

Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project

SHARON STRASSFELD

Interviewed by Jayne K. Guberman

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**A Project of the Jewish Studies Program
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Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

Jayne Guberman (JG): My name is Jayne Guberman. Today is Wednesday, October 19, 2016 and I'm here with Sharon Strassfeld at her home in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. And we're going to record an interview for the Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project. Sharon, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Sharon Strassfeld (SS): You definitely have my permission.

JG: Excellent. As you know, today we're going to explore your experiences during the late sixties and early seventies, and particularly your involvement in Havurat Shalom and the impact that the *havurah* had on you personally in your life and also on the broader Jewish community. I'd like to start by talking about your personal and family background, and to flesh out a bit who you were at the time you got involved in the *havurah*.

So let's begin with your family when you were growing up. You were born in 1950, in Providence, Rhode Island. Can you tell me briefly about your family when you were growing up?

SS: Yeah. So I was raised mostly in a refugee community. My mother was from Poland, but before the war. (00:01:00) And we grew up in an extended family. My grandfather lived around one corner, my cousins around the other corner, we did everything as a pack. They were — seven children between the three families, and if we went somewhere, we went somewhere, eight adults, seven kids, we packed into cars and we took off. We didn't do anything alone. I didn't have a notion of a nuclear family until much later in my life. And it was a traditional community.

JG: Go back for a minute and tell me about your mother and father. So what did your father do?

SS: My father was an industrial caterer, which meant he drove a truck. And my father was a very simple man, and very contented. He was the absolute enactment of *eizeh hu ashir, ha'sameach b'chelko*, "who was the wealthy person, he who was contented with his life," and that was my father. My mother was (00:02:00) extraordinarily ambitious, not for money but for intellectual advancements. So she didn't know any English when she got here, but she got her college degree, she got her master's degree; she was a master teacher, she started the Head start program in Rhode Island, and she was working on a Ph.D. when she died. She was quite amazing, my mother.

JG: Your father was not born in the United States, correct?

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

SS: No, he was born in the United States. He was first generation, yeah. And she, my mother wasn't.

JG: Oh, it's your mother who wasn't?

SS: My mother wasn't; she was born in Poland, in Mezrich.

JG: I see, okay. And how about siblings?

SS: I have one brother who — in our family, the girls stayed in Rhode Island, and the boys, when they turned thirteen, after the *bar mitzvah*, they were sent to a yeshiva in New York. So he lived at home until he was thirteen and then left, and went on to college at Yeshiva University (00:03:00) as well. Got his Master's, eventually made aliyah, and he lives with his — well, he has four children, three of them live in Israel, one of them lives abroad here in America.

JG: So, you started to tell me about the community. Tell me a little bit about this refugee community.

SS: So, I was thinking about it the other day because in the *sukkah* we were having a conversation about Kovno. And I, when I grew up, we *davened* at a *shtiebel* called *Anshe Kovno*, where the Mizriches *davened* at the Kovno, but down the street with two or other shuls or *shtieblech*, the kids ran wild, I mean really wild, until somebody would smack the table and say, "*zol zein shah!*" (00:03:44) and then everybody would quiet down for twenty seconds, and then —

JG: So, Yiddish, there was a lot of Yiddish —

SS: You know, I realized Rabbi Dreizen gave his *d'verei torah* in Yiddish. I didn't think about it at the time because I forgot about it, but everything was in Yiddish.

JG: Did you understand Yiddish?

SS: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I spoke Yiddish. (00:04:00) They used to argue in Yiddish in the family. Not my parents, my grandparents, but everybody was all together, and I remember them getting the *Forverts* and reading the "Bintel Brief," you know, that advice column, and then they'd argue about the answers with each other.

JG: In Yiddish.

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

SS: In Yiddish, yeah, they'd be arguing — “stupid answer,” or “right answer” — it was whatever. *[laughs]*

JG: And you kids all understood the Yiddish?

SS: I think my youngest cousins began to lose it, because my grandmother died when I was seven. And with her went some of the Yiddish culture. My grandfather still spoke Yiddish to my mother, but he would also speak English.

JG: And what would he speak to you kids?

SS: My grandfather spoke to me in Yiddish often — as often as not — and then they sort of lapsed into English after a while.

JG: So you said this was mainly a working class sort of community. (00:05:00)

SS: Yeah. It was, yeah, yeah. When I went to the Hebrew day school, it was then non-denominational — it was religious, but it was religious with a sort of vast tolerance for everybody. It was like Eastern European Orthodox, it's not like Orthodox in America today. And it was a community day school, so not everybody was Orthodox. You wouldn't have sent your kid there because you wanted an Orthodox education. You would have sent your kid there because you wanted a Jewish education.

JG: Were there other choices or —?

SS: No, this was it. This was the only place to go. And in my class, when I look back, some of the parents were from Eastern European, or had come here as — very young. And it was just that flavor in the community. It was a refugee community, you know. The camp we went to was called Camp Jori? It was the Federation camp, (00:06:00) which they told us meant Joyland of Rhode Island, but in fact it was Jewish Orphans of Rhode Island. It was established right after the war when Jewish orphans were showing up, and so — it was just, that was the flavor of the community that I knew. There was a wealthier, more established, more American community in Rhode Island, but they were Reform and Conservative. We didn't know from them.

JG: So from this very traditional elementary school education, you then went to a public high school. How did that happen?

SS: Public high school. *[laughs]* Yeah, that was a little shocking. So, the first day we get there, what I remember, I think, is all the other kids in this ninth-grade class at classical

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

high school sort of knew the drill. They'd gone to regular schools. We went to — there were fourteen kids in our day school.

JG: In your class.

SS: Yeah, in our class. So we get to this vast auditorium where the principal (00:07:00) gets up in the front of the room and says, "Look to the right of you. Look to the left of you. Only one of you is going to be here four years from now." So we're looking around thinking, What do they do with everyone here? Where are they going? We didn't get it. And then everybody left the room. We're in the auditorium. There's a bunch of kids from the Jewish day school, Hebrew day school, and we didn't know where to go. I didn't know where to go. I just sat in that room. And then after a while, we got hungry, so we took out our lunches and we ate our lunches. And then we waited some more, and then we went home when the bells ring. We were like, We didn't know where to go!

JG: No one came to tell you?

SS: No! People going through the room, back — and after, I started asking questions, so I — the piece of paper has this class and that class, and you have to go from room to room. I'd never heard of going from room to room to — the teachers came to us. We never went to different rooms. So the whole thing was just such a different culture, high school, such a different culture. (00:08:00)

JG: I can only imagine.

SS: And then the Bureau of Jewish Education in Rhode Island had special classes after school for day school kids. So we would go there, and that was a really good place to be.

JG: Tell me a little bit about your education. What was the nature of the Jewish education when you were —

SS: It was really traditional. I mean, we learned how to *daven* early, we learned how to read Hebrew when we were six. We were studying Rashi by the time we were eight or nine, it was pretty traditional.

JG: Boys and girls had the same curriculum?

SS: We weren't allowed to study Gemara actually, but the cutest boy in our class —

JG: Meaning, we, the girls.

SS: We, the girls. But we all wanted to be around the cutest boy in the class, so we petitioned, and they let us study Gemara then. They thought it was so wonderful that we — I don't remember what they were teaching us instead, but we asked and they said yes. Basically, the kids — we didn't run the school, but we didn't feel like we didn't have a voice at the (00:09:00) Hebrew day school. You know, it was like a Jewish school, where kids were — you could argue with the teachers, it was a different environment. And I get to classical high school, and you have to stand up next to your desk in order to speak to a teacher. I'd never heard of anything like that. The whole thing was foreign. I mean, it was even worse when I got to Stern College, and the first day I was in the dorm and they called us all together, the freshmen, and they had a meeting with us about the rules in the dorm. You had to sign in by 9 o'clock. My parents never did that. I could come home when I wanted, from the time I was a kid. It was — I'd never heard. So she gets through this whole thing, and she says, "Are there any questions?" And I raise my hand. She says, "What's the question?" I said, "Is this a joke or is this for real?" I couldn't imagine having people sign in at 9 o'clock at night, and you weren't allowed to leave after a certain time. It just seemed so strange to me to treat adults (00:10:00) like that. But whatever.

JG: How did you like your education?

SS: At the Hebrew day school?

JG: No, at the — at the Hebrew day school, but also —

SS: At the Board of Education. Look, everybody hates their education, but we ran as a pack. We played together, we saw each other in shul. You know, we were just — I remember all the kids in my class today. I hadn't heard from one of the people in my class for probably thirty-five years. She just wrote to me. She had a real estate question, so I wrote her back. It didn't seem strange to me at all. Because it was a really early connection, I've known her since she was four years old, you know. I'm sixty-six, she's sixty-six. She's a month younger than I am. And the Board of Education classes were for me like a homeroom. Coming from this massive high school, (00:11:00) with football games and dances on Friday night — a non-Jewish kid at one point, when I was in ninth grade, asked me to go to a dance with him on Friday night, and I didn't even know where to start to answer him. Like, Friday night? A dance? A non-Jewish boy? [laughs] I was like — it was so foreign, the whole thing was so foreign. And then we'd go twice a week to the Board of Ed classes, and they were like, you know, the *hevrah* was back together again, studying.

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

JG: So outside of the school, where you were in this Board of Education class, what were the most important Jewish influences in your life during high school.

SS: NCSY for sure.

JG: What is NCSY?

SS: NCSY was an Orthodox Jewish youth group. National Conference of Synagogue Youth. It's the Orthodox high school program. And it meant everything to me. It's where I found a home. And where a lot of us found a home, by the way, from what felt pretty alien in high school. (00:12:00) And there would be retreats every month — Shabbatons we called them — we didn't call them retreats in those days. And then we went to the regionals and we went to the nationals in the summer, and it was just an incredibly nurturing place, and everybody married each other. [*laughs*]

JG: What did you find compelling about the vision that NCSY was —?

SS: Oh, that's interesting. It was lots of singing and dancing, which I loved. The *davening* was very heartfelt. It was Orthodox, it was absolutely standard Orthodox, and I liked the learning. We had classes, and they were always interesting. They had the best teachers they brought in. It wasn't — what became later in Jewish life, you give the dregs to the high school kids and then eventually you gave them nothing, once we cut back. That wasn't the truth at NCSY. They gave — the best (00:13:00) of the upcoming rabbinical students taught for NCSY. And that was incredibly powerful.

JG: Did you yourself identify as Orthodox at that point?

SS: Oh yeah, for sure.

JG: And throughout your childhood?

SS: Yeah. Well, I would have said traditional rather than Orthodox. We would have said "traditional." But yeah, that's what we were.

JG: So this was a period of tremendous social upheaval for American youth. We're talking about the sixties. And how did NCSY strive to help Orthodox teens deal with the social changes in American society?

SS: I don't think — I had left NCSY by then. In other words, I graduated high school in '67, I think. Maybe '68. No, I don't remember.

JG: How old are you?

SS: I'm sixty-six, I think I was seventeen when I graduated, not eighteen. So '67 I think I graduated. (00:14:00) And NCSY wasn't dealing a whole lot with stuff happening around. They were really dealing with interior stuff in the Jewish community. I don't think I was — I was beginning to wake up in college. I stayed at Stern for two years and then went to NYU [New York University], and by then I was fully awake to what was going on.

JG: I want to — before we get to college, because I definitely want to talk about that — I know that camps also played somewhat of a formative role for you. What camps did you go to?

SS: So I went to Camp Jori, which was not very Jewish, but sort of Jewish enough. There were Friday night services, it was kosher — there was nothing overtly un-*Shabbosdik* on Shabbat, but it wasn't — you weren't studying, you weren't doing that. I was a CIT [counselor-in-training], by the time I was in high school, (00:15:00) I was a CIT at Yavneh, Camp Yavneh, which is the Hebrew College camp, and then at Camp Ramah in Palmer, when I was at junior college.

JG: And why those?

SS: Because by then lots of the people that I was hanging out with through NCSY were Boston kids. And sort of the center of the region was Boston. And I would go for Shabbat to Maimonides, actually. To hang out. And we'd go to the (00:15:28) Rav's *shiur* on Saturday night. So I was very familiar with Boston culture, and Boston culture was pretty much Yavneh. And Yavneh was Hebrew-speaking, which I couldn't do. So that was interesting to me. You didn't learn to speak Hebrew at day school. You learned to handle texts. So I was really good at that, but I didn't learn to speak Hebrew until a lot later in life.

JG: And why Ramah?

SS: Also Hebrew speaking. And I don't remember why Ramah. (00:16:00) I don't remember why. But I don't know —

JG: How would you compare the environments that you encountered?

SS: At Yavneh and Ramah?

JG: And their impact on you.

SS: That's interesting. Yavneh was much more rigidly Hebrew-speaking than Ramah was. Even in 1968.

JG: And was it transdenominational then?

SS: Yeah. But I guess maybe Ramah, which I went to in '69 I think, if I'm not — that was correct, in '69. Ramah was doing a lot of experiential stuff, and I was by then interested in experiential prayer stuff, just experiential stuff around Jewish stuff. And I felt much more — there was more air, oxygen in the room. And I was looking for that. And I think Palmer had been shut down for a year or so because (00:17:00) Zalman did some weird — I don't know if the kids were smoking dope. I don't know what was going on at Ramah, but they closed it down for a couple of years, and then they reopened it, and that's when I went back.

JG: And Zalman had been at Ramah? Previously?

SS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. He had a *davening* workshop. And the kids were really doing a lot of experimental stuff. They were making their own tallis. I think they were smoking dope though as well.

