

**Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project**

**ROBERT GOLDENBERG**

**Interviewed by Jayne K. Guberman**

**May 11, 2017 and October 18, 2017**

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

[Note: The initial interview with Robert Goldenberg was on May 11. Afterwards, there were some technical issues with the first half of the interview, so the first half was redone in October. This explains the oddity of the interview beginning with the section that was filmed second.]

### **Part 1 — October 18, 2017**

Jayne Guberman (JG): My name is Jayne Guberman and today is Wednesday, October 18, 2017. I'm here with Robert Goldenberg at his home in Princeton, New Jersey, and we're going to record the second part of our interview for the Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project. Bob, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Robert Goldenberg (RG): Yes you do.

JG: So, as you know, last spring we started our interview. We talked a lot about your experiences in the *havurah*, the New York Havurah, and some of the ways it had played out in your own life and in the larger Jewish community in America. So, today we'd like to go back and start by providing some background on you and your early life, and what led you to your experiences in the New York Havurah. Let's begin with your family, when you were growing up.

RG: All right.

JG: You were born in 1942.

RG: I was. That's correct.

JG: In Brooklyn.

RG: In Brooklyn.

JG: You described your family as “standard issue Ashkenazi immigrants” to the US. Tell us briefly about your family.

RG: Yes. Around the time that I was born, my grandmother, my mother's mother, came to live with us. So, we were a household of my parents and my grandmother and me, and then my sister was born some years later. My parents were both schoolteachers in the New York City system.

JG: Where had they grown up?

RG: They had grown up in Brooklyn. My mother lived into her nineties, and never did not live in Brooklyn. My grandmother had come from the old country, from Minsk. She was already married there. Her husband, my grandfather, had passed away very shortly before I was born. I'm named after him. She couldn't read or write. She was in other ways very competent, and she could read numbers, so that she could go shopping, which she did every day. It was her way to get out. But she couldn't read or write. My parents were both college graduates, and at least my mother, and maybe my father as well — I don't remember — had a Master's degree. They represented the kind of standard dramatic upward mobility of families of that kind.

JG: What was your mother's Master's degree in? [see addendum]

RG: Science. She was a biology major, though she spent her career teaching what were then called “retarded children” — now special-ed kids. My father was a high school math teacher. Our home was unambiguously Jewish. I don't think my parents had a single non-Jewish close friend, although they had plenty of non-Jewish colleagues at work, with whom they got along pretty well. The home was kosher. (00:03:00) My parents did not keep kosher out of the home. I always suspected that was on behalf of my grandmother who had come to live with us, but my mother vehemently denied that. My father was pretty clearly indifferent to the whole thing. He wouldn't have cared one way or the other. But my mother really did have a sort of sentimental attachment to Jewish tradition, although she, in her own life, was not very traditional. So, that's how we grew up. They belonged to a Conservative synagogue.

JG: What was the neighborhood like?

RG: It was a Jewish neighborhood, though not overwhelmingly so. There were plenty of gentiles in the building, even in the apartment house where we lived.

JG: What part of Brooklyn was this?

RG: I grew up across the street from Kings County Hospital, in what, I guess, was called Flatbush.

JG: So, can you describe the ethnic composition, or the religious composition, of the neighborhood?

RG: The neighborhood had many, many, many Jews, as I say, although not only Jews. There was an Orthodox synagogue not far away. I knew a couple of Orthodox families, but we were distinctly not Orthodox. None of my parents' friends were observant at all. It was a highly assimilated but unambiguously Jewishly ethnic world in which I moved. In my public school — and classes were large, this was the public-school system — I don't think I ever had more than three non-Jewish kids in any of my classes, until maybe not even junior high or high school. That gives you a sense of that, though I can be more detailed if you want me to.

JG: No, that's good.

RG: Okay. So, I had that kind of background. My grandmother, who lived with us, kept Shabbat at home, but she relied on my parents to do all the things that in another time and place a Shabbos goy would have done.

JG: Such as what?

RG: Turn on the lights, cook something. My parents made no pretense of being Sabbath observers.

JG: So your mother would cook on Shabbat, for instance.

RG: As I recall. If I'm doing her an injustice, I apologize to her, wherever she may be, but as I recall, that's correct. They belonged to a large Conservative synagogue, which they never attended. But they sent me to Hebrew school there. This was the Brooklyn Jewish Center on Eastern Parkway.

JG: When you say that they never attended, was that literally so? Did they not go for the High Holidays?

RG: That's correct.

JG: So, not at all.

RG: Not at all. In later years, because of the turn that my life had taken [see addendum], my mother began to go from time to time. My grandmother went on the High Holidays, and to say *Yizkor*. I don't remember whether she went more often (00:06:00) than that either. After all, she couldn't read the prayer book. When my mother started going to *Yizkor*, my father had no inclination to join her, but then in later years still, she bought him a tallis and made him come with her on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. So he

went. He was very compliant in that way. If she wanted him to go, he went. He sat there. It was not uninteresting to him, but as an outside observer. That's how I grew up. There was no real recognition other than the Kashrut of the home [see addendum]. Well, no, we lit Hanukkah candles. On Yom Kippur, when my parents did fast, suddenly they didn't turn on any lights. They plugged in a few nightlights. On Yom Kippur and only on Yom Kippur, suddenly they were doing all these things. We had no real seder until I got old enough to make one, which means ten years old.

JG: And what happened then?

RG: Then I presided over it. I wanted it. I probably learned at Hebrew school that I should want it. They had copies of the *Maxwell House Haggadah*, or something like that, so I read through parts of it. I was going to read through every word, until my parents told me, no, you can't do that. That's going to take forever. So, I presided over the family seder from then on, without break, until I had no family left except for my own nuclear family. I became, as it were, the rabbinic authority in the family — all of this was from an early age.

JG: It was indeed. You were a small child during World War Two.

RG: I was younger than a small child. I was born during the war, but I had no awareness of it at all.

JG: No awareness.

RG: None at all.

JG: Do you remember a time when you did become aware of the war, of the Holocaust?

RG: No. Actually, I did not. All of my grandparents and many of their siblings were already in America before World War One. Although there may have been a conspiracy of silence going on, it may also well be that there were no close relatives of mine left in Europe when the Second World War began — because it never got talked about, but I also never had a sense that something wasn't being talked about. I don't remember President Roosevelt dying either, although I do remember President Truman. The first public event that I noticed, the little Jewish calendar from 1948 had a whole page about (00:09:00) a Jewish State. I had no idea what that was about, but I remember noticing it.

JG: You were, like, five or six.

RG: In May of 1948, I was five and a half, right.

JG: So you do have a slight recollection.

RG: I was reading. I could read from a young age. So I found the thing and I read it.

JG: Do you remember any conversation?

RG: No, I don't. I don't remember discussing it with anybody. My parents, they and their friends were ethnically Jewish, as I said, but generally speaking — there was one exception to that, but there's always an exception to anything — generally speaking were not interested in Jewish things. So, their conversation, which I would overhear all the time, was not about such matters.

JG: What was the conversation about?

RG: Oh, professional things. They were all schoolteachers, so they had plenty to talk about with the Board of Ed and local politics. The men all played golf, so they could talk about that. Just, things transpiring in their lives. Everybody was raising children, so there were always stories about that. That's what I remember, but it was a long time ago.

JG: So, all of their friends were sort of these secular, ethnically identified Jews.

RG: That's right. They were all, as my father-in-law in later years would say, Workmen's Circle Jews. They were all leftist. I mean, Workmen's Circle is overtly leftist. They were not so political either. But they were all the kinds of people who voted Democratic. My parents were registered in the Liberal Party, until I talked them out of that on the grounds that in New York City, where what really mattered was the primary, they really should be registered Democrats. So they changed their registration. Right, so that's how I grew up.

JG: When you say Workmen's Circle Jews, were they actually members of Workmen's Circle?

RG: I don't think so. My father for a while was a member of B'nai Brith. No, by Workmen's Circle, my father-in-law just meant politically liberal, not religious, at home with Yiddish things, which my parents were. My grandmother lived with us. My parents and she spoke to one another in Yiddish. My father said in later years that he learned English when he started going to public school. I don't know if that's really true. It's a little hard to imagine he had no way of learning English on the street. But that's what he said.

JG: So you grew up hearing Yiddish all the time.

RG: Oh, I could speak Yiddish then.

JG: Did they speak to you in Yiddish?

RG: No, but I learned how to speak Yiddish from (00:12:00) listening to them. No, they made no effort. But it's interesting — according to legend, there was a fight between my two grandmothers when I was born. One said, "Well, of course we'll teach him Yiddish," and the other said, "Why would we do that? We're in America now." And they had a big argument about it.

JG: Which was the one who lived in your house?

RG: The one who was not a Yiddishist. My other grandmother, who was also widowed by the time I was not very old, could read, and especially read the Yiddish newspaper every day. So, she was very informed. And she read the *Forvetz*, the leftist newspaper. She wouldn't go near the right-wing newspaper. I don't think either of them made any particular effort to speak to me in Yiddish, but I was growing up in a house where these were the dimensions of our identity.

JG: Were your parents concerned with being American?

RG: Not overtly. Not consciously. We just took all that for granted. It wasn't one of the homes one hears about, that kind of thing where there was deep and overt gratitude for being an American. None of that. It's just, we're American. We didn't own an American flag. I asked my father, how come we don't? And he kind of just said, "I don't know." We just never felt a need to buy one.

JG: Did anybody in your family fight in the Second World War?

RG: My father did. He was in the Pacific for several years. I don't know of anyone else who did, but I was young enough that I might have been oblivious to all that. I do remember his coming home.

JG: How old were you?

RG: When he came home, I was probably between three-and-a-half or four. I don't remember exactly when it was that he came home.

JG: Had you seen him until that point that you recall?

RG: I don't know the answer to that.

JG: But you don't recall seeing him.

RG: Right. I mean, he wasn't shipped out until after I was born, but I don't know hold old I was when he was shipped out.

JG: What do you remember about his homecoming?

RG: People were glad to see him. It wasn't very festive. It was, people were glad to see him. That's all I can tell you, really. It wasn't an event that burned itself into my memory. I don't remember that there was a big party or anything like that. So then, I was going to Hebrew school at this Conservative synagogue.

JG: This was the East Midwood —

RG: No, that was the Brooklyn Jewish Center, and then we moved when I was thirteen, into the neighborhood of the East Midwood Jewish Center, which in many ways was the same kind of synagogue. It was one of the largest, as I call them, Conservative cathedrals of Brooklyn. I joined the teenage (00:15:00) youth group.

JG: Go back for a minute. What had been your Jewish education up to that point?

RG: Hebrew school. Standard, three days a week Hebrew school.

JG: Starting —

RG: Starting probably in first or second grade. And I took to it. I enjoyed it. I found it interesting, but I don't think I showed, at that early point, any sign of what would turn out to be the direction of my life. Then we moved to the East Midwood area, and I became active in what they called the Young People's Synagogue, which met on Saturday morning. It was largely a self-directed group of teenagers. This is already a foreshadowing of the *havurah*, but it was my first experience of belonging to a Jewish community which is a free-standing, self-governing group. It became my model of Jewish life. I never became very tolerant of belonging to large synagogues. I had a whole succession of these things. The big influence on me, which was the direct result of me belonging to this teen synagogue group, was going to Camp Ramah.



JG: I want to ask you a little bit more about your synagogue experience. One question I have is, what drew you to this? You had not grown up in a family that was involved.

RG: I don't know. I've never known the answer to that, although you can imagine that I've thought about it a lot. I don't know the answer to that. There was tension between my mother and her mother, always, which is not so unusual in Jewish families of a certain kind. I've always wondered whether I became very interested in the much more traditional Jewish perspective as a kind of taking sides with my grandmother against my mother, which would not be psychologically implausible, though I never explored that in therapy or anything.

JG: Were your parents supportive of your growing interest in Jewish things?

RG: My father, as I said before, was not interested in such matters. My father figured, if that's what I wanted, fine. My mother, one of the things she said about me when I suddenly began to become much more observant, one of the things she said about me, to me, was that, "I'm just worried that you'll be saddled with guilt when you abandon this." Which — well, "when" might be too strong. She might have said "if," though I remember it with her having said "when." Whether she was confident that was, just as parents always said, "a phase," or whether she just was actually worried, she said that I was committing myself to something that would be very hard to un-commit to, (00:18:00) if I ever decided to do that. It's true, by the way, that one of the features of my personality is that once I undertake something, it's very hard for me to say that's enough, I'm done with this now. So I do wind up sometimes committed to things long after I've lost any real desire to be part of them. She may have known that about me and been concerned, though she was wrong. Over the course of many years now, I've become less observant, more observant, and it's never been labeled with guilt. Labeled is the wrong word, but you know what I mean. So, she was right about that, but then, at the same time, several years later when I went to the rabbinical school at JTS, she began to feel that she had to behave in a way that was suitable for the mother of a rabbinical school student. That's when she started going to shul more often. That's when she started to pressure my father to go. That's when she stopped going to work on yom tov. My parents had always gone to work, not on the High Holidays, but on the other Jewish holidays. My father continued. My mother stopped.

JG: Fascinating. So, your Jewish education continued through high school, is that right?

RG: Yes, because East Midwood had high school development. Well, not development. Not department.

JG: Program.

RG: It continued its supplementary school program through high school.

JG: Had you had a bar mitzvah?

RG: Yes. Again, a standard bar mitzvah.

JG: What was a standard bar mitzvah in those days?

RG: I learned to read the haftorah.

JG: Did you learn the trope? Or, how did you learn it?

RG: I learned the trope. I did not learn how to read the Torah, which is what bar mitzvah kids now all learn, till years later. I read the haftorah. I'm sure the rabbi gave some speech to me that I don't remember at all, and then we had a party in the house, not one of these big lavish things. Just my parents brought in some deli and invited whomever they invited. I don't know. So, it came and went. It was not a memorable — well, no. It was not a fancy occasion.

JG: Did you continue because you were interested —?

RG: Yes. My parents were not pressuring me to do any of this. They would have accepted my decision to abandon it, as my mother thought that I would someday. No, it was all fine with them, but it was all my idea.

JG: You were starting to say that you —

RG: Some of my friends from that group are still my friends. Go ahead.

JG: — that your teen group that met, and you were very active in that. Tell us a little bit about that experience.

RG: Well, we had services every Saturday morning, which we planned and which we led. (00:21:00) Most of us were also in this high school supplementary school, so we saw each other repeatedly over the week.

JG: This was really your social group.

RG: This was really my social group, though I had other secular Jewish friends in high school and in junior high. But this was my neighborhood social group. We reinforced each other's interest in and commitment to Jewish involvement. Of those people, several became professors of Jewish studies, several became educators. It was a program that actually bore the kind of fruit that every educator wants a program like that to bear. The same guy who was the advisor to the group also was the head counselor at Camp Ramah. He was the one who recruited. — Aryeh Rohn was his name.

JG: Rohn?

RG: R-O-H-N, in English. It was a Hebrew name, really. He had gone from Europe to Israel, Palestine, and then came to America. He recruited me to Camp Ramah, and there, again, I had a much more powerful experience of the same kind of thing. I was only a camper for one summer. I was fifteen before I started going. But then I was on the staff for ten years. It was, again, the staff of the camp runs the place. It makes decisions and organizes programs. My peer group were these people, many of whom were also still my friends. I was having the repeated experience of belonging to a small Jewish group of people my own age who are inventing our Jewish lives together.

JG: Which Ramah did you go to?

RG: Poconos.

JG: Tell us a little bit about what that camp experience was like and how it impacted you, given where you were in your life at that point.

RG: I knew at once that it had had a very strong impact on me, although again, I didn't know how to think about it really. So, I've never really been able to account to myself of why it had such a strong impact. I came home from that one summer determined to keep Shabbat, determined to keep kosher out of the house, and my parents, who found some of that inconvenient, just allowed it to happen. They were not going to get in the way of my becoming what I wanted to become. So that was the impact that it had on me. That is to say, I can describe it, but I can't really explain it.

JG: Was this a singular experience of Shabbat, for instance, (00:24:00) for you? Had you had experiences that were similar to the kinds of Shabbats one would have at Ramah?

RG: I might have gone to a couple of USY weekends.

JG: What do you remember about Shabbat at Ramah, for instance?

RG: Just that there was a feeling that it was special, that it was programmed in such a way that it was enjoyable. That it was, in fact, as Shabbat is designed to be, a break from what we were otherwise doing all week long. That's the answer that I can give you. Nobody gave speeches about it. Nobody ever got up and said, "See how wonderful Shabbat is at camp? You could get that at home, too." None of that went on. It just was there, and it had the intended effect on me. I don't know quite how else to see it. We also had *tefilah* every morning, of course, and that didn't stick on me quite so strongly. But Shabbat did. The idea of keeping kosher did. Of course, the camp was kosher, but that could just have been seen as because they needed to feed us something. The home that I came from was kosher, so that was less novel.

JG: What about being *shomer shabbat*?

RG: What do you mean, what about?

JG: Did that stick? Did that carry over?

RG: Yes, very much. Very much still. Living by the Jewish calendar has probably been the most consistent piece of Jewishness in my life. As somebody once said, I'm a sucker for holy time. So I just took that on. I learned how to do it better. I got more skillful at making Shabbat valuable.

JG: In what way?

RG: I learned how to take walks. I learned how to take naps. I learned how to make the rhythm of Shabbat different and noteworthy. But I also was among friends with whom we kept Shabbat. So on Saturday afternoon, some of that same group of people would go and hang out at somebody's house. It was, as you said, also my social group, also my group of identity. I was much less reflective about a lot of these things than you would have hoped I would be, because I don't have more to say about them. Somehow I just got into this way of living the Jewish life, and it took with me.

JG: Were there particular counselors or leaders at the camp who had an impact on you?

