

Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project

GERALD SEROTTA

Interviewed by Jayne K. Guberman

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

Jayne Guberman (JG): My name is Jayne Guberman, and today is Thursday, February 2nd, 2017. I'm here with Gerald Serotta at his home in Chevy Chase, Maryland, and we are going to record an interview for the Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project. Gerry, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Gerald Serotta (GS): Absolutely.

JG: Great. As you know, today we are going to explore your experiences during the late sixties and early seventies, particularly your involvement in the New York Havurah, and also the impact that the *havurah* has had on your own life and on American Jewry more broadly. I'd like to begin by talking about your personal and family background, and flesh out a bit who you were at the time that you got involved. So let's begin with your family, when you were growing up. You were born in 1946 in Miami, Florida. So, can you tell us a little bit about your family?

GS: Well, also when you say Miami, it conjures up a different image than Miami in 1946, which was a sleepy, Southern, segregated town. My mother had been there since the twenties, and my father was stationed there during the war, and that's where they met. They met because they were fixed up through the National Council of Jewish Women. My parents were Southern Jews in that sense, at least my mother was, and my grandfather was the founder of, or one of the founders of, a major Reform congregation in Miami in the 1920s. So I'm definitely a Southern Jew, and part of my background is the liberal Southern Jewish experience. Our synagogue was involved in every cause you can think of, particularly Civil Rights, and that was where my connection to Judaism was very strongly, through my parents' activism, particularly my mother's. She was on the National Commission on Social Action of the Reform Movement. But the synagogue itself was involved in public affairs. My synagogue youth group, TIFTY, Temple Israel Federation of Temple Youth, went outside the synagogue walls. Within a couple of miles was Liberty City, and we did voter registration in the summer of 1963 in the black ghettos of Liberty City. So I always felt that that was part of my Jewish identity. The Passover seders we had focused on contemporary issues. And we were religious Reform Jews. We went almost every Friday night and certainly all the holidays. So Jewish identity was a very strong part of my upbringing, but Jewish observance, in the way you'd think of it in Conservative, Orthodox terms, was not.

JG: Tell me a little bit about what your parents did. I just want to back up and fill in some of the pieces.

GS: My father was a dentist; he practiced in Miami Beach until he retired at the age of eighty from dentistry. (00:03:00:00) He just passed away at the age of ninety-nine and

three quarters. My mother was a homemaker. When you had to fill out the forms, in those days they were called homemakers, but her job was social justice activist. She was the president of the League of Women Voters for the State of Florida. She was on the National Commission of Social Action. She created the first public television station — not created, but helped get it started. Later on, she had a list of people that she would recommend candidates to, and once you had a large list, candidates would come to your home to meet you. So she was active in regular political affairs, endorsing progressive candidates. My parents voted for Henry Wallace in 1948, so I was a pink diaper baby — a Jewish pink diaper baby.

JG: And you have siblings?

GS: Yes. I am the oldest, the oldest surviving. My parents lost a child at eleven months before I was born, but then they had four children. I'm the oldest of the four.

JG: Tell me a little bit more about what Miami Beach was like at the time that you were growing up.

GS: Not like it is today. At that point, it was probably eighty percent Jewish. My high school was about that percentage. So was my elementary. I went through public schools all the way up in Miami Beach. We were such proud Reform Jews that I would come on the second day of the festival and there would be me and a handful of Catholic kids, and we would watch movies all day because there weren't any students in the school. But my parents — and I did it also, I felt very proud about my Reform Jewish identity, and that if I observed only one day of the festival, I was going to be in school the next day.

JG: So how did Reform Jews fit into the larger Jewish demographic?

GS: Well, at that point in Miami, again unlike today and unlike Miami Beach today, there were almost no Orthodox Jews. There was a small Orthodox shul on 40th Street, and we lived on 51st Street in Miami Beach. So everybody was Reform or Conservative. The elderly community on South Beach was mostly retired left-wing types, very progressive, and many of them secularists. So there was kind of a progressive, secular community, but very much impoverished. What's now South Beach was full of SROs [single room occupancy]. The Art Deco district was run-down motels, mostly elderly Jews (00:06:00:00), who were politically active, but not involved in the Jewish community.

JG: So, you were describing the Jewish environment in your home. Can you just say a little bit more about that? What holidays were important to you? Did you celebrate Shabbat on a regular basis?

GS: We celebrated with Friday night dinner, candles, Kiddush, challah. That was not so much, I don't recall, until I got to be the age where everybody was having B'nei Mitzvahs, or bar mitzvahs, there were almost — I doubt that there were any b'not mitzvah at that time. I can't recall a single one. But the Shabbat was Friday night for us, and it was going to temple, and hearing a powerful social justice sermon that would carry through for the rest of the week. The message was very, very strong, in terms of pride in Jewish identity and how we cared about the world around us. We observed all the festivals, particularly Pesach. We had a very large seder for extended family and community. My mother edited the Haggadah. It was called "The Serotta Haggadah," which is as much social justice stuff as we could pull together until Arthur Waskow created *The Freedom Seder*, and then we started using that instead of the Serotta Haggadah. On Sukkot, we would create a little model of a *sukkah* that we would put on the table. The synagogue did have a large *sukkah*. We kind of connected to Sukkot, but we never thought of building one in our home. At the time, our congregation was huge, over two thousand families. So the *Yamim Nora'im*, the High Holy Days, were observed. The synagogue was in downtown Miami. Actually we lived in Miami Beach, so we drove. We weren't observant in any way in terms of traditional Shabbat observance, other than going to shul, or to temple. But the temple would come to our side of the causeway on the High Holy Days, because the only places big enough were the Miami Beach Auditorium, and then the Miami Beach Convention Center. There would be six or seven thousand people at services. So those were quite powerful experiences, in terms of being part of a huge congregation of people, and as far as we could tell, all of them were as connected to social justice work as we were, although my mother was certainly the leader of the activities in the congregation.

JG: Tell us a little more about your Jewish education. (00:09:00:00)

GS: So, I requested a bar mitzvah. It was not normal in the Reform congregations in most of the country in the fifties. Confirmation was what people did. The Reform Movement at that point was still proud of keeping people to the ninth or tenth grade. So Confirmation was what they expected, going through ninth or tenth grade.

JG: When you're sixteen pretty much, right?

GS: Uh, fifteen or sixteen. Well, really, fourteen or fifteen. It was ninth grade or tenth grade. So, of course, the culmination of Sunday School would have been Confirmation. All of the girls, that's what they did. They went through the ninth or tenth grade; I think ours was ninth grade, actually. But a few boys wanted to have a bar mitzvah, and the synagogue relented. I actually started Hebrew School earlier than most. Most start in fifth

grade, I started in fourth grade. So my Jewish education was primarily Sunday School, but all the way through. I went through twelfth grade, and I don't even remember why. My uncle, who had grown up in that congregation, my mother's brother, didn't have a bar mitzvah.

JG: Why did you want one?

GS: I don't remember. It could be — well, no, I don't think it was because I had a lot of friends in Conservative congregations. Until I was in high school, there were no Orthodox Jews at the Miami Beach High School or in the public schools. They went to the small day school that existed in Miami, very small.

JG: In your high school, was there a preponderance of either Reform Jews or Conservative Jews?

GS: It was probably half and half.

JG: Half and half. So, Reform was very strongly represented.

GS: Oh, yeah. Definitely. There was one large Conservative congregation in Miami Beach, and another moderate sized one — or two moderate sized ones — in the northern part of Miami Beach. So there was Reform and Conservative. Those were the two flavors — and absolutely no contact with the Orthodox community until I was in high school. A couple of kids, probably who were more academically gifted, their parents decided they would send them to the public school rather than the day school that was there. I think, because they were very smart kids that came over from the day school.

JG: As you were saying earlier, you were involved in the temple youth group.

GS: Right. (00:12:00:00) There was a Southern youth movement camp in Cleveland, Georgia, but I was never interested in summer camp, in stay-away camp, and there weren't any Jewish-oriented day camps, so my experience was really Sunday School, and the four years of Hebrew School, and of course, you had to look hard to have a non-Jewish friend. Miami Beach at that point, in our neighborhood, in our immediate neighborhood, let's say there were forty or fifty houses — there was one Christian family that had Christmas lights. But we could always go up to Bal Harbour which was a restricted area where no Jews or blacks could live if we wanted to go see Christmas lights. So we would go in our car during Christmas to go look. It was like going to a foreign country. But Miami Beach when I was born still had a curfew. Blacks couldn't be on Miami Beach after dark. That stopped in the late forties, but the discrimination that

was equally directed at Jews and blacks was there in Miami Beach. The country club that was down the street from our house had no blacks and no Jewish members. The Miami Beach Bath Club, right in Miami Beach where the community was eighty percent Jewish, was restricted. No Jews and no blacks could join. So there was a sense of exclusion, and there was also a sense of identification with the black community, since you could visibly see signs at some of these places, “No Jews and blacks allowed,” in the forties and fifties.

JG: What types of activities — social justice activities — would you say that the youth group that you got involved with through your youth movement —?

GS: What was most vivid was actually going into the ghetto, I mean, as high school kids. So, I don’t recall strong activities aside from that.

JG: That must have made quite an impression.

GS: Yeah, yeah, for sure. I mean, I can still — the poverty, I just hadn’t seen it. It was the same community, and we were literally a mile away from the temple, Temple Israel of Greater Miami. The physical signs of poverty, the smells of poverty. I can still remember it. I can still remember. The movie *Moonlight*, which came out recently, was filmed in areas that looked quite like the areas that we went door-to-door. Young Jewish kids without fear, but the sense that this is what God and the Prophets wanted us to do. (00:15:00:00) But, other than that, I don’t recall. For us, the rabbi’s sermons were powerful motives in the way we should think. I remember my family going to black churches, just in solidarity, even though really the only African-Americans we knew growing up were what were called day workers. People who if — my mother, who didn’t particularly care much for doing laundry and cleaning the house, so we would have somebody come over — they were called day workers, and you’d call an agency and you would get a day worker who would come to your house for the day. But we would then hire the people and pay them more than the company would have paid them, and they became kind of family members. But that was the only relationship I had with African-Americans.

JG: Looking back, what would you say were the most formative influences on your Jewish identity as you were growing up?

GS: Well, my mother was the strongest influence on all of us, including my father, who had come from a small Orthodox community in Saratoga Springs, New York. He was very supportive and very sympathetic, but even his language had to change as we were growing up. I mean, still “colored.” He used the expression “colored.” We didn’t use the expression “black.” Nobody did in the society. We were very proud of saying “Negro”

instead of “nigrah” [phonetic] (00:16:48:07), let alone worse. She, as a role model for us, was a very powerful influence. My rabbi, Joseph Narot, of blessed memory, was a powerful preacher.

JG: What was his name?

GS: Narot. It looks like it should have been spelled “*nerot*.” Maybe it was, at some point — “N-a-r-o-t”. He was also from an Orthodox background, and like many Orthodox rabbis who became Reform rabbis, the social justice message was what he taught. And our family was involved not just in Civil Rights but ultimately Haitian refugees, migrant workers, gay rights. I was already in college and beyond, but with our family and the synagogue and the rabbi — Jewish Liberation Theology was what I was weaned on.

JG: You went to public schools, as you said, in Miami, all the way through high school. (00:18:00:00) How would you describe the social and political environment in your school, and how did that affect you?

GS: Well, until we were, I would say, in high school, we didn’t realize that we were in a segregated school. I mean, as your political consciousness [*raises hands to indicate elevation*] — you know that the schools in Miami were segregated — were still entirely segregated. I graduated from high school in ‘64, and integration hadn’t started. Completely separate school systems. But this was a sort of typical suburban public-school system. Pretty high quality. For the South, certainly, very high quality. Mostly middle class and upper middle class. But the working class Jews and non-Jews who were there were kind of invisible, as I look back on it now. As I ended up being the president of the student body, I’m reflecting, since I had my fiftieth anniversary recently, on who was not visible to us among our classmates, and how they must have felt — those who were in single-parent families, who lived in apartments rather than single-family homes. It wasn’t as universally upper middle class as one might have thought, if you weren’t paying attention. But that was the norm: upper middle class, Jewish, suburban.