JG: So you were involved in an eclectic variety of Jewish environments, it sounds like. During your high school years. How would you have described your Jewish identity at that point?

SS: I would have said I was very traditional. But I think the restrictions on women — when I was first involved with NCSY, the fact that the boys in the group were leading everything and the girls in the group were sort of trailed along didn't register, I don't think, a whole lot. But as it went on, by my senior year in high school, I was pretty aware of it. (00:18:00) And certainly by the time I was a freshman in college I was aware of it. It didn't feel great. I went to Stern, and I wanted to, I wanted very much to go to Stern. My parents were opposed to it, but I wanted very much to go.

JG: Why did you want to go? What did Stern represent to you?

SS: Well the whole — first of all, I wanted to get out of Rhode Island. I definitely wanted to get out of Rhode Island. It was so suffocating by then. It's a very small Jewish community. Everybody knew everybody. And everybody from NCSY was going on to

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

YU [Yeshiva University]; most of them were going on to YU and Stern. And that was my group; that's where I wanted to be. And my parents were opposed. They wanted me to go to the University of Rhode Island.

JG: To stay close?

SS: Yeah, yeah. When I got married, my mother offered to buy me a house if I would move to Rhode Island, if I would move back to Rhode Island.

JG: What year did you get married?

SS: Nineteen-seventy. And it was a very touching moment (00:19:00) for me. Because I could see the yearning to have me back there, and I also understood there was no way I was going to go back to live in Rhode Island. That wasn't going to be my life. I didn't know what my life was going to be, but I knew that wasn't going to be it. It was going to be something other than that.

JG: So you went to Stern for two years.

SS: And it was just so much the wrong place for me.

JG: How so?

SS: It was the wrong place from the first day. I just wasn't raised in a small environment. My parents weren't these — I wasn't raised to think that my goal was going to be to get married and have a husband who learned and supported me, or whatever. Whatever that trope was, it wasn't my trope. My mother worked. I expected I was going to have a profession. I expected I would take care of myself. And it just felt so constricting to me from day one. I felt like they were choking me. From the dorm to (00:20:00) everything. I mean, it was so narrow. When I think now, I mean, I'm a businesswoman today. There wasn't a business course there, and I wouldn't have thought that I should have a business course. Because I didn't know I was a businesswoman. I fell into business by accident, and it turns out it was the right career for me. Who knew? And I would never have found it out. It just horrifies me now when I think about it. There were no economics courses. It was just such a small environment, just so small. And I — it felt — I tend to be a little claustrophobic anyway, physically, but I'm also claustrophobic emotionally, when I get shut down too much, and that's what Stern felt like for two years. I stuck it out the second year. And I loved my teachers. There were some wonderful teachers there, just wonderful teachers. But the whole environment wasn't who I wanted to be in my life, and it was time to go. So the day that I got accepted to NYU, I gathered my entire wardrobe — which

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

was all skirts, you couldn't wear pants — (00:21:00) I put them on my bed, I got a box, I put it in the box, I brought it to the thrift store. It was all expensive stuff my mother had bought me, too. I felt terrible. And I went out and bought two pairs of jeans, six tops, and that was it, I was off and running. [laughs] It was funny. I think I kept two Shabbos outfits and that was it.

JG: So what was NYU like for you?

SS: NYU was like, unbelievable. [laughs] I mean, I got involved, really involved in anti-war stuff. And there were so many amazing courses. I didn't know what to take first! It was so, oh my god, I just loved, loved being there. I loved it! I loved how open it was.

JG: And yet you weren't there very long.

SS: No, I was there one semester because Michael Strassfeld and I got engaged.

JG: Where had you met?

SS: We met when we were thirteen years old in NCSY.

JG: Had you been a couple through any of that time?

SS: We started to date at the end of — (00:22:00) maybe the end of high school, the beginning of college, and by then we were engaged, and I had to move to Boston. Because I think it didn't occur to either one of us that he should move to New York. So Brandeis didn't have mid-term —

JG: Mid-year.

SS: Mid-year admissions at that point. It might today. It didn't then. So I went to UMass.

JG: UMass Boston?

SS: Yes. And I loved that too. It had just started. It was very entrepreneurial in those days. I remember, to graduate you had to take a science course. And I could not absorb science. I'm sure it's because I have a block, because I'm not that stupid. I mean, it seemed like it, but I never passed a science course in my life. And I petitioned to have them waived, and they considered it and waived it for me. I said, "Believe me, there's no way I wouldn't want to do this but I can't." (00:23:00) So UMass Boston was great. And then we got married.

JG: In 1970 you said. So your high school years and college years, you were saying, were a period of tremendous turmoil and social ferment. What do you consider to have been the most formative experiences for you, in this late sixties, just before you were getting involved with Havurat Shalom.

SS: I guess the anti-war stuff was really important. We ended up having a lot of arguments in my family because my family was so loyal to America. And if America decided that they had to be in the war, even if we didn't quite understand it, it was an important thing to be loyal to America. And I was one generation removed from that thinking, and it just seemed to me so patently obvious that this was a mistake. So there was that breaking away (00:24:00) and that sort of wrench in the family. I think what I came to understand was a tremendous feeling of power that I'd never felt before in my life. As you watched campus after campus shut down across this country, and understood that somehow this bunch of kids, eighteen to twenty-two years old, were shutting down the country. It was mind-boggling at the time, watching it happen. It was — there were moments of rage because it was not only Vietnam, it was also civil rights. So we watched just — things you couldn't believe were happening. You couldn't believe the stuff going on in the South. The riots. None of it seemed like — but a tremendous feeling of power, like, we can change this; we can make this change. And in fact (00:25:00) it seemed like there wasn't much we couldn't make change if we wanted to make a change. And that was formative for me. That sense of we can change things, and we have. It's inside of us if we choose to use it. It's our possibility to do it. That was probably the most powerful feeling, the most powerful thing I came out of the sixties with.

JG: We're going to come back to this later, but I want to ask you whether your sort of consciousness around women's issues and second-wave feminism was starting to seep into your own consciousness in life at this point.

SS: I think that happened mostly at Havurat Shalom when I really began to think that stuff through. Because the disparity was much more profound there. I would somehow park my feminist stuff at the door and still show up in shul, and sit behind the *mechitza*, and I could tell you exactly why it made sense to sit behind (00:26:00) the *mechitza*. And why the tradition as I knew it was a wise tradition. So it took a while for me to sort through what people had put in my head and what was sitting inside my heart. And also to sort of own Judaism in a way. Not to take the leftovers that somebody else had given me on a platter, but to say, This is what I need. Because that wasn't the Judaism that I grew up with. The Judaism that I grew up with was a Judaism that demanded you to do certain things. The mitzvot were something you had to do because God called you to do it. But it wasn't about whether they nurtured you, or it expressed what you needed to

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

express. And I came to that sort of slowly, that notion that Judaism also had to be something that felt authentic and real and full of growth for me.

JG: Had you ever been involved in sort of a general women's (00:27:00) consciousness raising group?

SS: Somebody, actually Mary Gendler, who you'll be talking with soon, formed a women's group at Havurat Shalom.

JG: All right, so we'll come back to all of that. Let's get to the *havurah* and how you became involved, and your experiences as a member. So when were you first aware of Havurat Shalom — of the existence of Havurat Shalom?

SS: In 1970, when we got married, Art was at the wedding. Danny Matt was at the wedding. Actually, my grandfather, Danny Matt showed up all in white and barefoot, and he was one of the chuppah holders. So he walked down the aisle, in white, barefoot. And my grandfather said, "*Meshiach kimt.*" (00:27:47) [*laughs*] — because he'd never seen anything like it; it was funny. I mean it didn't strike me as funny at the time, but it was cute. A bunch of *havurah* people were at our wedding. (00:28:00)

JG: And how did you two know *havurah* people?

SS: Because Michael was at Brandeis, and Art was at Brandeis, and I don't know, we were all in sort of "seeking Jewish mode," and people find each other when they're in seeking Jewish mode. We didn't - I don't think it had occurred to us to join. We moved to Brookline and joined Young Israel. Saul Berman was the rabbi then. But that was — it was quickly clear that: a) we weren't Orthodox anymore; b) we weren't the young couple in Brookline in the way that they anticipated we would be young couples in the community. We were college seniors when young couples meant lawyers and doctors just starting out in their careers. We were so — we were doing anti-war protests. We were in a different place from the young couples that were at Young Israel Brookline. There was just no place for us there. It was crazy (00:29:00) to think that we moved there. And that's when we applied to Havurat Shalom.

JG: So you said that you were feeling your way along the path to a different Judaism from what you had inherited from your parents. What would you say at that moment in time was your essential critique of that Judaism that you'd inherited?

SS: I guess it was around — it was certainly around women's issues. And it probably began with women's issues, but it was also around, what are these words that we're

saying three times a day? Like, bla bla bla. What's the meaning, what's the intent behind them? And if we want to make them, if you want to *daven* three times a day, what is that going to look like? If you were creating a service, what does that look like? Something that you can say day after day and it resonates for you. So it was questions like that. (00:30:00) It was fundamental questions for things that I had grown up with that I'd never thought to question before. It was the *bentching* — It was things as little as the *bentching* after meals.

JG: What do you mean?

SS: If I were going to create — I mean, I tried to *bentch* after meals in those days, but I was busy. I was going to college, I was teaching Hebrew school, I was student-teaching, I was doing a lot of stuff. If you're going to have — if after every meal in which there's bread you're going to recite the entire *bentching*, I don't care how fast you do it so then you don't even hear it, it's just the wrong liturgy. That's not how you end a meal. And you're not going to use that three times a day. It's just not realistic. So what would gratitude to God look like if it were something that was more natural, and smaller, and realer, and not sort of global, "Let's thank God for creating, you know, *b'rit milah*, and the Torah, and for taking us out of Egypt —" (00:31:00) What does this have to do with the broccoli? I mean really! So it was like stuff like that, you know.

JG: So did the two of you start visiting Havurat Shalom? What was the process by which you sort of explored whether Havurat Shalom would be a better fit for you?

SS: So Art and Kathy invited us to come for a Shabbos.

JG: At their home?

SS: At their home. And they lived across the street from the *havurah*. And we had never been to the *havurah*. We'd heard about it; everybody talked about it. It was 1970, might have been '70 or '71. Maybe it was already in the Spring, but I think it might have still been 1970. So we went there, and they were finishing — we went there on a Friday afternoon, and they were finishing, still, the cooking. And they said, "Services are going to start; they're going to start soon. Why don't you go across the street and we'll catch up with you in a little while?" (00:32:00) So we go out their front door, you know, we take a right, cross the street, and there's a building with huge white pillars on it. And we go into that building, and everybody — there were men running around in wearing weird hats.

JG: What do you mean? What kind of weird hats?

SS: I don't know, they were just weird, with a tassel. They were like — round with a flat top and a tassel. So I said — I'm stunned here, I can't figure out what's going on. I'm like, "Oh my God, did we dress wrong!" Or like, "What is this, and where do you get the tassel?" So I said to one of the guys, "What time do services start?" He said, "Oh, you're in the wrong place. This is the Knights of Pythias. You want to be next door." And we walked out, and there's a little yellow house next door. And I realized, as we left the white building with the pillars, I had never — no conception that a shul wasn't going to — I grew up in a *shtiebel* (00:33:00) but it looked like a shul. It didn't look like a house. So I went next door, we went next door, and I walked in, and the sun was setting. Have you been to Havurat Shalom? I don't know if you've been there yet.

JG: In the seventies.

SS: So, then you know what it looks like.

JG: No, describe it because I don't actually have that clear of a memory.

SS: So, we walked in the front door, and towards the back on our right was a room with a straw ark on the wall. And cushions on the floor, no other furniture in that room. And people were quietly meditating on the cushions. Some — there were — so we went and sat down on some cushions, a little further back, because we were going to watch what was going on. And people had just closed their eyes and were just meditating until the services started. So we did the same thing, and it was extraordinary watching — there were candles lit (00:34:00), there was no overhead light, there was no unnatural light. There were just candles. And then after a while, somebody began a very quiet *niggun*, and I was just — it was the most astonishing thing. It was exactly — I was home. I was exactly where God intended me to be. So I never looked back. And I didn't want to leave that room.

JG: And how was the Shabbat dinner at —?

SS: Oh, my God. It was so crazy. When I think back then — so we probably got back to Art's house around eight or eight-thirty, and we didn't start the meal until eleven at night.

JG: Why?

SS: They were singing, teaching, I don't know. They were, there was stuff going on. And we finished, probably at twelve-thirty. It was just this languid — it was amazing, it was quite amazing. I mean I was hungry by then, [*laughs*] (00:35:00) but it was —

JG: And the other guests were people from the *havurah*?

SS: Yeah, there were other *havurah* members. It just, it shattered everything I knew, everything I understood about what was Jewish and what wasn't Jewish, how Shabbat went and how it didn't go, what *davening* was. It shattered everything. It was literally like standing there when Moses came down and shattered the tablets — and then had to rebuild the whole community from scratch. That's what it felt like. We just started from ground zero and began to reconstruct Judaism for ourselves.

JG: At that point, in 1971, it was the third or fourth year of the *havurah*. Were women able to be members in their own right at that point?

SS: Yeah, yeah.

JG: What was the actual process (00:36:00) for you and Michael of becoming members.

