedman who was active in Weiss's Farm and went to in Israel — what's a yeshiva, (03:21:00) kind of, but a liberal yeshiva?

JG: I don't know.

RA: I can't remember. Anyway. He gives courses that are like what a rabbi would give — on texts, in other words. And people could do that if they want. It's open to that in particular, learning. The level of learning may not be so high, but the fact of it. And it's also caring. I think today most of the shuls are this way. They have increased learning, accepted opinions of different things. Care for each other to some degree. Not immense, but to some degree, they all have committees that help people get through problems. (03:22:00)

JG: So where have you and your family landed for a spiritual home? Is it Rochelle's synagogue, at this point, where she's the cantor [see addendum]?

RA: Well, she's the cantor there. She's also the kind of program person as well. So I'm not so much involved in the organizational stuff, but some.

JG: Are there ways in which you say your Jewish life and ideas about Judaism have diverged from what you thought in the Fabbrangen days, certainly the early Fabbrangen days?

RA: I don't think it's as exciting as Fabbrangen was, but I don't think Fabbrangen is as exciting as it was. (03:23:00) Different things become motivating factors. We had the children, and we hope to have other children of a different type.

JG: Small children!

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: Rochelle's family lives here, the extended family lives here. So that's good for her. It's fine.

JG: It sounds like there's had to be a fair amount of compromise, just for reasons of different life stages, as well as opportunities.

RA: It coincided with an issue which developed, which was this question of — how do you phrase this? The *Avinus* versus (03:24:00) the *Imahot*? Big issue of our day. Previous day, actually.

JG: Can you elaborate?

RA: So, it's whether in the *Amidah* we talked about, when we talk about God — mothers, mothers included. So in the beginning of that coming up, my position was — and it wasn't the end of the world position — that actually it's as the God of Abraham and the God of — and the *Imahot*. But the reason — so Moshe's not part of the *Avinu*. It's the three particular guys who had a particular relationship with God. It doesn't mean that people can't or wouldn't or didn't. And the way the Torah presents it, it's very much (03:25:00) the men who carry the thing. It doesn't mean that women couldn't carry, but historically men did. So I thought another name would be a good idea for the women, rather than just repeating, calling them mothers instead of fathers. Other people thought differently, so. Whatever the decision was, it will be what it is. So that's really what happened. That was seen incorrectly as related to the move. We had to move, because of her position, her work.

JG: You're saying people saw your departure as related to the *Imahot* decision?

RA: Right.

JG: But it wasn't, really.

RA: No. I mean, I disagreed, but so what. And, you know, (03:26:00) it moved, actually, way closer to where we are. But so do positions.

JG: Switch gears for a minute. You've had a long career, in both public and private sectors, and the intersections between them, in which you focused on the development of affordable housing and otherwise promoting community empowerment for relatively poor areas and groups of people, with limited financial and other resources. How, if at all, do you see your work as connected to your Jewish values, and the vision of what it has meant to you to live a, what you call a holistic Jewish life?

RA: Well, I think it's very important, obviously — (03:27:00) because you're putting a problem for the society and using your value system to come up with solutions. And the single program that is today and has been for the last ten years is something called the housing tax credit — low income housing tax credit. And that replaced certain other programs. But still, it was a big step forward, and I played a major role in that. So that's the kind of activity that I'm interested in continuing. Not sure if that's going to happen, especially for a change of leadership.

JG: In our country, as we approach the inauguration of Donald Trump.

RA: Yes.

JG: Yeah. You've lived your life as, I think you would still say, as a (03:28:00) halachic Jew. Can you speak for a minute to your vision for growth and change and how it relates to your understanding of the Torah and the tension between midrash and Halachah? It's something we talked about earlier, but it seems like it's a thread that has run through your life, from the time you were very young and first thinking about these, all the way through your deepest sort of commitments today, feelings about what's important.

RA: So what you're referring to is the sense that — the vision of something is important. Taking the vision and making it work is very important. And that's what I hope to be, to have been doing in my (03:29:00) latter years. [*laughs*] But actually, since I've already told you, I have memory problems. I haven't yet figured out how to relate this to this search for meaningful connections. But I'm sure they're there. And, I hope to find them, *yirtzeh Hashem*, coming.

JG: So looking back over nearly half a century — hard to believe — of the development of *havurah* in American Jewish life, what would you say have been the *havurah*'s most important contributions and impact?

RA: That it's opened up the beauty of our tradition and the reality of God's presence. It's not the only group that does that, but I think that's what the groups we have in common — (03:30:00) a continuing search for ways to do that and make it better.

JG: When you say it's not the only group, are you thinking of other groups within the Jewish world? Or beyond? Or both?

Robert Agus, 12/14/16

RA: Beyond, I would say. But still a real component doesn't get lost in the mishmash of entities. Judaism is a great model, and the more that we can do that, the less likely we are to get presidents like we got. So.

JG: Can you unpack that a little? In what sense? Judaism's a great model in what way?

RA: A life of service and enjoyment. You've got to have all these different elements to make it work. But it's there.

JG: All these elements we've been discussing — *tefilah* —

RA: And I'm lucky to have met people (03:31:00) in all those organizations who you can see are truly committed to improving things. And we also have to figure out how to solve the situation in Israel. Not easy. But I think our ancestors — not a long time, but recent ones, to have gotten through the Holocaust and miseries like that makes this relatively small. But it's real.

JG: Yes, indeed. And as we were just mentioning, we're on the cusp of the inauguration of Donald Trump as president of the United States. So at this moment, a challenge, or what many people conceive of as a challenge, (03:32:00) are there any lessons you think the *havurah* experiment can impart to us for a path forward as we think about finding productive pathways for change and sustaining the movement in progressive directions, holistic directions?

RA: I would say the existing Conservative synagogues need just a tad more participatory music and storytelling. But the real change is in the world and for all people, different people. But they all have to share, do share in the search for ways of combining vision and path. And we have had it for a long time. We can help teach that it isn't either/or, (03:33:00) and it doesn't depend on charismatic leaders. It depends on all of us feeling the need and great opportunities to change aspects of life in the world.

JG: Given the energy that you feel around you now, does that leave you feeling optimistic? Or not?

RA: I think who knows, he may actually desire to make a greater influence, and to do that he's got to change and be closer to the rest of us. So for that reason, it could work.

JG: Okay, from your mouth to God's ears.

Addendum

Pg. 2: In Israel, that is. They wanted to come to America after being in Israel for a little while.

Pg. 3: There were actually four boys.

Pg. 4: Yoreh Yoreh is an orthodox *smicha* track that covers areas that deal with the day to day questions that rabbis might receive, such as questions on Kashrut or *taharat hamishpacha*. Most programs of Yoreh Yoreh also include study of the laws of Shabbat and Mourning. The most general form of *smicha* is “Yoreh Yoreh” (“he shall teach”). Most Orthodox rabbis hold this qualification; they are sometimes called a Moreh Hora’ah (“a teacher of lessons”).

Pg. 5: Everyone in their circles and community had maids.

Pg. 9: This section was a bit skewed, so for clarification: Rob’s brother was selling the car, and he raised the price, but the man buying it really needed the car. When Rob’s father heard about it, he dropped the price so the man could afford the car.

Pg. 34: Their previous Jewish experience hadn’t touched them — the *havurah* did, and it was liberating.

Pg. 70: A record made of festival participants, not just Rochelle.

Pg. 71: The nature of the spirit was circular — both groups gave and took from one another.

Pg. 75: Rochelle is the cantor at the Tikvat Israel Congregation.