JG: And progressive? In terms of political —

GS: Yes, I would say, to the extent that certainly the Jewish community in South Florida was liberal. There were some politicians that were very well-supported in the community. There was a particular state senator named Jack Gordon who was a state senator and a banker. He was actually a wealthy person. So there were some Jewish political heroes like that. But if there was a Republican in the school, I didn’t know about it. We didn’t know about it.

JG: So from there you went to do your undergraduate work at Harvard. And this was nineteen sixty —

GS: Four. I started in '64.

JG: So during a period of sort of rising social ferment among American youth, and development of the counterculture, the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam rising. To what extent were you involved with all of this?

GS: I was involved with most of it. The interesting way that I started — when I got there, I figured, I'm a Reform Jew. Hillel (00:21:00:00) looks to me like my home. So the first year, the first couple years, I went to Temple Israel of Boston and heard one of the great liberal sermonizers, Roland Gittelsohn. It would have been in '65, where he preaches the sermon, "I think this is the last Rosh Hashanah sermon I'm ever going to give" — because he thinks the Vietnam War is going to cause a nuclear conflagration, and he's going to orient his congregation to be against the War in Vietnam. This was in the fall of 1965. So this, of course, is kind of continuous with what I grew up with. It didn't surprise me. It kind of surprised me how powerfully he said it. So again, it's a continuity with what I was raised with — Jews should oppose the war in Vietnam, as Jews, and as religious people. So I was pretty active, but not in the more radical groups, because they didn't exist yet in Harvard. SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] hadn't been created at Harvard. But college Democrats, the Young Democrats, were fairly active and a good place for my activism. At the same time I was connecting with the local Jewish community, I actually did a sociology of religion survey of the congregation about how much they supported freedom of the pulpit for their rabbi. So, I was very interested in the Jewish community. My roommates were two half-Jews and one Cuban Catholic who only dated Jewish women. So the issue of religious identity, Jewish identity, ethnic identity, were things we talked about. We're still friends. So my Jewish identity was developing in response to the people around me.

JG: What role did Hillel play?

GS: Hillel was really a place where I could learn things. I took Modern Hebrew there. I rode my bike over on Sunday mornings to learn spoken Hebrew.

JG: On Bryant Street.

GS: Bryant Street. It was a ways.

JG: At the edge of the campus, sort of.

GS: Right. And the Harvard-Yale-Princeton Hillel Colloquia was a very interesting program. I think I attended it every year. It was a place — it didn't feel like a natural community to me. I'm sorry. I had friends there, but I was intimidated by the background of the folks who were there. They all seemed to know more than me.

JG: Was there much of a Reform presence in Hillel at the time?

GS: No. The president, (00:24:00:00) who went to rabbinical school with me was Mark Rosenstein, but I didn't know him. People I knew and cared about and thought were wonderful people, like Martha Ackelsberg (00:24:13:00) and Paula Hyman, I found them intimidating, Jewishly. Most of my career I was a Hillel rabbi, so I was very aware of how a Hillel looks to somebody whose Jewish education is less strong.

JG: Did you have a relationship with Rabbi Ben-Zion Gold?

GS: Not really, because I found Ben also intimidating. But there was a sweet, older Reform rabbi, Rabbi Zigmond — “Ziggy,” everyone would call him. So I was close to Ziggy, and Ziggy wrote a reference for me to rabbinical school. Of course, I became a big fan of Ben and loved him dearly after the time that we spent in Hillel.

JG: As professionals.

GS: As professionals. Later.

JG: So, during this period in the sixties, Rabbi Gold wrote an article on religion on campus, in which he said that faith in what he called “civic religion” was shattered during that decade, during the decade of the sixties, because of the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the counterculture. And at the same time he thought that this period also saw a new pride in diversity — that celebrated different lifestyles and religion. How would you describe what it was like to be a Jew — would you agree with that assessment — and how would you describe being Jewish on the Harvard campus at that point?

GS: You know, I didn't think of myself in those terms, as a Jew on the Harvard campus. I mean, I was very secure in my identity. I volunteered at Phillips Brooks House — Phillip Brook House —

JG: Phillips Brooks.

GS: Phillips Brooks House, right, and that was one of my expressions of my Jewish identity. I volunteered on a project at a mental hospital, visitors at a mental hospital, sort of adjunct visitors. And I looked for social service projects and did as much as I could as a political activist. Those were my Jewish outlets. Many of the people who did those projects were Jewish, and I noticed that. The Hillel for me was a place to learn, to deepen parts of my Jewish knowledge. I took a few classes in Jewish Studies. I took a couple of classes with Isadore Twersky. (00:28:00:00) Talk about intimidating, as a professor and person, although I was quite fond of him. When I applied to rabbinical school, I asked if he would write a recommendation for me, because that was the only really Jewish class I had. He eventually did, but he said that the Jewish — well, because I was also pre-med at the time, I hadn't decided to go to rabbinical school, and he said that the Jewish community needs educated laypeople. It needs Jewishly committed doctors, so I'm not so sure you should go to rabbinical school. *[laughs]*

JG: Israel was also catapulted into the forefront of people's consciousness. The Six Day War happened during your undergrad years.

GS: Yes, well it was catapulted from nowhere in my case. That's something else about the Southern Jewish community and the Reform community. It was profoundly non-Zionist, except for a handful of rabbis, and my rabbi wasn't one of them. One of the rabbis in Miami, with whom I was quite close, Leon Kronish (00:28:10:21) was the head of Israel Bonds. His son Ron Kronish and I were best friends all the way through high school. I was at the Kronish family home every second Seder every year, since we only had one Seder. So I was with my rabbi and congregation on the non-Zionist side of things, as I had thought about it, but the Six Day War had a profound effect on a lot of us. I had some obligations that summer, but Ronny Kronish and I tried to volunteer, if they would take shorter-term volunteers. You had to be there at least six weeks or eight weeks. I don't remember.

JG: Volunteer in Israel?

GS: In Israel, yeah. So we were ready to go. I actually was driving back from Boston with Ronny, who went to Brandeis, when the war broke out. So we were listening to it on the car radio and trying to figure out how we could volunteer. That was my first real sense of connection. I just felt I should be there. But it was not from my upbringing, and it wasn't particularly from any experience at Harvard. Most of the community that I was familiar with might have contributed money, but I would describe them as non-Zionist, or even Diasporists. I mean, this is our home. Our issues were social justice issues here, or creating a warm community where people can observe, and Israel was not on people's agenda, unless they were raised in one of the movements. The Habonim, Young Judaea

(00:30:00:00) — I had a handful of friends like that, but we never discussed it in high school.

JG: So, would you say the Six Day War was a pivotal point for you personally in terms of your relationship with Israel?

GS: Yes, and completely unpredictably. There was something in me that said, This is me. And I hadn't thought about it probably half an hour the rest of my life. I mean it was, yes, there is Israel over there, and I am here, and there is plenty for me to do as a Jew in America. I certainly felt at home and I had a mission as a Diaspora Jew. I was going to fulfill what Jeremiah thought that I should do, and pray for the welfare of the city, and act on it.

JG: So that was your sense of identity.

GS: Right. That was my sense of identity. And until I went to Israel for the first time, that really made an even bigger impact, and also completely unpredictable to me from my background. I went between my first and second year of rabbinical school. I went to Ulpan Akiva in Netanya, to improve my Hebrew, which I thought was inadequate for what level I wanted to study. It was good enough for Hebrew Union College, but it wasn't good enough for me. So I took off that summer and went to an ulpan. And that totally amazed me, the sense of connection to a place, because it came out of the blue. I wasn't prepared for it.

JG: What year was that?

GS: Summer of '69.

JG: Summer of '69. So, you graduated from Harvard in '68 —

GS: — I went directly to rabbinical school. And my choices in 1968 were between Havurat Shalom, the RRC, which was just starting, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, and Hebrew Union College, which I had been oriented to my whole life in the Reform Movement. But I actively considered Havurat Shalom and the RRC.

JG: Why did you decide on rabbinical school as opposed to medical school?

GS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I got into medical school. I continue — my parents — not that they'd insist, but just, what if I change my mind? I was pre-med. I might as well apply and take an acceptance. But my experience of the sixties was very formative in terms of

going toward rabbinical school — the anti-war movement, the sense that the society around me was collapsing. My passion was anti-war work and Civil Rights (00:33:00:00), human rights, and I didn't think that going to medical school and spending four years in a medical school, and then a number of years in a residency, I could respond to what was most important in the world and to me personally. I was heavily influenced by Martin Luther King and William Sloane Coffin, two Protestant ministers. William Sloane Coffin was the chaplain at Yale and a passionate anti-war activist. And I heard him. I heard both of them speak in Cambridge and Boston, and they were to me like, say, Jeremiah. They were very inspirational people. My rabbi was at a much lower level but also was in the same ballpark of people speaking out against the war and organizing in the community and I —

JG: So this was a very activist vision, for the rabbinate.

GS: Yes. And I thought the rabbinate, because my rabbi was like that, was a place where you could do that kind of work — connect powerful religious, historical, ethnic identity with the issues of the day. And I thought that's what I would be able to do, even while I was in rabbinical school, and then as a rabbi. So Coffin, who I heard speak a number of times, was a chaplain at Yale at that point, then went to Riverside Church. So I also thought that the campus was a place, and one of the reasons why I went into Hillel was William Sloane Coffin as a role model. I didn't really think of that when I started rabbinical school. I assumed I would be in a congregation someday, and as a medical —

JG: No, but I was going to say —

GS: I was a pre-med student. My interest was primarily in psychiatry. I was interested in the field of psychiatry, so I thought becoming a therapist was going to be my life's work. And I thought of the rabbinic profession, to the extent that it is a profession, as a combination of the things I was most interested in. And, as I said, my own Jewish identity was challenged, tested. I had to think about it all the time with my roommates. They were influences on me. My half-Jewish roommate, Peter Millock (00:35:38:00), whose mother was Jewish — both of his parents were anarchists, but his father was an Italian immigrant who was so hostile to the church, the Roman Catholic Church. He was the only one of the people I was close to then who was dead set against my going to rabbinical school. (00:36:00:00) He was elderly. He was even then in his 70's, this passionate Italian anarchist, and he thought I was wasting my time.

JG: But he wasn't persuasive, ultimately.

GS: No, he wasn't.

JG: What I wanted to ask before was whether there were rabbinic voices during that period in the mid-sixties that were — I mean, outside of your rabbi —

GS: Well, as I said, the first person outside, and the first rabbi I really encountered as an adult, was Roland Gittelsohn, who was a great liberal. Turned out to be not so liberal on issues of Israel/Palestine, although, in his mind I think he thought he was. But there were a number of Reform rabbis who I knew of, and of course I knew about Abraham Joshua Heschel. I knew him, I mean, the picture of him was in my mind. I hadn't read any of his books at that point. Of course his books were not — at that point there was probably nothing other than a handful of essays that would (00:37:00:00) have been relevant anyway. It was his person and what he did. But I was quite aware of all the number of rabbis who went to the South. A few of them that I know went to St. Augustine, which was in Florida. When that happened in 1965, it was a powerful lesson for me. So the action of rabbis — and I wasn't particularly aware of the rest of the Jewish community — but certainly a number of rabbis who were active in Civil Rights, they were collectively a strong influence on me.

JG: During your college years, just to go back for a second, were you drawn to go to the South, sort of following in the footsteps of these rabbis to actually work on voter registration, participate in any —?

GS: I'd done that already in high school. No, there were a handful of folks around the seminary, particularly in Columbia, who were more directly connected there and I know made it down there. I know several of my friends in the New York Havurah in fact did that. No, by that point, my activism was more anti-Vietnam War focused than Civil Rights.