SS: So we had to spend a Shabbat there. We had to meet all of the *haverim*, and you had to — when the membership meeting happened, if you were turned down by two members, you weren't admitted. And plenty of people were turned down. The feeling was — and I think it was correct at the time — it was an intentional community. And if two people were saying they were not open in their hearts to really having these people in the group, to admit somebody and then constantly close the door on them the whole time they're there, wasn't what the group was about. So people's hearts had to be open to real membership in the group. So we had to — we met everybody that weekend — Barry and his then-wife were not there for that Shabbat; they were away.

JG: Janet.

SS: Janet, yes, Janet Wolf, I knew it'd come back to me. So (00:37:00) we invited them to come for dinner to our apartment in Brookline a couple of weeks later because everybody — you had to have met everybody. And when I was on the phone with Barry, he said, "By the way, we're vegetarians." I said, "That's not a problem." And I got off the phone. I said to Michael, "What do they eat?" And he said, "I'm not sure." So we called, and somebody said — I'm trying to think if I called my brother. He said, "They can eat pasta, they can eat rice, they can eat beans, they can eat vegetables." And I said, "Side dishes?" I had no notion, like, no chicken, no fish, no brisket. What are they going to eat? I don't get it! But we made a meal, and then we were admitted. And it turned out half the group was vegetarian. But people liked to come to our house because we had chicken.
[laughs]

JG: Did you have to write anything, or it was all through these conversations? (00:38:00)

SS: No, it was all through conversation. Yeah, it was through one-on-one conversations and how you interacted with people.

JG: What did you understand yourselves to be committing yourselves to by becoming members?

SS: Oh my God, it was huge. First of all, it cost \$500, which was an enormous sum of money in those days.

JG: Each?

SS: No — oh, I don't know. That I don't actually remember. I don't remember that. But we were earning, I want to say, \$4,800 for the year, or \$5,000, so that was a hugely enormous sum of money. But we didn't think about it. The building had to be supported, the group had to be supported. Secondly, you had to take two classes every year.

JG: Every year, or every —?

SS: Every semester. There were communal meals once a week, there were meetings once a week, there were retreats at least (00:39:00) four times a year. Shabbat services, Friday night, and there was an expectation that you would volunteer to do stuff. Cleanups and planning stuff. It was very clear this was going to be the center of your lives; this community was going to occupy the center, the middle, of your life. So you had to really be prepared to do that. And it was amazing, actually.

JG: So I want to look at some of the key components of the *havurah*. I want to look at this notion of community first. How would you describe the *havurah*'s notion of community at the point that you got involved? You mentioned that it was a small, intentional community. What did that mean?

SS: It meant most of your social connections were in the group. If I wanted, if you wanted to go to a movie, you probably would (00:40:00) end up calling somebody in the group to see if they wanted to go. If you ended up in a project, you'd probably be doing it with people in the group. It just became your sort of natural extended family, this group. There were, you know, there were — factions is the wrong word. There were alliances and stuff in the group; it was like a normal social community.

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

JG: How big was the community? Can you describe somewhat of who was, who made up this community at the point that you joined in 1971?

SS: So... joined with us was Allan Lehmann, and Michael Paley joined then. Barry and Janet were members, Art and Kathy, Joey and Gail Reimer were members. I think the Felds were in the middle of leaving. Larry Laufman was a member.

JG: The Savrans were members.

SS: Yeah, the Savrans were members. They had just gotten married that year when we joined. Lucy Steinitz joined. I forgot —

JG: So how big was the group?

SS: There were probably somewhere between twenty-five and thirty members, something like that. Bill Novak. I'm blanking on his name, Larry Laufman's sidekick who was just hilarious — Oh, Epi was there, Seymour Epstein was there that first year with his then-wife. What I'm doing right now is mentally going around the room at a meeting, trying to remember who was sitting where and where they were.

JG: What was the proportion of men to women at that point, would you say?

SS: Many more men than women. Some of the wives — originally, I don't think — oh, David Roskies and Shayna were there.

JG: Joel Rosenberg.

SS: Joel Rosenberg was there. Danny Matt.

JG: Richie Siegel.

SS: Richie Siegel. (00:42:00) Yeah. Oh, I just remembered. George Savran and Bill Novak and somebody used to jam. They all played music. It was so much fun when they got together to just hang out. Anyway, now I lost the question, I'm sorry.

JG: We were talking about the proportion of men to women.

SS: So, originally, women couldn't be members. It was men. And then that changed, I think, gradually. I don't remember who the first woman was. Oh, it wasn't Shayna. David Roskies was married to Dina in those days. And I think Dina might have been one of the

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

first people to lead services if I'm not mistaken. Or I was one of the first people to lead services. And by the time I joined, in the third year — I think it was the third year — I was joining as a member. I wasn't joining as an accouterment to Michael.

JG: Were there women who were not attached to a man who were members?

SS: Yeah, Lucy was. (00:43:00) Naomi — Naomi Katz was. Maybe they came the year after us. But yeah, in that period women were joining by themselves.

JG: Was there still a notion, the year that you joined, of being either a full-time or part-time member?

SS: No, there were no part-time members. That didn't exist.

JG: So that had fallen by the wayside already.

SS: I don't think there were —

JG: There were in the very beginning.

SS: Originally? That's interesting. Joanne Schindler was a full-time member too, but I think she joined a little after us. Jeff — did Jeff Dekro belong? I don't remember.

JG: So you mentioned the house. The *havurah* had purchased a house in Somerville in 1969.

SS: Thank you, Danforth.

JG: Yes, thank you Danforth. Can you talk about the role that the house played in the creation of community? And also, any descriptions you want to offer of the house would be wonderful.

SS: So the house was ideal for what we used it for. Because all the rooms on the first floor (00:44:00) opened into one another, with very wide doorways, so the prayer room was in the back of that first floor. And in front of it was a room with a ton of sort of moderately broken-down sofas and chairs pushed against the walls. So the house had wood floors, scuffed, very — it had all the window trim and door trim was all — I don't know if it was oak, but it was also old wood trim. The walls inside were yellow. The prayer room wasn't yellow; it was sort of white. And next to the prayer room on one side was the meeting room, and the other side also, with a wide doorway, was the dining room

with big long wooden tables and chairs around those tables. And the services on Friday night were closed only (00:45:00) to *haverim*, open on Shabbat day. So the rooms would fill up. Both of those adjoining rooms would fill up with people who were visiting. And people generally — the room, the prayer room would be filled with *haverim*. They would generally sort of set up chairs to be able to participate along the edges. Behind the dining room was really an old kitchen. Nothing had been done to that kitchen for a long time. A door out to a backyard, a small backyard. And upstairs was a library, various — was there a bathroom on the first floor? I don't think there was a bathroom on the first floor. I'm pretty sure there was not. Upstairs was the library, a couple of bedrooms, a bathroom, a big bathroom in various states of decrepitude and disrepair. And then upstairs was Joel Rosenberg's room which was a kind of a turret room. (00:46:00) And — it's hard to believe there was only one bathroom in the house though.

JG: Would you say that the aesthetics of the place and the ways in which it was used reflected core values of the community?

SS: Yeah, I would say. There was a project to paint the *havurah*. Did anybody mention that to you? In the very early years. In the early years there was a project to paint it. It desperately needed — and everybody was given a section to paint, and you could watch how the building — some of it got painted, some of it didn't get painted [*laughs*]. And what I learned from the state of the building was both — for many people to own a piece of property is a huge mistake for the piece of property. Because, essentially, nobody owns it then. But I also learned how much stability the group had because of that building. It was our place. And it meant a lot to everybody. (00:47:00) I can't imagine what it would have felt like in a rented environment, in a rental space. You knew forever that services was going to be in this room, in this place; that Krishna Cat had his place in the building. When you walked in on Shabbat morning you were going to smell the smells from the kitchen, you know, with whoever was making Shabbat lunch. It was very important for the group, the stability of the group, for it to be an owned piece of property.

JG: And everybody had a stake in it.

SS: Yeah.

JG: Because they were contributing financially as well —

SS: Both everybody and nobody. Both things were true.

JG: So outside of classes and religious services and celebrations, when and how did the community get together in the house?

SS: Well, we were there for communal meals every week.

JG: During a weeknight?

SS: I think — it was Wednesday nights, (00:48:00) if I'm not mistaken, was communal meals. And also the classes were held there, so you were in and out of the house all day long. It was never — the front door was never locked. One of the most shocking things of my adult life was, I want to say ten years ago or fifteen years ago, I was driving with my oldest kid, Max, to Tufts for some reason. And I said, "Oh my God, we're like two blocks from the *havurah*. Let's stop by." And the door was locked, and nobody was there. And that was, like, unimaginable. There was — like if I had an hour free during the day between something I was doing, I'd go over and see who was around and wanted to get a cup of coffee. Because the door was always open, there were always people in and out hanging around.

JG: I understand that there were also laundry facilities in the building.

SS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I forgot about that. We had one in our house. I think, we had a laundry in our apartment, so it wasn't an issue for us.

JG: But people came with their laundry.

SS: People came. (00:49:00) Absolutely. It was like a social gathering, you know. I learned about English muffins from Joel Rosenberg. Because we were having, I think, a cup of tea one day, and he said, "You want something to eat?" And I said, "I don't know. What do you got?" And he said, "I've got English muffins." He's sticking it in the toaster. So I took a knife, and he says, "What? Who cuts up an English muffin?" It was funny. I mean I learned a lot of things from people in the *havurah*. Danny Matt taught me about artichokes. *[laughs]* You didn't have that in Eastern Europe; we didn't know from artichokes.

JG: So I want to talk a little bit about these communal meals. So can you describe a little bit the atmosphere and aesthetics of the meals?

SS: They weren't haute cuisine, that's for sure. *[laughs]* They were often gloppy rice dishes, or — it was like everybody's (00:50:00) — always this array. It was always vegetarian.

JG: Why was that?

SS: Because there were so many vegetarians in the group, it just became the norm of the group, we didn't have meat for any communal meals. And every so often somebody would try out a new recipe, and then you'd have a whole new taste experience. It was fun. They were fun. They were really fun. We — I remember there was a retreat once where we had a silent meal. Actually, there was a communal meal where we had a silent meal. Which was because we were trying out different things. Then we had a meal where you had to feed the person next to you; you couldn't eat your own food. You were fed by the person next to you.

JG: What was the purpose of doing a silent meal, or that kind of feed the person next to you meal?

SS: So there's some kind of midrash, and I don't remember what the midrash is, what the midrash was (00:51:00) about — in heaven, I think, somebody — I don't remember the midrash, Art would probably remember it, about being fed by the person who takes responsibility for —

JG: Hell is where you eat —

SS: Or something like that. So we did it; it wasn't successful. And it wasn't a group that naturally tended towards silence when we were all together at a meal. It was naturally towards silence in *davening*. There was real respect for the nurturing quality of silence in *davening*. But once you left the *davening* room, silence wasn't the norm in the group. So a silent meal was not — I mean, everybody was looking at everybody else, thinking of comments they wanted to make and couldn't, the whole meal.

JG: Were those — the idea of doing a silent meal drawn from Eastern or other philosophies that were also in vogue in lots of ways?

SS: Yeah, people were experimenting with all kinds of things. Also we experimented a lot with what was floating around in the culture. (00:52:00) We did co-counseling. Richie Siegel set it up and we did that for a while. We did encounter groups with the whole group a couple of times. Excruciatingly painful. So we did sort of borrowing from lots of cultures around us.

JG: To see what fit?

SS: Yeah.

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

JG: Was there other stuff that was going on during these meals that contributed to the atmosphere? Music? Pot? Anything else.

SS: That's a good question, and I don't know if I remember. I don't remember. I remember a lot of chaos, and everybody showing up, and dishes over the tables. And whoever was in charge of setting the table and then cleaning up, but I don't remember — I don't think it was more than that. I don't know if the meetings were right after the communal meals. I don't remember.

JG: Were there (00:53:00) any agreed-upon practices or thinking, even, about kashrut, given that these were vegetarian meals in particular?

SS: Oh, I think the assumption was that people were kosher, at least in their homes and in the *havurah*, but I don't know that it was an overt conversation. Yeah, I don't remember a conversation about kashrut.

JG: Speaking of meals in people's homes, the *havurah* was known as the "Shabbat-inviting community." So, which meals did people tend to invite others to their homes?

SS: Always Friday nights. You could invite people for Shabbos lunch, but it was always trickier because everybody wanted a nap, and then you had these people at your table. We would have people for Shabbat lunch, but Friday night for sure. Especially if — sometimes somebody had broken up with somebody and they were by themselves. So somebody always invited, made sure that somebody had a Shabbat meal with somebody, one of the *haverim*. (00:54:00)

JG: So did some people tend to take on the role of inviters, and some people were more invitees?

SS: Yeah, probably. Like, I don't think Bill Novak had a lot of people over.

JG: Was it more couples and single people — kind of?

SS: Yeah, probably.

JG: Where were you and Michael in this?

SS: We lived right across the street from the *havurah*. [CUT]

JG: So you'd grown up in a traditional family, where extended relatives gathered, it sounds like, for Friday night dinners. How did these Erev Shabbat meals at Havurat Shalom compare to the ones that you'd grown up with?

SS: They were — everything about Havurat Shalom was like *me'in olam ha'ba* (00:54:40) — it was just a taste of the world to come. I don't know how else to describe it. Every so often I think to myself, maybe I'm romanticizing it; maybe it wasn't that wonderful when I was actually living it. But then, I'll be together with the Paleys — (00:55:00) the reason I think that's not the case is because, among the people that are the dearest to me to this day, are people from Havurat Shalom. The Paleys, the Lehmanns, the Greens. These are people I still see regularly, I care about them, I'm in touch with them. And they experienced it the same way I did. It's not like we're romanticizing it. It was incredibly powerful. And nurturing. And it formed the basis of everything I came to understand about Judaism and about the Jewish community. And Shabbat meals were sometimes banal, but most often wonderful. Conversation was wonderful, the classes were wonderful, and some of that conversation spilled over into Friday night dinner talk.