RG: There were people who had an impact on me in (00:27:00) other ways, but I didn't identify my becoming interested in leading a more Jewish life with anybody. It wasn't under the influence of any individual person. I didn't feel that I was under the influence of any individual person. Ismar Schorsch himself was my counselor the one year that I was

a camper, but it didn't make the same difference to me. Anybody else could have been my counselor. Had I had some sort of jerky nineteen-year-old for my counselor, maybe things would have all been different. I can't speak to that. Then in later years, I became very much under the influence of Rabbi David Mogilner who was a very powerful influence over my life. He was the director of Camp Ramah in the Poconos from the early sixties on, when I was already on the staff. I worked closely with him, and I just admired him greatly. But by then I had made my Jewish commitments. That was all in other dimensions of my life that that came into play.

JG: You went back to Ramah in a junior staff position —

RG: And then a senior staff position. By the time I left, I was the associate director of the counselor training program, and also the program coordinator for the camp. As I said, I was on the staff for ten years, and then I had nothing to do with Camp Ramah until my kids started going. But that was Berkshires, when the whole world was different.

JG: Yeah, indeed. So, you graduated from high school in '59.

RG: Correct.

JG: And went on to do your undergraduate.

RG: Right. I went to Cornell.

JG: How did you decide on Cornell?

RG: It's the place that I got into, to be simple about it. I applied to various places. I got into Cornell and Brooklyn College, and I really didn't want to go to Brooklyn College. So, I went to Cornell, which was fine. I enjoyed the education that I got there, although in retrospect, it could have been a better designed education. I'm not blaming myself for that. I'm blaming the school for that. That's a whole different conversation. But once again, I became very quickly involved in the Jewish life there, which was the Hillel. Again, there was a Hillel rabbi who was Rabbi Morris Goldfarb. He, of course, was an active guide to the group, but also, to a very considerable extent, we ran our own lives as a group. I also became very active in what was then the Young Israel of Cornell, which is essentially the Jewish living house and had the kosher kitchen. There we were entirely on our own. We just ran our own building.

JG: Was this a university-sponsored house, or was it an independent project? (00:30:00)

RG: Well, it was university property. It was a university-owned house. I'm sure we had to register with them in whatever way we did. The university was responsible for maintenance, so that we were in touch with the university people constantly, but it wasn't sponsored by the university. It was only registered with the university, which is a different thing.

JG: Was it sponsored by Hillel?

RG: No. It was sponsored by the National Young Israel Movement, although it no longer is. It's still there and in the same building, but it's now a much more free-standing entity.

JG: So what was it like, in the days that you were there?

RG: Well, it was ostensibly Orthodox, which I was not really. Maybe half the residents in the house were in fact Orthodox, graduates of day schools and all that. The other half just liked living there.

JG: How big a group was it?

RG: A couple of dozen? We had monthly meetings. We made policies. The kitchen was run by one of us, not by a grown up. You got to run a kitchen. That was a big job. We did it all ourselves. There was some tension between the observant and the non-observant guys.

JG: Were there people there who were truly non-observant?

RG: Oh, yes. There were people there who, if we said we needed a minyan, they'd say, Don't bother me with that stuff, but who lived there for reasons that were not always easy to understand. It may have been — well, they were just not easy to understand. I'm not going to start speculating. So I lived there, and again it became the kind of group in which I liked to live my kind of Jewish life. In both the Hillel and the Young Israel, I rose to positions of leadership, and it kept it going for me. It reinforced what was already — you could call the trend of my developing life.

JG: What was it like to be a Jewish student at Cornell in those years? We're talking '59 to '63?

RG: Right, '59 to '63. A couple of things are worth mentioning. First of all, to be *shomer shabbat* there was very hard, because the university had no knowledge that this was going on and didn't care. I had to take a couple of classes on Saturday. They were

required for my major. I just sat there and listened, I didn't take notes. The university as a whole was much less hospitable to overt Jewishness than universities have since become.

JG: How was that manifest?

RG: In several ways. First of all, we couldn't get the university (00:33:00) to accept that the kosher kitchen at the Young Israel House could be brought in under the university meal plan. They just wouldn't have that. So if you ate there, you paid for it out of your own money. That probably meant that you didn't have a meal plan, which meant that other meals that you bought in the university cafeteria were also at the cash rate. The university wouldn't hear of changing that. Here's one story. I think it was my sophomore year. The first day of classes was during Rosh Hashanah. So I went to one of the professors and said, "I'm going to have to miss the first day of classes. It's a Jewish holiday. Is the syllabus already available, please?" He gave me the syllabus, and then he said, "Well, if you can't do things our way, then why are you here?" So that kind of attitude — it was still acceptable to express that kind of attitude when I was a student. He was an old guy. He was the old guard. I don't know if younger professors would have said that. I also had a math professor who was much younger, married to an Israeli. He understood that I didn't come to class on the first day of yom tov but didn't understand why I wouldn't come to class on the second day. "Even El Al flies on the second day of the holiday!" he said to me. His wife was Israeli, and they were secular. So, there wasn't a lot of readiness to be understanding of what I was trying to become. Let's put it that way.

JG: How large a community was the Jewish population of the university?

RG: Overall?

JG: Overall. Do you have a sense of that?

RG: I was told twenty percent. Although, in later years, I was told by somebody who knows, most of the estimates of Jewish populations on university campuses, right down to today are much too high.

JG: The estimates are too high?

RG: — are too high. So maybe there weren't twenty percent. I just don't know.

JG: And of that, let's say, twenty percent, how large a group would you say were involved —

RG: Jewishly involved?

JG: Jewishly involved and also on the observant end.

RG: Oh, on the observant end?

JG: Are we talking about a very tiny —

RG: I am. I'm talking about no more than fifty people, and maybe even less than that. There were some observant women, too, who lived in the girl's dorms. They would come eat meals with us.

JG: So, this house that you were living in was male only.

RG: Only. In those days, there was no co-ed housing anywhere.

JG: And there was no supervision at all, there were no “adults” living in the house.

RG: That's correct. If we had gotten into the habit of making wild parties, it would have come to somebody's attention, but that wasn't who we were. There was no (00:36:00) adult supervision at all. In theory, the national office of Young Israel ought to have been paying attention, but it sort of paid none, because we weren't sending them any money.

JG: I see. And how was this house integrated, if at all, with the Hillel on campus?

RG: It wasn't institutionally integrated at all. It was a separate entity. But many of us who were active in either were also active in the other. We went back and forth, more or less comfortably.

JG: What was the rabbi, the head of Hillel's attitude toward this Young Israel House?

RG: Favorable. I mean, he understood that we were providing a valuable service. He thought, every now and then, the Orthodoxy of it was a little immature, which I'm sure was correct. He didn't like the national Young Israel office at all. He thought that they were really just not carrying out what ought to have been their responsibilities to us. But we all got along with him just fine.

JG: What do you mean when you say that he might have thought that the Orthodoxy was a little immature?



RG: Sometimes, some of us — not me, because I never claimed to be Orthodox — started insisting that a certain thing be done a certain way, which there was strictly really no need for it to be done that way.

JG: Can you think of an example?

RG: The question of a *mechitzah* at the Saturday morning service was probably the most persistent problem along these lines. Finally, one of the boys who lived with us in the Young Israel House —

JG: Wait, what was the issue?

RG: They wanted a *mechitzah*, and there wasn't going to be one as long as he was the rabbi. There was separate seating, mind you. It was the Conservative style of the fifties and sixties. Finally, one of us, only one, stopped attending the minyan on this issue. But because he had also been the president of Hillel and was a regular Torah reader, he undertook every four or five weeks to read the whole parashah, and that week he would come. Of course, he didn't want to *daven* there, but he also didn't want to leave the rest of us in the lurch. So that was an admirable, I thought, solution to his problem. Otherwise, they wanted certain things that they weren't going to get. But there was no persistent tension over this. It was over once we were graduated and were gone.

JG: What did you study?

RG: I was a philosophy major, which was much more academic and much more analytic than I realized it would be. Being a philosophy major turned out to be of no use at all in trying to understand the big questions of life, which was why I had become a philosophy major. In later years, right down to the present, I realized (00:39:00) how unsophisticated my reading of philosophical texts was, and part of what I said before about the education that I got. Somehow, none of my professors helped me become more sophisticated in the way I read those texts. I took courses, I did pretty well, but that was all. I just floated in and out of it. But I was a philosophy major.

JG: So you graduated in '63?

RG: Sixty-three, and I went directly to JTS.

JG: To the rabbinical school.

RG: To the rabbinical school, yes.

JG: At what point did you start thinking about the rabbinate?

RG: Before I was a freshman in college.

JG: So you went to college thinking that —

RG: Expecting that I was going to become a rabbi. Now, why I expected to become a rabbi is interesting, because I had no desire to be the rabbi of a congregation at all. Because rabbis of a congregation have to answer, questions that I didn't know how to answer.

JG: Such as what?

RG: Like the meaning of life. “Rabbi, why did this happen to me?” But I went to the rabbinical school for the simple reason that I had never met a Jewishly informed person who was not a rabbi, which is a sign of something about the way I grew up. I wanted to be a Jewishly informed person, so I figured I'd better go to rabbinical school and become a Jewishly informed person, and then I'll figure out what to do. While I was at the seminary, I realized I was destined for an academic career, so I went directly from there to graduate school.

JG: What was your experience like at the seminary? And what years are we talking about here?

RG: Sixty-three to sixty-eight. I learned a lot. I learned an awful lot, and I don't want to betray my gratitude for that. I learned an awful lot. It was religiously a not very satisfying place, because there was no real intellectual exploration of the kind of questions that I had hoped to satisfy as a philosophy major and still wanted to satisfy.

JG: These were, as you were saying, the 'big questions'?

RG: Existential questions, right. Seminary just assumed that everybody would be observant, which was not the case, but it assumed that, and it taught a lot of texts.

JG: Everybody would be observant, meaning people out there, Jews, or —?

RG: No, no, no —

JG: So you meant the rabbinical students.

RG: Yeah. When you applied to the rabbinical school, you signed a pledge to be observant.

JG: And what was meant by that, at that point?

RG: Shabbat, and Kashrut, and *tefilah*, I would guess. All those were things that I was doing in those days anyway, so I didn't think about it much. Of course I signed. But I was told that in the dormitory, maybe half the men did *daven* every morning, when I assumed in my naivete that it was a hundred percent — (00:42:00) that kind of thing. There were no courses about religion at JTS. Religion was not a concept that informed the way they did things. There were courses about Jewish thought, which were mostly, again, just reading texts. There were courses about history, and a lot of Talmud and Bible courses. I was in a special pre-academic program, so I didn't take all the rabbinic training courses.

JG: Because you had decided at that point —

RG: Because I just knew that I wasn't interested. In fact, I was warned before I even applied, don't tell them that you don't think you want to be a pulpit rabbi, because that might damage your chances of getting in. That, I think, has changed over the years. I have no idea if this was just an urban legend or had some truth to it, but I wasn't going to find out the hard way, so I didn't tell them. Once I was in, the increasingly clear reality that I was going to go to graduate school after that didn't seem to bother anybody. But I had been told the seminary in those days was in the business of training pulpit rabbis, and everything else was incidental.

JG: What did they do to train pulpit rabbis?

RG: There were courses that I didn't take. Courses in the kinds of things you ought to know before you meet a young couple, before you do a funeral — before you, before you, before you. You know?

JG: Pastoral kinds of things.

RG: Pastoral. That's the word they use. Pastoral training, right. Had I taken those courses, maybe I would have discovered how to answer people's questions. But I wasn't interested.

JG: And you weren't required to take them, it sounds like.

RG: Correct. I was in a special program that carried exemption from them. Otherwise, I would have been.

JG: Are you saying that the existence of this special program actually acknowledged on some level that there were people there who were not intending to be pulpit rabbis?

RG: Maybe yes, maybe no. It just acknowledged that there were some people there whose proficiency in Talmud was such that they should be allowed to develop that proficiency and not worry about these other courses. People who went through that program, almost none became pulpit rabbis. But whether that was understood or was just, as it were, coincidental reality was hard for me to know.

JG: Were there teachers there who were particularly influential for you?

RG: Well, certainly in my ability to learn to read rabbinic texts, which became the heart of my professional life. No, there were not teachers there who had a personal influence on me. (00:45:00) Heschel was there, who had a great personal influence on certain people, but those were essentially his chosen acolytes. Otherwise that was a closed group unless one became an acolyte, which I was not interested in doing. Mordechai Kaplan had already been eased out of the place, or I might have had a different relationship with him. No, no, there was no one there who became a personal mentor to me.

JG: So, how did you feel going through the JTS program?

RG: I learned to be grateful for what it was giving me and to be disappointed in what I couldn't get there.

JG: Did it inform the way you thought about the American Jewish community, or the Conservative American Jewish community?

RG: The American Jewish community, not at all. It had some effect on the way I thought about Conservative Judaism. Part of what I noticed, for example, and this changed in later years, most of the really powerful faculty members were European. The Talmud department governed the place, essentially. Almost none of them had been what we now call pulpit rabbis in Europe. They were all scholars, very distinguished scholars, but they conveyed a certain disdain for their own students. Their students were not ever going to be as learned as they were. It wasn't even so clear that they were even interested in becoming as learned as they were and were going to go into a line of professional work that they didn't have much respect for. I began to suspect that many of these rabbis then went out into the field and had the same kind of disdain for their congregants, who were

not nearly as committed to Jewish life as these rabbis wanted them to be and couldn't get them to be. So that was a pathology. I don't know how persistent it's been, because the faculty, of course, now have a different makeup, and a different attitude toward the students. So, maybe the pathology has not continued, because, when you've got a bunch of rabbis talking to each other, the things they said about their own laity were not very pretty.

JG: The kinds of critiques that people involved in the early *havurot* were leveling at the American Jewish community, and that was more broadly felt as well, had to do with many of these kinds of issues.

RG: Correct.

JG: The sterility, the performative aspect of it, “big box” Judaism.

RG: Correct, all of the above. And (00:48:00) it was very hard to tell whether these rabbis were presiding over this stuff because they felt that there was nothing they can do about it — they just didn't have the kind of following that they would need for this to be different — or whether they thought it was fine. That was very hard for me to know, because I was having nothing to do with it all.

JG: So, you were ordained in '68, is that correct?

RG: Right.

JG: What path did your career take following your ordination?

RG: A standard academic path. I went to graduate school. I finished a doctorate.

JG: Where did you do this?

RG: At Brown University, with Jacob Neusner.

JG: What were you studying at that point with Neusner?

RG: I was studying some courses in particular about the early rabbis, which was what he was doing — the Jews in the late ancient world. Under his guidance, I was taking a few other courses, simply to broaden my background in related areas. I took a course on the history of Christian theology. I took a course on the New Testament. Things like that.

JG: You'd known for a while at this point that you'd wanted to go on to do a degree?

RG: Well, not quite. One of the features of my early adulthood was that I never really saw much beyond the next stage. So, I couldn't think what I wanted to do once I left the seminary other than go to graduate school. My parents were both teachers, don't forget. Probably, had I thought about it, I would have realized that, but I didn't have a very clear idea of what it meant to have an academic career. I just know that I wanted to go to graduate school and continue learning stuff.

JG: Was Brown the self-evident place, to be with Neuser? Or were you considering other places as well?

RG: I was. I was accepted into other programs. Again, to be perfectly honest, Brown offered me more money than the others. So I went there, because I didn't see why that wasn't a reasonable basis for choosing. I wasn't sorry that I went there. Then, once I had a doctorate, there was nothing much else to do than to apply for academic positions. That too has changed, partly because the growth of the academic sector has slowed down. So now, the Association for Jewish Studies, for example, at its annual meeting, actually has sessions on non-academic careers open to people with doctorates in Jewish Studies. All of that is much past my time. But, yeah, then I just started what amounted to an academic career — what *was* an academic career.

JG: So, where did you go first?

RG: I went to Sir George Williams University in Montreal, which is now called Concordia, and then I came to NYU for two years. The going (00:51:00) to NYU in a sense was a mistake, because again, I was naive. I didn't read the signals. I didn't see that the religion department at NYU was going to be demolished, and then it was. It was just shut down. So I needed to find another job. I had figured I would stay at NYU. I wanted to be in New York. I went to Wichita State University in Kansas for three years.

JG: You were married at this point, right?

RG: I was married. Yes, I was married at this point.

JG: When had you gotten married, you and Judith?

RG: I was married in 1969, after one year of graduate school. We travelled together to all these places.

JG: Before we move on, I wanted to ask you about this period of your rabbinical school and the beginnings of graduate school, because it coincided with the period of tremendous social ferment in American society, particularly among youth.

RG: Right.

JG: — the development of the counterculture, the anti-Vietnam movement, Civil Rights, etcetera, and also the very early beginnings of Second Wave Feminism. To what extent, if at all, were you personally involved in any of these movements?

RG: Almost not at all, frankly. I had worked very hard to make myself at home in the tradition — in which I had not been raised, after all. So challenges to tradition, even challenges to another tradition altogether, raised anxiety in me and weren't necessarily appealing.

JG: And when you say that, you mean the American tradition.

RG: I do. Right. I mean, the American cultural tradition. I also mean the tradition of protest didn't much speak to me. My taste in music was then and is now very, very conservative. I don't listen to rock. I listen to Mozart.

JG: Did you listen to folk at all in the sixties?

RG: Not very much, no.

JG: Not protest music?

RG: I was exposed to it, so I was aware of it. I'm not completely unfamiliar with it. But it wasn't what interested me. It wasn't what spoke to me in any meaningful way. As for the Vietnam War, it took me a long time to sign on to the opposition to it.

JG: Were you aware of dissent while you were at JTS?

RG: Oh, there was great dissent among the rabbinical students, in particular about the war. Also, there was the sense among the rabbinical students as to the unsatisfying nature of being a student there, which some people wanted to push back against (00:54:00) more strongly than others. Yeah, there was all that going on, and I was aware of it. I sort of kept it apart from me, mostly.

JG: Were you aware of faculty feelings?