JG: So, what you were starting to say a few minutes ago — that you had some choices, at least in your mind, about which direction to go in terms of rabbinical school —

GS: Yeah. I had met Art Green my senior year and knew about Havurat Shalom forming. It started that year. The New York Havurah started the year afterward. And for its first year, its first couple years, it thought of itself as degree-granting. They were going to give people a degree of "*Haver*," but more relevant, or also relevant at the time, was draft deferment. So you could study there, as you could in several yeshivas in Brooklyn, and go about whatever else you wanted to do, but you would get a draft deferment. Now, I wasn't —

JG: Which would have been true at RRC and —

GS: Yes, Hebrew Union College and RRC would have qualified for that, as would have medical school. I wasn't going to rabbinical school to avoid the draft, but a number of my classmates were. I mean, my class in New York, the New York school of HUC [Hebrew Union College] started with nineteen people and only seven finished. A lot of folks who were part of the anti-war movement discovered that was one of the ways that they could avoid the draft. Some of them would have made great rabbis. It's too bad. (00:40:00:00)

JG: So you actually applied, is that correct, to Havurat Shalom?

GS: No, I ultimately didn't apply. But I thought about it. It was still pretty inchoate, and I didn't really know the people. I had a wonderful seder with Arthur and Kathy Green —

JG: That year?

GS: Yeah, '68. Pesach '68, when I was still making a decision.

JG: They were just about to get off the ground.

GS: Right, right. Yeah, they were talking about it. That fall is when they started. So they were talking about it and it just was a little too unconventional for me to make that choice. And the same thing with the RRC, which looked very good on paper, but I would have been the first, with Michael Luckens, the first two students. He was the first student in 1968. And the one thing that I did do, and partly in response to all of this, was I decided to go to the New York school of Hebrew Union College —

JG: Rather than Cincinnati.

GS: Rather than Cincinnati. Because Cincinnati was the classical Reform liberal, in a religious sense, school, where my Rabbi had gone, and I was convinced, partly by my contact with people like Art Green and the more traditional folks at Hillel that I would be not a fully educated, fully involved Jew if I went to Cincinnati, which was too much like what I grew up with in Miami. There was one particular Rabbi who helped me realize that, Dick Hirsch, who had gone to both Cincinnati and the New York school. At one point, they closed the New York school when Stephen Wise died, so he had to go to Cincinnati to finish. And it re-opened after that.

JG: When did the New York school open?

GS: Stephen Wise started, JIR [Jewish Institute of Religion] started, uh — I should know that, right?

JG: More or less.

GS: Nineteen-twenty? But it didn't merge with HUC until Wise died in the late forties. The people who didn't want to merge formed the Academy for Jewish Religion. But they were very different experiences, being in Cincinnati and being in New York, and I chose to go to New York because I had enough connection with *Klal Yisrael* and other forms of Judaism. Hillel was an influence in that sense. I realized I had a sliver of the Jewish community in my background, and I wanted to broaden myself. It was part of my motivation for joining the New York Havurah, in fact, a large part of my motivation. Same motivation.

JG: So, let's turn to that, and the beginnings of your involvement in the New York Havurah, (00:43:00:00) which was formed, as you just said, in the fall of '69. So, what's your understanding of how and when the idea for this new community began to take shape, and who was involved in those very early stages?

GS: Well, the history that I heard at the time was, John Ruskay was a rabbinical student. Peter Geffen had been not accepted by the seminary.

JG: He was a rabbinical student at JTS?

GS: At JTS, yeah. So, there was a group of rabbinical students and graduate students around the seminary who were sort of spiritually unhappy at the seminary. It was too confining, too straight. And they had a particular galvanizing event, which was — Burton Weiss, who was a draft-resister, had come to New York and knew these folks, I think through Conservative Movement contacts. They set up sanctuary for Burton at JTS, as churches were doing for draft resisters. We are a synagogue, and we're going to protect Burton Weiss. So around that, they gathered and said, this place doesn't meet our Jewish needs. It's too stultifying. It's too rigid. We should form a collective of our own. I don't know whether they were in touch with the people in Boston or not. But that was the nucleus around that sanctuary, I gather, from talking to Peter Geffen, John Ruskay, Al Mintz, who were, as far as I could see, the people organizing it. That we would instead form a community that would also have a serious study component of people who wanted to increase their study and deepen their knowledge. And in the beginning, once it formed, the first year the New York Havurah also gave draft deferments. It was much more controversial within the *havurah*. There were people who thought we should do this to save Jewish lives, regardless of how serious we are, and other people who felt we were

lying. We'd be lying to the government if we said this is a serious seminary and that people could get a serious degree here and would deserve a draft deferment. So, there were conscientious arguments on both sides. But the first year — because in Havurat Shalom they said you'll get a degree of "*haver*." That's what the degree was going to be, which is good enough, as far as the government is concerned. The New York Havurah, the ultimate seminary model was — we did it legally for a year (00:46:00:00) and then it disappeared. There was too much cognitive dissonance around it.

JG: In that first year, '69 — '70.

GS: Yeah.

JG: And many of the people who were involved were actually seminary students at JTS.

GS: That's right. Or former. John dropped out and started graduate school at Columbia, and Mintz — Alan Mintz. There were two Mintzs — there's Mintz, Alan and Mintz, Louis — Alan was working on his PhD in English. It was his first PhD, before his second PhD. He may have still been an undergraduate. But they were kids. I mean, twenty, twenty-one, and twenty-two-year olds started the New York Havurah.

JG: Were there faculty members? Rabbi Gene Weiner —

GS: Yeah. Gene was *the* mentor, the member of the faculty who was sensitive to the spiritual needs and the angst of people there. So he was a beloved mentor of those folks, a very, very key person.

JG: So what was his role, would you say?

GS: Well, some of this is before my time, but he was a mentor and a spiritual advisor to the individuals. The first meeting, I believe — well, we were organizing meetings all along, but we gathered on Shavuot in 1969, at Nyack — Camp Ramah at Nyack.

JG: Back up for one second and tell me how you first became aware of these stirrings and decided to get yourself involved. You were a first-year rabbinical student at HUC at the time.

GS: Right. So, a couple of my friends, Ronny Kronish and Keith Karnofsky, had somehow connected. Keith, maybe because he went to Columbia as an undergrad, had connected with this group of folks from the seminary. And Marc Rosenstein. And this very interesting group of people, they're planning this concept, and you should come.

You should be part of it. I don't think they had an agenda that there should be Reform rabbinical students there. It was on a personal level, that it would be very interesting. But at that point, even though the *havurah* didn't exist yet, there was an admission process. You had to be interviewed by — there was a core group. I don't even know who would have qualified at that time, but it was certainly at least John, Peter, and Alan. There were other folks, people who taught at the seminary, or doctoral students like David Sperling and Reuven Kimelman, but I'm not sure (00:49:00:00) who was considered to be a member. There were probably eight or ten people who were members, and they were going to admit others.

JG: So they were constituted as a *havurah*.

GS: Right.

JG: And are you saying that they also had gone through whatever process legally to be chartered as a seminary?

GS: By the time we started in the fall, there was a definite legal document. John had a good — John will tell you his name — but a wonderful liberal lawyer who died, passed away quite young, and had helped with the legal work. So we were constituted as a divinity school, or rabbinical school, capable of giving deferments, which we did for a year.

JG: So this was '69.

GS: Yes, it started in '69. Well, the organizing was happening between 1968 and '69, while I was a first-year rabbinical student.

JG: So, as Havurat Shalom had just gotten off the ground.

GS: Right, right, right. So it was kind of simultaneous, and as far as I knew, completely separate, and just started because of a group of people who convened around Burton Weiss at the seminary. But they were adding members. I don't know if they had an idea of how many they wanted, but you had to be interviewed.

JG: So, what was that process for you?

GS: Well, it was vaguely intimidating also. Here's Alan Mintz, who's one of the smartest, most eloquent people I've ever met, and who I'm quite fond of. Alan Mintz was a year younger than I. He meets me at one of the Upper West Side — it's not a deli. It's

like these little restaurants — diners, like, maybe even the actual one that Seinfeld used, I think, maybe. And so Mintz interviews me for an hour, two hours. I don't remember anything that he asked me. I found it a little bit weird. I wanted to be part of the group, and he wanted to know about me. I was certainly — this was a pretty knowledgeable group, even though pretty young. If they weren't knowledgeable, they were very smart. Most of them had very strong Conservative Movement backgrounds, or even stronger. People like Reuven. And here was me with my background and passions, but very little basic knowledge of Judaism. My Hebrew was pretty weak. I didn't know the traditional service at all. I knew what I grew up with.

JG: You mean the Reform service.

GS: Right. So I was really a learner, and it was a challenging experience. Mintz had already (00:52:00:00) — we called ourselves by our last names; I don't know why — he had already started *Response Magazine* and was extremely thoughtful and erudite and also very funny, and so — I was accepted. I don't know what the criteria were.

JG: On the basis of that interview.

GS: Yeah. Well, I knew people. I mean, I don't know whether they just wanted to — maybe they were just checking out people's personal affect, whether we would fit — because it was a fairly intense community. If our personalities would meld acceptably. Maybe that was part of it. I never found out. I never saw any criteria. You'd have to ask the actual founders. I found it off-putting also. I was on the side of open admissions by the time that issue was — it wasn't debated during the first year so much. I actually left for two years. I spent two years in Israel. So I was a member of the *havurah* for its first year, and then I came back for its fourth year.

JG: Were there other people from the HUC sort of world who were also —?

GS: There were four of us. Four first-year rabbinical students.

JG: Who were they?

GS: Ron Kronish, Marc Rosenstein, Keith Karnofsky, and me. I think that was it. When I came back, one of the most wonderful acquisitions for all of us — I happened to study in the library next to David Ellenson. David, having a small-town Orthodox background, being completely lost at HUC spiritually, and I said, "I've got a group of friends that you'll enjoy." David's a wonderful human being. You could say that about a lot of those folks, but David particularly was a wonderful addition because his background was quite

different. He was a fellow southerner and small-town Orthodox and a brilliant scholar of comparative religion, and therefore also a brilliant scholar of comparative Judaism. So he had a perspective that very strong scholarly folks we had — like we had Bob Goldenberg — didn't have on the kind of things we were interested in.

JG: So, the original brochure for the New York Havurah (00:55:00:00) sort of described the vision, and what they said was, "Free from ties to other institutions, the *havurah* will aim to create a new kind of religious leadership for the Jewish community, and to serve as a model for a new form of Jewish life." What was the driving desire for a new form of religious leadership?

GS: Well, it was the dissent from the seminary model. I actually don't remember that language. I guess I saw that brochure, because that already sort of positions the rabbinical seminary model. You know, we're going to educate leaders. We felt, by the time the *havurah* was forming, we were creating a new form or re-imagining a form of Jewish community as much as leadership. Leadership was not such a strong motive for the way we were structured. I remember — I don't know if it's in that document or another document — there would be four pillars. You should *daven* together with the people you do political action together, with whom you socialize, and with whom you build community. Those are the four pillars of the New York Havurah. So it would be an integrated community. The communitarian focus of it was stronger than the leadership development focus.

JG: And yet, much of the disenchantment of the original members, many of whom were students at JTS, did focus on the JTS model of rabbinical education. So how would you describe the pedagogic approach of HUC in comparison?

GS: I was a very rebellious student there because I thought the curriculum was arbitrary. At least at the seminary, the curriculum was describable. At HUC, it was classes in history, classes in theology, classes in Halachah. It was departments, and it wasn't — I didn't think it was rabbinic education. It didn't have the strong core that JTS has, but that's from my perspective. I thought the approach was dilettante-ish. You could speak well by the time you got out, but you didn't have an in-depth knowledge or an in-depth basis for speaking well to issues. I thought the curriculum was underdeveloped. The *havurah* the first year had classes, really wonderful classes, which (00:58:00:00) completely contrasted with my rabbinical school classes. David Sperling taught a class in Psalms. Reuven Kimelman taught a class on, in effect, ethics, rabbinic ethics, but he was particularly interested in non-violence in the Talmud, which he wrote quite a bit about after that. So he was testing out what he would write about, and teaching us from sections in the Talmud that dealt with human life and human rights, essentially. And it was a small

class of people who cared about each other, really cared, not just that you could translate the Psalms and get into the head of the author, but how might this connect with your experience. And certainly, the issue of non-violence, and the War in Vietnam, and whatever. So we were studying relevant texts, but serious text study was part of the *havurah* and continued to be, the years when it was a well-organized community. Text study in relationship to the world outside was —

JG: To the contemporary world.