JG: Was there singing, in general?

SS: Yes, there was singing. And people like — people plugged into each other's lives a lot, and that meant a lot. None of us were living near family, and this was family. (00:56:00) This was really family. And it's the same family to this day.

JG: So to look at another angle of this experience, I want to look at community meetings and the sort of incessant group processing that everybody also talks about as a salient memory in their experience. Do you have memories of that group processing and how that took place — when and how it took place?

SS: So, on one hand and on the other hand. So on one hand, the group processing gave me a language for how to unpack what was happening in a group. This was a very — a group of very intelligent, very thoughtful people, and very psychologically aware people. For example, even the comment (00:57:00) people made about being open to — being open to *haverim* as a requirement for membership was very thought through. On the one hand, you could say, they blackballed people. But there was a deeper understanding about what that process was that was going on, and you had to be respectful of that. So I learned an entire language that I had never had access to, and I learned it in that group. And I never unlearned it.

JG: What were some of the elements of that language, or the tools and resources that you got from that process?

SS: So the group — people that were speaking often spoke slowly and thoughtfully about what they were unpacking in response to what was on the table. It wasn't a shoot from the hip and shoot your mouth off. It was a slow, slower process. And people responded in a slower way. There could be silence (00:58:00) in the group for a little while as everybody digested what someone had just said before somebody else spoke. I'd never seen that before in a group. I've been in a lot of groups in my life, but I was never in a group that was as respectful as this group was, and was as thoughtful about where it was trying to get. On the other hand, the group could do its entire process very slowly. Art Green would stand at the outside and listen, and at the end, come in and say something and that's the way the group would go. Now often it went that way because what he was saying managed to coalesce a lot of the direction we should be going in any case. But he was also a powerful figure, and a directive figure, and he — I think his own struggle was leashing that power and not using it indiscriminately in the group. And he was good at that. So both things were going on. But for me, acquiring the language of (00:59:00) trying to understand what was underneath responses to things was very important. Very important.

JG: What kinds of things were coming up? Were there recurring topics and tropes of things that needed attention by the group in these meetings?

SS: It could be everything from what themes are we going to have for the Shavuot retreat, and how were those going to get played out. Were we going to invite non-*haverim* to come on a retreat? That was always a big issue about when the group was open, when the group was closed. I remember a particularly painful meeting when a couple who were both in business school at Harvard applied for membership. They had come every Shabbat for many years, and the group voted them down because they were in business school. (01:00:00) And I wasn't interested in business at that point. I just thought it was — they felt that they wouldn't fit into the group. And I understood the thinking because there was nobody — we thought that business was a joke. Bella Savran's father came to visit us one Shabbat, came to spend Shabbat for us, and offered to buy chairs for the entire building. And we thought it was funny. He was a successful businessman, this was his daughter's Jewish choice, and he wanted to be helpful to us. But in some ways it was not an open group. We had our standards of what was acceptable and comfortable and fit within the social context of what we knew. (01:01:00)

JG: Can you elaborate on that a little bit? You've mentioned business as being — business and business-minded people as being outside the scope. What else?

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

SS: I think money was uncomfortable for a lot of people. You know, there were people in the group who came from families with money, and people were always a little uncomfortable around them. It was a bit of a joke in the group. That kind of stuff. I mean, it was a high-minded group. It was anti-war, it was exactly the values of the sixties, played out.

JG: The counterculture.

SS: Right. American counterculture. And those kinds of issues didn't fly.

JG: Were the meetings structured in a particular way? And was there leadership within this group? How would issues of authority sort of play out?

SS: So you know, when you just asked the question, I'm trying to remember — how did meetings run even? Who was in charge of them? I guess somebody must have had an agenda so we knew what was going to be raised. (01:02:00) Or they were being raised, you know, with somebody for a reason. But I don't remember how. I don't remember somebody being in charge. There was a group that was more central to the inside of the group, and I think those people knew who they were, and we knew who they were, but it wasn't — it was never in an in and out kind of way. It was just people with more authority, who took more responsibility sometimes.

JG: What gave them the authority?

SS: I think the group did. When you and I spoke before and I said Barry Holtz was our group historian, he fell into that role. He could — if we were arguing and trying to work out an issue, he would say, "Well, four years ago when we had this issue come up, this is what we decided. (01:03:00) And this was why." And that was very useful information to have. None of the rest of us had it. And people had their different roles in the group. Bill Novak would bring interesting people to speak to us every now and then. Yeah, people just — the thing that was wonderful about the group was whatever area you were going to flower in, there was a place for that in the group. If it was music, there was a place for you. If it was culinary, there was going to be a place for you. Once you were accepted. And that was a wonderful part of this group.

JG: What about women's roles?

SS: What about that!

JG: And I don't want to get into women and ritual and public worship yet, but did women have — where was there sort of status and role in the group? And what kind of voice did women have (01:04:00) in these kinds of communal decisions and discussions?

SS: So my experience in the *havurah* was that women's voices were not suppressed, but they were not heard as powerfully as men's voices were. I don't think I'm looking back and coloring it. I think that was accurate. I didn't feel unfree to say whatever I wanted, but I knew in the end that decisions were going to be made probably by Art and Barry, and to a certain extent George, Bill Novak might speak, Michael Strassfeld might speak. You know, Danny Matt could say something, but those were the voices that were going to resonate most powerfully for the people in the room. But on the other hand, I didn't feel disrespected. It was a weird balance. If I had something to say, I felt like people listened to it. If I spoke in a class, I felt like people heard (01:05:00) what I had to say. But I don't feel like I was ever a deciding voice in the group. And I don't feel it's because I was leashing my power, and I feel like in groups that I've been in since that time, that wasn't the case. But I think as we get older, and things changed culturally, I think the *havurah* probably would have changed. In other words, if the *havurah* I was in was in 1980 instead of 1971, I think I would have been heard differently.

JG: Yeah. So this was a time when there was an ideal of openness between — of real personal sharing, from what I understand. And it was also, as you say, largely, or at least proportionately, more of a male community. So what was it like to be a woman in that space? I just want you to talk a little more about that, and for you personally. (01:06:00)

SS: I think for me, personally, I was feeling my way into women's stuff. I didn't know what it exactly meant. My marriage was not an equal marriage, and most of the world that I looked at around me was not. We were all trying to feel our way into what's fair, what really feels fair, and can things change enough so that the balance gets redressed and things feel more fair in the world. And the answer seemed to be consistently no. And the *havurah* — after the first year or so, I began to lead services. And I felt as empowered to lead services — I mean the first aliyah I ever had was at Havurat Shalom. And I remember, I grew up *davening*; from the time I was an infant, they took me to shul. And I remember (01:07:00) my hands shaking when I went up for an aliyah, and I remember my voice being very quivery. Within a year, though, I was leading services. I was *shaliach tzibur* and people were very happy when I led services. Not because it was me, but they were happy to have women participating. I think the group was changing and looking for that.

JG: Just, a little bit as a side note here, in the published pieces about the very early years of the *havurah*, there's very little about how drug use or changing sexual norms were

affecting the way people were relating to each other in the group. Can you comment on this? Was this — in your experience, what was the attitude towards drug use within the *havurah*?

SS: I think people — people smoked dope pretty casually with each other. It wasn't a big deal. It wasn't done in public, the whole group smoking together, but I know (01:08:00) people would go off and get stoned. I remember my father-in-law, who was a rabbi in Marblehead at the time, one of his congregants came up when we joined Havurat Shalom and said, "I heard your children joined Havurat Shalom. You know they have wife-swapping there." And he came to us very embarrassed and asked about it, and we said, "There's no wife-swapping!" It's like — [laughs] There were — I think people were exploring sexual boundaries in those days. I wasn't very aware of it because I was married, but I wasn't unaware that people were exploring them. But it wasn't — I think there was an affair that went on that was problematic at the center of the group, but it was kept quiet, and one of the people left the group. (01:09:00) And that was — sort of made the thing go quiet.

JG: Yeah. We were beginning to talk about the *havurah* as a spiritual community, and I wondered if you could describe the attitude towards *tefilah* and how it compared with your experience of prayer in other settings.

SS: So, when I grew up, prayer was — I don't even think we knew the word "spiritual." It wasn't part of the lexicon. You know, we have to praise God three times a day, that's what we do, we get through it, and you do it as quickly as you can and as competently as you can. And the *havurah* — so the journey into the *havurah* was a journey about what should prayer look like for me. That was part of that conversation, and the *havurah* answered it, provided many, many answers. There was nothing, in the early days (01:10:00) of the *havurah*, there wasn't anything that was off-limits to try. I remember there was one Kol Nidre where somebody played *Chichester Psalms*, Leonard Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, which — I know it's not his best-regarded piece of music — I loved *Chichester Psalms* then, I love it now. And it was — part of that was the experience of hearing recorded music at Kol Nidre where you don't normally do that. Some of Leonard Cohen's music we listened to. We sang — we did a lot of singing, a lot of singing. And sometimes it was negro spirituals, sometimes it was things we adapted to be able to use from American culture, and all of that was fine. And that was very freeing. (01:11:00) To be able to look at prayer in a very wide-open lens was incredibly valuable. Very valuable. And it sort of retooled for all of us what great *davening* was. There were no children in the *havurah* at that point. Well, there was one guy who wasn't a member of the *havurah*, who lived with Danny Matt, above us, actually, in our house, and he had a daughter. Her name was Peleh, if I remember correctly. He would bring her to services,

but she was a little older, and if she got nudgy, they'd take her out. So the integrity of the services was never infringed upon by any kids. Once I left the *havurah* and I realized, in the real world, people don't get that kind of silence in services, and don't get that kind of intentionality, partly because life intrudes. (01:12:00) It was a rude awakening. I never experienced *davening* like at Havurat Shalom. Not before then, not since then. I've had good *davening* before, I've had good *davening* since, but I never had transportive *davening*.

JG: What made it transportive?

SS: I don't know. It was a deep respect for poetry and music and silence, the things that we don't have enough in our liturgy and in our *davening*.

JG: What do you mean when you say the *davening* was transportive? What was the *davening*? Are you talking about the actual words of the traditional liturgy, or more than — something broader than that?

SS: I'm talking about — I think our liturgy for the most part is a failed liturgy. I've always felt like it's a wrong liturgy.

JG: Why?

SS: Because it's too many words, too many repetitive themes, too many words. Too many — I mean the *Kedushah* for *Shemonah Esrei* gets (01:13:00) reburied and reburied and reburied in 6 different other places, the same liturgy. Why? Why do we need this? What's the point of it? And if you peel back all the layers and stand at the beginning of the process, liturgy is about extending gratitude to God. And if you begin at that place, how are you going to get to that place of real acknowledgement of that gratitude for the gifts we have? And you don't have to get there by piling on. You can get there by editing out and making space for the gratitude to grow. Do you know what I'm saying? And the *havurah*, for the most part, got you to peel back and then come forward into different places to see what felt natural and what felt unnatural. Eventually, as years wore on, we ended up with a pretty traditional *davening*. (01:14:00) But the *shaliach tzibur*, the one who was leading services, was always free to innovate. There were never restrictions on that. And that was a tremendous gift to the person leading services because it gave you the freedom to try different things, to see what worked.

JG: Can you talk a little bit more about the ways that people did innovate, what kinds of resources that they drew on? I think it was Art who talked about the *tefilah* and *davening* at the *havurah* as being a "patchwork of creativity that drew on multiple sources."

SS: Yeah, it's true. It could be — people could be taking poetry from all kinds of places, or *kavanot*, intentions, from all kinds places. It didn't begin and end in the Jewish world. It began and ended in the world. (01:15:00) And music was really important. And the thing that was amazing about Havurat Shalom that I've never seen anywhere else, is when we began a *niggun*, we didn't end after two — singing it twice through and then you stopped. We continued the *niggun* until the *niggun* came to its natural close. When it was the time for it to end and the group subsided from the *niggun*, that's when the *niggun* ended. And that's really powerful, to understand that music has its own resonance and its own lifeforce in the middle of the service. It's got to — you have to let it breathe and grow. You can't constrict it because otherwise it's not music anymore; it's a formula. So that was really powerful.

JG: Someone mentioned — that I think it was Allen Grossman, a professor at Brandeis — came and gave a talk on the relationship between — (01:16:00) was it liturgy and poetry, or prayer and poetry? Were you there?

SS: Yeah, I was there for that. And who else came? Bill Novak, I think, invited Al Grossman, but he invited —

JG: There was also somebody's graduate advisor.

SS: Yeah, and I just don't remember whose it was. Now Barry was at Tufts. I don't remember, I really don't remember.

JG: But at any rate, I had the sense from what someone said that that helped make a distinction between poetry and liturgy. Not all poetry works as liturgy.

SS: I remember that.

JG: What, in your memory, did work, and what didn't work? What made something work?