RG: Almost not at all. They didn't talk about these things. Heschel, of course, famously did. Otherwise not at all. It was known that Saul Lieberman, who was the academic star of the place, hated the communists because he was a refugee from the Soviet Union.

JG: What was the feeling at the seminary and among the people you knew about Heschel's involvements in the Civil Rights Movement, and involvement in the march with Martin Luther King?

RG: Except among his acolytes, Heschel was not always as revered as the memory of Heschel now has become. In certain respects, he cultivated a following. He was like a rebbe. He cultivated followers. His attitude toward the student body as a whole was not always respectful.

JG: What do you mean by that?

RG: I remember at least one occasion when he spoke to us as though we were little children, the whole assembled student body. I remember one occasion when he came to Cornell while I was still a student there to give a talk, and the talk consisted of reading a few pages of his book, which happened to be pages that I had just read. I later came to see that a lot of academics do that. They go and give readings from their books, and everybody is supposed to be grateful and pay them honoraria for that. But at the time, I just thought it was shocking.

JG: Do you have any memories of what the response was to Heschel's participation in the Civil Rights march?

RG: No, I actually do not.

JG: So it wasn't something that everybody —

RG: He wasn't a luminary in the building at the time, except among those people whom I keep calling his acolytes. I know it's not an altogether respectful term, but —

JG: The sixties also saw the beginnings of the Jewish counterculture, which grew out of the experiences of the young Jews in the larger social movement.

RG: Right.



JG: As well as issues within the Jewish community in itself. And at the same time, Israel was undergoing profound changes during this period.

RG: Right.

JG: The Eichmann trial, that happened earlier in the sixties, and then the Six Day War in '67 catapulted Israel to the center.

RG: That's right. That's right.

JG: How would you describe your relationship and your feelings about Israel at that time?

RG: I wished Israel well, for sure. I had no animus toward Israel at all. At that point, I don't think I ascribed much religious (00:57:00) importance towards Israel. I just thought it was a good thing that the Jews had a state. And the state, at that time, as you will recall, was in the hands of socialists. The state as a state didn't have much of a religious aura. I visited in 1966 while I was a student there [see addendum]. I had relatives there. I was in touch with them by correspondence.

JG: But none of your studies took place in Israel.

RG: That's correct. Because I was in this advanced Talmud program, I was not allowed to spend my junior year in Israel, which is what most of my class did. It was as though the seminary didn't think that a person could properly study Talmud in Israel, which — it leaves one speechless. So, I went to Israel for only a brief visit before school started in the summer of 1966. I remember it was before the war, because Jerusalem was still divided, and all that kind of thing.

JG: This was your first visit?

RG: My first visit.

JG: Do you remember what your impressions were?

RG: I had a good time. I loved it. I liked it. I mean, in fact, my Hebrew was pretty good, so I could function in the country very well. I traveled a little. Mostly I stayed in Jerusalem, but I traveled a little. I had relatives in a kibbutz up North. I had one friend from Camp Ramah who was living in Haifa. So I went and visited all these people, and I

functioned entirely in Hebrew. So it was a good experience. But then, as things turned out, I didn't go back for another twenty years.

JG: What about the Six Day War? How did that —?

RG: It frightened me very much.

JG: Why?

RG: Because I knew that if anything went wrong, it would be a disaster for the Jewish people.

JG: So it frightened you, as it was starting.

RG: Oh, yes. It frightened me even before it was starting. Very quickly after it started, I knew there was nothing more to be frightened about. While the war was on — and again I noticed this in myself and I couldn't explain it — I stopped *davening*, and I just had the radio on constantly. And then once the war was over, not even when it was decided, but when it was over, I went back to being who I was. Who I had been. I thought that was very peculiar even as I was doing it, but that's what I did.

JG: What do you think of it now, when you look back on it?

RG: I think it was very peculiar.

JG: Do you have any sense of what was going on for you?

RG: I think I was protecting myself from the danger that the whole Jewish enterprise was about to fall apart. And then, when it didn't, I just resumed what had been my role in the Jewish enterprise. As for the counterculture, I had no exposure to it (01:00:00) during most of those early years. I'm a little bit of an interloper in this whole oral history project, because I had nothing to do with the *havurah* movement until 1974. I was living in places where there was no sign of it, in Providence, in New Haven, in Montreal. And then when I moved to New York, we lived for a period of about two years on the Upper West Side.

JG: What period was that?

RG: 1974 to 1976. I had good friends in the *havurah*, one of whom went back to that high school group, in fact. And so, I started coming to the *havurah*, and I very quickly

saw that this is for me. This is good. So I got very involved in the *havurah*, but only starting in 1974.

JG: So earlier, had you been aware of —

RG: Hardly.

JG: *Response Magazine*?

RG: No, I discovered that during those years in New York. I had no idea about any of this.

JG: Not the world you were living in.

RG: Oh wait, no, that can't be right. *Response Magazine* started before I left the seminary.

JG: Right.

RG: No, I was aware of it.

JG: Just before.

RG: Just before, because actually I wrote a letter to the editor in which I engaged in a sort of pseudonymous argument with Arthur Green.

JG: What was the argument about?

RG: About the kind of mystical Judaism that was coming to characterize the *havurah* movement, which didn't make sense to me. I had certain critiques of the *havurah* movement, even as I became very active in it.

JG: Are you talking about while you were still in rabbinical school you had this?

RG: Yes, I think so.

JG: *Havurah Shalom* opened its doors in September of '68.

RG: Yeah, but Arthur Green was already Arthur Green before that. It was the proto-*havurah* movement. You're quite right.

JG: The pre-, just-pre.

RG: *Response Magazine* predates what became the *havurot*.

JG: Exactly.

RG: Yes. And, you know, Arthur and I talked all the time.

JG: How did you know him?

RG: From the seminary. We were students together. And then over the many, many, many years, we drifted apart; we got back together. I saw him just last December for a very long talk. Then I wrote to him when Kathy passed away, and — just very recently — he represented a different way of thinking about Judaism than I did, and I tried a little bit to engage in dialogue with him. I don't recall much about that at all, frankly.

JG: How do you see the differences now, to your approaches to Judaism (01:03:00) then?

RG: What do you mean by now and then? Say that again, please.

JG: From now, when you look back at that period, what do you see as — you just said you have different approaches to Judaism.

RG: Oh. Well, his basic understanding of Judaism arose out of Kabbalah, and in particular out of Hasidus. Mine arose out of the classical rabbinic texts, which are a very different take on things.

JG: So, what's the import of that — those differences?

RG: I was struggling with a much more sober understanding of God. Some of the flamboyant creativeness of the Kabbalah just struck me as being out to lunch. I was working much harder at maintaining a steady pattern of observance than that other part of the Jewish world seemed to find necessary. I guess that's the kind of thing that I'm talking about.

JG: Why do you think it was so much more work to maintain a steady pattern of observance, coming from the perspectives that you were coming from?

RG: Because I hadn't been brought up that way. The world as a whole was not supportive of it. Even the world of Conservative Judaism, once one got out of the bubble of the seminary, was not altogether behind it. And I was never unaware of the temptations of the outside world. I had been eating yummy non-kosher food before I started eating kosher food. I had been going to concerts on Saturday afternoon before I stopped going to concerts on Saturday afternoon. So, I had to keep telling myself, no, it's good to have given all that up. And it took a little work. It still takes a little work, after all. Here in Princeton, there are many deeply committed people to Jewish life, but not very observant people. So Nina and I, my wife and I, are trying constantly. They are always respectful of us, but almost nobody hesitates to drive on Shabbat. Almost nobody hesitates. If it happens that one week, someone's minyan isn't meeting, it's entirely possible that they'll go car shopping. (01:06:00) We are dealing with that with people whom we respect deeply, and who are our dear friends.

JG: It sounded to me that you were saying, however, that Art Green and people who came from this more hasidic stream had less of a struggle around —

RG: I can't speak to that. I doubt very much that someone like Art Green has lived his life without a struggle. I know him too well for that. It's not really for me to say, but that's my strong impression. I don't mean to denigrate other people's struggles. It's just — I was engaged in mine.

JG: In your own. Right, exactly. Okay, so one last question before we move on to your experiences in the *havurah* in particular, and that is the issue of the draft, which was a major —

RG: Oh, a terrible, terrible thing.

JG: — issue for young men of your generation.

RG: Right. I, of course, as long as I was a seminary student, had a divinity exception.

JG: So, this was through '68.

RG: This was through '68. When I graduated from the seminary and lost that, I was not yet twenty-six years old, so I was in fact available to the draft.

JG: What was the significance of twenty-six?

RG: That was the age at which young men who had not yet been drafted moved into a kind of secondary category. They were looking for people —

JG: Twenty-six and younger.

RG: Right. But you were still subject to the draft until you were thirty-five. Jack Neusner got me appointed as assistant Hillel rabbi at Brown. It was a paper appointment. My only obligation was to conduct Friday night services, so that the Hillel rabbi didn't have to, but it preserved my exemption. So the whole issue of the draft, in certain ways, bounced off me and didn't really affect me. On the other hand, it was expected of seminary graduates that they volunteer for the chaplaincy, and I and a very small number of other people simply refused to do that. I was going to go to graduate school and take my chances, and I wasn't going to volunteer, partly for the same reason — I didn't want to be a chaplain and answer questions that I couldn't answer. I just had no sense that I was suited for that role.

JG: When you say chaplaincy, do you mean in the military?

RG: I mean a military chaplaincy, yes. I do mean that. As a result of that, I was barred from the Rabbinical Assembly for a number of years. It all had to be allowed to pass and quiet down and (01:09:00) become a bygone before I wound up being a member in good standing in the RA. But that was all a kind of draft, but not the government draft. That was the RA forcing people to volunteer for something that most of us did not want to do, but a few of us refused. Those of us who refused, I'm trying to remember, were all going into academic work, so that the placement services in the RA didn't matter to us. I have to admit, that was probably a consideration. One friend of mine volunteered, went to the physical, failed the physical, and looked so happy on being told that the medic who had examined him said, "Didn't you volunteer for this? Why do you look so happy?" So my friend just left the room. He didn't want to start explaining all that to him. But it was very stressful and led to a lot of ill will and bad stuff.

JG: So you were exempt during the period you were at Brown.

RG: Yes.

JG: And you graduated from Brown in —

RG: Seventy-four.

JG: Seventy-four. So, during that whole period.

RG: I don't know.

JG: By the time '74 happened —

RG: I turned twenty-six in the course of my first year in graduate school.

JG: So you were basically okay.

RG: I was basically okay. And I had a reasonably good — I don't remember exactly what it was — lottery number, when they did the lottery, so I really went through those years unhappy that friends of mine were going through this stuff, but not feeling especially — except for the volunteering for the chaplaincy bit, I felt that all of that was not necessarily going to be a threat to me.

JG: Okay, so let's go through your experiences in the New York Havurah. So, the *havurah* was founded in the fall of '69.

RG: I'll take your word for that.

JG: And you first became involved some years later, in '74.

RG: Right.

JG: You were out of New York City during that period.

RG: Right. My first visit to the *havurah* was in the spring of '74 when I was down from Montreal in preparation for the move. I became very active almost at once when we moved down in the fall.

JG: And you became involved through a friend, essentially.

RG: Essentially, right.

JG: And immediately felt a sense of identification and comradery with this group.

RG: Right, and the friend knew that I would, which is why the friend had been so urgent that I should try it out. (01:12:00)

JG: Describe what it was about the *havurah* that you found so appealing. Then, just to give you a little road map, I want to then go and discuss some of the specific sort of pillars of the *havurah*: sense of community. Just a quick overview of its general appeal to you.

RG: What appealed to me first of all was that the people in it were very interesting, and a lot of them were rather like me.

JG: In what sense?

RG: They were academics. They were the combination that I represented of being pretty well-informed Jews, without necessarily being traditional believers, which I was never able to become, although we haven't talked about that.

JG: Say a few words about that right now. Here we are. I mean — you're a rabbi.

RG: Right, well that's another reason I didn't want to become the kind of rabbi who had to answer other people's questions. When I was a freshman in college, I had a friend, and we were walking. I was explaining to him why I thought a Jew should be observant. I gave an argument in terms of Jewish history, and Jewish community, and all kinds of stuff, and then he said, "You haven't said a word about God." And I realized that I had not, because that's not how I thought about these things. Over the years, my piety, if I can call it that, has waxed and waned, but I could never just settle into traditional belief. Still not. When you do too much academic stuff with Judaism, you develop a kind of layer of — not cynicism, that's not fair. Skepticism. Once you learn about the documentary hypothesis, you can't think about the Torah the same way.

JG: Would you say it gives you a level of detachment?

RG: Yes. Or, I would put it differently. Your attachment becomes more intellectual than emotional. The emotional attachment is to the group, to the people, which in the case of the *havurah* was very powerful. So, that was part of it. I just felt that these are people that I know how to talk to and who are living lives not very different from mine, so we could share each other's lives very comfortably. I also liked the kinds of things the *havurah* was doing. Again, not so much the social protest thing, which was already beginning to fade by the mid-seventies, but the weekly meetings, when somebody gave an interesting talk about something, and the retreats when we would just go and hang out somewhere.  
(01:15:00) I liked all that. That was all very good. And unlike, say, Fabrangen, it wasn't a *davening havurah* particularly. When we went on Shabbat retreats, we had *tefilah*, and I liked it well enough.



JG: So it was more about the community. So let's talk about community per se, because community was absolutely central —

RG: Correct.

JG: — to the *havurah* vision, to itself and its ideals.

RG: That group of people is still as closely bonded to one another as any group of people that I know. And this is when the *havurah* as such has ceased to exist for decades.

JG: How would you explain or describe the vision, the image, the ideal of community that the *havurah* was seeking to embody at this point?

RG: At the time I came in, it was already a little less ideological and a little less articulate about these things. The community that had been created — well, I was going to say was just taken for granted, but I don't mean that in a skeptical sense. I just mean that we breathed it. It was the air that we breathed. So, the community was designed to create experiences that we could share with one another. It was designed to create a framework in which we looked out for one another, which we still do. Most of the people who have come schlepping out to visit me in Princeton in my illness were members of the New York Havurah in the seventies.

JG: That tells you something.

RG: That's a mind-blowing fact. I get a little teary when I think about that. So the community, the overt content of what we were doing — but you want to talk about community, I'm sorry. Bonding, a sense of being responsible to and for one another. There was a sense early on that we were the model of what the new Jewish community would look like, but I think at a certain point we knew we should be glad for what we had and not be so ambitious about the outside world.

JG: You came into the *havurah* at the beginning of its fifth year. It had been founded in '69.

RG: Right.

JG: So, it was you and Judith at the time, correct?

RG: Right, and maybe some other people were just joined when I did. I didn't have a sense of that.

JG: What was the process at that point of becoming a member?

RG: There was no process. We joined. There had been a very elaborate process.

JG: What do you know about that early process?

RG: Only that, in later years, it looked a bit ridiculous and pretentious.

JG: How so?

RG: Interviewing people, asking them to present character references. (01:18:00) There was one case with names that I will not speak, even after I was a member, of somebody being blackballed because one current member said, I don't want them in my *havurah*. That was all someone needed to say, and that was the end of the discussion. We just came in because, as it happened, that same person just told the world that we were going to be members of the *havurah*, and then we were.

JG: So there was no process.

RG: There was no process in our case. None whatever. Whether there had been discussion of us in our absence before we joined is more than I could say. If there was such discussion, it was not deemed proper to tell us about it.

JG: Once you were a member, were you aware of discussions of other people?

RG: Only this one incident about somebody who made it clear that they wanted to join, and the group decided that they should not.

JG: Based on this one strong dissent.

RG: Well, I don't know whether other people were in sympathy with that dissent. That strong dissent was enough, but maybe there were even more, had it become necessary. I can't speak to that. I did not know the people about whom this discussion was going on, so I had nothing to say about it.

JG: One critique, as you just alluded to, that had been leveled at the *havurah* in its very early years was that it was elitist.

RG: Yes, well, an elite needs to be elitist. It saw itself as a vanguard. It was, yeah. Elitism is a funny kind of a thing. It's only objectionable if it's not deserved.

JG: By the time you got involved, would you say that the people who wanted to become members, who were self-selecting, so to speak, did fit in easily? That they were self-selected in a reasonable way?

RG: Some more than others. The *havurah* had a reputation which attracted certain people who, in fact, were not a good fit for it. Some of those people drifted away.

JG: What would make someone not a good fit?

RG: Social awkwardness. Inability or unwillingness to adapt to the level of observance that the *havurah* did expect at its organized events. People who just participated in group discussions in an unproductive way and taxed other people's patience. Stuff like that.

JG: Was there a process by which people were removed or asked to leave, or did they just literally —

RG: No. (01:21:00)

JG: They read the tea leaves.

RG: And some people didn't read the tea leaves. They remained members, and other people talked about them. No, there was no process for that kind of thing at all. One of the things that happened over the years is that the *havurah* began to develop what you can call — it's a slightly over-simplified term — a two-tiered structure. In later years, thanks to Mitt Romney, I thought a little bit about “makers and takers.” On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the *havurah* held public services. The inner *havurah* more or less conducted them, but dozens and dozens of people came who were essentially consumers in the synagogue model, and that changed our experiences of what it was like to have Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services.

JG: Why did the *havurah* decide to have such open services?

RG: I don't know. That happened during the years that I was living in Kansas. When I came back, it was already just the way things were now being done.

JG: So, how would you describe the people who were involved, and how many members were there at the time that you and Judith got involved?

RG: Maybe two dozen? I can't describe them generically. They're very distinct individuals. There were professionals and there were academics. There were a few people who were just, you know, people, who joined, became active or not so active. There wasn't a type. There wasn't a profile. It was part of what made it interesting.

JG: Would you say there was a certain level of observance that people shared?