GS: — to the contemporary world, yeah. It was key to the study component. We were consistent in our *shitah*, in our system, on that. When I thought about the three *havurot*, including Fabrangen, I always thought of Havurat Shalom as the spiritual *havurah*, and Fabrangen as the political *havurah*, and the New York Havurah as the intellectual *havurah*. That's a gross exaggeration and a gross stereotype, but the New York Havurah was fairly traditional in its *davening*, much more so than Havurat Shalom or Fabrangen.

JG: I want to come back to that in a minute. You mentioned Rabbi Eugene Borowitz as a mentor. He was a larger than life figure in the Reform seminary, an enormous influence.

GS: Yeah. [*nods*]

JG: What drew you to him, and what kind of an influence did he have on your rabbinical education?

GS: Well, nothing really drew me to him other than his ideas. He was a brilliant teacher of theology, comparative theology. A lecture he gave on Buber could make you weep. But he also was a post-naturalist. I was raised with an Orthodox rabbi, and the textbooks we had were written by Roland Gittelsohn, a lapsed Orthodox rabbi who became a (1:01:00:00) Reform rabbi. The textbooks were by Roland Gittensohn and Gittelsohn was a naturalist, and a sort of Reconstructionist, and that's vaguely what I thought I was.

JG: What does a naturalist mean?

GS: That God is imminent in the world, in natural processes, the sort of Kaplan — it's not a supernatural God. It's the God of ethics, the ground for ethics. That was very congenial with the way I was raised, but it wasn't connecting for me, it was intellectually there. And Gene Borowitz, freshman year, the introduction to the ranges of theology and the introduction to people who I hadn't met. I hadn't read any Heschel. And he's there explaining Heschel and Soloveichik, and everybody — all the liberals, Kaplan and Leo Baeck and whatever, so I understand the people I grew up with. But I was deeply

influenced by Borowitz's explanation of Buber and Rosenzweig. I felt intellectually excited and spiritually drawn, and I didn't think that the kind of Reform worship that I grew up with — it was soothing, but it was not powerful for me, and that was one of the reasons why I was very pleased to be part of the *havurah*. That's what I expected and that's what I gained. As traditional as our *davening* was, for me it was a revelation.

JG: Traditional as the *davening* was in the *havurah*?

GS: Yeah. The *havurah* was kind of like straight Conservative Movement *davening*, by and large, with some nice guitar music thrown in for mood. The intellectual side of it — the Ezrat Nashim which emerged out of the New York Havurah, that was an incredible creative edge that was an unpredictable and wonderful blessing to us all. And those are my friends. So they challenged us, and all of us grew from that. All of us who were trying to relate to a personal God, and still in our old patriarchal models, and where we had difficulty. That was a revelation for all of us, men and women. That was part of the New York Havurah. The Ezrat Nashim were mostly *havurah* women. So even though our *davening* wasn't the most creative, the ideas (1:04:00:00) that we played with, or we were challenged by, were quite important.

JG: So all of this, it sounds like, was complementary to everything that you were getting through your rabbinical education at HUC, supplementing in a very profound way.

GS: I learned much more from my friends in the *havurah* than I did in rabbinical school. There's no question. Just through the *davening*. I learned *tefilah* through the New York Havurah.

JG: I want to come to that in one sec, but I want to start looking at the pillars of community and prayer, *tefilah*, social action, and learning — pull it apart separately. (1:04:55:00) Many people point to community, this idea of community building, doing all of this in the context of a community, as the heart of the *havurah* endeavor. Can you articulate what the vision for community was, and how it would function within the New York Havurah, as it was getting off the ground?

GS: Well, this is the late sixties, so we had in mind communalist and commune-type ideas, even though we didn't ever think about living together. On the other hand, we spent every Thursday night together. So we cooked together and spent, well, not the whole night, but we gathered every Thursday night. This is in addition to Shabbat. We went away on a retreat once a month, which was really critical. So there we did live together. Most of them were sort of camps or public facilities where we slept in one room. Forty people. Well, maybe not the first year. We had this very inexpensive state

parks with retreat centers. So we were intensely bonding on a regular basis, and that was important to us. It was a pillar. So if you're studying something, you're going to know intimate details and have an intimate friendship with this group, which meant the size of the group was significant. You couldn't do that with a hundred people. You certainly couldn't do that in a shul. So the primary ideology of the *havurah* movement, as I would describe it, is, "small is beautiful" — an intimate community.

JG: How large was that first group, to the best of your recollection?

GS: Maybe twenty.

JG: In the first year.

GS: Yeah. And that was less homogeneous than it became because there were a few people who were sort of creative artists who would come in as semi-draft dodgers, but who knew people, and Reuven, who, I don't even know what he was originally, Reuven Kimelman, but was becoming quite *frum* and quite Orthodox, even though he was studying at the seminary, and Sam Heilman (1:07:24:15) was part of the group the first year. So we had an Orthodox contingent, or an Ortho-prax contingent.

JG: Actually, it was quite pluralistic. You had Conservative, you had Reform, you had Orthodox.

GS: Right. And that was also very important to us, that we were post-denominational.

JG: So this was a deliberate effort on the part of the founding members —

GS: I'm sure it was.

JG: — to reach out to these different communities.

GS: Right. They were affirmatively recruiting Reform rabbinical students, I think.

JG: When the New York Havurah began, they rented an apartment on West Ninety-ninth Street.

GS: Ninety-eighth, I think.

JG: Okay.

GS: One of those.

JG: One of those — Ninety-eighth, Ninety-ninth. Can you describe the space in which you were meeting?

GS: It's interesting, because the first year, we didn't have an apartment. We went from people's homes. It was the second year — I guess the second year. I don't know, because I was away. The very first Thursday night dinner was at my apartment.

JG: That's how it began?

GS: No, no. Well, we'd already had a retreat. We had the Shavuot retreat. But the first Thursday night gathering, which was probably, I guess, in September, or maybe we started over the summer. I'm not even sure. Maybe we started before the Shavuot retreat. But we did not have an apartment the first year. Where did we *daven*? That's a good question. We *davened* in people's apartments, basically. So by the time I came back, Richie Siegel had emigrated from Boston to New York, and he was in the *havurah* apartment. So I don't know which year we acquired the apartment, because Richie was the first inhabitant, den mother, whatever. I'm not even sure it's not two or three years down the road that we had an apartment.

JG: So, in the beginning, you were meeting in people's homes.

GS: People's homes, and that's where we *davened*. We didn't have any communal space. I lived in the next *havurah* apartment from '74 to '77. We had the apartment, and then I moved out to New Brunswick. But we had a huge apartment at 102nd and Riverside. "Yuge," as they say these days. The living room, 100 or 150 people could be in that living room — crowded, but they could be.

JG: Where did the financial resources come from, to rent an apartment like that?

GS: Well, it wasn't that expensive, believe it or not. It \$750 a month, of which I paid \$250, because I lived there. And the original apartment was just a small apartment. I suppose we paid dues. I'm sure we paid dues. I'd imagine there was startup money. John had raised money — John, Peter, I don't know who. But we didn't have any staff, so we must have had some dues that covered the apartment. The *havurah* apartment that I lived in had the *havurah* school in it. There was a school for neighborhood kids, of particular people we knew — Paul Cowan and Rachel Cowan (1:11:01:20). Rachel had not even converted to Judaism yet, but they were raising their kids Jewish. Paul was an "orphan in history," as he put it, and wrote about it beautifully. So we set up a school for Paul and

Rachel's kids and for neighborhood kids who would fit — who didn't fit into the established denominations, we would do something very creative — that met in the *havurah* apartment.

JG: So you started to mention the regular Thursday nights.

GS: Regular Thursday nights. You couldn't overestimate the impact of the retreats though, because that was an intense twenty-five, thirty hours together once a month, where we had to schlep everything up into the country — prayer books, whatever we were using. We did intensive study. That was where we did our best *davening*. We talked about issues. I mean, that was in many ways the core of the community, the retreats. It was a lot of effort. I mean, it was a lot of effort actually to do this, to get the food together and get away, but it was really important to us in terms of deepening relationships.

JG: What would the flow of the day be? Well, the Shabbat, from Friday on.

GS: That's where we did our best *davening*. Kabbalat Shabbat there was a little bit more experimenting. Some people experimented before Kabbalat Shabbat with traditions related to psychoactive substances which weren't legal at the time. But that was called Kiddush. That's how you would start the Shabbat. I don't know where that custom came from, but others can describe it. So some people had a Kiddush before the Kiddush. That's something that we did in those days. So that, the Kabbalat Shabbat *davening*, sometimes outside if the weather was good. We also always did a Sukkot and Shavuot retreat. Sukkot, because it was a little longer and we built a *sukkah*, and Shavuot, we learned all night — *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* (1:13:26:16). Those were really, really strong. Those were our strong suit, I think — retreats and communal experiences like that.

JG: Sounds like they were in many ways the glue.

GS: Yes, yeah.

JG: Created the bond for community.

GS: Right, right. And, you know, making a meal for each other every Thursday night. We would alternate who would cook, whose house. There was a small community that cared enough about each other to feed each other, that sort of thing. But it was a standard Shabbat. We'd have *davening* at all the appropriate times. I borrowed a Torah from one of the Hillels. I'm not sure if we had it the first year, but the *havurah* Sefer Torah was borrowed from a Hillel that wasn't using it. We'd play sports in the afternoon. We hiked, played Scrabble using a siddur to mark the score for everybody. You know, you could

say where you were in *Pesukei Dezimra* rather than what your score was. So that was a regular thing, Scrabble and sports in the afternoon, then Havdalah and return.

JG: Sounds intense and very empowering.

GS: Yeah. The fact that we were a small group, face to face, and everybody knew everybody. We felt Heschel's writing at the time looked askance at suburban congregations where people don't know each other — they're there for an education for their kids but they're not committed to each other. We were, going back to the idea of a model, this is what the Jewish community should be, what we are. We were that impertinent, or self-centered, or whatever you want to say. But I do think our — the sort of characteristics of a *havurah* spread, and it could be the larger synagogues who'd caught on to the intimacy elements of it started forming *havurot* within congregations.

JG: It sounds like most of the people who were involved, if not all, were single, or married without children.

GS: Yes.

JG: There weren't many children, or any children.

GS: Right. The first year, I think that Sharon Sperling was born already in the first year, but maybe not. Most of the people were single. If there was a child, it was Sharon Sperling. Then David Ellenson joined and had one child, Ruthie, so at the beginning there were very few, if any, children. There were also very few, if any, women. It was only one woman who was an actual member.

JG: And that was?

GS: Liz Koltun (1:16:48:01). Phyllis Sperling participated because she was married to David Sperling. I don't remember if anybody else —

JG: Were there other sort of partners of members, or spouses of members, who were involved in the communal meals or in the retreats?

GS: There were by the fourth year. By the fourth year, we had admitted women. That happened while I was away. So women were members on their own. But that was an issue. There were people who thought of it somehow as some kind of a cloister or something, where women —

JG: Male club.

GS: Male club, yeah.

JG: In the beginning.

GS: Yeah. Liz was grandmothered in, and nobody else.

JG: How did she come to be a member?

GS: She was a very good friend of Alan Mintz. I think that's the only reason. She knew a lot of the folks. There was a — the strong core were JTS Conservative Movement and Camp Ramah, in Palmer, and some of the sensitivities and liturgical creativity, such as it was, came from Camp Ramah in Palmer, where I think Zalman had taught once. So the other people were sort of — we were recruited in the first year.

JG: Can you tell me a little bit more about the role of these weekly communal meals? For one thing, the New York Havurah was known, at least to some, as the place with the good food, the best food.

GS: Yeah, only a few people were good at it, but yes. People cared. I mean, it was a religious meal in that sense, spiritually. We expected to be able to really enjoy that time together, and people would take a lot of care. I remember Maurie Pomerantz cooking in my kitchen. He'd gone down to the fish market and bought this enormous bluefish that I'd never seen. My family didn't eat fish that much. That was the first dinner. It was quite spectacular. Now that I think of it, there was one other spouse. Alan Sugarman and Shira were a married couple in the first year. So, as far as I recall, those were the two spouses, and if Sharon Sperling was born, but I think it happened the second year.