SS: Lots of things didn't work. (01:17:00) Lots of things didn't work. But the good thing was, the group was incredibly patient, so you didn't acknowledge that it didn't work until later, when it was all later, and people would debrief with each other about it and figure it out. Yeah, some poetry didn't work. Sometimes music didn't work. Some kinds of music didn't work. Sometimes there was too much slash and burn with the original liturgy. You have to have some of the original liturgy for it to feel like a whole service. But for the most part the *davening* worked. But it also depended a lot on the *shaliach tzibbur* and

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

where they were at for the day. And what their intention. I don't remember a lot of not working, now that I'm thinking about it. I remember liking this *shaliach tzibbur* more than that *shaliach tzibbur*, but — (01:18:00)

JG: What made something work, do you think — as you look back on it? And were there things that worked so well that they —

SS: Became institutionalized?

JG: Became incorporated and institutionalized to an extent?

SS: I think some of the silence got institutionalized.

JG: Some of the what?

SS: The silence. Certainly at the beginning of Kabbalat Shabbat on Friday nights. Beginning with silence and meditation became institutionalized. That's how we began services. The lights — you know, *davening* to candlelight on Friday nights became institutionalized. I don't know if that still exists today, but that's what became the norm of the group, because it was so powerful, it worked.

JG: There was a tension, as I understand it, between innovation and tradition, and eventually, as you just mentioned, there was a felt sense of the importance of what some of the people called (01:19:00) a “traditional sensibility?”

SS: Yeah. I remember people arguing about it. I remember David Roskies arguing — there were — people had their roles in the group. There were people who were the innovators, pushing for more creativity, and then there were the people pushing for more conforming to what their notions of what traditional liturgy were. And there was those conversations. But you know, the — it struck me, by the way, in every minyan I've belonged to since, you have the people who are the traditionalists who want things to be the way they're supposed to be, or the way they were, or the way they remembered them or they wanted to remember them, and then you have the people that are open to more creativity. And we had those conversations, but once the *shaliach tzibbur* walked into the room, they led the service they wanted to lead. (01:20:00) And that permission was groupwide. Nobody ever walked out of a minyan at Havurat Shalom because they didn't like what was going on — that I knew of. I don't believe that that happened. But they would argue. David Roskies would argue vigorously for the reinstatement of whatever he wanted to have reinstated. I remember that too.

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

JG: And ultimately, though, you said it came back to a more traditional, for want of a different word, liturgy. And why do you think that was so? And was it changed at that point? Did it feel different at that point?

SS: What was different is, we never, ever raced through *davening*. We weren't trying to cram as much as we could into the two hours or two and a half hours we were going to be in that room. So the pace never changed. It was always a slower (01:21:00) pace of *davening* and nobody was — you didn't get points for being the fastest to finish *Aleinu*. So that, by definition, meant that there were a lot of things omitted from the liturgy. In *Pesukei Dezimra*, for example, lots of — there were lots and lots of psalms that were skipped, but the ones that were done were done with *kavanah* and seriously. And that, I think, satisfied lots of people on the traditional end and the not traditional end. Because they got the *matbeyah* of the *tefilah*, the foundational aspects of *tefilah*, they became adhered to, but with enough space around it that people that needed more space to *daven* could also do it.

JG: What about Musaf, for instance?

SS: Always a tension in the group, always! [*laughs*] Full Torah reading — there were certain issues that were always coming up and revisiting.

JG: So those are two (01:22:00): full or not Torah reading, Musaf or not.

SS: Musaf or not. What were the other things? I don't remember the other issues. I remember those.

JG: Were there any definitive conclusions one way or the other about it?

SS: No, it wasn't a definitive —

JG: Sometimes it was full Torah reading, sometimes not.

SS: I think we went to the triennial cycle if I'm remembering correctly. But, you know, it was a group. Even if the group made definitive decisions, nobody remembered them and held to them anyway, and then we'd re-discuss it a year later. And if Barry didn't say, "You know, we did make a decision about this in February of a year ago," nobody would remember.

JG: What was the role of Torah study in the context of the service?

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

SS: Oh, the Torah discussions were great. They were really wonderful.

JG: Was this something new for you? Had you experienced something like this before?

SS: I had experienced Torah study, but not in the context of a shul. Of a shul experience.

JG: Of a service. (01:23:00)

SS: Yes, a service. So yeah, it was new for me. And it's one of my favorite ways to experience Torah study is in the context of the *leyning* — instead of a *d'var torah* at the end. I like when somebody presents a small idea, and then the *kahal* can discuss it. I like that a lot. And it was always interesting at services. They would meander their way through lots and lots of thinking and lots and lots of unpacking. And then someone would wrap it up, and either we'd do Musaf or not do Musaf.

JG: What do you remember about the kinds of approaches people took to Torah interpretation of the parashah, and what role did relating the parashah to contemporary issues have within the discussions generally?

SS: I can't really speak to that because I don't have a strong memory of it. I do remember that people did bring up contemporary issues, (01:24:00) but as often as not the conversation was about the text itself, and about midrashic material around the text. And the characters within the text. I think trying to unpack the characters within the text. I remember they were very rich, the conversations were often very rich. But I can't tell you why, or who led them.

JG: Did you ever lead?

SS: No, never. It wasn't my thing. I would lead services, I didn't lead Torah discussions.

JG: So you said that when you first came, how far into your membership was your first aliyah?

SS: Oh, within the first year, for sure. And I was leading services by the end of the first year I believe.

JG: What was that — can you describe what that was like?

SS: That became my thing. More than — I don't like to give *d'verei torah* today. I do it when my minyan today asks me to do it, but I never felt — I always feel like there are

people with a lot more interesting things to say than I have to say. (01:25:00) And why am I occupying space? You know, let's get somebody else to volunteer who can do it better. I like to lead services, because I've spent a lot of time thinking about what makes a good *shaliach tzibbur* and what doesn't make a good *shaliach tzibbur*, what the group needs from you in order to lead them.

JG: Can you say a few words about that?

SS: Yeah, I think partly — the group needs you to feel centered in your place. They need to know that you're comfortable leading. Because if you don't feel comfortable, they absorb your anxiety about it. And they can't *daven* if they feel your anxiety. So your job is to bring yourself back into that place of feeling secure and safe in what you're doing, and let everybody around you feel safe, and go on that place with you. And also, you can't occupy so much space that you take away the autonomy of people to have their own (01:26:00) *davening*. You can't be sort of a larger-than-life character if you're going to be a good *shaliach tzibbur*. You need to know when to pull yourself back and let people move forward. And there was something else that I feel strongly about. It'll come back to me. Yeah, I mean, I feel like my job when I'm leading services is not to do the work that other people are supposed to be doing for themselves, but to give them a model of how you can do it. And sometimes I teach in the middle. I really find *Adon Olam* an amazing piece of liturgy. And we just — it's just a tossable, throw it in the garbage and get it over with piece of liturgy, so sometimes I'll stop and really look at *Adon Olam*. (01:27:00) Like the last time — where were we? At Hebrew College, Zalman was there, we were having *davening*, and I'd been asked to lead Musaf. And I began that end of the service —

JG: This is — when are you talking about?

SS: This is three years ago, just before — and I said, listen, *Adon Olam* is an amazing piece of liturgy. It starts out in a global way, *Adon Olam Asher Malach*, and by the end of it you're sitting in God's hands. You can't be more intimate than the way this ends. And we have to look at that and really focus on it. And, I can't tell — I love *Adon Olam*, and people came up to talk about it afterwards, because I hate when liturgy becomes garbage liturgy. You know, it's just junk. If it's junk, then don't say it. But if you think that you're *davening* still, don't take off your tallis, don't trivialize it. Keep your intentions there and really do it. (01:28:00)

JG: What was it like for you when you first started being *shaliach tzibbur*?

SS: It was very scary. That's when I understood it was very scary. Because women weren't leading it. If I'm not mistaken, Dina Roskies was the first to lead it and I think I was the second. And there were no role models for how women lead services. So the only thing we knew to do was to imitate what the men were doing that worked, and it was frightening to lead if you've never led or been raised to be able to lead. It was then that I began to realize, I can't be frightened to do this. Otherwise I can't lead services. So I have to stand here in a certainty about this so everybody else can relax and do their *davening*.

JG: What made you —

SS: I could see the anxiety on people's faces.

JG: What made you feel that you could stand there with that degree of confidence?

SS: Because I understand liturgy, I understand *davening*. I have conversations with the *Ribono shel Olam* (01:29:00) every day. It's a deep part of my life. So if I can't — if I'm that woman and can't lead services, there's no woman in the world that can lead. Do you know what I mean? I have to push myself. My job in 1972 was to push myself to learn the skills that I needed to learn to be a woman in that sphere.

JG: And what kind of responses did you get?

SS: People were very open. People liked when women led. But most women were too reticent to lead, or too frightened to lead.

JG: Was it a different experience for people, do you think, when a woman led? Was it for you?

SS: I don't know, I don't think so. No. I liked it.

JG: So what did you mean when you say that the only model they had was a male model. Is there a different model for women, somehow?

SS: I think — I think most successful women *shaliach tzibbur* I know lead slightly differently. But it depends on the woman, it depends what she's doing. I tend to have a (01:30:00) more masculine way that I lead. My voice used to be very strong. It's less strong now, but it used to be very strong. And I have that kind of dominant personality, so that's where it ended up.

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

JG: So I want to talk specifically about gender issues within the *havurah*. And we've talked a little bit about attitudes towards women in general and women's participation in public worship. What roles did women occupy when you first came, and how did that change over the time that you were there?

SS: I think we cooked and we cleaned; we did organizing.

JG: I mean, within worship though.

SS: Within the group, that's what we did, and I think within worship we didn't particularly have roles.

JG: Did women wear tallisim, did they —?

SS: I remember, I think I might have been one of the first to wear a tallis. I had been to the first women's feminist conference (01:31:00) —

JG: In New York?

SS: Yeah, in New York. And Arlene Agus had designed a women's tallis. So I sewed that same tallis — she somehow gave out instructions about how to do it. It was quite beautiful, and I used that for many years, until I sort of segued into a regular tallis.

JG: So this was 1973, that that conference was, I believe.

SS: So that's when I started wearing a tallis.

JG: What about *kippot*?

SS: When I was first married, I covered my hair. But then I stopped within a year or two. And by the time I came to the *havurah*, I think Kathy Green covered her hair. I don't know that anybody else did. And then I didn't cover my hair during services anymore. I just stopped covering my hair, and I think most of the women did. Maybe Dina didn't, I'm not sure.

JG: By the time you got to the *havurah*, were women being counted in the minyan?

SS: Yeah. I think women were always counted in the minyan. (01:32:00) at the *havurah*. I think. Maybe they weren't, I don't know, in the first two years maybe they weren't. We were counted, but we didn't do anything, so it was like — there was no role for us to

participate. Or we didn't take a role. We were too intimidated, I think, to take a role. I mean, we were surrounded by an awful lot of incredibly brilliant, accomplished, sure-of-themselves men in the group. Buzzy Fishbane, Art Green, I mean the list goes on and on for people that are polished and smart. Eddie Feld. So if you're a woman who didn't grow up knowing how or what to do, to move forward in that environment, it takes incredible fortitude and stamina to do it. You have to take baby steps, knowing that you're going to look like an idiot. David Roskies once came up to me, and I never forgot it. It's probably going back twenty years ago, when we were in (01:33:00) Minyan Ma'at in New York, and he said to me, "You know why you're a good *shaliach tzibbur*?" I said, "No, why?" He said, "Because you don't care if you fail." And I thought about it for a long time afterwards, and he's right, he's absolutely right. I don't care if I look like an idiot when I'm up there. If I do something that people think is weird and it didn't work, I don't care. I just keep going on. It doesn't matter. If that didn't work, something else will work.

JG: What's an example of something —?

SS: Singing to "Jimmy Crack Corn," if that's what I wanted to do that day. "Waltzing Matilda." I don't know, reciting poetry that somebody didn't like. I just keep doing it. It's not that I'm so heroic. It's that I don't experience embarrassment the way other people do. And if you don't, you can do whatever you want to do and not be very worried about it. Do you know what I'm saying? And that's a big advantage.

JG: During this period, as you were just mentioning, (01:34:00) the first feminism conference took place in New York, Ezrat Nashim had been formed in the year before — by this point, was there any sensitivity to issues regarding gendered language in Jewish liturgy, or even in the metaphors that we traditionally hold up in discussion, etc.?

SS: Right. So I want to say 1974, '75, I was invited to be on a panel about liturgy. And I was so brain-dead still at that point that it didn't occur to me that we really had a deeply embedded problem with language in the liturgy. My problems with the liturgy were not around language. And I didn't — when I look back, I'm really ashamed at my participation that day, terrible. (01:35:00) Because I heard women talking about male language, and I'm thinking, but the rest of the liturgy doesn't work, what do we care whether it's got male language or not? But they were right to be concerned about it, because *Shemona Esrei* is *Shemona Esrei*. You're going to be dealing with, you know, Avraham v'Yitzhak v'Yaakov. That's what you're going to hear. You're not going to throw out all of the liturgy because you're going to land up with nothing. So you have to reclaim the liturgy and figure out how to deal with the male language. But I didn't get it. I

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

just — for me it was like, why is it bla bla bla all the time, and I just didn't address it properly.

JG: Did anyone within the *havurah*?

SS: Mary Gendler formed a women's group at Havurat Shalom, and it did not work.

JG: When was this, would you say?

SS: This was in I think 1972, maybe. She'll remember the year, I'm sure. And it didn't work. (01:36:00) She had children. So her anger was a different quality than we had, the rest of us in Havurat Shalom. And also I don't think we'd opened up the door yet to that kind of anger, and that kind of sense of betrayal from society. I don't think we'd opened the door fully. We could *kibitz* about it and talk about it, but the full brunt of the betrayal, I think none of us felt it fully at that time. And it's scary, so I think we didn't do it, we couldn't really do the group. And we comforted ourselves by saying, "Mary's so angry." But Mary was angry for good and sufficient reasons that we all should have been angry about, you know, if we were looking at that. We were looking at other issues.