RG: Yes, although it was also partly that they shared that when they were with one another. There was no question that people were more or less observant in their private lives. There were, and still are — it's like a neutron star, you know, what's left when the thing exploded. Not all of us keep a kosher home. Most of us, over the years, became less observant, so that very few of the original members of the *havurah* who are still part of this group are *shomer shabbat* anymore. Very few of them eat kosher out, although a lot of them still have kosher residences. So, that kind of thing attenuated.

JG: Many of the very early members in the very first years were seminary students.

RG: Correct.

JG: Mainly from JTS, (01:24:00) a few from HUC.

RG: Correct.

JG: Did that continue to be the case, or did that change from the mid-seventies when you first got involved?

RG: A lot of my good friends were seminary students. I don't know what the proportion had been earlier. I really can't answer that. There were a lot of seminary people there still when I was there, though not everybody. That was not always an indicator of the level of people's involvement either.

JG: Would you say that members of the *havurah* shared a general political orientation?

RG: Well, there was certainly a left orientation. There were more or less radical among us. I mean, people were interested in different issues. Some people were interested in domestic social justice issues. Some people were interested in peace issues. These people didn't argue, you're getting interested in the wrong issue, but they didn't all do the same

things by way of acting out this more broadly shared commitment that would now be called progressive.

JG: When it was first founded, the New York Havurah, like Havurat Shalom in Boston, which had been founded a year earlier, was mainly a male community. By the time you —

RG: No, that was no longer the case.

JG: No longer the case.

RG: Not in any noticeable way. The friend who recruited me was female.

JG: So there were many women.

RG: Oh yeah. Including very centrally placed women.

JG: What do you mean by centrally placed women?

RG: People very active. People who helped to set the tone. People who did a lot of the work. That's what I mean. People whose voices were heard.

JG: How would you characterize the role and the status of women during this period within the *havurah*?

RG: I would say — and the women might not agree — completely non-problematic. That was done.

JG: So you were on the other side of that.

RG: That's right.

JG: When the New York Havurah began, they rented an apartment —

RG: Yes, on 102nd Street.

JG: 102nd Street?

RG: I think so.

JG: — which served as the central meeting place.

RG: Gerry Serotta lived in it, and we used it as our meeting place.

JG: Right. So, that place was still there when you were involved. How important would you say the apartment was?

RG: Well, we needed a meeting place. We were really too big. The apartment had been chosen in part because it had an enormous living room. That's also where we had our High Holiday services before this opening up that I mentioned before. Without the apartment, there would have been another level of organizational task — where are we going to meet next month kind of thing. The apartment had a kitchen, so it was very helpful in preparing Shabbat meals.

JG: Shabbat meals.

RG: Once a month we had a Friday night dinner in the apartment.

JG: So, I wanted to ask you next, what were the regular occasions on which, and the rhythm, of the *havurah* meetings?

RG: Good question. I can tell you that because it was very firmly fixed at the beginning, and over the years it eroded. We met every Thursday night, partly to do whatever business needed to be done, and partly because there was a program. There was a member — there may have been more than one at a time — whose job it was to make sure that there would be programs every week. So, that was the most regular thing we did.

JG: What kinds of programs were there?

RG: Usually one of us making a presentation about something, either from our own work, academic or non-academic, (01:28:00) or something going on with the outside world that one of us wanted to talk about. Every now and then, it must be, though I don't remember very clearly, that it was agreed to bring in someone who would speak. The idea always was that the presentation should open up into discussion. So, that was every Thursday.

JG: Was there a meal as part of that?

RG: No, there was noshes, and there was stuff to drink — wine and even some booze. Once a month, we had Friday night dinner. I was just mentioning that. Everybody would

bring something. You really couldn't cook it there, because you couldn't cook for twenty-five people in this one little kitchen, so people would bring stuff, but the kitchen was available to heat things up, and stuff like that. All of that had to be kosher, and all of that needed to have a veggie option.

JG: Was meat served?

RG: Oh yes, meat was served. Most of us in those days were committed carnivores. And then afterward, there would be this complicated procedure by which people who had spent more would recover their expenses, and people who had spent less would pay into a pool from which the other people could take, that kind of thing. That got very complicated and annoying, but it worked. It all worked. Oh, and on those Friday night dinners, we also had a *tefilah*. We began with Kabbalat Shabbat, and then we had dinner. Once a month, on a different weekend, we had a Shabbat retreat, where we all went away, all being whoever went. We brought all the food with us and all that, and after the retreat we evened out the expenses, and again we had Kabbalat Shabbat and dinner. In the morning we had *tefilah*, which over the years became harder and harder to do because more and more people were just not getting up for it, and we needed to have a minyan — wanted to have a minyan. And then we had lunch, and the afternoon rolled around. After Shabbat, we did something of a kind that was good for after Shabbat, and then Sunday we went home. So those were really very nice, a lot of fun, and that's where we really got to know each other. We also had a two-day retreat on the beginning of Sukkot, and Shavuot, when again we went away, often to the same places.

JG: Where would these retreats take place?

RG: In the winter, we went to Shelter Island, which is off Long Island, and was manageable in the winter. When the weather was a little more mild, we went out to the Catskills. (01:31:00) In each case, there was our place where we always went, who we had a working arrangement with, and we went there. Over the years, these retreats became more and more sporadic, and now it's been awhile since any of them have happened.

JG: Over what years are you talking about when you say they became more sporadic? For instance, during the seventies, were they still going full swing?

RG: Into the early eighties, the holiday ones. Into the early eighties, the Shavuot one was still going on. When I moved back to New York to teach at Stony Brook, I no longer lived in Manhattan.

JG: What year was that?

RG: That was 1979. I was away from New York for three years. We also had a child. A lot of that was going on already without us. Part of what we learned in terms of our original image of community is that people's lives were going to make this much harder to sustain, as people got older, as people moved away because of their careers, as people had children who were more and more demanding of their time and energy, all that. To some degree, we hadn't really thought about it. There was some talk of buying what amounted to a retirement home for those of us who were no longer following careers, who were no longer raising children, but nothing ever came of that talk.

JG: So, by the time you came back and were at Stony Brook —

RG: No, I was living in Queens, for the first while. We went in regularly, but not dependably, so to speak. So, for the High Holidays we certainly went in, and I don't remember more about that. I don't remember whether the meetings were still going on every Thursday, but I just wasn't going to go in every Thursday.

JG: What about the retreats at Weiss's Farm. Were you part of that?

RG: Never. I've never been to Weiss's Farm. I was completely absent from all of these developments until 1974. You don't believe me when I say that, but it's true.

JG: I do believe you. Were Weiss's Farm retreats not happening in 1974?

RG: They had stopped I think as soon as the Havurah Institute began. I may be wrong about that, but I think the Havurah Institute had recalled the *havurah* conferences, which was also —

JG: Late seventies.

RG: Yeah, late seventies, right. The first institute was in '80. So, we went to a lot of institutes, and we went to High Holiday services.

JG: You're talking about later, in the seventies and eighties.

RG: Yeah, after we moved back, when we no longer lived in Manhattan. The other thing that I should mention is that already during the two years that I lived in New York, the *havurah* (01:34:00) spawned a men's group, and the men's group lasted longer. I was going in to the men's group meetings until well into the eighties. What I was going to say,



which is why I wasn't sure if it was worth taking the time, is that I don't remember. Certainly the idea was a thought — let's have a men's group. We made a little game of it — don't tell our wives. Let's make believe we don't know what they're talking about. So it was like a secret, non-existent men's group that everybody knew about. Most of the same crowd of characters, men, joined it. It wasn't ever quite as exploratory or consciousness-raising as men's groups were supposed to be, but it was just another way to get to know each other. I valued it. Again, it was a good thing to do. Over the years there have been occasional efforts to re-constitute the men's group, but it's just too hard. Too many people are too busy —

JG: And too spread out at this point.

RG: And too spread out. Although the great majority of us still live — of the people that I'm talking about, I probably live as far from New York as any of us.

JG: Here in Princeton.

RG: Here in Princeton. There's Bill Aron who's in California, and okay, that's far.

JG: Yes. How large was the men's group?

RG: Ten, twelve? Something like that. We met in the same apartment, which was funny, because how could you keep a secret there? But nobody else was there, and, anyway, really good talk, but it was —

JG: Do you think it was influenced by the consciousness-raising groups that your wives, many of them, had been going to?

RG: It had to be. It had to be. And among us there were those — again, as with so much of what I've talked about, that I was less reflective than a lot of those people — there were those who consciously and earnestly hoped that this would become such a movement, but it just didn't.

JG: So, let's turn to another pillar of *havurah* life, which is *tefilah*, prayer.

RG: Right.

JG: Can you describe your own experience of prayer, and how that comported with the attitude toward *tefilah* within the *havurah*, your earlier experience?

RG: My own, you mean personal?

JG: Personal, yeah.

RG: Well, as I have said, all of my Jewish experience somehow was lacking a strong sense of the theological.

JG: Yes.

RG: There have been times in my life when I was very committed to regular *tefilah*, and some of those times, I had a sense that I was actually addressing whatever, although (01:37:00) probably it was always a little bit of a projection. That is to say, I was addressing whatever was my way of saying that I was saying something that was very important for me to say. My concept of *tefilah* — the kind of *tefilah* in many of the groups that I described much earlier today that shaped me — *tefilah* tended to be very traditional. I mean, especially in this living unit in Cornell, which was officially Orthodox, and the *davening* at JTS, which is essentially Orthodox [see addendum]. We *davened* without a *mechitzah*. And then, as I may not have mentioned, I belonged, when I lived on Long Island, to an Orthodox synagogue for twenty-two years, because it was more like a *havurah* than the giant other synagogues in the area. People really cared about each other. Everybody was there for Jewishly serious purposes, and we liked it there. But the *davening* there also was very traditional, and that shaped my taste in *tefilah*. In the *havurah*, it was really like that earlier on, partly because we had more people who were familiar with traditional *tefilah* and could carry it. Later on, as more and more people joined who were not familiar with it, it had to ease up a little bit — which is fine. I'm not passing judgment. I'm just describing. So, I could fit into that *tefilah* very easily. I almost never led *tefilah*, but that was more of a reflection of what I think my voice sounds like than any more religiously weighty reason.

JG: How important was *tefilah* in the context of the New York Havurah? What do you think *tefilah* was trying to achieve?

RG: Nobody talked about that. *Tefilah* was just built into the Shabbat programs.

JG: Let me interrupt for one second to ask, in '74, when you joined, were there regular Shabbat *tefilot* every week, or still just this once a month?

RG: No, no, no, no. Well, twice a month. There was a Friday night dinner —

JG: And another retreat.

RG: Right. That's all.

JG: Were most people, would you say, going to *tefilot* elsewhere on the other two weeks, or —

RG: I can't answer that. I was not.

JG: You were not.

RG: I was not. It was always my firm practice, for years and years and years and years, to read the parashah every week with some attention, but it wasn't my firm practice to go to shul. That changed in this Orthodox shul on Long Island, because again I just got pulled in and became an important part of the community there. (01:40:00) But, of course, once you join a community, you start doing things the way that the community does.

JG: So, how would you describe the experience of *tefilah*, in the *havurah*?

RG: Very pleasant. It was part of why we were together. We actually did remarkably little talk about what it meant to us. We didn't say whether we should go different in any way, or whether we liked it just the way it was. It was a little bit just part of the woodwork. It was just the way we got together for Shabbat. Part of what we did was have *tefilah*. There were people on Friday night who managed to come when *tefilah* was over, because they wanted to join for the dinner, that kind of thing. Not everybody came for *tefilah*. As long as we had a secure minyan, nobody really paid attention to who wasn't showing up. But yet, when we no longer had a secure minyan, and yet people weren't willing to get up early just to — that caused some resentment.

JG: At Havurat Shalom, there was much attention paid to the tension between tradition and innovation within the service. How would you characterize the service?

RG: Much more traditional. Much less reflective. Much less conscious in that way. Fabrangen also, in Washington, they paid much more attention to *tefilah* than we did. We ultimately were a social and intellectual, rather than a *davening, havurah*.

JG: At Havurat Shalom and at Fabrangen, there was a lot of attention to making the *tefilah* meaningful.

RG: Yes, we didn't. I don't recall that we worried about it that much.

JG: Were Reb Zalman and Shlomo Carlebach significant factors?

RG: Not much. Shlomo Carlebach was the subject of a certain amount of derision, because of his attitude toward women, for one thing, which had some notoriety attached to it. Reb Zalman, I think, was already a little too flaky for a lot of the people at the *havurah*. Yes, one of the members of the *havurah* early on was Lynn Gottlieb, who went off to become a very non-standard rabbi in Arizona, but sort of dropped out of the *havurah* scene. We lost track of her. But she was already who she was in the *havurah*.

JG: What about the role of Torah reading at the *havurah*?

RG: We shared it out. People who could, did.

JG: You had a Torah scroll.

RG: The *havurah* still owns a Torah scroll, which I think is kept in the Heschel School, except when we need it. (01:43:00) How we got it, and from where we got it, I don't know. It also happened during my years of absence. At one point, I offered to give lessons in how to do these things. I had one or two people who attended semi-regularly. They were actually more interested in learning how to read the haftarah than the Torah, because it takes less prep, let's face it. You only needed to do it once a month at these Shabbat retreats, so we would divide it up. One person never read the whole parashah. There were enough of us who could do one, maybe two, aliyot that it wasn't burdensome, and we did it. We also had Torah discussions on these occasions. I haven't mentioned that. They were also a very important part of the experience.

JG: How so, and what did the Torah discussions consist of?

RG: Somebody would raise a few questions.

JG: Someone who had prepared them in advance, or —

RG: Yes. One person would be designated to do this, and if nobody was, everybody just waited to see if anybody in the room had some thoughts to share. Then we talked about these questions. We just shared our thoughts. There were a lot of people who were good at that kind of thing, so that the discussions were well worth it. My current minyan, which meets at the university campus, is also like that. A whole bunch of professors who are smart people, and so the conversation — that sounds elitist, but I mean only that it makes the discussion time well-spent.

JG: How would you describe the approach people took to discussion and interpretation of the weekly parashah?

RG: Good question. Mostly, we share in sort of the fruits of the academic and Reconstructionist reconfiguration of how to think about the Torah

JG: Can you elaborate?

RG: Nobody — it wasn't that often that someone said, What is God trying to tell us? What is the writer trying to tell us? What is, at best, the Torah trying to tell us? The idea that the Torah came down in one chunk directly from heaven was just not even defended. That all the rules in the Torah had to be obeyed was also not usually defended. We were all leading the Jewish lives that we were leading, and it wasn't in most cases because it said so in this book. But the book had a certain history. The book was the origin of everything, and therefore was entitled to a certain respectful attention, which is what we give it. I remember once — and I'm going to talk about myself now — the very first Torah discussion I ever participated in was about (01:46:00) the command to exterminate Amalek. Everybody was looking for all these reasons why Amalek deserves this treatment, and I said — I was brand new there — I said, “Maybe they didn't. How do we know that they deserve to be exterminated? We don't go around exterminating people because they piss us off.” I felt empowered to say that, although I didn't redirect the conversation. I said that and then the conversation kept going. But I was very glad to see that I was in a place where I could say something like that.

JG: Was there a response to it, would you say?

RG: Not much, not much. It was getting late in the discussion. I had suddenly had this idea. People really wanted to get on with *Musaf* already. *Musaf*, by the way, at a certain point became optional.

JG: So who decided? The leader —

RG: Usually the leader. That was true of a lot of these venues. That's true of Minyan M'at at Anshei Chesed also. The leader had a lot of autonomy. That was one of the ways in which we empowered people. If you're leading *Shacharit*, you'll do what you think is proper to do it, by the leader of *Shacharit*. So, I found *tefilah* comfortable, which I mean in a strong sense, not as a trivial word. It was about the only *davening* that I did in those days, and it was good to do. It was part of my experience of Shabbat in a *havurah*.

JG: While we're talking about *tefilah*, I want to focus for a minute on the issue of gender and women's roles, within the context of worship, at the *havurah*. Art Green had described the very beginning years of Havurat Shalom, so this is the late sixties — '68, '69 — as a pre-feminist moment.

RG: Right, I think that's fair.

JG: As you are well aware, second wave feminism — this is what we were just discussing — was just starting to get underway with women's consciousness groups. Your wife at the time was very —

RG: Right.

JG: — was involved in the early beginnings of Jewish feminism. Can you talk a little bit about that and your perspective on —

RG: I have to begin with what may seem like an over-intellectual distinction, but I think it's important. I don't know about feminism, but I do know that the *tefilah* was fully egalitarian by the time I joined. And, again, I can't speak about the first five years at all. Women led, women led the discussion, women read the Torah.

JG: You weren't aware of women wearing tallit, *tefillin*?

RG: Oh, gosh.

JG: *Kippot*?

RG: I don't remember. I would guess that some did and some did not. So, the issue of women's participation was not an issue at all. What it meant that women were now participating, which already gets us into a more thoughtful feminism — if I remember correctly, the men in the group were not yet much alerted to this question, but some of the women — again, my wife among them — had begun to see that this is a very important question. Just as they had begun to see that maintaining the tradition is already yielding to male authority, because the tradition was shaped by men. So, is there a feminist obligation to not maintain that tradition? That kind of question was beginning to percolate. But, as I say, more than that, I think it was not yet a dominant theme in the ongoing life of the *havurah* because the egalitarian stuff was taken for granted, and the ideological stuff had not yet really found its place into the agenda. That's my recollection of those early years.

JG: Those early years. In the early years of Jewish feminism, women often were concerned with having a role —

RG: Right, right.

JG: — an equal role in all the worship, but not necessarily in changing the liturgy and fundamental —

RG: That became a very important question. That's part of what I'm trying to say. Some women wanted to fight their way into a tradition that had been undeniably shaped (01:51:00) by men. Other women said, it was shaped by men. We need something that was shaped by women. That was an issue that was beginning to emerge among the feminists, but I don't recall that it came into the mixed gender life of the *havurah* very much. I don't think the men had come to see what kind of a question that was.