JG: Would people cook communally, or someone would host?

GS: Well, I hosted, but I didn't cook.

JG: That's what I mean. You're not cooking in your own kitchen necessarily.

GS: Yeah. Yes. So, it was something of a pot luck, but a really high-quality potluck.

JG: So how would those evenings go? What tended to happen?

GS: Somebody would lead a discussion. There would be a theme. So it wasn't just getting together. We'd discuss an issue or a text, study.

JG: Were these meals an occasion for sort of informal community meetings?

GS: Yes —

JG: In addition to text study.

GS: Yes. That would have been the place where we would discuss how we were going to expand, how do we bring in members, or do we want to bring in members. I do, I mean, I remember the discussions about women being members, and that would have had to be that first year. By the time I got back, there was an avid discussion about whether we should have open admissions — and arguments, with very strong opinions on one side or the other.

JG: And how did that go?

GS: Well, they were contentious, but the points, because they were really — the points were valid and hard to square. We have an intimate community. We had a rule that if one person didn't want to, that was it. We had a black ball possibility. And I thought that was — I mean, personally I was offended by that. It's like a sorority or a fraternity. But we were an intimate group, and if somebody had a pre-existing relationship that was really challenging that could affect — and that was the rationale. I mean, you get somebody in, and then the person who has been a *haver* or *havera* from the beginning is going to feel uncomfortable. It took a little bit of exercising that rule, which happened once or twice, before people couldn't tolerate it anymore. And then we didn't have the black ball principle, and we moved to sort of a form of open admission. I mean, there had to be some idea. People still had to apply. There had to be a sense of compatibility. Somehow — and you'd have to ask the people who were really there from the beginning — but there was a sense you weren't smart enough, you weren't together enough, that there was some criteria by which you could be rejected. I was an open admission guy. People with strong interest and passion who are willing to take on the same mission, we ought to be open to them.

JG: So you were on the losing end of that opposition in the beginning.

GS: Basically, yes. Definitely in the beginning. It happened gradually over years. But, getting back to the question, we would have discussed it on Thursday night.

JG: And was it a consensus model for decision making?

GS: Yes. Definitely consensus. That's part of that same — this is a membership. You really want to bring everyone along. There are different priorities. I'm not sure when in that conversation we'll get to it. One of the most interesting episodes happened the first November of the *havurah*. November 15, 1969. There was one time in the *havurah* where the diversity was very, very clear from the beginning. It wasn't so much that we disagreed, but priorities. November 15, 1969, which some people my age will immediately relate to as the time of “the Mobe,” the National Mobilization Against the War in Vietnam, which was a weekend, including a Shabbat, in Washington. Hundreds of thousands of people were expected in anti-war action, and we were strongly opposed to the war. There was Jews Against the War in Vietnam, that had sort of come out of the New York Havurah and other *havurot* also. But at the same weekend, the G.A., the General Assembly of the Jewish Welfare Fund, was meeting in Boston, and there was scheduled to be a strong student contingent of people led by Hillel Levine to argue for more funds going into Jewish education, but in a very rebellious way. Like, you can't put money into hospitals that are just Jewish in name only, and all these other wasteful things. Jewish education and funding for students should be a higher priority to the Federation. So, of course, we were interested in that, too. Three quarters of the *havurah* (1:25:00:00) went to Washington to participate in the Mobe, and one quarter of the group — Alan Mintz was the part of the group that went up to Boston to be with Hillel Levine and interrupt. It was a demonstration at the Jewish Federation's gathering. We were in Washington marching all night on Shabbat. There was a march against death. There was a service. We all stayed in my sister's apartment in Georgetown — about thirty of us on the floor, had Kabbalat Shabbat, and then walked over. I don't know how we got to the Pentagon, but we walked all night long. This was Friday night, all night long, walking from the Pentagon, past the White House, depositing the name of a Vietnamese village in a basket. Shouting the name of a village that had been destroyed and then finishing the march, called the March Against Death. The next day was the demonstration, on Shabbat, during the day. There were all kinds of proto-Fabrangen folks organized in Washington.

JG: JUJ.

GS: Yeah, Jews for Urban Justice. It was an incredibly powerful Jewish experience — Shabbat, and bonding for us, because it was November of the first year of the *havurah*. And here was this other bonding experience going on at the same time. We had very broad interests within the *havurah*. Again, I was contrasting the New York Havurah against the other *havurot*, just from my perspective, and from my perspective we were much more focused on the Jewish community. We were close to the rabbinical schools. We were interested in the federation. We were interested in a model for the Jewish

community. Ezrat Nashim turned to the Conservative Movement. That's what you're interested in — how the movements developed, how we could influence them. I would say that was a cultural difference, or an interest difference between the original three *havurot*.

JG: Was there a discussion at the communal weekly meals about which way to go? How were the decisions made?

GS: Oh, yes. We didn't have to disagree. Some people were going to Washington and some were going to Boston. Of course, some of us were saying, how could you spend the weekend there when this is happening in Washington? I mean, personally we felt that way. We didn't argue that way. Why would you argue that way? It was obviously worthwhile what they were doing in Boston. But for some of us, the Anti-War Movement was the most passionate thing we cared about at that point in our lives. And there was a Jewish component, the fact that (1:28:00:00) there would be a strong Jewish Shabbat component to what was happening in Washington was very important.

JG: Did the *havurah* contingent and JUJ, your hosts there in Washington, were they also part of a larger Jewish presence at the Mobe?

GS: We didn't combine, I think. There were programs, but we did our own thing, as I recall. There were later demonstrations — Kent State, Cambodia, I think — where there was more organized inter-*havurah* cooperation, or knowledge about what they were doing. I may be conflating events there, too. There was also a Jewish component because all of these things would end up being on Shabbat, so that was an issue for some people in terms of travel and being within walking distance. People felt this was a wonderful way. Those of us who were *Shomer Shabbat*, including myself, as long as we could walk to the demonstration, it didn't bother us. We *davened* wherever we *davened*, and we'd deal with it. But there was also a small Jewish component at the counter-inaugural of Nixon in '73. I remember meeting Arthur Waskow on Capitol Hill, near the Washington Monument, where he was passing out almonds and raisins in sort of yippie-type fashion, dancing all over and wishing everybody a good Shabbat and that sort of thing.

JG: What was the impact on the *havurah* of having participated in these events?

GS: Very strong. Something emerged as Jews Against the War in Vietnam. That's what I grew up with, an organized Jewish community being involved in issues like that. Of course, Heschel was a big model, was a big influence on folks. And Dr. King, the last year before he was assassinated, had come out against the war and gotten into a lot of hot water for it. The liberal Jewish community was opposed to the war, but there was already

some blowback from Israel about being visible as a Jewish community against the administration.

JG: The American administration?

GS: Yeah, the American administration. Being visibly identified as Jews against the War in Vietnam. I had —

JG: The American administration?

GS: Yeah, the American administration. Being visibly identified as Jews against the War in Vietnam. In 1970, (1:31:00:00) Yitzhak Rabin had just been appointed the ambassador, and there were a bunch of us in back at the rabbinical ordination wearing white armbands and passing out literature for Jews Against the War, and Rabin came up to me and said — I don't remember if it was in Hebrew or English; I think it was in Hebrew, because his English was very poor when he started out as ambassador — he said, "Why aren't you demonstrating for Soviet Jewry?" Which we were. I mean, one day of the week we were doing that, and another day of the week we were Jews Against the War in Vietnam. I sort of tried to explain that to him, and he said, "This is not good. This is not good for Israel."

JG: For you to be demonstrating against the war.

GS: Yeah. As Jews. So that's an anecdote. But in terms of the *havurah*, we were sixties people and progressive and anti-war, and to be able to do it in that context was very, very powerful. It wasn't life changing. We were already in that space in our lives. But it felt so wonderful to be able to be there with our very close *haverim*, even though some of us had only known each other for three or four months.

JG: And when you came back to New York, you're saying there were activities that grew out of this.

GS: Oh, yes. Things were better organized out of Washington. They had "trees for Vietnam." But we participated in protests. We formed something called Jews Against the War in Vietnam. I don't remember the institutions. There was a project called the National Jewish Organizing Project, which came out of JUJ and Fabragen, but had an impact. There were programs. We had an anti-war demonstration. It was on 55th Street. Marjorie Guthrie spoke at it — spoke about Arlo's bar mitzvah, and the *havurah* was part of the organizing of that. Mostly in coalition, wherever the Reform Movement was

already strongly opposed to the war. Rabbinical schools, also. So we weren't isolated in the Jewish community.

JG: I also understand that some members got involved in creating something called Jews for Peace. In the aftermath of the mobilization in Washington, Peter Geffen operated a branch from the Park Avenue Synagogue.

GS: That may be what I'm thinking of — Jews for Peace, Jews for Peace in Vietnam. That's it. The same thing. (1:34:00:00) It's just the nomenclature.

JG: And then you worked also with some kids.

GS: I did, yes. I worked in a Reform temple in Forest Hills, in Queens, and the kids were totally into doing anti-war stuff, partly just because it was cool and they saw college kids doing it, but they did a beautiful service with all kinds of poetry and spirituality. I was so proud of these kids. This was my junior youth group. There were a couple of powerful supporters of the war in their congregation. They just fired me on the spot, the other people that were the advisors of these kids. But I was leaving the next month anyway. The parents of the kids were so proud of their kids and so excited about the work they were doing, and how engaged they were through the temple, that they would even create an anti-war service for a Friday night service, with Jewish elements. They said, Don't listen to him. Stay here for the next month and a half. Many of us were teaching in various synagogues, whether we were rabbinical students or not. People were in demand as teachers in schools. Peter had a strong connection with Park Avenue Synagogue, where a number of *havurah* members taught over the years.

JG: That was definitely a way of extending the impact into the community. So I want to talk about *tefilah*. You were starting to describe the *tefilah*, saying that it was a relatively conventional style of *davening* there.

GS: Very little difference, I think, from what you would get in a Conservative synagogue. Participatory — the big thing is that it was completely participatory. It wasn't somebody leading and nobody following. I'm trying to remember what siddurim — what choice did we have? We probably had a Silverman Siddur, the standard Conservative Movement siddur at that time. There weren't creative Siddurim. There wasn't a Reconstructionist siddur. I don't think we would have used it anyway.

JG: Would Shabbat services take place on a regular basis, or irregularly in those early years?

GS: I think it was once a month because people had other commitments. (1:37:00:00) My memory is not so clear and not so powerful. My guess is the retreat and one other Shabbat a month we had services. I'm not one hundred percent sure on that. And the *chaggim*. We also did the *Yamim Noraim*, and those were very, very strong, especially once we had the apartment that I was a den mother for could fit 150 people.

JG: You mean the —

GS: — the apartment itself, the *havurah* apartment.

JG: So by the time you were in the fourth year —

GS: No, that was even further. It was '74. Well, it started in the summer, so, five years. At that point we had a regular minyan in that apartment every Shabbat. That became the West Side Minyan on the Upper West Side. It started at the *havurah*, and then moved from the *havurah* over to Ansche Chesed on West End. Once we had that apartment, anyway, which was large enough, and maybe with the first *havurah* apartment of Richie's, we might well have had *davening* every week by that point.

JG: But early on, it was more frequent.

GS: I'm pretty sure, yes.

JG: Many people talk about the creative tension between tradition and innovation as characteristic of *havurah* services. To what extent was that true in the New York Havurah services?