JG: So the group just —?

SS: Just fell apart after the second or third meeting, it just didn't happen.

JG: Interesting. (01:37:00) Were you aware of the founding of Ezrat Nashim?

SS: Sure. Yeah, we were in touch with all the other groups in those days, we tried to keep — I mean, Weiss's Farm was happening, so we met other people. I mean it was a small community in that sense, so we made sure to stay in touch with what was going on in the other groups, in some way. We considered ourselves the oldest, more established, smartest group. But it didn't mean we didn't have an interest in the other groups.

JG: Were these issues — these issues of gender, and consciousness of women's role and status, being discussed outside of women's conversations in the *havurah* at that point?

SS: It would come up at meetings every now and then, but do I think the men took this seriously? No. I don't think they did. (01:38:00) I think everybody paid lip service to it. but when we look at like, who were the organizers? Who were the *shleppers*? It was the women.

JG: Art Green called this a "pre-feminist moment."

SS: Yeah, I think that's true. It's like, there was a little bit on the cusp of stuff happening, but it was not sitting in the center of this group, that's for sure. And people would say the right things, but they didn't act the right way. There was so much disparity between what was going on, you just had to not go there.

JG: So women were leading *davening*. How about reading Torah?

SS: Yeah, women *leyned*. But when I say women, I'm talking about a really small minority in this group. There were probably three or four of us doing this kind of stuff. There were not a lot. And the ones of us that did it, when somebody needed something to get done, they called on us, because there wasn't anybody else (01:39:00) to call on. If they wanted a woman in a role, we got called on. By the way, that happens today in my minyan today. There were two of us who led services of the entire group. I don't know why, but it's the truth.

JG: Were there efforts ever to teach other women to *leyn*?

SS: Yeah, everybody always volunteers — “I'll teach whoever wants to learn it.” But women never did it. Both in Havurat Shalom and today. Because you really need to be willing to put your neck on the guillotine in order to do it. For most women that's what it feels like. It's very scary, very uncomfortable, and why are you going to put yourself there? And as much as you say, if you do it — we said it in those days in the seventies, if you do it three times, it won't be strange anymore, it's just something you do. But if you don't, if you're afraid those first three times, then you just don't do it. (01:40:00)

JG: So I want to turn to study and learning now for a minute, which was a very intrinsic part of life at Havurat Shalom. What would you say was the *havurah's* vision for the place of teaching and learning in the community?

SS: So, what was so amazing about *havurah* study was that people who were teaching classes would be sitting next to you in a class themselves taking a class the next day. And that's a very powerful message. The message is that we are a community of learners. You can have something to teach the group, but you're also going to be, another time, you're going to be a learner in the group. And it's an ongoing lifelong enterprise, this vision of study and deepening understanding of the text. It doesn't end; it doesn't stop. And we're not satisfied unless we are seriously engaged in Jewish study.

JG: So even people who came (01:41:00) into the community essentially as faculty, they would also take classes.

SS: They would also take — well, in other words, if people came from the outside, then they wouldn't necessarily be taking a class. But if Art Green was teaching a class, or Allen Lehmann was teaching a class —

JG: Or Everett Gendler.

SS: Or Everett. They could be taking a class with you, too, and there was an assumption that — and it wasn't hierarchical learning either. It was very much sort of unpacking, everybody unpacking together what we were studying.

JG: Were there people though who were thought of as teacher-types?

SS: Probably. But I don't remember who they were, to tell you the truth. Most everybody was in graduate school, so they had their formal (01:42:00) teaching — and lots of people were studying Jewish Studies at Brandeis or elsewhere. So they had their fill of that academic learning elsewhere. What was going on here was something other than that.

JG: Were there any issues, looking back on it, around authority and how expertise functioned in the community?

SS: There was always an issue around Art, because he was such a large presence in the group. But other than that, I don't think so. I don't think it was an issue. I don't think it was an issue.

JG: Were there teachers that you yourself found particularly inspiring, that drew you?

SS: I think it was Joel Rosenberg who taught poetry, which was wonderful. I took a midrash class with — I don't remember who — but that midrash class was wonderful. (01:43:00) It was wonderful, it was just wonderful study.

JG: Was there, in any sense, an established curriculum?

SS: No, definitely not.

JG: So how would it be decided what classes were being taught?

SS: I think there'd be a meeting about it. About what people wanted to study, if I'm remembering this right, I think there was a meeting about what people wanted to study. And I think some people would step forward and volunteer to teach stuff. And I think Art

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

would coordinate this, and sometimes I think they were looking for someone to teach at this, or at that. And they'd come up with somebody to do it.

JG: And when would the classes meet?

SS: All times of the day or night.

JG: Throughout the week?

SS: Yeah.

JG: And you were supposed to be taking two at any given time?

SS: Yeah.

JG: What about the issue of people's different levels of skills and expertise? Were there — some people, many people came into this *havurah* at a quite high level (01:44:00) but some had fewer skills, even no skills. How did they get help to —

SS: I don't know. I think sometimes people would help other people with reading skills and stuff like that. You could arrange that informally with people around the group, if you wanted. If you wanted to learn how to *leyn*, people would teach you how to do it. If you wanted to learn better Hebrew skills, people would teach you how to do it. And then the classes, I think — you'd just choose based on what you felt like was going to be comfortable, for you to be able to learn something.

JG: Yeah. Let's move to — I want to talk about social activism. Obviously this was a period of tremendous activism on the part of American youth, you've mentioned how you were involved in some of it. How did you (01:45:00) find the political atmosphere at Havurat Shalom, and how compatible would you say you found other members' ideas and levels of engagement in social activism and anti-war work for that matter, with your own?

SS: It varied wildly depending on the person. You have people like Bella Savran who was very pro-Israel and Zionist and whenever there was something going on in support of Israel, she was urging the group to do that. And then you had people who were very involved in anti-war stuff and that was their — and there were people who did nothing. It didn't interest them one way or the other. Some of us were involved in planning like, Weiss's Farm retreats where social action became one of the topics that were important at those retreats. But the entire Havurat Shalom didn't go to Weiss's Farm. (01:46:00) Some

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

people would go and other people weren't interested and didn't go. So I think there was — different people had different pockets of interest, and they pursued them, and they tried to get different people on board, but if you weren't interested, you didn't do it and if you were, you did.

JG: Did it become an issue for some people — I, for instance, remember reading that Bill Novak complained about lack of political awareness and mentioned that several members actually left the group over this —

SS: Yeah, I think that was second year. Not the year I was in. I think there was a splinter, a split in the group, and some people did leave because of those issues, but I wasn't in the group then. We of course heard all the history about it. I think they were, that was the Dorton group, but I'm not sure. Yeah, I think that was the Dorton group. But I don't — I mean, I know some of the names now, but I didn't know who they were then. (01:47:00)

JG: Do you continue to be involved in —?

SS: Political action?

JG: During this period?

SS: Yes, but I wound up being more interested in women's issues and sort of action within the Jewish community rather than anti-war stuff. The war stuff resolved itself in the end.

JG: And the draft was much less of an issue obviously, after few years.

SS: So, you know, my focus became more on the Jewish community, those kinds of issues became paramount for me.

JG: What, for instance, in the Jewish community?

SS: So the question was how the Jewish community was funding or not funding things we cared about, and what the priorities were in the Jewish community. Those kinds of issues were front and center for me. And of concern to me in those years. And I'm thinking about the (01:48:00) protests of Federation in 1969.

JG: That Hillel Levine spoke at.

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

SS: Yeah, Hillel Levine spoke. And the Institute for Jewish Life which was formed and then that demise, and then —

JG: What was the Institute for Jewish Life?

SS: So, in response to the protests —

JG: Say a little bit about this.

SS: So Michael Strassfeld and a bunch of other people worked on — the Federation, the National Federation was going to meet in Boston.

JG: In '69?

SS: In '69. And everybody in our world was concerned about the fact that Jewish education was just not on the agenda. I mean, it was still the time when lots of money was going to hospitals and all kinds of far-flung projects, none of which were, in our minds, the projects that would create the next generation of Jews. So there was a movement to protest Federation, to stand outside and protest, and make everybody walk by with signs (01:49:00) — some of which I think Michael still has; actually, he never threw anything away, thank God. Who knew this was going to be a good thing someday? But Federation did an interesting thing, and opened up the doors, and said, Come in, and here's a slot, speak to us. So Hillel Levine spoke brilliantly, and from that Federation meeting something called the Institute for Jewish Life was formed. I think Leon Jick was involved, if I'm not mistaken. And a certain small sum of money was put aside to serve as seed money to fund new Jewish projects. And some interesting things came out, but it was never enough money, and — it was never enough money. It wasn't going to be a game changer, that's for sure. So, you know, issues like that. (01:50:00)

JG: We started to talk about Zionism a little bit. How would you describe your own relationship to Israel and the role Zionism played in your life?

SS: I was — the first year I visited Israel was 1967, after the war. And it was an extraordinary time in Israel. I'd saved up money working in a factory to be able to go with my very good friend in those days, and I fell in love with Israel, and I never stopped being in love with Israel, until today. Although, you know, you want to take everybody's heads and bang them against the wall on a regular basis. But I feel exasperated about Israel today in the way I used to feel exasperated by my parents. You know, it's family, what are you going to do? You know, you landed up with these people. [laughs] (01:51:00) But Israel was a — could be a topic of contention at the *havurah* in those

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

years, because there were people that were very blindly pro-Zionist, and there were people that were very critical of the beginning of the Occupation in those days.

JG: And the Yom Kippur War happened right in your second year —

SS: Right. Which was just mind-boggling. And there was a fight at the *havurah*. I know why, because after the Yom Kippur War, we were supposed to go on retreat for Sukkos. We always went away for Sukkos and Shavuot and there was a group of people that felt we shouldn't go away for Sukkos because things were such in a disarray in Israel. And there was another group that felt we should go away, but we should be studying Israel, and the retreat should be centered on Israel. And I remember just huge and painful conversations about it.

JG: (01:52:00) And what happened?

SS: We scheduled the retreat, and I think we talked about Israel, I think that was the compromise solution. But I remember Bella being angry, and I don't remember what it was about, but it was around that time.

JG: There's also a group that left — was this in your time also? A group from the *havurah* that left and were among the founders of Kibbutz Gezer?

SS: That wasn't from Havurat Shalom, was it?

JG: There were some people.

SS: Really?

JG: It must have been just before your time. Did this ever get resolved? Some people have described the *havurah* as a quote, "distinctly American phenomenon." Would you agree with that?

SS: Yeah, I would agree with that. The real truth about the *havurah* is nothing ever got resolved. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Everything was an ongoing, evolving conversation, so even if you thought you'd put something to bed (01:53:00) because you'd actually voted on it and took a position, it didn't matter because three months later it'd be open again and you'd have the same conversations again.

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

JG: Yeah. So you've mentioned several times the issue of retreats, and Weiss's Farm. Can you talk about them a little bit? How often did they happen, and who would be there, for instance?

SS: Okay, so they're two distinct things. Havurat Shalom had its own retreats, and those were separate and closed to everybody else.

JG: As you just mentioned.

SS: Right. So Weiss's Farm was the general *havurah* movement. There was a big old house in New Jersey, sort of run down in rural New Jersey, fabulous flatland all around it on a country road. And this older, refugee couple running it. Their daughter, who was not married at the time, (01:54:00) used to come to the retreats, and she eventually met her husband at one of our retreats, which was wonderful; they were overjoyed. Mrs. Weiss did all the cooking for the retreats, it was quite — baked all the challah — it was quite amazing, the whole thing. When I look back on it, it's quite amazing when I think about it.

JG: And this was a time that members from the three original *havurot* joined together.

SS: Right.

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

SS: Right. There was the feeling that we should be meeting across our local lines because we had a larger platform to look at, a larger sense of what our agendas should be, and what we might be exploring with one another, to look at. So that's where Weiss's Farm began. And the conversations were just amazing. (01:55:00) Lots of Havurat Shalom members never went. There were, I don't know — I don't actually know, but if I would guess, I would bet it's a half a dozen of us that went, not more.

JG: You mean at any one time?

SS: At any one time, yeah.

JG: Did you go regularly?

SS: Yeah, I always went. I thought they were very — I had a sense of the *havurah* as a movement, not as just my personal journey.

JG: Even early on?

SS: Early on, absolutely. Because it seemed to me such an amazing model for the Jewish community. How could we not have seen ourselves as pioneering an entirely new Judaism? One that was going to not be the failed Judaism we knew, but a successful Judaism of engagement. That's how I saw it. So talking across — seeing what other's people's experiences were and unpacking things in a more global way, I thought made a lot of sense. We looked at, for example, the issue of tzedakah. I hadn't thought about this in years. (01:56:00) How this community gives, who it gives to, under what circumstances, what compels us to give, why do we give? And from that, lots of us formed local tzedakah collectives, and we would pledge — I think it was five percent of our gross income, something like that, to a pot, and then we would make allocations. So lots of things came out of Weiss's Farm, I think, lots of projects. The Havurah Summer Institute which exists to this day came out of Weiss's Farm. It was a bigger venue for Weiss's Farm.

JG: So in that sense, you mentioned that Weiss's Farm was an incubator.

SS: It was definitely an incubator. It was a really serious incubator.

JG: How did the Havurah Institute emerge out of it, and when?