JG: Do you recall, for instance, whether in the liturgy at the *havurah*, were the *Imahot* being regularly referred to?

RG: No, not yet, not yet. I forget when that first came in to the official liturgy of the Conservative movement altogether. Not so long ago. Maybe twenty years ago. But we're talking about something more like forty years ago.

JG: Yes.

RG: And I don't think so. I don't think so.

JG: This was a straight traditional liturgy —

RG: Pretty much, pretty much.

JG: — but with women reading Torah and leading services.

RG: That's right — which had also been what was going on at my teenage synagogue group, where again, we just used the Silverman siddur, but women played the same role as men. Whenever there was a stronger Orthodox presence, as at the Hillel, then of course that wouldn't be, and at the seminary either. Yet, this was the time of the famous Ezrat Nashim visitation to the G.I.?

JG: The G.A. [General Assembly]

RG: The G.A., right. That happened, I think, in '72, so just before my time. So, the impact of that was being felt.

JG: And in fact, what was happening then were a couple of national conferences that took place in New York.

RG: That's right. I went to one of those.

JG: The second one men were invited.

RG: That's right. The first is the one I went to.

JG: What was that like, for you as a man?

RG: You know, I didn't at all feel marginalized. I felt that the fact that they wanted me there probably meant that they were glad I was there — as opposed to something that has happened much more recently, that people from the previous dominant movements had been told, We don't want to hear you. We want you to sit quietly and listen. None of that was going on, at least not in the particular sessions that I attended. There may have been other sessions where it did. I can't speak to that. So, yeah. That was all part of my learning about all this, and I knew that I was there to learn, that I was not yet ready to be a player in a lot (01:54:00) of that stuff, except my marriage.

JG: So, were you sort of uniquely positioned because of your relationship with Judith?

RG: I don't think uniquely. I don't think so.

JG: Was it talked about within any of the meetings that took place in the *havurah* on the role of women?

RG: Some, but it was mostly by way of egalitarianism, rather than the more theological and ideological dimensions. Some of that was coming in. Judith would talk that way, but not everybody quite knew what she was talking about. It goes back a little bit to what I was saying much earlier, that my sensibility in all this stuff was pretty traditional. If it wasn't going to be traditional, then I might not be interested in it. That's part of the problem with the Conservative synagogue here, where the *davening* can't be traditional because not enough people would know what was going on. So, I don't find it very rewarding to go there, frankly, because to me, the traditional mode is a way that I sort of keep myself in the mainstream of a very long history, and that's what brought me in in the first place. I also mentioned the G.A. thing. The activities of Ezrat Nashim were certainly



being noticed in the *havurah*. Certain members of the *havurah* were certainly very active in Ezrat Nashim. That was beginning to introduce these larger questions, and it may be that what really happened is that that's the point that I moved to Kansas.

JG: Right.

RG: Because I came back, and it felt different already.

JG: There were big changes.

RG: There were big changes.

JG: And a consciousness was being raised over this period of time,

RG: That's right. But overall, all Ezrat Nashim really wanted, initially, was also just to get women into the rabbinical school at JTS, which is not a very revolutionary thing to want at all.

JG: Which it turned out not to be.

RG: That just may be. That just may be.

JG: [*laughs*] Yes.

RG: That's the war of unintended consequences. Some of them were intended, but that's another discussion, too.

JG: Yeah.

RG: So, that was my experience of it. I saw that something was happening. It was coming very close to me personally, but it was a little too early for it to be setting a larger agenda the way it did, say, by the mid-eighties. That was a whole different world.

JG: Yes

## **Part 2 — May 11, 2017**

RG: Well, you know, certain people in the group, I'm talking about the current group, all of them have obsessions.

JG: The current group.

RG: The current group. (01:57:00) So, somebody wants to talk every year about hardening Pharaoh's heart. They can't let go of that. It's a really interesting question. I don't make light of that. So, if they're going to lead a Torah discussion during those few weeks, when that's the theme, right? — you know where you're going. I get very interested in God's punitive side, which is sometimes really quite unpleasant. Let's talk about that. I get interested in some of the stories in Genesis, because those are some really interesting characters.

JG: Were those different kinds of approaches manifest in these early *havurot* discussions, as you recall?

RG: I don't recall, but I can't believe that they weren't. How could they not be? Because we were a quite varied group of people, who took turns, in a systematic way, of opening up these discussions, and so they would lay out certain themes for the kind of things that they wanted to talk about, and the discussion would in fact pursue those themes, or somebody would hijack it and talk about what they wanted to talk about.

JG: Right. Personality is also —

RG: No, no, no, no. We had a lot of strong personalities in the group as well.

JG: Right. So, let's focus for a minute on the issue of gender and women's status within the context of public worship.

RG: Right.

JG: You know, Art Green, describing the period just before your involvement, the very beginnings of the *havurah* movement, the first few years or so, described it as what he called a pre-feminist involvement.

RG: Right, right.

JG: But, at the same time, second wave feminism was beginning to take root, women's consciousness was being raised, men's consciousness to an extent, and as you mentioned earlier, many of the founders of Jewish feminism were members —

RG: Right.

JG: — coming out of the *havurah*, first through a class that they brought together, and ultimately in Ezrat Nashim in '71, '72. By the time you got involved in '74, what roles were women playing?

RG: Okay, you have to remember that because of my earlier experiences and all these other environments that I described to you, women — well, girls, had always been equal to boys.

JG: So, this was in Ramah?

RG: This was at the East Midwood Jewish Center. This was at Ramah. This was not so much in the public worship at Cornell Hillel (02:00:00) Cornell Hillel in that sense sort of replicated right wing Conservative Judaism. There was separate seating but no *mechitzah*, and girls played no role in the public leading of the service. So, in other respects, female students could be the president of Hillel, and all those other things where that didn't apply. At the *havurah*, it was just taken for granted that *tefilah* would be completely egalitarian, but since, after all, I took that for granted too, I didn't find that exciting or new. I just thought, this is another piece, another outpost, of the world in which I have been shaping my own Jewish identity since I've been fifteen years old.

JG: If you look back on your own life, was the very idea of egalitarianism always resonant for you?

RG: I just took it for granted.

JG: You took it for granted. Was there a time in which that term, egalitarianism, sort of became the term of —

RG: Yeah. There must have been such a time, but it's been for so long now that I just take that term for granted that I can't pinpoint it. I'll tell you one story, back to my high school days. This teen group once a year led the late Friday night service.

JG: In the main service.

RG: In the main service. In those days, Conservative synagogues had these eight-thirty late Friday night services. One of our female members led it, and the rabbi's only comment was, "Why did she have to wear a red dress?"

JG: This is the late fifties you're talking about.

RG: Mid to late fifties. I mean, he had no objection to our doing it that way. He had no objection to her leading the grown-up service on this one occasion, which was, after all, special. But why couldn't she sort of not call attention to the fact that she was a girl?

JG: Do you recall in the mid-seventies women wearing either a tallit, or a —

RG: Not much. I began to notice that a little bit later. Judith made herself a tallit at a very early point. She probably wore it, but again, she was one of the leaders of that world, and she did. She didn't buy a store-bought one. She made one. (02:03:00)

JG: What about women having aliyahs?

RG: No problem.

JG: No problem. And counting in a minyan?

RG: Well, as I say, until it got to be a problem on Saturday mornings on the retreats, that was never a problem. We were a group of thirty or forty people. Not everybody would come on time. A few people on Friday night would make a point of coming when they figured the *tefilah* was safely over and they could come for dinner. But mostly we weren't counting with any sense of, well, gosh, where is the next person going to come from?

JG: You had enough people.

RG: Plenty of people.

JG: Do you recall any first times that women were doing something in the *havurah*?

RG: Yeah. There were a few women who had grown up in more traditional environments who had their first aliyah in the New York Havurah, and that was very lovely. That was very lovely. A few women read the Torah for the first time in the New York Havurah.

JG: What was that like for you as a man, sort of experiencing —

RG: I thought it was lovely. I'd like all kinds of people to learn how to read the Torah. As I say, in the strict context of liturgy, other than my years at college, from which I always kept myself a little bit distanced, it never occurred to me that there should be this distinction between the genders. So, when I saw that there was no distinction, I didn't say, "Oh, how exciting." I said, "Oh." There was a guy, an Israeli guy, who married this musicologist, who was in New York as economic attached to the Israeli consulate. So, he

would show up at *havurah* meetings in a three-piece suit, because he came directly from the office. That made him feel a little uncomfortable —

JG: On Fridays, you're talking about?

RG: No, Thursday nights. But on Friday nights, he once said to me that getting used to the sound of a woman's voice leading *tefilah* took him awhile, because he had grown up Orthodox. But he got there.

JG: And he was choosing to be there.

RG: Right. And he married a woman who's not going to fool around with this stuff.

JG: Right. Judith Plaskow mentioned that the *havurot* at some point became a breeding ground for liturgical change, influenced by Jewish feminist thinking. (02:06:00)

RG: Yes.

JG: Probably a little later?

RG: A little later, and a little less in the New York Havurah than in the others, as I recall. But again, remember, after 1979, we were back in the New York area, but much less heavily involved in the *havurah*. We were living in Queens. We had a child. We were busy.

JG: And it was hard to get there.

RG: Hard to get there, and the worst of it was finding parking. The Havurah Institute was an important breeding ground of that particular thing, which I guess we'll get to eventually as well.

JG: Do you think changing attitudes toward women — the ordination of Sally Priesand in '72, or Sandy Eisenberg Sasso in '74 in the Reconstructionist Movement — had any impact on how things felt by the time you got into how practice was in the *havurah*?

RG: I experienced *Ezrat Nashim*, which I watched from up close but not in, as aiming at the Conservative Movement. So the fact that all of these other movements were way ahead of the Conservative Movement didn't matter a whole lot. To some degree, of course, given that the Conservative Movement also has its own sort of elitist attitude toward less halachic movements, but that's just part of the problem. *Ezrat Nashim* made

two famous demonstrations. One was the General Assembly, which was not the Conservative Movement, but the other was at the R.A., which was. Then slowly, slowly, advocacy for ordaining women began to emerge within the Conservative Movement.

JG: Starting in the seventies but moving into the eighties.

RG: That's right. And Ezrat Nashim and its, if I can call it that, fellow travelers, were among the really important people pushing that.

JG: How much were you personally influenced by what you were hearing in discussions with Judith and others who were involved with Ezrat Nashim? As you say, you had a really close up view.

RG: Right. In my private life, I was in the program from the beginning, so to speak. But it was also true, by definition, that I had never met a female rabbi. I had never met a female cantor. That is to say, Jewish professional identities took me a little bit longer to come around with.

JG: In what sense?

RG: A female rabbi was just (02:09:00) somehow unfamiliar, so the unfamiliar always takes a little longer. I got to the point where I couldn't see any reason why there shouldn't be female rabbis.

JG: When was that for you?

RG: Oh, gosh.

JG: Are we talking seventies, eighties? When are we talking?

RG: Seventies. We have to throw in a little bit my years in Kansas that we have not yet talked about.

JG: Which was in the middle of this period that we're talking about. '76 to '79?

RG: That's correct.

JG: So, tell us why you went to Kansas.

RG: Because I lost my job. We lost our jobs in New York.

JG: You had been at NYU?

RG: NYU, and the whole religion department was abolished. It was an ugly political maneuver, and I had been much too naive when I took that job to wonder about whether I had to worry about such things. So, of course, I didn't worry about them, and then I needed a job. Judith needed a job. We both got jobs at Wichita State University. So we moved to Wichita Kansas, which is the flipside of, "Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore." We were now in Kansas.

JG: Yes, very far from New York City.

RG: Oh my goodness. In a small, embattled enclave of liberals, many of whom were at the university. We made really good friends, and life in certain respects was very convenient. It was small. You could get places. I could walk to work, which I had never had a job like that before. If it was one hundred and six degrees, I didn't want to walk to work, but I could walk to work. That's where our son was born. The minute he was born, I said to Judith, "We can't raise a child here." But we were living there already for a year and a half, and without a child, it was, you know, a way to live.

JG: Why did you feel that you couldn't?

RG: Because there was no Jewish substance anywhere. There was no place where he could learn from Jewish models to whom I wanted to expose him.

JG: What was there of Jewish life there?

RG: There were two synagogues — a Reform one and an Orthodox one. The Orthodox one was sort of Orthodox. It had no *mechitzah*. Allegedly, he had a letter that was filed from Rabbi Soloveitchik allowing him not to have a *mechitzah*. I never saw the letter. But you couldn't tell the members of these two synagogues apart from one another. It was all a matter of family loyalty to one or the other. There was a small number of people who had kosher homes, and a very small number of people who kept Shabbat. Neither (02:12:00) rabbi had anything which I thought I could possibly learn from him. So it was just very thin.

JG: What did you try to do?

RG: I tried to create a *havurah* on campus for Jewish students.

JG: Was Judith teaching there as well?

RG: She did. But there weren't any Jewish students, and the *havurah* turned out to have a Hebrew Christian for a president and a non-Jew for vice president. Sweet kids, but, you know.

JG: Why were they there?

RG: It was a nice group of people. I can't say that they were takers, because they were, you know, the leaders of the organization, but there was no Jewish substance in it. I tried to get a few of the — how can I put this — smarter people whom we knew to engage in periodic Jewish study privately, and that worked a little bit better — but only a little bit better. So, we refused to join the synagogue, because we made a statement that we will not join a synagogue that is not egalitarian. And we never did. On the other hand, nobody in the synagogue had the slightest idea what we were talking about. So, it was sort of like a pat on the head, oh, that's nice.

JG: Sounds kind of lonely Jewishly for you.

RG: It was terribly lonely. By ourselves, we had our university friends, and we had each other, but there was no community. There was no Jewish community. But I learned something about how most American Jews live, which is a lesson that I have never allowed myself to forget.

JG: And what's that lesson?

RG: Because it's not that different here in Princeton, which we don't have to talk about on this recording, but —

JG: And what's that lesson?

RG: The lesson is that the conveyance from one generation to the next of real Jewish content so that the commitment becomes something more than sheer sentimental nostalgia is very hard to do. It requires an enormous investment of commitment, time, and energy on the part of those people who can do it. I call it the “Big Ten,” which is an athletic league, but my “Big Ten” is time, energy, and *neshamah*. Somebody has to invest these things, or the community will just empty out. So, I learned that in Kansas.

JG: In addition to *tefilah*, dedication to Jewish learning was a priority in the *havurah*. By the time you joined in the mid-seventies, how important were classes, actual classes?



RG: (02:15:00) There weren't any. By class, if you mean a single session in which somebody teaches an interesting text and gets discussion of it going, that's what these Thursdays were, and that's what would happen at the retreats. Enough of us had access to xerox machines, so — not a very long text, but you took a page and you made thirty copies. There was also, by the way, the first night of Shavuot we stayed up all night.

JG: So you had a *Tikkun*.

RG: We had a *Tikkun*, yeah. We could do that. So again, at various hours of the night, somebody would do this. There were no classes in the sense of courses. Everything was basically one shot. If a person wanted to do something that needed two one shots, you just found two opportunities to do half of it each time. Havurat Shalom had courses, as I recall. Fabrangen, I don't know. We didn't do that. For one thing, those of us who could have taught courses were doing that for a living, and it was enough. It's like why students don't come to our minyan here. It's enough. But we had a lot of active learning going on —

JG: In this way that you're describing.

RG: Right. Somebody would bring a text, distribute copies, and tell us what he or she wanted to tell us about that text, and then we would just learn. One such text could be the program for a Thursday evening. One such text could be one of the hour slots of the *Tikkun* of Shavuot.

JG: Did many members of the *havurah* teach? Did you?

RG: Yes, I did.

JG: What did you teach about? Tell us some of the kinds of things you would teach about.

RG: What I know is Talmudic texts. So, I took an interesting text, presented it, taught about why I thought it was interesting, and we talked about it. I have no recollection of which texts they were. We're talking about a long time ago. The same thing I would do now. Bible scholars taught Biblical texts. Medievalists taught, you know — people who knew hasidic texts taught hasidic texts. Nobody was — and this is going to sound much worse than I mean it to sound — nobody was really stretching their boundaries. People were just sharing with other people that which they had to share. And because people had such different things to share, over the long haul everybody learned a lot from others who

knew different stuff from what they knew. Discussion was satisfying. It was a pretty good group of people to have discussions with. (02:18:00)

JG: So, you're describing a situation where someone with some expertise, presumably, would teach, and the students were the members of the *havurah*.

RG: Right. Well, you might bring your friend.

JG: Close friend or any friend?

RG: Most of the time, yes. If there was a reason to think something more or less sensitive was going to go on, then maybe you thought twice about it.

JG: In your class though?

RG: Oh, no, but on a Thursday evening, if, in addition to the class —

JG: Ah, I see. Interesting, because the original vision for learning and teaching in the *havurah* envisioned a non-hierarchical, sort of democratic ideal.

RG: Well, I must say that as time went on, more and more people who originally would not have dared felt empowered to do this. So the non-hierarchical principle in principle held. The problem was — and I put it rather harshly before — once we started having makers and takers, there were people there who were very grateful for what other people had to offer, but just sensed that they had nothing that they could offer in exchange. And they may have been right, in some cases. And also, as time went on — I told you about this one musicologist. There were also people who could talk about art. In other words, there was no narrowly defined list of acceptable topics for these things. Those of us who are Jewish Studies professionals did what we did. But other people were not Jewish Studies professionals, but they felt that the group was willing to hear from them as well.

JG: So, how would the list of these classes be developed? Was it just that you could sign up, or was there any discussion about what it was that people wanted to hear?

RG: No, as I recall, I think somebody, or maybe a small group, took responsibility for a certain period of time to make sure that there would be programming every Thursday night. So, if you wanted to offer a program, you'd talk to them about it.

JG: And would they pretty much automatically accept a program idea?