GS: Most of the innovation was really supplemental poetry, or, after the first year or so, guitar playing. We would start Shacharit on retreats with "Morning Has Broken," Cat Stevens. Beatles songs. What we thought of as spiritual music from our culture, we integrated into the service. And poetry. I remember the very first year — it's not *davening* per se, but I remember a discussion on one of our first retreats, if not the first, with John Ruskay. We had a *Sefer Torah* and we'd *leyn*. Or, if we didn't yet, we read from a Humash. But then it came to the *haftarah* — the *haftarah* is a ritual, but it's meaningfulness is not so clear to us in this day and age. They're somewhat arbitrarily chosen. (1:40:00:00) Some of them are edifying and some of them are gruesome. John says, "Why don't we have something else for a *haftarah*? I mean the concept. Let's find a short story or a poem that relates to the Torah portion, take the institution of a *haftarah*, and do something different with it." So on that level, which isn't *davening* per se, but what happens during *davening*, we were ready to question from the very beginning. But I

don't think *tefilah* was our strength. We had some beautiful *daveners* after the first year. Richie Siegel himself was a gifted *baal tefila*. But we didn't have a lot of gifted *ba'alei tefila*, for one thing. And until Ezrat Nashim started advocating, we weren't so conscious of the male bias in the *tefilah*, in the prayers themselves, in the structure of it, and what we did and how we did it, how we sat. The informality was something that was important, and that, in its own way, was revolutionary or different. Anybody could lead. We sat in a circle. We sat on the floor. We preferred sitting on the floor.

JG: Makes it easier to be facing each other.

GS: Yeah, facing each other. We had some peculiarities that I still wonder about. We were so intent on our *davening* that it was a New York Havurah custom — I don't know if it was in the other *havurot* — to not stand for the *Barchu*. We just never moved. Maybe we were lazy, but we kind of bowed in place rather than standing. That was just what we did. Or for any of the various Kaddish prayers, I don't think we stood for anything except the Kaddish Yatom, (1:42:00:00) Mourner's Kaddish, and for *tefilah* itself, when we tended to walk around, particularly if we were outdoors. People did their own *tefilah*. So there were stylistic things, but not so much a change in liturgy. That I associate much more with Havurat Shalom. I was amazed, even from the beginning, how different it could be and how creative it might be, and it began to get even more creative once they integrated feminist theology and new prayers. The *havurah* was pretty traditional in that way.

JG: What about music? Carlebach —

GS: Well, we sang. We sang Carlebach. We sang from the very beginning, and the Carlebach music that was conventional we used, particularly on Shabbat. (1:43:00:00) Sometimes on retreats — the space kind of intensified what we were doing, and I remember we would move more and maybe even dance a little bit. Those were much more powerful once we got away from the city. I'm remembering more movement and dancing and passion when we were away on retreat, and that's probably why they were so powerful for us. But getting together on a standard Shabbat, there weren't a lot of creative *baalei tefilah*, or people who thought of liturgy as the place to innovate, until Ezrat Nashim came in, or emerged, and that influenced what we prayed, but not so much how we prayed. It took a while. The Rosh Chodesh thing — I mean they were doing really creative elements that could have been brought back into Shabbat in some way, or Thursday night if we *davened* Maariv. But we weren't on the creative edge place there, in New York.

JG: Art Green characterized this moment in '68, '69, when Havurat Shalom and the New York Havurah were founded, as a sort of pre-feminist moment in a lot of ways.

GS: Yes.

JG: Changes happened over the next several years, but many people have talked about the fact that they weren't even particularly cognizant of it. They weren't even thinking about it particularly.

GS: I don't think it came up, no. I mean, we were ready to exclude women from membership. In no way did it come up in any kind of strong way in the first year.

JG: Were women ever present for *tefilot* in the first year? Besides Liz Koltun.

GS: Liz, and I don't remember (1:45:00:00) Phyllis being such a *davener*. So some of it may have just been personal proclivity, but yes, sure. People did bring girlfriends and boyfriends. I don't remember the first year. Maybe we didn't have any yet. We should have. But by the fourth year, people brought friends and close friends and boyfriends and girlfriends. And the retreats were a more extended family experience, by the fourth year when I was there.

JG: Early on did women — do you remember any women who were there ever having a public role? Was there any issue about *kol isha*?

GS: No, not an issue like that, and I don't think there would have been, even from the *frum*-er end of the spectrum. But it didn't happen, so I can't be sure. By the time I got back, I would say my classmate and dear friend Martha was sort of the leader of the *havurah*. The leader of the *havurah* in the first year was clearly the triumvirate, as they were called — Peter, John, and Alan. By the time I got back, if there was a president of the *havurah*, which there wasn't, but the strongest leader was Martha. So there was strong female leadership in the whole structure of the *havurah*, and certainly in the prayer service by then.

JG: You're talking about like, '74, right?

GS: No, '72 already. I came back in '72.

JG: Seventy-two. So Ezrat Nashim had just been formed.

GS: Right, but sometime between then and the first three years, women were leading *davening* and were clearly part of the community. It happened while I was gone. I think partly from their experience of leading, and feeling empowered, people like Paula and Martha — and Arlene Agus, who was on the periphery of the *havurah*; she was a fellow traveler — they were allowed in, but they were leading the same service, and were excluded by the liturgy. It's superficial in some ways, superficial to add the *Imahot*, but when you first do it, it doesn't feel superficial. It feels revolutionary. Havurat Shalom at a certain stage started to add the *Imahot*. Well, what about the God language? What about the rest of the Hebrew?

JG: The gendered language.

GS: Yeah, the gendered language. That didn't have much echo in the New York Havurah, which (1:48:00:00) meant we didn't take the liturgy as seriously as we took the text, and the lived experience of the Jewish community, whereas the other powerful communities were much more intentional and focused on the liturgy. We were concerned about egalitarianism, but not so much the liturgy. That's my observation.

JG: You were a rabbinical student at HUC, not at JTS. So, Sally Priesand was ordained in 1972.

GS: Yeah, that's right. Exactly. In some ways the Reform Movement didn't add the *Imahot* — although that's not the most important thing — to the latest version of its prayer book.

JG: What was the latest?

GS: Yeah, the *Mishkan Tefilah*. There was an in-between step, but the Reform Movement was just as slow as the Conservative Movement. All it did was ordain female rabbis, but it had no impact. The first feminist rabbi, who was my very close friend then and still is, Laura Geller, was the third rabbi ordained. If she had been the first rabbi ordained, things might have moved a little differently. She was a fellow traveler if not a member of the *havurah* for a few years when she was in New York.

JG: What year was she ordained?

GS: She was ordained in '76. Between '73 and '76, she was a fellow traveler of the *havurah*. But she was a strong feminist. Sally, who is a lovely person, wasn't a feminist, didn't define herself as a feminist, and wanted to make sure that people weren't threatened by being the first. I have great sympathy for Sally, and great affection for her, but she

wanted people to know that she was just like any other rabbi, but she wore a dress. She wasn't going to change the liturgy. She wasn't there to make waves. The second woman ordained didn't actually take a job in the Jewish community. So the Reform Movement in some ways was behind the Conservative Movement, and certainly the Reconstructionist Movement, in taking feminism and the ideas of feminism seriously.

JG: Did the attitudes within the Reform Movement or Reconstructionism as they were evolving have any direct impact on the early ways in which *tefilot* happened within the *havurah*?

GS: I think it's much more in the other direction. The beginnings of Jewish Renewal had an impact on the Reform Movement and the Reconstructionist Movement (1:51:00:00) — so the sensitivities and the creativity and the change of language. You had Joe Rosenberg translating, deeply influenced by Havurat Shalom. So his influence influenced the way liturgy developed in the Reconstructionist Movement. Mordecai Kaplan was a naturalist and focused on ethics and removing prayers that seemed ethically offensive. So it's definitely the other way. I can't think of any particular way that the Reform Movement influenced the *havurah*. Some of us from the Reform Movement had great social justice passion. It was called "Prophetic Judaism" at a certain point. But so did our friends from the seminary and our Orthodox friends.

JG: That wasn't translating into —

GS: No, it wasn't translating. It was a sort of emphasis, a specialization or something, but not the Reform Movement per se or its ideas. The people who were influencing the *Havurah* — people like me and David Ellenson, were Gene Borowitz, who was a strong, progressive liberal, and influenced by Heschel also — so it was sort of a cross-pollination.

JG: When you came back from Israel in '72, do you recall what it was like for you to experience women taking new roles?

GS: It didn't — partly because I knew two of the strongest leaders. Paula and Martha were friends — not close friends, though we became close friends — from college. I found it liberating and positive, and I didn't find it strange. I don't know why I didn't, because there were no female rabbis at the time other than Sally, who had just been ordained. But I don't think it changed the dynamic of the community. Maybe this is thinking more than feeling, but ideologically I was very pleased. It's not an all-boys club. It's part of moving in an egalitarian direction, which I felt the *havurah* should do anyway. I was anti-elitist in my thinking about the way it should be. If we're going to be this

powerful community, we've got to influence the community, and we have to look like them more. I have reasons, intellectual reasons, but I found it only liberating.
(1:54:00:00)

JG: As we were discussing, in the beginning, the New York Havurah was grounded and founded on the idea Meredith Woocher called the “nexus of religious and political values,” which sounds like it was a continuation in many ways of the social justice activism that you had imbibed over the course of your childhood at home. What had been your experience, if any, as a Jew in sort of the general social justice movements of the time — outside of Jewish contexts?

GS: That's interesting. Maybe I have selective attention, but if you look at the Civil Rights Movement, the percentage of whites who were Jewish was pretty high. Same thing with the anti-war movement and early organizing for SDS. Jews always seem to be fairly prominent in the social justice movements.

JG: But not always acting within Jewish contexts.

GS: That's right. That's certainly right.

JG: Or within a Jewish framework.

GS: That is something that the New York Havurah felt very strongly about, and I personally felt that it was something that was important to do. Not to simply be a Jew, but to be part of the organized Jewish community so that we would be visible as a community.

JG: Why is that so important?

GS: Well, I think I imbibed the value of Kiddush Hashem in the way that it's used in the Talmud, not in the sense of martyrdom but in the sense of an example. We should be an exemplary people, and our actions in the public realm should reflect Jewish values. You could say that was defensive, or you could say that was the foundation of Judaism, as far as I was concerned. I was always proud of being a Jew in these movements. The tensions, which emerged only slowly in the late sixties and early seventies between progressive politics and Jewish identity, hadn't quite formed. At that point then it became important to be a progressive voice in the Jewish community. The New York Havurah, as I said, was always oriented toward the organized Jewish community. Although we were countercultural, we were trying to influence people. That's why it was a Jewish organization to oppose the war, and therefore try to bring the Jewish community to be

involved. The same thing with successive organizations like Breira. (1:57:00:00) The Jewish community's views on Israel and Palestine were important, not just what individual Jews felt. We were trying to influence public opinion already then within the Jewish community to the kind of Jewish identity that we thought was authentic.

JG: You yourself had been involved in the Jewish counterculture in a variety of different ways as it was beginning to take shape. Can you tell us about your work as editor of the Jewish Student Press Service?

GS: Yes. There were two big institutions — well, they were one, but the Press Service was part of a network, the North American Jewish Students Network. That was “the movement.” People spoke about, in general, “the movement” in the late sixties, and there was a Jewish Movement. Most of the people involved in that, I discovered once I came in through the press service, were Habonim/Hashomer Zionists — progressive Zionists, many of them secularists, some of them even the last wave of the Yiddishists — the Workmen's Circle and the Yugntruf. It was very, very different from the Havurah Movement. When I was in Israel for two years, the second year —

JG: The first year, you were doing what?

GS: The first year, I was a visiting graduate student in Israel. I took courses at Hebrew University. HUC hadn't started its year in Israel program yet. Or maybe it started that year, but I was already a visiting graduate student at Hebrew U. That's basically what I did, but I chose to stay another year, to take a leave of absence from rabbinical school to continue to work on my Hebrew, and also because I was really in love with being there, especially Jerusalem. So I got a job through the Jewish Student Press Service, and that's how I heard about the student movement. It hadn't really impacted on the New York Havurah. It was around the same time. I'm not sure when the first National Jewish Students Network Conference was. I believe it was in '69, right around the same time there was this, in-effect, secular Jewish student movement, part of the World Union of Jewish Students.

JG: Nineteen sixty-nine.

GS: Yeah. So I heard about it when I was in Israel and applied for the job as the first editor. I set up the Israel Bureau of the Jewish Student Press Service.

JG: What was the Jewish Student Press Service?