SS: So — when did it emerge? Probably 1976 — if I could figure it out — 1976 or 1977 or something like that, was the first year we did it. I remember thinking (01:57:00) about it a lot, thinking we need to establish, not like a “weekend,” but a larger venue. A place where people can come and study for a week and take in people not necessarily from the *havurah* community. Because there's no place for adults to study in America. There was no place. Limud didn't exist. So if you're an adult and you want to get basic Jewish knowledge, you're going to go to a synagogue class, I guess, once a week with a rabbi. But the kind of study we were talking about just didn't exist here.

JG: Were there real differences between those *havurot*, between those original *havurot*? How were those different?

SS: Oh yeah. You knew, Fabrangen was always going to be social action because of the people that were most engaged in it, that was going to be their push. We were more engaged in spiritual, (01:58:00) Havurat Shalom. And the New York Havurah, I think they ate together. It was a gastronomic *havurah*, that's what it looked like to me. They ate together and they went on retreat. They didn't *daven*. Fabrangen had *davening* every week, we had *davening* every week, New York Havurah never did. When we — when

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

Michael Strassfeld and I first moved to New York, there was no place to *daven*. There was no minyan. So we formed a minyan in our living room. When we talked about it, everybody said, People in New York don't *daven*. They're just not going to *daven* on a Shabbos. So the first week we had ten people, the second week we had thirty people, the third week we had sixty people, and we were off and running. Yeah.

JG: Are there any other examples of small projects? You mentioned tzedakah projects that came out of the Weiss's Farm discussions.

SS: That's a good question. I don't know. (01:59:00) No, I think those were the ones, but people might remember other things that I'm not connecting the dots to. That could be the case too. Lots of talk about feminist stuff began at Weiss's Farm and continued at Weiss's Farm. Also sexuality, and all kinds of personal issues. And it was interesting because after Havurat Shalom — it's the same *haverim* in the room every single week. This was wider, more oxygen to the same topics. And it was helpful. It was helpful to hear other people's take on things, from different geographical locations, different backgrounds.

JG: Yeah. So I want to spend a few minutes just reflecting on how some of the ideals and practices played out in the real world, and have you just sort of reflect and comment on them. (02:00:00) One is the admissions process, and particularly the issue of inclusion and exclusion that you mentioned early on. Many people have mentioned this as something that was problematic and at the heart of it. And I'm wondering in general how the group dealt with it, and how you felt about it and experienced it, and how it changed, if at all, over the course of the time that you were involved.

SS: It had, at the time, I accepted it because it was the norm of the group, and I think for that kind of intense group, that was the right norm. But I have never since joined a group that was exclusionary.

JG: On purpose?

SS: On purpose.

JG: Why?

SS: Because I've never been in that kind of an intense community where it was important. I had been in groups where they felt like they should exclude people, but I'd never see the reason for it, (02:01:00) if it's an open group. If it's the kind of intense group that Havurat Shalom was, it made more sense to me at the time. Because to have

somebody — there were people in the group who were problematic, so don't let me mislead you that we were all one big happy family. There were definitely problematic personalities in the group. But they weren't — they weren't there by accident. They were there because people said that they were going to be open to those people. So the commandment was to stay open to these people, and to try and exist within that orbit with them, and that was the struggle, that was the work. For me it was a lot of work because I was extremely judgmental, more so in those days than I am in these days. Extremely judgmental. So overcoming (02:02:00) a sort of natural antipathy that I might have felt, or — disagreeing profoundly with somebody's approach to something would be very powerful for me. So in that kind of environment I think you have to have a closed group. Or you don't — you're not going to be in the kind of intense community that they were looking to create, we were all looking to create.

JG: Some commentators have observed that despite the ideal of an egalitarian, non-hierarchical community, there was still, nonetheless, a sense of power and authority. And that those issues of power and authority reverberated in various ways throughout the group. How do you assess that now, looking back on it?

SS: You know, I think that it was boys vs. girls. I think it was as simple as that. (02:03:00) Art Green taught me more about how to be a powerful person in the world than anybody else I've ever met, because he knew when to leash his power, and he knew when to unpack it. And that was very powerful — it was very powerful to watch in the group. He wasn't overtly trying to mold the group in his image. It was — he was stuck on the seam of — sometimes thrust into the rebbe role — liking that rebbe role, hating that rebbe role, liking being the leader, not wanting to be the leader, not wanting to be seen in that way. So it was very complicated, where he stood in the group, and watching him struggle with that and sort of suck his power back in sometimes and let the group do what it needed to do. (02:04:00) Or move forward and sort of sum up the position that he thought we should be taking was very — I learned a lot, I learned a lot watching power politics get played out.

JG: In very — sounds like ethical hands.

SS: In good hands, yeah.

JG: Another theme that goes through everybody's comments, and also the writing about the early *havurah* in *Response* — members and people in that immediate environment who were commenting — were the limits on the possibility of intimacy. Here's a small intentional community, and people often talk about finding it stifling in some ways, and that the effort to remain open taught them about the limits of their ability to remain open,

or their desire to remain open. (02:05:00) And I'm — did you find that to be the case personally? And I want to add one other thought, which is: how, if at all, do you think the addition of women as full participants affected the quality of relationships within the *havurah*?

SS: So if I unpack some of that — there were times when I thought to myself, not the first year or the second year, but maybe the third or fourth year I was there, “I can't have this conversation again, these people are choking me. I just need to stop, it needs to end.” So I get that. And to listen — because always another — every year in the Spring, there were new *haverim* coming in. And they had new thoughts about issues that we — as I said, we never put an issue to bed. So we raised it again, and raised it again, and the next year yet again. (02:06:00) And we'd have a new cast of characters. And it was a struggle sometimes to stay open to — and also not to feel like, “Oh, I'm one of the *vatikim* here, and we've already made this decision, and you're a newcomer. So shut up, we're not listening to you yet. You have to be here a year or two, and then you can talk.” [*laughs*] No, that's not staying open. So that stuff was hard, that was hard for me. But the notion that in order to be in a rich Jewish environment it's worthwhile to do the struggle towards intimacy with the people you're studying with and living that Jewish life with, it strikes me that that was a very rich and noble notion to have, and the right notion to have. And everywhere I've been since I've tried to recreate that everywhere.

JG: And has it worked?

SS: Yeah. Our Berkshire (02:07:00) Minyan are people deeply connected to one another, and when there's disagreement in the group, most of us struggle to figure it out so the intimacy of the group can continue, unmarred by personal difficulties. But, having said that, there were, as I mentioned before, there were problematic characters in the group, and lots of tension sometimes around — they especially came out in the encounter groups we had, which were incredibly explosive.

JG: How did the encounter groups work, just briefly?

SS: We brought in an outside facilitator, and we would — and the vow was that we were going to be honest.

JG: What's the purpose of an encounter group?

SS: It's to unpack the difficulties of the group, and let you go deeper in your relationships. And it was — I guess the encounter group was one example of, I don't want to be this intimate. Because I thought (02:08:00) — I had a different notion.

Evidently there was a pact among some people not to discuss the most problematic person in the group. I didn't know that we were doing that — that that was off limits. So I sort of, I thought it was innocent, raised it — and was sort of left stranded, and it was very complicated, very problematic. I think we did two encounter groups, and then we stopped it as a technique because it was very divisive and painful. I think we learned, you can't uncover everything. Some things have to stay papered over. Sometimes if there's a crack in the drywall, you repair it as best you can and you paint it over and keep moving. You don't dig out the whole crack.

JG: Another critique of the *havurah*, even back then in the seventies, was (02:09:00) based on the fact that most people, as you said, didn't have small children. Many weren't even married. Many were still students. They weren't struggling with the demands of family and work and all of that. How do you see that as you look back, in terms of these issues of intimacy and the creation of real community?

SS: I think it would have been impossible to do Havurat Shalom if any of us had had children. Because we couldn't have been the center of our Jewish lives. You've raised children, I've raised children, and somebody at our minyan this Yom Kippur talked about — she was a pediatrician from Boston and talked about — you know, having to go home and make lunch for her kids, which we all did. Not to mention (02:10:00) a minor dissipation of the intensity of the *chag* on Yom Kippur. I don't think it would have worked. And I don't know that it wouldn't — it's not a good model for us now at this time in our lives. In other words, living together in small, intentional communities strikes me as the best way to get older. And the best way to be younger. And then you do what you need to do in the middle of your life, and then when you're by yourselves again as adults, I think an intentional community is an incredible way to live. So I wish we had Havurat Shalom today.

JG: If you need to sip more —

SS: Yeah, I do need to sip more.

JG: (02:11:00) So we're now coming to sort of the last segment, where I just want to look at some larger reflections on the impact of all of this on your life, and more broadly. So you were a member, as we've said, from 1971 to 1974. Why did you guys leave at that point?

SS: I left because I took a job in New York.

JG: Doing what?

SS: The national, there was a national foundation for — National Jewish Resource Center. Which Yitz Greenberg had started with Steve Shaw. And they were looking for an administrator, and I was really interested in retreats. I was interested in camping and retreats as a mode into a deeper Jewish life. So this was, to me, a tremendous opportunity. I quit very shortly — I quit within six months after I moved there for a whole lot of reasons. But I was willing to uproot my life because I thought it was such an amazing project. (02:12:00) And by then, the first book had come out. We were sort of on a larger stage, without meaning to have been. And so I was looking at the Jewish community from a much wider lens, about what the needs of the community were. And it felt like New York might have been a good place to begin to explore some of those other things.

JG: So let's talk about *The Jewish Catalog*, which is the book. So the first edition was published in 1973, and went on to become one of the most well-known products of the Jewish counterculture, and also one of the runaway hits of the Jewish Publication Society, its publisher. Tell us a bit about where the idea originated and how you and Michael came to be involved.

SS: So Richie Siegel and George Savran were both getting a Master's at Brandeis, and to get a Master's in Contemporary Jewish Studies, you had to dream up a new project (02:13:00) and write a thesis about it. So they dreamed up a Jewish Whole Earth Catalog. The *Whole Earth Catalog* was enormously powerful in those days. And then they decided they wanted to do it. So they went to the Institute for Jewish Life and they got a small grant to hire a secretary, and they hired me, I was hired to be secretary. And then George dropped out of the project. He didn't want to write a book. And then they ran out of money, so I became, not a secretary but an editor. And then Michael Strassfeld decided he wanted to do it. So the three of us — Richie, Michael and I — began sort of editing this volume about the Jewish lives we were leading, essentially. And it started small, in small ways. Every year we build a *sukkah* — how do we do this? Somebody's got to write this down so we don't — (02:14:00) because every year we'd stand there with a bunch of wood saying, "How do we do this? What happens now, for the *sukkah*?" So we began simply like that. Find out who's baking good challah and let's get them to write their recipe up so we have it in an institutionalized way. And then we put out the call, and people began to send us in stuff, and from that grew a book. And the Institute for Jewish Life actually lent us money — it didn't give us money, it lent us money. We paid it back with the royalties from the first book.

JG: Who was your target audience in your minds?

SS: We had no idea. We didn't know what we were doing, we had no — *[laughs]* it was completely — when I look back on that whole period, I don't know what we were doing! Just writing this book, like — it was crazy. We didn't have a target audience. When — our editor at JPS was Chaim Potok. He called us into his office. He was incredibly intimidating. (02:15:00) I mean, really intimidating. He had these piercing dark eyes and he was brilliant and intense, and he said, "So what does the book look like?" And the three of us are sitting there, completely mute. And I think I said, "Well, I guess it looks like a Jewish book." And he said, "Well what does a Jewish book look like?" And I think either Richie or Michael said — it was quiet for a while, we were all digesting the question, and then one of them said, "Maybe a Gemara." *[laughs]* So from that the design was born — the center text with the things around it. But we had never thought about any of these ideas, ever. I mean, who knew? And he said, "What does the paper look like?" I said, "What do you mean, what does the paper —?" (02:16:00) He said, "Go take three books off of my shelf." So I took three books off of his shelf. He said, "Feel the paper." So I opened them up and I touched the paper. And I said to myself, "Oh my God, each paper feels different. Each one feels different." And the other thing I thought was, Oh my God, somebody chose the paper for a reason! Somebody wanted that paper. And that was when I began to understand, Oh my God, somebody designs books!" I was twenty-three years old. What did I know? I didn't know anything about publishing or books or anything else. So everybody's lives changed after that. This book happened, and we were very lucky.

JG: Why do you think the concept of do-it-yourself Judaism touched such a nerve? And among whom do you think it actually made a real impact?

SS: I think there were a lot of young people our age, which is to say young married people older than we are, in their late twenties, (02:17:00) early thirties, who were beginning to come back into synagogues and it just wasn't working for them. They'd been a part of American culture, going back into these infantilized sort of arid environments, and it just wasn't working. And then this book appears that's lively and funny and colorful and irreverent. And if it was about anything, it was about ownership. It was really about ownership, about owning Judaism, not standing on the outside and looking at the rabbi and saying, He's a jerk, that doesn't work for me. It's about ownership, and how do you do it yourself? How are you going to make this part of your life? And it was in a sense giving people permission to do that. And I think it hit at the right time when people were looking for permission to begin ownership of their Judaism. So it worked. I don't think it would work today, because there's too much distance now that's been created.

JG: What do you mean, too much distance?

SS: In other words, the next generation and the next generation, they've gotten farther and farther away from the source. So the (02:18:00) Judaism that's getting peddled around now is very consumer-oriented. Rabbis today and congregations today are struggling with the no-dues model, and pay as you need it, pay as you go, but implicit in that is a consumer approach to Judaism. When I need it, it'll be there for me, and when I don't need it, I don't have to support it. And that is completely, everything foreign to what we were doing.