RG: Yeah. I mean, the only question was variety and other scheduling needs, so an individual person might be told, I don't think this is the right time for that because they're having this and this and this just before, or whatever.

JG: Were there topics that the *havurah* as a whole, would you say, wanted to address?  
(02:21:00)

RG: I think some of the earliest members wanted to keep the level of social consciousness somewhat higher. And again, it's very important since we're talking about me to remember that I was not a founder. Some of the edge of this had already begun to blunt by the time I got there, and I myself was neither temperamentally nor intellectually equipped to do that kind of thing. I was tolerated. When I taught, I didn't teach something like that. I didn't know how. So it went on, but it began to fade. Instead of learning a text, let's talk about what we think about — I don't know — the environment. In those days we didn't talk about climate change. Let's talk about climate change. Or, let's talk about welcoming ceremonies for baby girls. I don't recall that that very often became the official topic of a public gathering of the group. People talked about these things all the time, and as the years went by, many of our members had baby girls. We went to each other's simchas, and when somebody was in a really sort of catty mood, we would compare what we liked and didn't like. Oh, that was a really nice ceremony, but — So, that was part of the price you paid for belonging to this group. People were never happy just to say mazel tov and to get on with it. So, that kind of thing went on, and it often did give rise to one level down conversation from the official conversations in the formal meetings of the group. And of course, we saw each other all the time. If there was one Friday night dinner a month, on the other Friday night dinners, we were always at each other's homes. But those were clearly smaller groups, reflecting already some of the inner social networking of the larger group.

JG: And also, presumably, where people lived.

RG: Correct.

JG: And how accessible they were.

RG: Correct. I don't remember when it began to happen that a bunch of the members, old time members, moved to New Jersey, mostly Teaneck. Those people had to be willing to get into their car on a Friday night and come into the city. Most of those people, when I first got to know them, also lived on the Upper West Side. But, it had to do sometimes with children. (02:24:00) It had to do with all kinds of things. So, the group became a little more widespread, and that was one of the things that happened to the Thursday

night meetings. If you worked until six o'clock on Thursday night, the idea of an eight o'clock meeting in Manhattan, if you lived in New Jersey, lost some of its appeal.

JG: What was your experience teaching this kind of a class, as compared to teaching in other settings?

RG: I almost never had a university class with that many people who really knew stuff. I never taught graduates. Over all of my career, for various reasons that are not really to the point today, I was teaching undergraduates. And although I had a few — I call them refugees from the Yeshiva world — mostly it was at an introductory level all the time. And they learned, and some of the bright ones learned enough that by the end of my getting to know them, they could come into my office and we could have really good conversations. But the level of the class was rarely as satisfying as what the *havurah* could do when it was really grooving on a topic.

JG: So, would you say that in alignment with the *havurah* ideal that teachers were learners and learners were teachers — that actually was your experience.

RG: Oh, yes.

JG: You would find that you would actually learn things?

RG: I was learning a lot. I probably knew as much about Talmudic texts as anybody in the group. I didn't know anything about Hasidut. I knew almost nothing about medieval Kabbalah. So, I would sit and learn from people who knew as much about that stuff as I knew about anything, and it was great.

JG: Would you ever learn things in your own classes that you were teaching?

RG: Also yes. I would certainly learn things that people saw in these texts that I had never noticed. Some of them were not specialists, but very good readers of texts. So yeah, I often came away thinking, Oh, that's interesting.

JG: They brought different perspectives.

RG: Different perspectives, and just, sometimes, a flash insight that they had into a particular text that I had just never encountered before.

JG: What would happen at the retreats, the monthly retreats? Was there a chance for text study or other types of study?

RG: It was, to some degree, just an extended version (02:27:00) of the same thing. I could walk through one of these retreats. So, we got there on Friday afternoon. One of the interesting changes that took place was the idea that you should get there before Shabbat began to erode. Since I was trying very hard to be *shomer shabbat*, I noticed these things. A lot of the other people, it was okay with them. It was okay with me too, ultimately. I wasn't going to pass judgment on these people, but I felt that it made a difference in why the group thought it was there. So, we began with a certain amount of just logistical stuff. Food had to be put into the oven. Hot water had to be prepared. Stuff like that. Everybody had to go and make their bed. But then, the program would begin, unless a few people informally wanted to do something first, with *tefilah* and dinner, after which there would be a session, not very different necessarily from the sessions we had been talking about. Then, and this is an important difference, it's not like people went home. So people just sat around talking up to all kinds of hours. That also, in the long run, had an effect on when the minyan could meet in the morning, but everything touches on everything else. Then in the morning, we got together. There was breakfast and then *tefilah* and then Torah discussion, and then ultimately lunch. There may have been time before that. If the weather was good, people also went for some outdoor time. So the truth was, you couldn't program the retreat too tightly. Then after lunch, there would be more of the same, but there would also be nap time built in. Then at night on Saturday night, there was often something much more fun.

JG: Like?

RG: Like a whole bunch of us played chess until all hours of the night. Word games. Whatever people wanted to do. This was not going to be an activity for the whole group. But after awhile, people got to know each other, and people knew who the other people who would like to do on Saturday night what they would like to do on Saturday night were. So that just all worked out. Sunday morning, I think there was no formal program. There was breakfast, and if enough people wanted to make a minyan they could, but it was not expected. But part of the obligation of the members was to help make a minyan on Sunday morning. And then we cleaned up and went home. Enough of us had cars that everybody could get there.

RG: Singing. You asked about singing. I am not a singer. I love listening to music, but I'm the kind of singer who doesn't contribute. I sing between the notes, as somebody once said. So, there were probably groups, (02:30:00) sub-groups, who broke apart, especially on Friday night, and sang. But I usually found somebody to schmooze with instead.

JG: Were there things like campfires where people would sit?

RG: Not outdoors. It wasn't that kind of a place. Some of the places had fireplaces, and then they would make a fire.

JG: Would there be a fire going during Shabbat, or not necessarily?

RG: Again, it turned out that there would be, eventually. Maybe even from the beginning, I don't know. My very first retreat was a Sukkot retreat, which was not Shabbat, and it was nice. People kept feeding the fire. It was great. The next retreat was a Shabbat retreat, and I noticed they were still feeding the fire. Not everybody did, but nobody wanted to make a scene over it, so it just happened that way.

JG: Were there other aspects of Jewish culture that were —

RG: Yeah. Some people read Jewish literature and made their presentations about that. Sometimes we read a little Kafka. Sometimes we'd read a little I.B. Singer. It all depended on who was there that felt that they had something to present. And as I said before, there was a widespread feeling that really no topic was off limits, and people on the other hand didn't push back too hard, so that a topic that might have been off limits just was kept off limits.

JG: Was there anything about the way teaching and learning, and the way teaching happened for you in this context, that had any influence on how you taught in your university classes?

RG: That's an interesting question. The kind of teaching that I found when I was new was very like the teaching that I did, so that in a sense I just fit into what I sensed as the existing way that things were done, and that's the way I taught my university classes, too. That is to say, I walked in with enough stuff to say that if nobody else said anything, it would be fine. On the other hand, I almost never told students, "You can't ask questions today. I need to cover some ground." So that if anything, one of my teaching weaknesses was that I let students derail me, a little more than was good time management. But especially if students were asking good questions, I couldn't see why we shouldn't talk about that instead of what I wanted to talk about. It's a perfectly good question. Likewise, here there was no (02:33:00) curriculum. There was no syllabus. They didn't have to worry about time. So, I just let the conversation go where it did. If in the course of this I remember that there's this one thing that I really wanted to make sure I said, I just stopped everything and I said it. And then we moved on.

JG: One other thing I wanted to ask you about, just while we were thinking about retreats for a minute, is on the presence of children.

RG: Ah. When I first joined, if I remember correctly, the only children were Sharon Sperling and Ruthie Ellenson. And they just became part of the scene. And then Judith and I moved to Kansas, and we came back and there was Alex. A few other kids of his cohort. Adina Rosenbaum was a little older than him. Eitan Davidson was in between those two. Judith Rosenbaum was a little older. Some of those kids are still very good friends today. And yes, at the retreats, in the course of time when there were enough of them, one of the things that always happened was that the kids made a play. And we all sat there, and of course we told them how wonderful it was.

JG: What kinds of things would they make plays about?

RG: Oh gosh.

JG: Was it Jewish themes, or anything?

RG: Maybe. One year, a couple of the boys and their fathers played a father-son baseball game, and it ended very badly, because the fathers won and the boys lost it. We didn't try that ever again. The boys were pretty young at the time, like seven, so.

JG: No one thought of mixed teams?

RG: No one thought of mixed teams. Well, the kids came up with this idea, Hey, we'll play the dads. I didn't realize how badly it was going to end. Clearly none of us did. So I said okay, and then it ended very badly.

JG: Meaning they were very upset.

RG: They were very upset — which was no surprise. It's just that we hadn't really thought of it. It all happened very quickly. So we went out to the baseball field, and we played this game, and there it was. But the kids made a play, and as they got older, the older kids were joining the discussions. A lot of them were going to day schools, so that they had some at least textual knowledge to bring into the thing. If they went to one of the better day schools, they were used to the format of people sitting around and talking about a text — not just absorbing knowledge but engaging it. So, that was very nice.

JG: So, let's turn our attention, at least briefly, to the question of political activism and social justice.

RG: Okay.

JG: Because, as we've mentioned (02:36:00) already, the New York Havurah was founded and in many ways grounded, at least in the original vision of it, as sort of the nexus of political and religious values.

RG: Correct, religious values engaging in the world.

JG: Exactly. By the time you became involved, what was the role of political activism in the *havurah*?

RG: I would say those individuals to whom this was initially very important — and I don't mean this in any kind of patronizing way — were still members and, to them, it was still very important. And they engaged in it and they tried to get the rest of us engaged in it, with more or less success. But the public agenda of the group as a whole displayed that less and less. Or at least that's my memory of it.

JG: What's your sense of why that disillusion —

RG: I could throw out a whole bunch of possibly relevant things. Age. People got older. They didn't have energy for it. They didn't have quite the same kind of idealism. Professional obligations, which just took a lot of time and energy. Family. It's one thing to go to Washington for a rally if it's just you, but if that means you're leaving a spouse and three toddlers behind or whatever, you know, it's different. And to organize the whole family to go, that was a project.

JG: In terms of Vietnam —

RG: Yes. There were members who — do you know the name Burton Weiss?

JG: Yes.

RG: Yeah. So, there were people in the group who tried to get the group as a whole to engage in semi-mass activity in support of Burton Weiss.

JG: Can you explain what that is about?

RG: He was doing a sit-in in the seminary. I forget the time.



JG: A sit-in for what?

RG: I think it was anti-Vietnam. Some of this happened while I was living in the Midwest, so I heard stories, but didn't experience things. We were going to picket in front of the building. We were going to bring him out under protection so he could address the group, and then we were going to bring him back in under protection, so that nobody tried to seize him.

JG: And he was in the seminary —

RG: I believe that he was a rabbinical student at the time. The sit-in was taking place in the seminary chapel. (02:39:00) But that's all that I remember. There was also Watergate, after all. These things became things that we talked about when we got together, but I don't think anybody was trying to change the world in quite the original way anymore. To the great regret of a few members of the group, who didn't want to see the group evolving away from this commitment. My sense of it, as I remember it, was that that talk was happening.

JG: The Jewish counterculture was also in swing at that point, and members of the *havurah* were often very self-reflective about what was going on. They were writing. There were books, articles, newspapers, etcetera. Were you personally involved in contributing to —?

RG: I didn't do much of that. As I've said earlier in this conversation, I was not very reflective around these things. My temperament was just much more private. When I was invited to write something, I often did, but I would never on my own have started generating materials for circulation.

JG: Did you read magazines like *Response*?

RG: Oh, yeah. I had a subscription. I had the whole run of *Response* until I retired. I left it in my office. Yes, I read *Response*. I read *Moment* when it was new.

JG: Did you start reading *Lilith* at all?

RG: Well, it came into the house, so I looked at it of course. It still comes into this house and I still look at it. Yeah, I read *Lilith*. I was also reading some general issue political things. I read the *New York Review of Books*. I read — gosh, it's been a long time. I read stuff.

JG: Yeah.

RG: And every now and then, I did feel a pang of guilt that I was not letting it affect me more deeply than it was. That should be added to the story. Because I knew that I was watching all this kind of from the outside. But I let that be the case, frankly. I just did.

JG: In what sense were you letting it be the case, as opposed to —

RG: I could have re-oriented my priorities. I could have made myself do stuff. I could have (02:42:00) made myself go to more rallies. I could have changed the kind of stuff that I was teaching. And I didn't, very much. I just did what I liked doing and continued doing it.

JG: Yeah. This is a period in terms of Israel where it's after the Six Day War, it's after the Yom Kippur War. It just happened the year before you joined. How would you describe your relationship with Israel at this point — your relationship, or yours and Judith's?

RG: I wished it well. I sort of followed events. What I remember very distinctly about the Six Day War is that during the duration of that war, I became obsessed with it and did nothing else. And during the Yom Kippur War also. Basically I just let it crowd out of my life a great many other things. But as soon as each of those wars were over, I just sort of closed the file on it and went back to being who I was.

JG: This was also the period, '73, when some members of the New York Havurah were deeply engaged in trying to get Breira off the ground.

RG: I belonged to Breira. I was not a very active member, because, as I said, I didn't do that kind of thing. But Breira looked to me like the kind of organization that I ought to be supporting.

JG: What appealed to you about it?

RG: I agreed with its politics. As I began to think about those things, I was already disillusioned enough with where Israel seemed to be heading that it felt to me like somebody who would get Israel in its collective vagueness to reorganize its priorities would be doing a good thing. But Breira made the mistake of positioning itself a little too far to the left, and ultimately it became unsustainable. I remember one Salute to Israel Parade —

JG: In New York City.

RG: In New York City. You know, the big parade. It takes place in the spring sometime. It's supposed to be because so many *frum* people take part and it can't be before Lag BaOmer, and Yom Ha'atzmaut is before Lag BaOmer. There was always a little bit of shakiness in the scheduling of it. Breira did not participate in the parade. Instead, they stood at the margins of the parade handing out leaflets, expressing all their misgivings about Israel, which I thought was a sign that Breira didn't quite understand how to be politically effective in the Jewish (02:45:00) community. And it dwindled.

JG: In general, was there an overall response to Breira — which after all, was right there? They were actually early on renting space within the *havurah* itself.

RG: Yes, we knew those people.

JG: But was the political orientation within the *havurah* —

RG: No. Breira as a topic, again allowing for the possibility that I'm forgetting things, was not really on the agenda.

JG: So it wouldn't have come up, for instance, as a topic of conversation —

RG: No. Breira wasn't invited to make a presentation for us on Thursday night.

JG: Deliberately, would you say?

RG: No, because that's not what the *havurah* discussion on Thursday night were already all about. Those of us who were good friends and already active in Breira would talk about it all the time.

JG: So, let's move to some reflections on what impact the *havurah* had on you and your involvement as time went on, which was considerable. We've been discussing mainly this period of '74 to '76, and then once you returned to New York. Just to recap here, what would you say were the most significant way that the New York Havurah had changed or evolved during the course of the seventies and into the eighties?

RG: In my life, you mean. The New York Havurah became the matrix of many of my most important friendships. I compared it before to the Cheshire cat. There was no 'there' there, but it was very important. I treasure that. I worked on that. Especially when it was my turn to have a quite spectacular divorce, those friendships were very important to me. But the New York Havurah was so in alignment with my own conception of what a nice

Jewish community would be like that I didn't need to change that conception very much. It met my needs so nicely that I just let it meet those needs. And then, as the *havurah* began to change so that it met those needs a little less well, there was nothing I could do about that. So, you know, my (02:48:00) deep appreciation became a little tinged with regret and nostalgia.

JG: This is into the early eighties?

RG: Into the eighties and even into the nineties.

JG: Just to give us in one place an overview, what were those changes that had happened over the course of the seventies and early eighties?

RG: The program became much thinner. I don't mean that each individual program was less good. I mean there were fewer programs. The Thursday night meetings stopped happening. The monthly retreats stopped happening. Those two things, which were very important to my experience of the *havurah*, were just not part of the experience anymore. Meanwhile, I was living away from New York anyway. I was in Queens, but that's like away from New York in many ways. We won't go there now. So, whatever was going on in the *havurah* was a little less available to me. There was also a *havurah* men's group, which I've been forgetting to talk about.

JG: At what point is this?

RG: Oh, God. I think while I was living on the Upper West Side still, because our earliest meetings were in the apartment. It was kind of silly, because we officially didn't exist as a group, and we didn't talk about it with our wives — except, of course, we did, because every now and then we all disappeared.

JG: Meaning, you didn't talk about it with your wives to the extent that they didn't know it existed?

RG: Technically. Of course they knew it existed.

JG: And you're talking about the seventies still?

RG: It began probably sometime during the second half of my two years on the Upper West Side.

JG: Which is when?

RG: Seventy-five to seventy-six. Then, when we moved back to Queens, I did drive in. It met more frequently at this point than the official *havurah* met, and I generally went in. But the truth is, every now and then, I got preempted by something else, or Alex was sick and I had to stay home with him.

JG: What can you tell us, fifty years later or so, about what went on at these meetings? What was the agenda?

RG: They were mostly *schmoozerei*. Every now and then we shared some stories about our younger days, some of which were slightly spicy, and many of which were not. We didn't very much — and this was to the disappointment of some members of the group — we didn't very much get into our own feelings about stuff. It wasn't the kind of men's group that the sixties and the seventies was generating. (02:51:00) It was much more just a bunch of guys hanging out.

JG: It wasn't a men's consciousness raising group in the sense that women's consciousness raising groups were.

RG: No. I think it might have been — in fact, no, not I think, I know there were people among the original members who hoped it would become that, but it didn't take long until we saw that it wasn't going to, because not enough people in the group wanted it to.