GS: In the beginning, it was a press service to what was another phenomenon emerging then which was Jewish student newspapers. There were twenty or thirty Jewish student newspapers. *Genesis 2* I think was in the first wave. If not, it was in the second year of it. (2:00:00:00) Most large campuses with Jewish enrollment had a Jewish student newspaper. The Press Service was formed by Network to service with content — to be a JTA, a Jewish Telegraphic Agency — for the Jewish student press. It also, the Press Service, collected them and sent them out the papers by mail to all the other papers. All the papers. The first year there were twenty or thirty. At one point I think there were fifty or sixty Jewish student papers, in the late sixties, early seventies. I worked as the Israel Editor from '71 to '72, and then the editor of the Jewish Student Press Service from '72 to '73, while I was in rabbinical school — I had a full-time job. It was an interesting experience in how much sleep you need or don't need. I would get to the press service at 6:30 in the morning, work for a few hours, go to class, and then come back. The Press Service, being in contact, we did a tour for editors — while I was in Israel — from the papers. We were supported by the “Jewish establishment,” the Press Service, particularly in Israel. Our money came from the Foreign Ministry, the Histadrut, and the Sochnut — Morele Baron, Mordechai Baron. So my boss was Mordechai Baron, Colette Avital from the Foreign Ministry, and Yitzchak — the head of the Histadrut, at least nominally. His last name is disappearing on me, but anyway. I met, heard about, was in touch with what was going on on campuses. At that point it was still pretty much undergraduates, progressive Zionists basically.

JG: In America?

GS: In America. North America. So when I came back and became the editor of the Press Service — the Press Service's office is in the offices of the North American Jewish Student Network; they shared an office in the clothing district in Manhattan — so I had a foot in that camp. And that and the *havurah* camp were totally different places. The only place where they intersected was *Response Magazine*, which was one of the organizations that received money from Network, which received money from established Jewish organizations that were trying to connect with youth. So we were considered very important to invest in young people, whatever they were doing, and we were doing sort of radical Jewish politics, the beginnings of what became the ideas of Breira. (2:03:00:00) It was something called the Radical Zionist Alliance, RZA, that was part of the same group of the North American Jewish Students Network.

JG: What about your year in Israel though? You had alluded earlier that this was extremely formative in terms of your views.

GS: Even more so. Just two months there on an ulpan oriented me toward Israel really centrally. I became a Zionist. I was not raised a Zionist, but just spending time there and realizing what was emerging. This was 1970, three years after the Six Day War. There's no way to live a full Jewish life without a deep connection and involvement with Israel. It's intellectually impossible, and because I loved it so much there and felt so powerfully connected to its potential, I came back a Zionist, and I've been involved. The New York Havurah, again, of the three *havurot*, we were the ones who were most engaged in Israel. That's partly because Breira formed from members of the New York Havurah, but even before that, John Ruskay and Peter Geffen were deeply connected to Israel, had been there back and forth. John was studying Middle East politics at Columbia, so we had speakers from Israel. We were involved. We were not the counterculture that sort of turned away from Israel to develop a non-Zionist brand, which was somewhat true of the *havurah* movement as it developed. It was extremely focused on creative Jewish communities here. We were back and forth to Israel — a lot of the members. I remember when John Ruskay brought Nahum Goldmann to speak to the New York Havurah. It was a subject of debate and involvement and we were pretty much on one side. I mean, there were a couple people —

JG: Can you say who he was?

GS: Nahum Goldmann?

JG: Yes.

GS: Nahum Goldmann was probably the most prominent international Jewish leader between 1920 and 1960 in the world. He was the head of the World Zionist Congress and the head of the World Jewish Congress at different times. He lived most of his life in Switzerland. He had become famous in the late 1960s because he tried to negotiate with the Egyptian government on behalf of Israel and was already talking, before the Six Day War, about diplomatic connections that could be made (02:06:00:10) between the two. He was the senior statesman of the Jewish world. And here he was, eighty years old, coming in a very impressive suit of clothes. He was a very wealthy man. I don't know where his money came from. But we were all there in torn jeans looking pretty raggedy, and he sat there and told us his view of the Six Day War and how it could have been avoided.

JG: So this is before the Yom Kippur War.

GS: Yes.

JB: So how had your experience in Israel, those two years in Israel, helped to shape your view? You were a Zionist, but —

GS: My knowledge level was pretty low. The first *ketah*, the first paragraph, at the ulpan in Hebrew University — I remember it was in August of 1970 — it was a paragraph written by Shlomo Avineri, who's still around and became Director-General of the Foreign Ministry. It was about two peoples, one land — two peoples. So I'm reading, and learning modern Hebrew more effectively, and that's the first thing that I'm reading in the ulpan. But that year that I spent as a journalist, I did travel extensively on the West Bank. It was much easier to travel in the West Bank in those days. It was safer, definitely safer. The perception wasn't that it was safer, but I had as my guide an Israeli, a pacifist named Joseph Abileah who played in the Israeli Philharmonic and had a certificate of *e-hatamah* (2:07:48:20), that he didn't belong, from the Israeli Army because he was a pacifist. This was not helpful to him in Israeli society, but in the Philharmonic Orchestra it didn't matter. He introduced me to Palestinians, whom I met and talked with about their aspirations. It was so close to the Six Day War people really didn't know what to make of it. But they were Palestinians. They weren't Jordanians. So I had an up-front view of what the dynamic was, and I met people like Morele Baron, who became a very important peace activist over the years, but who was then head of the department of Noar Vehechalutz [Youth and Pioneering Education] (2:08:32:20) and a protege of Moshe Dayan and Lova Eliav. So there were very important Israeli intellectuals, politicians, who were talking about "one land, two peoples" and what would the solution be. Some people thought, as Abba Eban did, three states — Israel, Palestine, Jordan, "Benelux." (2:09:00:00) It was talked about already then. So I developed a pretty strong level of knowledge. I spoke a little Arabic, enough to get around.

JB: How would you characterize your views at the time that you came back to the States?

GS: I wasn't an activist, but I understood that there was an issue here. The settlements — the problems in articulating the issue were really because of Golda Meir, who was claiming that there was no such thing as a Palestinian. If you had lived in Israel and been on the West Bank, you knew that there were. So, at that point, you had a Labor government completely denying that there was any issue, and you had a press for settlement. We knew that it was kind of blind to be thinking in those terms, and of course, people knew that Ben Gurion had said, "How can we give this back?" right after the Six Day War — that this would destroy Israel to maintain control of the West Bank and Gaza. And there were a few people in the Labor Party, and left of the Labor Party, and I got to know a few of them, interviewing some of them. I came back convinced that there had to be an accommodation for the Palestinians, and we started talking about it before we formed Breira in March of 1973. We had an inter-*havurah* conference. That was actually

quite an interesting conference. You might say it was similar to what I described as the two places people were on November 16, 1969. In March of 1973, there was a gathering at Rutgers Hillel, an inter-*havurah* gathering. Alan Mintz — it was Alan's idea, but it was so long ago that poor Alan hadn't gotten the message that you had to have a certain number of women at this thing. So he invited, like, forty-nine guys and Arlene Agus, or something like that. Fabrangen refused to participate unless there were more women invited, and unless — I think they had an anti-anti-egalitarian bias, too. "We'll choose who comes from Fabrangen." Alan, who thought he was inviting the people who were most knowledgeable about the two subjects — the point was, half of the group was dealing with the "new Halachah," which was more of a Fabrangen concept than anybody else's concept, but if we're a serious movement, which we were already talking about then, and we aren't Orthodox, maybe there are egalitarian *halachot* that we should be evolving. (2:12:00:00) So there's a group of people, and Yitz Greenberg was there. Yitz was involved as a scholar and a friend of the *havurah* movement. This is an important Orthodox rabbi.

JB: So this is already thinking in terms of — there are three *havurot* at that time.

GS: Right.

JB: So this is thinking already in terms of a "movement."

GS: Oh, definitely. Definitely. I think in some ways more Fabrangen, which, as I said, is more political in some ways. There was a section that was "new Halachah," and then there was a section on what was called the "discussion between Zionist and non-Zionist" — except, by definitions that anybody would have used, they were all Zionists. There were a couple of Israeli radicals who defined themselves as non-Zionist. But it was how do we think within our countercultural community about Israel as a Jewish state and the Palestinians? How do we square our progressive values with what was already beginning to seem like an occupation? The word probably wasn't in our vocabulary.

JB: This was —

GS: March, '73.

JB: March, '73. So this was still before the war.

GS: Yeah.

JB: So this is a *havurah* conference, or was it broader than that?

GS: A little bit broader than that. Well, no, Alan I think was drawing from the three *havurot* and maybe a couple of other people. But it basically was the three *havurot* because one of the things that happened out of it was the impetus to move toward what was called Weiss's Farm gatherings. They were inter-*havurah* retreats. That was the first one, but I don't think it was called that — "inter-*havurah*." That is, in fact, what it was. There were a couple people — well, of course, Stephen Cohen, who just passed away this week, Stephen P. Cohen was there. He may have been connected with Havurat Shalom at that point. He was in Boston. He and John were the sort of leading intellectuals on the Israel-Palestine side of the discussion. That's the side that I participated in, and I had a lot of direct experience from my time there, so I was naturally drawn to that. This group was divided into two parts and both of them had a strong afterlife. "New Halachah" as a concept faded. There was a New Halachah Newsletter (02:15:00:00) that Richard Friedman from Fabringen edited, where there would be a discussion of what would a progressive Halachah look like. Issues of egalitarian worship would have been part of that. For example, what liturgy, what role of women? It was clear that traditional Halachah didn't fit, but our practice wasn't as good as our preaching. It also, I think, gave a strong impetus — gave Ezrat Nashim ideas that this has got to happen. They're not even including women into the intellectual vanguard of the *havurah* movement. Once the meeting happened, there were several more women invited than the first part, and poor Alan had to do teshuvah for years, I think. Both discussions were very serious, but as a concept "new Halachah," as opposed to the *minhagim* that we developed over the years, I think lasted for a year or two, as an intellectual construct, and it didn't have an afterlife. But it was definitely part of the early discussions at Weiss's Farm. So the conference was the precursor to the inter-*havurah* retreats, and it was definitely the precursor to Breira. Out of this conference, we said, well, we're very concerned that things aren't moving. The Palestinians are being boxed in by settlements and new movements, and by no recognition of the fact that the West Bank, which we focused on more, and Gaza, weren't being assimilated into Israel, and couldn't be assimilated into Israel, and shouldn't be assimilated into Israel. So we were quite aware of that, and from this conference, we decided to gather regularly — we meaning people in New York, mostly New York Havurah members. Michael Walzer came up from Princeton to talk to us. We created something called "A Call to Discussion on Israel-Diaspora Relations," and we were very concerned that this situation was dangerous. We were talking in the summer of 1973. We had several meetings, and then the war happened. We got together after the war and said, "We've got to be an organization in the Jewish community." This was predictable. If we don't learn the correct lessons from that war, Israel is going to be threatened by not solving the Palestinian issue. So, "A Call to Discussion" (02:18:00:00) then became Breira, in November/December of 1973. There were ten or eleven of us who were on a working committee, I think we called it.

JB: Was Arnold Wolf part of this group?