JG: So what do you think its impact was though at the time?

SS: I don't know.

JG: Do you think it changed people's approach to ritual?

SS: I think things happened because of the *Catalog*. And because of the *havurah* movement. Because the *Catalog* was sort of the larger, outward manifestation of what we were all doing anyway. I think lots of shuls began to experiment with smaller groupings within shuls, and that was a big deal for many people. Not a big deal meaning everybody was doing it. Meaning (02:19:00) those people that participated in these smaller groups, they were meaningful, they gave them a way to stay in the shul, and that's what was important. But I don't know how much of a larger impact on that it had. I think it probably taught a generation of *xi* kids that Judaism was not as stodgy as they thought it was.

JG: Well, you went on to create two additional volumes of the *Jewish Catalog*. And other books as well. Tell us a little bit about those, and what motivated you to keep doing this kind of work.

SS: So, somebody wrote to us at the end of the first book — we got a barrage of mail. And I answered every one. Nobody else would answer! I hand wrote — I can't believe I did it, but I did it. Somebody wrote to us saying, "It's quite obvious that none of you have children, because there's not one thing about children in this book." And I said, "That's not true!" And I went back and looked at the table of contents, and I said, "Oh my God, there's nothing about children — that's absolutely true!" It was amazing to me when I looked at it. So we said, (02:20:00) "Okay, so let's do another one, and let's include the stuff we left out of the first one."

JG: Did you have children by that point?

SS: Yeah. We had our oldest kid at that point. So I think I was pregnant — maybe I was pregnant. So we began a second volume, which was so huge it got divided into two volumes. It was too big to publish as one volume. So it wound up being three books.

JG: So to what extent do you view these as outgrowths of your *havurah* experience?

SS: Oh, I think they were all completely outgrowths of it. I don't know that they're as significant a phenomena as people think that they were. Do you know what I mean? In some sense it must have been, because everywhere I go, someone always comes up to me and says, "I still have your book." And it would be very gratifying if it felt like it were my book, but I felt like that book exists (02:21:00) outside of me in the way my kids do. Do you know what I mean? It's not really — so I guess it had some impact. But in the end, is it a game changer? I don't think so. I think people — the Jewish community has evolved in the way it's going to evolve, and it fights the problems that it's been fighting for the last fifty years, or seventy years, and they come up with half-baked or full-baked, sometimes good or sometimes bad solutions and answers.

JG: So you said earlier that in some sense your whole life has been a quest to re-find the experience of your initial *havurah*. And you've been involved in the founding of many, let's call them start-ups in the Jewish community, from institutes to schools to minyan and social action projects. Can you talk about some of these — what you think are the most important, and how you see them as (02:22:00) outgrowths of your *havurah* quest and experience?

SS: So, of everything I've done, most of the things that I value most about what I've done are the local things. I like small, local projects. So Anshe Chesed which we worked on in the seventies — there was a synagogue in New York that was going to be sold to a developer. Wolfe Kelman, *alav ha-shalom*, who was the head of the Rabbinical Assembly for the Conservative movement, came to us, and to Rachel and Paul Cowan, and said, "Can you help? You have a minyan that's meeting in your house. Can you help put this shul back on its feet so it doesn't need to be sold?" And we did it. We raised the money. We brought people back to the shul. We did it. It was an amazing project. It was amazing to watch. (02:23:00) And that's the sort of community building, creating small Jewish communities that nurture themselves and become a locus for people's Jewish involvement, that I think is a really important thing. More important to me than the *Catalog* is, believe it or not. Because the *Catalog*, you throw it out into the world and people do what they want. Anshe Chesed, people came every Shabbos. They had Shabbat meals together. They raised their kids together. Some of the people here in my minyan here in the Berkshires are people I knew from Anshe Chesed.

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

JG: So did this become your community?

SS: Yeah, that became my community. Eventually we hired a rabbi. Yeah, it became a really powerful place. Heschel School — we didn't have a place that felt comfortable to send our kids — started a school. Hundreds and thousands of kids have graduated that school today. (02:24:00) It's quite amazing to watch.

JG: Were you building on something in that case, or was that from scratch?

SS: There was nothing. That was from scratch. That was *really* from scratch. [laughs] The people that sent their kids to that early school were like — when I look back, I can't believe we were willing to entrust our kids to a school that was just starting. It had no history. But it was quite a fascinating journey, that school, starting a Jewish school.

JG: When did that start?

SS: That started — 1981, I want to say. Something like that. '80, '81.

JG: And what about your involvement with the National Havurah Institute?

SS: That grew because of Weiss's Farm. Weiss's Farm I think might have been closing, or it might have gone on. But we understood, there has to be a place for people to come to study. Not just — we can't just do it in our small community. There has to be a place for American Jews who want to come to study to study. (02:25:00) What it turned out what American Jews don't want to study with a bunch of hippies! [laughs] Counterculture types, you know. But we wanted to study with each other, so hundreds of people would show up every summer. We'd have it at one college campus or another. I stopped going after a while because — I just wind up in the Berkshires every summer, or for a while I was in Israel every summer and it just didn't work out with my schedule anymore. But I think it was one of the best things that we did, and it exists to this day, thirty years later. And it was a very powerful place for people to come together, and things grew out of that. You know, there were local *havurah* retreats. In a certain sense, it was a pre-Limud Limud model.

JG: There's an interesting tension and juxtaposition between the very local and the national growing out of that, and their relationship with each other. (02:26:00)

SS: I never put a lot of — I was interested when Weiss's Farm happened and we could meet across grounds, but I didn't put a lot of energy into national things. Because it seemed to me most change happens locally, and it's best to create good local models, and

Sharon Strassfeld, 10/19/16

those models can export themselves elsewhere. You can see how people are living and growing from what you've created locally. You can't always see it when you're doing a national project.

JG: Right. So when you first went to New York, though, you were involved in starting — ?

SS: West Side Minyan. And then Minyan M'at. Both of them met in my home when they started before they moved into Anshe Chesed.

JG: Then they moved into Anshe Chesed?

SS: Yeah. We moved West Side Minyan into Anshe Chesed and continued there, and then the group had gotten larger and more — I just wanted something smaller and more intense. So, you know, a small group of us began to meet at my house. (02:27:00) And then that got bigger and bigger — I mean, West Side Minyan was thriving. We didn't steal people away from them. And then that moved into Anshe Chesed after a while. So there was the West Side Minyan, the Minyan M'at, and then the regular shul minyan. So there was a lot of stuff going on in that building, all of it really interesting!

JG: And how about the minyan here in the Berkshires?

SS: So the Berkshires minyan started out in somebody's house. It met there. And then he decided he didn't want it, so Kaya Stern helped to find a space for us to begin to meet. And the local Reform shul, believe it or not, the rabbi of that shul said, "Come and use the library." We're an egalitarian, traditional minyan, and she was completely unthreatened by it. Debbie Zecker. She said, "Come and use the library on Shabbat mornings. No, you don't need to pay us rent. No you don't have an obligation to us." (02:28:00) We had approached the Reconstructionist shul here, and they said, Yes, you can use our space, but you must use our prayer book. And we said, That's not happening. So we moved into Hevreh; we've been in the library now for a decade. And we make a financial contribution to them every year, and it's been an incredibly interesting experiment. We do kiddush together at the end of services. We both end at noon so that we can have kiddush together. Some of us have joined the shul as a show of support, even though we don't — but it's pioneering a new model for me about how we use Jewish real estate in this country. And what shuls can look like going forward — what they need to look like going forward.

JG: Say a few more words on that.

SS: So, Wolfe Kelman said years ago that when men came back from the war, they had absorbed a kind of non-Jewish aesthetic about what synagogues ought to (02:29:00) look like. So the synagogues that got built in the fifties and sixties were all these massive, large, institutional buildings, frontal *davening*, that were very different from what synagogues had looked like up until then. I wasn't raised in these massive buildings, I was raised in the *shtiebel*. So we got stuck with all this real estate that doesn't really work as a model for us. It doesn't work in terms of how people want to *daven* today, I don't think, and it never really worked well for the way that Jews *daven*. It works well for the way that other people *daven*, not the way we *daven*. So the question in my mind, because I invest in real estate, and I think about space all the time, is, So what do we do with these buildings? This is the Jewish real estate that we own, what are we doing with it? You know, how do we use this real estate. And I think the model of using it differently, using the real estate differently, letting other groups in, (02:30:00) letting people find, creating opportunities and letting people find their niche within these buildings is what we need to be doing now. We need to be looking in that direction, not in sort of frantically trying to grab people to join the thing as it's existed until now, because the model doesn't work; it doesn't work anymore.

JG: Do you see the independent minyanim as part of the outgrowth or legacy of the *havurah* movement?

SS: Yeah, definitely. I don't know that they see themselves as that, but I think we were the pioneers in that kind of endeavor, and it astounds me that — much of what we do has permeated the Orthodox community today, and it just astounds me.

JG: In what way?

SS: Well, because you have — there's a whole schism in the Orthodox community now between the independent minyan and the shuls, and these egalitarian — and it's all, it's exactly (02:31:00) what we were doing forty, fifty years ago. Exactly the same conversations and the same intentions. So I think what we've done — everything from women rabbis, it's all flowing through the Jewish community. There's change happening all around us, but it's slow. It's slow.

JG: Do you see a relationship or any sort of continuity between the *havurah* movement and what became Jewish Renewal?

SS: Well, I think Jewish Renewal sees it that way, and there is a connection. They annoy me for the most part [*laughs*] so it's hard for me to be generous of heart. Because whatever we were in Havurat Shalom, we weren't sanctimonious. We were self-

deprecating if anything. And the Jewish Renewal movement can be a little sanctimonious, and a little supercilious at times. (02:32:00) And it's hard to take. And I've seen their published material in which they have a timeline, and they see themselves as having superseded the *havurah* movement. I don't quite see it that way. I think they're a different iteration, a different direction of the same thing. But whatever, it doesn't matter, they do their work; everybody else did their work. It's all fine.

JG: I want to look one more time at the issue of feminism, and Jewish feminism. And looking back, how important do you think Jewish feminism was in the development of the *havurah* in terms of women's roles, and the status, both in worship and the community in general, of women?

SS: I think — this is what I really think. I think the *havurah* was un-self-conscious about women's roles. And that's a ringing indictment of Havurat Shalom. It paid lip service to something that it didn't fundamentally take seriously. (02:33:00) Having said that, it set the stage for the women who emerged onto that stage to be able to do what we were going to do. What we were going to be able to do. It did create the vacuum for us to be able to emerge into that, and that's been a very rich part of my life, and I wouldn't have had those tools if I hadn't been a member of Havurat Shalom. There would have been no way for me to have those tools. So I'm incredibly grateful. But the women that felt sidelined, and enraged by that sidelining, I think had a merit to what they were maintaining. I think both things were true.

JG: And finally, and you can go however you like with this, what would you say, how would you assess the impact of the *havurah* movement overall on Jewish life in America, and also beyond America, beyond the United States. (02:34:00)

SS: You know, the problem with that question is it — requires such nuance and subtlety of observation to really understand the answer. And I don't think there's one answer. I think it's — you know what it's like? It's like we're supposed to see ourselves as pieces of dust in the world but also the inheritors of God's image. Both things are true. The *havurah* movement is a blip on the screen of Jewish continuity and Jewish community, and yet it is also something that's had profound impact in very significant ways that are actually unidentifiable throughout the Jewish world. In other words, all these independent *minyanim* that sprang up, sprang up as — you can trace it back to Havurat Shalom. You absolutely can. The understanding about why Jews study — not in the Orthodox community, but in the non-Orthodox community, (02:35:00) that came from the *havurah*; that's where that came from. I think you can trace lots of significant Jewish projects back to Havurat Shalom today. But what's the difference? [*laughs*] In the end it doesn't matter, things grow —

JG: You're saying credit —

SS: Yeah, I don't think the credit matters. It doesn't matter. I don't think credit matters. I think if you want to be honest about it, it goes back to Havurat Shalom, but the people that would argue, No, it doesn't, it goes back to — it doesn't matter. The community's been growing and developing in the ways it has, some of it healthy, some of it not healthy. And that's what has to be our work today, not trying to figure out, you know, was it the Renewal movement or the *havurah* movement? Was it Fabrangen or was it —? I mean I've heard these conversations and I think, *zeh lo mishaneh*. It really does not matter. Let's stick to what the important stuff is.

JG: And what would you say, standing at this moment in 2016, what is the important stuff looking forward?

SS: (02:36:00) We have to figure out Israel. It's really important. It's heartbreaking. When I say heartbreaking, I mean it cracks open your heart to watch how Israel conducts itself and how our kids in America are caught right in a vice between commitments to the Jewish community, commitments to their American values, commitments to democracy. It is completely heartbreaking. So I have to begin there. And then I think the next thing is, we have not succeeded in raising a generation of kids who see themselves as obligated to the Jewish community. And that's of serious and deep concern to me. And I'm not just talking about charity. I'm talking about their own commitments, about finding their own place in the Jewish community. (02:37:00) They're too free to float around to different places. And that's wonderful for them and enriching and nurturing, but in the end, I want their feet rooted where they belong. And I know that's judgmental — I can hear my kids yelling at me, but what are you going to do?

JG: Is there anything else you want to add, Sharon?

SS: No. That was it. You're a good interviewer.

JG: Thank you so much.

SS: Thank you.