JG: How many people were involved?

RG: Eight-ish? I could probably name them all, but that's not the point. Most of them were members of the *havurah*. One or two of them joined the men's group although they were not members of the *havurah*. We met regularly. It was an important thing for us to be meeting regularly. But it was much less deep than what a men's consciousness raising group would have been.

JG: Were you glad for that?

RG: Personally? I didn't mind. I would have had to work hard at keeping up with the conversation if it moved into a deeper level, though I kind of knew that it would be good for me. But I wasn't the one who was going to push hard for that to happen. Then, like everything else, it just began to meet a little less frequently, and I moved eventually from Queens out to Long Island, which made it impossible. As far as I know, no such thing exists anymore. Every now and then, a bunch of the old timers say, Let's revive the men's group! And everybody says, yeah! And then nothing comes of it.

JG: Are there one-off reunions in the meantime, or not?

RG: We all see each other all the time.

JG: That's different than coming together as a group.

RG: As a group, no, there are not really. The closest thing I came to that — and again, it would have been on my kind of superficial level — I learned this wonderful acronym, ROMEOs: Retired Old Men Eating Out. So I tried to get a bunch of us to become — we would meet once a month and eat somewhere.

JG: As ROMEOs.

RG: As ROMEOs. But then it never happened, because it turned out that I meant lunch and some of them meant dinner, and we just never got it off the ground.

JG: What do you think that speaks to? It's interesting. You had all come from an intensive community essentially. You knew how to do this.

RG: It came in part from the fact that peoples' Big Ten, as I called it before, was attenuated.

JG: Remind us what the Big Ten was?

RG: (02:54:00) Time, energy, and *neshamah*. It came from the fact that the capital that we were living off was so rich and so abundant, it was just there. We all knew it was there. They say about people who haven't seen each other for twenty years, but they remember how to resume the conversation. We're like that. We're like that at this point. We all get together at the home of one of us most July Fourth weekends. July Fourth — that's just the thing we do. Otherwise, we're constantly just meeting each other, in some groups, in various permutations.

JG: You're friends.

RG: We're friends — very important good friends. Those friendships are not gendered, or at least for me, a lot of those really, really important friendships are with women.

JG: Have there been other contexts in your life in which you made such good friends with the number of women as you did through the *havurah*?

RG: Here in Princeton, in these last few years. Not largely, that's a little bit strong — significantly, among people whom we first got to know at the Summer Institute. It's a *havurah* grounded networking.

JG: Let's talk about that. How did you get involved in *havurah* activities at the national level?

RG. When the first Havurah Institute — there had been these conferences, which were like mini-institutes, which I also didn't go to, because —

JG: So you didn't go to the Rutgers Conference in '79. Is that what you're saying?

RG: No, no. I did not. In the summer of '79, we were moving back from Kansas, so I was distracted. But by '80, I was invited to be one of the teachers at the first institute.

JG: So, that was the first Summer Institute. It was at the University of Hartford in July of 1980.

RG: Correct. Wow, you know stuff. That's right. Hartford, I would have remembered. The date I would not have remembered — I mean, the month. I became a regular at these institutes. I must have attended — I'm making this up — fifteen out of the first twenty. It became a very important part of my year. Again, a whole network of friendships began to emerge out of that. I'll get, in a few minutes, to why I stopped going, which is just one of the accidents of life. Meanwhile, I was also invited to be a member of the founding board of what was then the National Havurah Coordinating Committee. So I got involved in the governance of this whole thing a little bit. Partly because I did not live on the Upper West Side, (02:57:00) I couldn't be a regular in the office. They had an office in those days that was a little bit more marginal to some of that.

JG: What was the province of the National Havurah Coordinating Committee?

RG: Never clear. Never clear. It wanted to be what the name said. It wanted to be the home office of the *havurah* movement in the United States — or in North America really, and it never quite pulled that off.

JG: And already, you're saying in 1980, did the National Havurah Committee conceive itself as either being the coordinating body for a movement, or was that aspirational at that point?

RG: A little of each. In other words, it worked hard at maintaining that consciousness of itself, but on the ground it wasn't getting anywhere. I think it was just too hard to sustain as a purely aspirational, theoretical thing. But the National Havurah Committee became the sponsoring organization of the Summer Institute, which to this day is one of the most successful programs of its kind that I have ever seen.

JG: Can you tell us a little bit about it?

RG: It lasts a week. I don't have to tell you facts about it. I mean it just generates deep contact among people.

JG: Please do. I mean, first describe —

RG: Okay. So, it runs from a Monday to a Sunday, so that it culminates in Shabbat. During the week there are two classes a day, and really formal classes that meet four times. Nobody can teach in both slots, so that all teachers are also learners. There is a smaller group who runs it, who supplies the energy. One of the really nice things, which you don't see among all the great organizations of the sixties, is that the younger generation has taken it over. That was a little weird, because I was like this old guy watching from the bleachers. But it worked. It worked. These are young people, some of whom are the children of my generation and some of whom are just young people who found the institute and loved it and joined it and became more and more involved. All right, so there are these two classes. In the morning, there's *tefilah* — lots of different varieties. The only rule is that none of them can be non-egalitarian.

JG: What kinds of varieties would there be?

RG: There would be what they call traditional egalitarian, which is basically *davening*. There was a so-called (03:00:00) *havurah*-style *davening* — a lot more singing, a lot less adherence to working their way through the siddur. There could be a Four Roads Minyan, which was much more internalized experience. There could be a feminist minyan, there could be —

JG: What would be a feminist minyan?

GB: Women were doing it their way, bringing in a lot of other stuff. On Shabbat, there could have been as many as eight such minyanim. During the week there was probably a little more like four. And there were meals, of course. Everybody ate in these cavernous college dining rooms, but there was a lot of conversation that just went on and on and on. There were also workshops, so called — one-shot things, some really like mini-classes —



some of which were skills teaching, some of which were some novelty sessions about some weird thing that somebody wanted to explain to whoever cared to come in and listen to about it. Then there was an evening program, which was much more relaxing, including an auction where a bunch of money would get raised every year. Over the years, they developed — thanks to certain very generous donations — programs for bringing in subsidized twenty-somethings to create a new generation, and some of those people then became the leaders of the organization. Others, you know, drifted away. That's all standard. And then came Shabbat, which is the emotional high point of the whole thing. Yeah, and then Saturday night would be a big party, and all these friendships were just being cultivated and preserved and maintained. As I said, many of our dearest friends here at Princeton are people who we saw once a summer at these things, and now we see them all the time.

JG: When you look back at that first one in 1980 and then the early years, how many people would come?

RG: Some of them pushed 400. For a while there were two or three a year.

JG: Two or three —

RG: — institutes a year. The one in the Northeast, one in California, and sometimes a third one in the Midwest. And that turned out to be, as so often happens, the Havurah Committee was over-extending itself and had to fall back from that. So now, at least since the nineties, there has been only one. I think '85 may have been the last year of plural institutes, or thereabouts. (03:03:00) We also had a magazine — a wonderful magazine called *New Traditions* that published only three numbers, also back in the eighties. The NHC came very close to bankruptcy in the 1985 area, when I, for my sins, was the national chair and had to sort of get us through that. It was partly very bad mismanagement on the part of the professional staff, and part of it was simply that we had never been paying attention frankly to whether the revenues could support the program. So once we got through that, which was really very scary, it sort of all retrenched and then slowly began to grow a little bit. Now there is again paid staff, but on a much more stable level. It's a very healthy organization now. The institute is still just wonderful.

JG: The institute, among other things, became an important forum for discussing feminist perspectives —

RG: Correct.

JG: Particularly the eighties.

RG: Also correct.

JG: What's your perspective on this issue and the so-called "gender wars"?

RG: The institute began to attract, and this is my partisan description of what happened —

JG: Early on, in the first year or so, before we sort of move into this — obviously this was a much broader movement at this point; you were drawing on a much larger group — was it the first three *havurot*?

RG: Correct.

JG: Who was part of this summer institute at this point?

RG: It was partly just people who had become regular attendees at the institute. It was just their thing to do. There was not yet B'nai Or. There was not yet any of the other organizations which have since — and this is a nasty word, but — siphoned off some of that radical energy, so that the Havurah Institute as such became a somewhat more mainstream thing. But in the eighties, all of that turmoil was within the framework of the institute. And there were women pushing that the institute commit itself to a much more radical feminist view of its own purposes and its own program, and it led to — there were these groups of women who went around finding things to disapprove of at the institute. I called them — I'm taking the phrase from the French Revolution — (03:06:00) the "committee of public safety."

JG: What kinds of things would they bring up?

RG: Well, I'll tell you some stories.

JG: Please.

RG: In the 1985 institute at Brandeis — I think so but it's plus or minus a year, it doesn't matter — there was a newly married couple who attended the institute, very excited to be there.

(03:06:39)

RG: Yes, the story I wanted to tell you. So, in the 1985 Institute, I think, there was this young couple who had just been married. At the very first night of the institute, a bunch of their friends and also some strangers who just wanted to join the moment did *Sheva Brachot* for them. And the “committee of public safety” [see addendum] came over and said, “That is disgusting! This institute should not be the venue where we celebrate a patriarchal institution.” And they went home. And they just went home. So that kind of captures it. It was terrible to watch. It was the organization tearing itself apart. And then eventually, it pulled itself back from the cliff.

JG: Do you have other examples of the tensions that the sort of issues around gender —

RG: Well, what are the rules behind deciding what kind of minyan can take place and what kind of minyan can't take place? Can a *mechitzah* minyan take place? If there are enough people there who want it who do all the work themselves, can it take place? If it takes place, can it be in the program? If it can't be in the program, can at least a little notice be tacked up on some bulletin board somewhere? All of these things became fiercely debated issues, and the debate was not peaceful. The debate was lacerated with fury, and it was terrible to be there. On the other hand, and all-women's minyan was perfectly fine.

JG: Is there any sense in which you think, looking back, given the revolutionary nature of what Jewish feminism is really about as it was struggling —

RG: As it was finding its own way —

JG: Finding its own way, but also struggling to come to grips with what genuine egalitarianism actually meant —

RG: Mhm —

JG: — that you think that it was inevitable in a sense?

RG: Oh, gosh. Inevitable is a very strong word. There is a sense in which it is unsurprising that the organization had to go through this very difficult period. But I'm not sure (03:09:00) that it was inevitable, because I would say that there were people there whose intentions for the organization were not altogether benevolent.

JG: In what sense? Can you say?

RG: They were willing to bring the organization down if it didn't live up to their standards.

JG: I see.

RG: Some of those people then wandered off to the Jewish Renewal world, and others just backed away, because the organization was really too important for that.

JG: Backed away from —

RG: — from these confrontations. Some of them still attend. Not all, but some of them still attend, and, as I'm sure you've learned from your interviews, talk about these things with a different sort of distance and awareness of what it was like at the time.

JG: How did the institute and the bodies that managed this whole process help the organization as a whole get through it, help the institute get through it all? Why did it survive?

RG: It survived, I think, because too many people sensed its value. Because a number of the people who were the most uncompromising sort of gave up on the organization and left. When you say 'the organization', we're talking about the institute. The National Havurah Committee was essentially just like a shell corporation, managing the institute. I think those are the reasons.

JG: Were there ways of managing these kinds of discussions, or making decisions, that evolved that helped?

RG: One of the program items that came up during those institutes, that came up, maybe not every single year, was the question: How does an organization in which there is disagreement decide to handle that disagreement?

JG: Exactly.

RG: So, there were people thinking about this. The people who overtly, explicitly thought about this were not very many, but some of them just provided a kind of ballast as the thing went on. And so, it got through. The nineties were much quieter — (03:12:00) much, much, much, much quieter. And then, in the late nineties, I stopped going, because my kids were old enough to start going to Camp Ramah, but I couldn't afford to send them there, so I worked there, and I couldn't do both. The timing of it was just not okay.

Once we stopped going to Camp Ramah, because my kids were no longer going there, we have now — Nina and I — have begun finding our way back to the institute.

JG: You're actually mentioning something that is somewhat fascinating, which is that many, many of the original founding members of the early *havurot* went several times, somewhat consistently, to the first several years of the Summer Institutes, and eventually stopped.

RG: Stopped. Right.

JG: Do you have any theories about why that would be so?

RG: Well, in my case, it was pretty clear why that was so. I can't generalize from my case to others. It might be that people got tired. It might be that certain people began to have opportunities to play similar roles in other venues: B'nai Or, Aleph, you know, so their need for the institute was a little less narrowly focused, and you know, you get to see the world. The institute, when all is said and done, is only what it is, and for that to be your main such activity every year for thirty years requires a certain amount of determination. Every now and then, starting — let's see, so I stopped going to Camp Ramah in 2006, I think, and every now and then, a whole bunch of the old timers would say, Hey, let's all go back. It happened once, I think in 2009, and since then a number of us have been going back somewhat less regularly or in a coordinated way. But we've tried that, because even those of us who were on other sides of the gender wars back then, at this point we've gone back a long way and we can be a little bit more relaxed about it.

JG: Did you and your wife Nina belong to other *havurot* over time?

RG: I belonged to Minyan M'at.

JG: When was that?

RG: Off and on since it was founded, (03:15:00) But I wasn't living on the Upper West Side, so that just means, when I went into the city for Shabbat, that's where I tended to go. Nina belonged for a long time to the West Side Minyan, which is much looser and more experimental, and — I use this word with all due respect — flakier than Minyan M'at, which is in certain respects unbelievably stodgy and self-important. You may want to edit that out of the tape, but in the meanwhile, I've said it. So, we never belonged to another *havurah* because we never lived in a place where there was such a thing. When we lived in Queens, and this was true both when I lived with Judith and when I lived with Nina, the shuls were all very boring, Queens-y synagogues. So I got to go to one, and

Nina often didn't go to any. I wanted to take Alex to shul, and I could read the Torah there sometimes, which made me feel useful. Then we moved to Long Island, where, for reasons that continue to fascinate me, we almost at once joined the local Orthodox synagogue. This had a lot to do with the charismatic rabbi who was there, who over twenty years became a dear friend.

JG: You belonged to that synagogue for twenty years?

RG: Yeah. We joined it almost at once, and we lived in Roslyn for twenty-two and a half years. Noam [videographer for the project] knows the family of this rabbi. Why did we join that shul? I'll tell you why. We moved to Roslyn because, well, other names that you probably know, Joy Levitt and Lee Friedlander told us, Come live in Roslyn. You can live within walking distance of a Reform and a Reconstructionist and a Conservative and an Orthodox shul, and you'll decide which you like. And they became friends too. So we moved to Roslyn. On the very first Shabbat, we had a three-week old baby, so I went to shul and Nina stayed home with the two kids. I walked into this Orthodox shul that I went to for the simple reason that it was the closest. This rabbi had never seen me before in his life. In the Orthodox world, that's not how you do it. Before you move to a community, first you spend Shabbos there and you see whether or not you like the shul. I hadn't done any of that. I had just moved there. And he just never let go of me. And he was very good at it, and it was completely genuine. He knew that we are not and will not be Orthodox Jews, but we were polite. On the premises we (03:18:00) behaved properly, and again, over the years I became very useful there. I became a kind of associate rabbi, never with rabbinic authority, but with much teaching opportunity. I was the *ba'al koreh* there for many, many years, and we just made many, many, many friends there — whereas the other synagogues were all bigger and much more suburban-y.

JG: So this was the synagogue that your kids grew up in?

RG: Yes, and which they hated, it turns out because it was much too — and I see this now — very narrow, very confining, very dull. To us it was none of the above, because we were adults. We didn't have to be confined by its confining-ness, but it was very insular. All the things that I could say by way of criticizing Modern Orthodoxy, I could say about that shul, but I won't. They ran away from it as soon as they went to college.

JG: So here you are in this Orthodox shul. What happened when you retired and moved to Princeton?

RG: Ah, well, some of this is awkward for the public record. We thought we would go to the local synagogue. There was one synagogue in town. It was basically around the

corner. To be blunt but brief, it is very thin. It is boring. It's run by a bunch of kind of right wing businessmen, and we very quickly saw that there's no 'there' there for us — whereas there is a very small egalitarian minyan that meets on campus on Saturday mornings. The non-Orthodox students don't attend, because non-Orthodox students have enough Shabbat on Friday night, and they sleep, or whatever they do. I don't know what they do. So that I say when Nina and I walk into that minyan, we don't change the average age in the room — lovely, lovely, lovely, lovely people, the kinds of people who, forty years ago, would have loved the Havurah Institute. And we have a little world there. We do have sixties-style Torah discussions. We do it all ourselves, and there's no rabbi in charge. Nobody even knows what we do.

JG: Is it connected to a shul?

RG: No, it's connected to the Center for Jewish Life at Princeton, which is the formal sort of holding corporation of Hillel. It meets on those premises, and it's recognized as one of the things that goes on in the building.

JG: Is it mainly a non-student minyan?

RG: Our minyan is almost entirely a non-student minyan. At the beginning of each academic year, a couple (03:21:00) of freshmen wander in, and by November we've stopped seeing them. Every now and then, a graduate student couple come in and they last a little longer, but then they have a baby and so much for that. Every now and then, visiting faculty come in, and they last for the year and then they're gone. So, we're basically ourselves, and we're an aging group, and the number of people in that group with really serious disease is very high. So, the future of this minyan is not so secure.

JG: What's the age span, would you say?

RG: I would say the youngest people there are in their sixties, and the older people there are in their late eighties.

JG: In this minyan and in general in your life, what would you say have been and are the enduring aspects of the original *havurah* vision and experience that have continued to be meaningful to you?

RG: The settings in which I have always felt happiest — and ironically, this Orthodox shul in Roslyn is an interesting exception to this — the settings in which I have always been happiest are the settings that at the beginning of this conversation I called my template — a small group of people making their own way, forming their own group,

making sure that the group is sustainable, and doing things as they have decided to do them. That's been true every time. To me, that was real Jewish life. What I couldn't abide was sitting in some very large auditorium with a rabbi somewhere up there, telling everybody else how to be Jewish, knowing that they weren't listening. Some of my best friends over the years have been Conservative rabbis who spent their careers doing that, so good luck to them, but I couldn't have made it like that. Whereas all these groups, each in its turn — one of the things that I don't do very well is keep the friendships from one stage of my life to the next. It's too easy for me to make friends, so I just start up again, and pretty soon I'm off chugging along. All of these groups have been like that. When I was in my twenties, they were people in their twenties. Now I'm seventy-four, it's people in their seventies. We just do it. A few of us are a little more central to the group than the others, so if a decision has to be made, a whole flurry of emails goes around, and soon a decision will have been made. (03:24:00) Somebody decides every Sunday or Monday at the latest, all right, who's going to read the Torah this Shabbat. It just gets done. Someone else brings Kiddush, someone else prepares the haftarah, someone else prepares the Torah discussion. One member of the group is in charge of maintaining the calendar in which all these slots are filled, ideally for the next couple of months, sometimes not so well. As long as our health holds out, it's exactly the way I've always wanted to live.

JG: Are there ways in which you would say your Jewish life as you're describing it here, and ideas about spirituality, observance, etcetera, diverged significantly from what you thought during those early *havurah* years?

RG: Yes. I think about this a lot actually. When I lived in Roslyn, although we belonged to this Orthodox shul, we had many, many friends in the big Conservative shul, where the rabbi also became a very dear friend, but which was twenty minutes further walk. And, you know, being in that room was not any better than being in the room where we went. In that crowd of Conservative Jews, most of whom were not really observant, observance carried valence. It was respected. When they talked to people like Nina and me, they were a little bit apologetic. I don't mean that by way of lording over them, I'm just setting a tone. In Princeton, it's not like that. The ethos of the Princeton Jewish community, including the parts of it in which our most important social networks are, does not include the valence of observance. So, in our minyan, for example, of an average attendance of maybe fifteen, really no more than five keep Shabbat. But the rest like our minyan. They come on Saturday morning, and then they go and do what they do. Very often at Kiddush — we have a lovely Kiddush — one of them will say, Want to go out for coffee after this? Sure. So, that's a little frustrating.

JG: A little frustrating for you.



RG: Yeah, because I always envisioned belonging to a community in which more or less, my core commitments were shared by the other people. And my core commitments to kashrut, to Shabbat, is simply not the norm here. It's not expected, and there is no deficit in just not sharing it. They are all respectful of us, but that's just interpersonal stuff. It's not really (03:27:00) —

JG: There's no expectation.

RG: There's no expectation of it. There's no sense that maybe we should be a personal model to others in this respect. Sometimes they don't come to the minyan because they're going to Philadelphia for some reason — sometimes this, sometimes that.

JG: Does that feel for you personally consistent with the way you felt since the beginning of your involvement in Jewish life?

RG: No, because in the past, at the very least I was able to convince myself that, in fact, more people did share those commitments.

RG: So that in the earlier occurrences of my template, I was able to convince myself that a much higher percentage of the people whom I encountered — and also, outside of Montreal, I couldn't find a shul I liked, but I found many, many Jews who were my kind of people. And they were happy with their shuls, and I was not, so that was all fine. I may have been wrong. Of course, I was also very naive about these things. I was finding my own way into observance, and I just talked myself to some degree into believing that the whole world is doing this with me. When I was a student at JTS, one of my friends in the student body said, "You know, no more than half the guys who live in this dorm *daven* every morning." I don't know whether that was correct, but the idea that it might even be correct enough that he would say it was just shocking to me. Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. So when I began to see in the leadership of the National Havurah Committee and in the Havurah Institute a lot of deeply involved people were in fact not observant, that created a kind of cognitive dissonance for me, which I got used to, but it never occurred to me that you would want to be a leader of something like that. One member of the board said to me one year, "I love coming to board meetings, because then on Saturday afternoon, I can go shopping." She lived out of town. The board didn't meet on Shabbat, but she came for the weekend, and on Saturday afternoon she went shopping, and then on Sunday the board met. So the idea, again, that a person would say that and not sense, it's alright that I do that, but maybe I shouldn't let the whole world know, that required a sort of recalibration of my conception of things. And I got used to it — because even in the Orthodox synagogue not everybody was Orthodox.

JG: Are there ways that your own ideas, for yourself, changed?

RG: Over the years, I alluded to this (03:30:00) before when I quoted my mother's line about guilt. Over the years my own halachic norms have come and gone. When we lived in Montreal, where there's a lot of really good eating, we kept a kosher apartment, but very quickly I just stopped wondering about what I ate out. I didn't eat shellfish, I didn't eat pork, but I ate. Then we moved to New York, and then I met Nina, who had always kept kosher, so she brought me back into the Kashrut realm. My career as a regular *davener* also has had starts and stops. Partly under the influence of this Orthodox synagogue, and partly because there were times in my life that I sensed some kind of intrinsic meaning in it, I actually *davened* very regularly and not just in the morning. It was part of my way of just measuring the progress of time, focusing in on the kinds of things that the siddur presumably wants you to focus in on, and it was very good for me. And then I just stopped seeing these things in the act of *davening* that I had previously seen, and I let it drift away. So, it comes and goes.

JG: And you, as you say, don't feel any guilt.

RG: I feel no guilt about it at all. I feel some nostalgia, because some of the earlier periods of my life, these things were very important and very nice to have in my life. But then I just couldn't have them anymore, because it was just too artificial and too unreal. So I let them go. I'm not going to hold onto something because my mother was afraid I'd feel guilty. I keep thinking — and I know this is only a fantasy — that one of these days, I'll wake up in the morning, and I'll go find where my *tefillin* are. But if it hasn't happened in all these years, the odds that it's going to happen tomorrow are very slender.

JG: You've spent your career as a professor —

RG: Yes.

JG: — in Jewish Studies — mainly, the bulk of those years, at Stony Brook, right?

RG: Correct.

JG: — with a focus on Judaism in late antiquity?

RG: Well, no. The program was much too small for that. I was doing almost all of the undergraduate teaching in Jewish Studies that there was. I taught a full year survey of Jewish history. I taught an introduction to great Jewish books, most of which were not (03:33:00) ancient books. I taught a course on Zionism, because I felt somebody needed

to teach a course on Zionism, so I did. I taught some courses not in Jewish studies. It was interesting. The religious studies program at Stony Brook had no one who taught Judaism. The whole thing was a very complicated administrative accident. The Jewish Studies program, which is where I was, supplied the Judaic Studies courses for the religious studies program — which was fine, but once I was also a courtesy member of the religious studies department, over the years I taught a survey of world religions. Every now and then I taught the course for majors and minors, “The History of Religious Studies as a Field,” all of which I enjoyed teaching, but which was not Jewish Studies. Then at a certain point, I moved into the history department, and the price that I paid — well, price is the wrong word, because I didn't mind paying it at all — the history department had no one teaching Greek or Roman history, which is like a *shandah*. So I said, all right, “I'll teach Greek and Roman history, too. Therefore, that much less Jewish Studies.” And the department was fine with me. Every semester, I told the department secretary, “All right, next semester I have to teach this course in religious studies, and I'll try to teach one course in Jewish Studies, but I may not be able to teach a course in history next semester.” We all worked it out. They were very good to me. I just balanced all these three different venues, really any way I wanted to, because nobody was really telling me no, you can't do that, we need you for this. I forget. That was an answer to your question, but I may not have answered.

JG: No, it was basically broadly speaking, do you see a relationship between your involvement in one of the early *havurot* and your career path?

RG: It certainly is true that many of the most active of the early membership of the New York Havurah became Jewish Studies academics. There's quite a substantial list of those people. I can't think of Fabrangen, and there was a smaller handful of people like that at Havurat Shalom also, or became Jewish professionals, like Eddie Feld. But I saw my membership in the *havurah* as what I did with my private time, because it was my community. You work, you have a job. You do it well. You do it responsibly. You do it because — I was very lucky — I always enjoyed the way (03:36:00) I could earn a living. But you do come home from work. It's clear now in retrospect, of course, that I was doing exactly the same types of thing in the classroom and in the *havurah*, because that was the kind of thing I did well and enjoyed doing, and there were these two different venues in which I could do it. But no, I didn't see either of those as guiding me toward the other, in part because really, despite what I just said, it's not like a voting majority of the *havurah* were academics.

JG: Of course, they didn't have to be academics. You chose academics. Others chose —

RG: No, right, right, right. I don't think so. I don't think so. Beth Friedman Shamgar, who went off to become a Schubert specialist at Bar Ilan, she didn't join the *havurah* because she wanted a place to talk about Beethoven symphonies. But once she was in the *havurah*, that's what she had to talk about, so she talked about it. In that sense the *havurah* essentially drew people in who liked what they found there, without necessarily having a pre-existing sense that this is what I'm looking for. Our minyan here in Princeton — again, some of them are university people, some retired, some not retired. But at least half the membership are not university people at all, but they wandered in one day, and they liked it, and they've become very active members in this very small group.

JG: I just want to spend one minute looking back and asking you to assess what you see as the New York Havurah's greatest successes and its most important challenges.

RG: Okay. Its greatest successes, in retrospect, are the friendships that it nurtured, which after all flourish decades after the *havurah* as an organized programming activity disappeared. The number of us who would say that our most important friendships are one another is not trivial. Its greatest failure, which may be part of what brought it down, was the whole “makers and takers” thing. Eventually, we had a large follower-ship who were just consumers. I think that put a certain strain on the organization.

JG: Did you then (03:39:00) and do you still, if so, consider yourself a *havurah* Jew?

RG: People ask me that all the time.

JG: Really? Why do they ask you that?

RG: Because they know of my history. Part of them have no idea what a *havurah* Jew is, so that makes it easier to fend off the question. When I lived on Long Island, I belonged to an Orthodox synagogue. My background was all in the Conservative movement, for which I had almost nothing nice to say, and I had this long history in the *havurah* movement. So who was I? And the only answer I could give to them is to repeat what I just said to you. There's all that. Am I a *havurah* Jew? There's a sense in which my sense of an ideal Jewish community is still what the *havurah* aspired to. I'll repeat it. A small group of people living life that they have constructed with one another, in some engagement with the outside world, but an engagement of their own choosing. The risk of that, of course, is a kind of elitist disdain for the outside world, of which I have seen plenty. But it doesn't have to be like that. That's not inevitable. That's how I would like to be living my life, and in a sense I have that here in Princeton, except it's not quite as organizationally defined as the New York Havurah was. There's no group that I belong to here which fits that description, except maybe this minyan. But on Thursday mornings, I

have a study group, which are *havurah* people. On Wednesday lunchtime, I have a different study group which are *havurah* people. On Tuesday and Friday mornings I have one-on-one study groups, both, as it happens, with Conservative rabbis. So I get around.

JG: What are the topics of those study groups?

RG: The Thursday morning, he thought was *Daf Yomi*. It's actually we've been working our way through *Bereshit Raba*. First we schmooze for half the time, and then we read three sentences and we talk about those three sentences for a while, and maybe read another three sentences, maybe not. The Wednesday group has a little more of the makers and takers problem as well. Wednesday morning, so there seems to be a commitment that we should be studying a Talmudic text. But one of the other Havurah Institute people and I choose what they're going to be, and most of the other people are just happy with whatever we put in front of them. And we work (03:43:00) out of the *Art Scroll Talmud*, simply because the translation is serviceable and the notes are sometimes useful, though a lot of them are just mind-bogglingly *yeshivish*. And there a smaller subset of the group is carrying the group. But there are also in the group two retired Conservative rebbetzins who live in Princeton. So it's not like nobody in the group has anything of their own to supply. It's just that some of the people in the group are very grateful for the fact that the group is being made possible for them by other people. I don't resent that. It's fine with me. It's just that in the case of the *havurah*, the proportions became different. There were maybe a dozen and a half people carrying fifty. So on Rosh Hashanah, there were all these strangers in the room who had really no idea what was going on. Someone had to announce pages, which to my mind immediately kills whatever's going on.

JG: Finally, we were starting to discuss earlier the proliferation of *havurot* in synagogues, and I wanted to come back to that. How do you see those *havurot*, your relationship to the independent —

RG: Going back to your question, am I a *havurah* Jew? The proliferation of those groups has entailed a kind of explosion in the meaning of the word *havurah*. Now, any group that designates itself a *havurah*, it's a *havurah*. So some of them — and I've experienced maybe half a dozen of them up close over the years — some of them are actually the people with some real Jewish background in the group, who find the grown up synagogue where the rabbi is spoon-feeding everything to everybody just unsatisfying. So they go off and make a minyan, which is again traditional *davening*, but they do their own *leyning* and they do their own this and they do their own that. When the rabbi is supportive of this, when the rabbi doesn't see it as threatening, it's a wonderful enrichment in the life of the community as a whole. If it's not what would be called a *havurah* in the sixties, let it be called a *havurah*. Because again, in its own way, it's a

group of people finding their own way, this time within the venue of an organized synagogue congregation and doing what they want to do. Here in Princeton, there is a *havurah*-type minyan that meets at the Jewish Center, but separately, (03:45:00) and again they're sort of grandfathered in. I don't know. The rabbinic pulpit here has been a little bit of a revolving door over the years. I gather that some of the rabbis in the past were not very happy about this. They see it as a threat. That's always the problem with these groups. But the current rabbi is perfectly happy with this, so they meet. There's a different group which I think largely overlaps with that that calls itself The Havurah, but I think it is more a social group and a learning and discussion group that doesn't have a Shabbat program. I might be wrong about that. We don't belong to that group at all. There's just a limit to how many groups you can belong to.

JG: What do you see as the relationship, if any, between the original *havurot* and others in this legacy and independent minyanim of today?

RG: That's a very good question. Independent minyanim of today are in some way the same impulse one generation later, having adapted to the fact that it's no longer the mid-twentieth century. It's the early twenty-first century. I believe, and this may be factually incorrect, I have not studied it, that a lot of the independent minyanim tend to attract people who, like the original members of the *havurot*, can carry the load. Alex, my son, belongs to Altshul which can have dozens and dozens of people on a Shabbos, but there are plenty of them who can *leyn* and plenty of them who can lead *tefilah* and plenty of them who can give a *d'var torah*, several of whom are Jewish professionals, at least some of whom are rabbis and Jewish professionals, and it's lovely. But it doesn't have the same impetus to social action. A lot of them do as individuals. It doesn't meet every week. Alex got involved frankly because he had a little girl growing up, and he wanted to give her some such experience. But now he's very involved. He's in the leadership cadre especially of the children's program. It works like that. In Manhattan, the Upper West Side is peppered with these groups, about which I know actually shockingly little. In the Germantown Jewish Center in Philadelphia, there are three regular *tefilot*. There's the one in the main sanctuary, which is rabbi-led. There's a more right wing one, and a more left wing one. The more left wing one is really an offshoot of the RRC, that meets there. They all coexist. Every now and then they get together for a joint kiddush or whatever, (03:48:00) but they all coexist. Anshei Chesed, in addition to the main sanctuary, there are at least two that meet every week, and I don't know how many that meet not every week.

JG: So, looking back over this past half-century and the evolution of the *havurah* in American Jewish life, what role, if any, do you see for the *havurah* in twenty-first century Judaism?

RG: You mean the *havurah* in its original sense?

JG: It's an evolving —

RG: There are going to continue to be groups like this, because there are enough people who want and need and demand this kind of Jewish environment — who don't want to have anything spoon fed to them, especially from someone for whom they are not otherwise inclined to have much respect. They want to find kindred people with whom they can design the things that they want to do. That's now an impulse that is hard baked into American Jewish life. And the *havurah* movement in the sixties and early seventies, in certain respects, triggered it. There are still some remnants of the original *havurot*, which are still doing their thing. They look to me a little bit vestigial, but that might be unfair of me, because the one that I belong to is by far the most vestigial of them all. Fabranken and Havurat Shalom do seem more functional still than that. But all over the place there are these groups of people who are just doing their thing. And I think what the early *havurah* movement, what it did was to give permission for that, and to lay down a couple of guidelines — guidelines is even too strong — just some suggestions as to how it might best be done. The models are still there, and by now, from the early seventies to the mid-teens, there's even an intermediate generation which did whatever it did. So, these groups exist. Some of them will fade. Some of them become one generation groups. Our minyan here in Princeton shows alarming signs of not having a successor generation to take it over. The Havurah Institute is a flamboyant success at this. So, it's hard to predict what it's all going to look like, but the *havurah* movement, and especially once it stopped having disdain for the unwashed masses (03:51:00) and began to see that the unwashed masses, among them are people who are looking for what we looked for, but maybe aren't quite able to find it on their own. And a lot of us, also, we moved out. I moved to all kinds of places. In some of those places, it became possible to be the catalyst of the formation of such a group.

JG: That's wonderful. Thank you so much.

RG: Thank you so much. This had been wonderful to talk about.

## **Addendum**

Pg. 2: The question concerns my mother's Bachelor's and not her Master's degree.

Pg. 3: That is, I entered rabbinical school at JTS. At that point, my mother also for the first time stopped going to work on Yom Tov.

Pg. 3: I suppose that means "of our Jewishness," but my grandmother was a very strong personality and brought an intensely Jewish presence into our home. My parents often spoke Yiddish with her, though her English was more than adequate. This was not one of those well-known cases where they did so to keep secrets from me; I was learning Yiddish by observation, but my parents were both native speakers of Yiddish themselves (at least this was the accepted story), so they "lapsed" into *mameloshen* when speaking to a representative of that early period of their lives.

Pg. 23: I was never a student in Israel. This was a slip of my tongue, and it is clarified as the conversation goes on.

Pg. 39: This was the case when I was a student there, but is no longer so. I should have said "was."

Pg. 70: This was my name, never spoken in public, for the group of feminists who went around vehemently objecting to anything that smacked of leftover patriarchy.