GS: No, no, Arnie was brought in much later. Much later. It was all people — now we were a few years older, maybe we were all twenty-five, twenty-six. So it was some of the same people. It was certainly John Ruskay and Peter Geffen. David Saperstein was part of the original group. He was a rabbinical student at HUC. There were a few other folks who were *havurah* people. Gershon Hundert, now a professor at McGill; Ross Brand, a professor at NYU. So there were graduate students and rabbinical students and New York Havurah people, and we began to collect advisors for credibility, basically. We knew as much as they did, but our liberal friends and allies, like Gene Borowitz, and from the seminary, Morton Siegel, who was an educator. Joachim Prinz was on the first advisory committee, a great rabbi who emigrated from Berlin in the thirties and was the person who spoke before Martin Luther King at the march in 1963. So we had what we thought were really important scholars and communal people behind us, and we developed a whole network of people like that, mostly intellectuals and all pretty much focused around New York, or at least the East. One of the other ones was David Gordis, who was with us from the beginning. Six or seven people. Sidney Morgenbesser (02:20:20:07) on the faculty at Columbia. We met and said we needed a name. Gershon said we should have a Hebrew name to demonstrate our Zionist credibility and our Zionist belief and our Zionist involvement. We all knew the slogan in Israel at the time was "*ain breira*". It would be nice to do something better for the Palestinians but "we have no choice" — "*ain breira*" So we called ourselves "Breira," which at one point got us into a misunderstanding, probably intentional, that we considered ourselves an alternative to Zionism — (0:21:00:00) that we were a non-Zionist group, when in fact, we were precisely the Zionist element of the counterculture. We were the ones who cared the most and paid the most attention to Israel and its future. We were profoundly Zionist in our approach. We thought, as I myself learned, you can't really have an authentic Jewish community in the Diaspora and ignore what's going on in the State of Israel. Hopefully you can be enriched by it, you can be enriched at least a little bit by the diversity and the experimentation. We have a little more freedom because of how Israel developed, but we have much to learn and much to gain from a connection. When it started, it was also called a Project of Concern in Israel-Diaspora Relations, and a lot of our ideological and practical steps were, how can we get the American Jewish community to talk about these issues? So we also have democracy and Jewish life, the role of intellectuals and the openness to ideas and a deeper connection with Israel, and the varieties of opinion in Israel. Because at this point, you had Golda Meir as the Prime Minister, and Golda was a universally loved or respected person in American Jewish life. And the Labor Zionists, who were still in power, had a lot of difficulty with Breira — they had a lot of difficulty — some of whom later became very strong doves, like Arthur Hertzberg and Leibel Fein

(2:22:46:16) and Al Vorspan, opposed Breira, because we were criticizing the Labor government. This was long before Begin. It took them awhile to come around.

JB: At what point did members of other *havurahs*, particularly Farbrangen get involved — Arthur Waskow and others?

GS: Somewhat later, when we expanded to become a national organization and expanded the board. Arthur already had a reputation as a sort of antagonist in the Jewish community, which was very unfortunate, because Arthur was a deeply creative influence on many people in the Jewish community. The Jewish community was a little slow in understanding. Arthur is the first person to create a really modern Haggadah, which now every movement does. The *Freedom Seder* was the first of its kind. He's been an inspiring intellectual and spiritual figure for a long time. Back then he was the "enemy of the Jewish people," as far as the Jewish establishment (02:24:00:00). He was a vigorous political progressive and not at all ashamed to say, "As a Jew, I oppose the war in Vietnam, and me and my friends here are going to plant trees in Vietnam." The true conservatives in the Jewish community thought he was public enemy number one. So when Arthur wanted to be involved, people on the board sort of said, Gee, if we have Arthur on the board, we're going to attract all this heat onto us. Do we need that? And we decided we were not going to exclude Arthur, who was already our teacher. We'd just have to face the music when it happened. And that's exactly what happened. We knew it was going to happen, and it happened. The attacks on Breira came from the far right of the Jewish community, a JDL spinoff group called Americans for Safe Israel. Rael Jean Isaac wrote this pamphlet, about twenty-five pages. Twenty pages of it was about Arthur. Nothing was on Breira and its platform and the people who were involved. It was all — Arthur had a post office box next to this organization. It was pure red baiting. Arthur and a couple of other people — poor Barry Rubin, who ended up being quite a conservative Jewish academic on the Middle East questions, when he was sixteen, he was a socialist worker guy, and he wrote a negative piece about Israel. When he was sixteen. So Barry Rubin, who wrote for the Breira publication and wasn't central at all, and Arthur, who was on a twenty-five member board and wasn't particularly central, though we loved him and were happy to have him, but he was never particularly central to the organization — the organization lasted effectively for three years. I mean, four, formally. Yes, the conference was in '77, so by the time we incorporated in '74, that's four or five years.

JG: Can you articulate what the main positions of Breira were and what was so controversial?

GS: Well, what was controversial was, we raised the question of wouldn't Israel be safer if there was Palestinian self-determination? Two states is a later form. We talked about

Palestinian self-determination as being in the interest of Israel. We thought that the Jewish community in North America should have an open discussion about those kinds of issues, and that open discussion would clearly bring out views that were opposed to the Israeli government. So, we brought in Lova Eliav, Meir Pa'il, (02:27:00:00) important voices from the dove-ish Israeli community. That was still early in the structure of the American Jewish community. The Council of Presidents was fairly new. The Council of Presidents was formed by Nahum Goldmann actually. AIPAC [American Israel Public Affairs Committee] had just started in the seventies, and its job was to represent the Israeli government. So here's an American Jewish organization saying that maybe they got some things wrong, and we should listen to dissident Israelis and think for ourselves as American Jews was deeply threatening. The idea of dissent was threatening. It was the idea as much as what we said, and what we said was opposed by the Labor Party, for sure, but it wasn't so radical. It was more the principle of dissent was not recognized.

JG: What happened?

GS: What happened was that this critique, which came from the far right, which would have been easy to defend against, was picked up by AIPAC in its early stages, and they sent it around. They sent around the document that was produced by a JDL [Jewish Defense League] spinoff, and that gave it credibility. Our goal — of course, we did in some way want to influence American policy, but the stakes weren't what they are now. We were trying to influence discussion in the Jewish community. We were educational. Like the New York Havurah, we wanted to make an impact on the community. We wanted people to really look at Israel more closely and ultimately to agree with us, and then to help convince Israel that it was on a suicidal path. Once the official organized Jewish community was distributing stuff about us, then we had to defend ourselves, and we were already mortally wounded by that first attack. We existed for another couple of years. We had to defend ourselves. The attack was so tendentious. It wasn't on our policies. It was on our people, so then we had to defend people. Then we had our own organizational issues, some of them having to do, in my opinion, with sexism. We had some problems right around the same time among the small staff that we had. We had one major funder, and that hurt when the funder got discouraged not by the attacks on us, but on the fact that we were kids and weren't as strong as we could have been (2:30:00:08) organizationally. So we lost our major funder, but we were mortally wounded by the folks who were trying to keep discussion and dissent down. That's what happened. We weren't strong enough to survive. I was part of a small faction on the Breira board that felt we should be multi-issue. We had a discussion about that, and I think it was voted, like, eighteen to three that our strength was our Zionism and our Israel/Palestine issues, and being multi-issue would be distracting. I thought we should work on issues of economic justice and feminism and the Jewish community here. We

worked, by the way, not just on Israel/Palestine. We did do a little bit of work on what was called the Ashkenazi-Sephardi split and social gap questions in Israel. But not so much.

JG: In Israel.

GS: In Israel. But I felt we should be working as a multi-issue, progressive Jewish organization. I also felt we'd be more authentic. We came across as critics of Israel without any roots in the Jewish community here. We had very credible intellectual leaders in the community attached to us: Jesse Lurie of *Hadassah Magazine*, the editor, was a big supporter of ours. At one point even Jacob Neusner was on our advisory committee. So we had a lot of intellectuals, but we didn't have grassroots. And our chapters — we had chapters, but very few. We didn't have good grassroots. I thought we'd be more authentic as an expression of progressive Jewish identity, which was inclusive of a progressive view on Israel.

JG: You don't think that would fatally dilute the —

GS: Well, other people thought that, at the organization. That's what they thought. I thought it would just give us credibility as an American Jewish organization, which was also deeply concerned about Israel, and not defensive, sort of. The American Jewish Committee wasn't in the same position it is then, but to the extent that they dealt with Israel, they were defending the government. It was the same thing with the ADL [Anti-Defamation League], which also hadn't yet really moved into defending Israel as a major issue. I thought that would be a good strategy, and that was what we believed in, so I thought we should do it to the organization. That's what I did when Breira folded, and John Ruskay turned to me at the meeting where we had to figure out what to do with the money that we still owed. (2:33:00:10)

JG: Folded — I mean, what brought it to that point?

GS: Financially folded. We weren't able to sustain anything. Once our big funder had backed out and our credibility to organize in the Jewish community had been so damaged, we just ran out of steam.

JG: Was this '77?

GS: Probably the fall of '78. Yeah, the last meeting was in the fall of '78. So would sit around the room, the board, thinking, “Who do we pay off? How do we dissolve the organization?” So we have all that discussion, and I turn to John and I said, “We finished

this. What are we going to do now? What's next?" And he said, "It's your turn." That's when New Jewish Agenda — the transition was very direct. John said, "It's your turn." So from that, New Jewish Agenda was born conceptually, and I felt, organizationally wouldn't make the same mistake. New Jewish Agenda would include a progressive Zionist vision, but it wouldn't be the whole organization.

JG: It was a multi-platform organization.

GS: Yes. We had a platform on Central America. We had a platform on Argentine Anti-Semitism, on gay rights, which is very strong. We were the first national organization to take that on as a major issue for —

JG: The late 70s/early 80s?

GS: Nineteen-eighties. Yeah. Our founding conference was December of 1980. The first meeting was in the New York Havurah apartment. It was not my apartment any longer. I was already at Rutgers. In May of 1979, I invited about two hundred people. I think about seventy-five people were there. I invited half men and half women. I didn't make that mistake again. About seventy-five were there, a number of them from the various *havurot*, including Fabrangen. We formed the organizing committee for the New Jewish Agenda at that point. We organized slowly and carefully and built grassroots around the country. So by the time we had a founding conference, in December of 1980, there were probably twenty, twenty-five chapters. So we were much harder to destroy, even if our views were even further out in some ways than Breira. They were clearly progressive across the board, so a Jewish conservative would not have liked us, even if they agreed with some of our platform. We were a progressive voice in the Jewish community and a Jewish voice in the progressive community. That was our formula. (02:36:00:00) And we were. But all these things were sort of outgrowths of the New York Havurah and its ethos, and its attempt to organize the Jewish community or influence the Jewish community in certain ways. We spoke about it originally in terms of leaders. I think we were talking about the community itself — its democratization, its ultimate empowerment of women, although not so much at the beginning, and its acceptance of gay, lesbian, the whole gamut. Our whole instinct was to try to influence the nature of the Jewish community.

JG: Writ large.

GS: Writ large, yeah.

JG: Well, you were providing leadership also at the same time, pushing these ideas and creating the organizational structures that would give them functionality.

GS: As Ezrat Nashim. Well, Ezrat Nashim, that was an interesting place. I happened to be in the place where this is happening. You had the religious feminist movement, which came out of the New York Havurah essentially, out of ten women on the Upper West Side who were the strongest leaders of it. Of course, there were people all over the country eventually. So, Ezrat Nashim comes out of the New York Havurah. Breira comes out of the New York Havurah. What became the Jewish Women's Resource Center was physically in the *havurah*. Laura Geller, my friend — I got her a grant to work on the Jewish Women's Resource Center while she was still a rabbinical student.

JG: What was the mission of the Jewish Women's Resource Center?

GS: To create liturgy, create historical materials. It was to be some kind of gathering of information and resources for the Jewish community but reflecting a feminist perspective. At one point, the Breira office and the Jewish Woman's Resource Center were in the New York Havurah apartment. I think the impetus ended up in Boston, with the — whatever it's called now — that's the Jewish Women's —

JG: Jewish Women's Archive?

GS: Archive, yeah. Is that in Boston?

JG: Yeah.

GS: So this was the first stage of that. What I was going to say was that the movements came together. The *havurah* movement and the Jewish student movement came together with the women's conference — the first National Jewish Women's Conference.

JG: Also in the early seventies.

GS: Yes. '73, probably. That's when the religious community and the secular, Zionist, feminist community of the Jewish Student Movement came together. (03:39:00:00) So that was a powerful gathering. The first one, I think, Yitz Greenberg was the only man who was allowed to enter. Blu Greenberg was very involved. I was there as a support. I brought the *Sifrei Torah*, but I didn't go into the hotel. Or I gave it to somebody in the hotel. And that was Ezrat Nashim meets the Jewish Student Movement.

JG: And about 800 people, I believe, came to that first conference.

GS: I think so. It could be. It was a very large conference. Either the second or the third conference was the Jewish Women's Men's Conference.

JG: Exactly.

GS: But those are the sort of things that emerged from the *havurah*, because of its focus on the Jewish community. Most *havurot* emphasized the fellowship or specialized in things like Havurat Shalom. That way of thinking specialized in intensive liturgy and *davening* and liturgical creativity and influenced us all by the products — the people and some of the things they put together. The New York Havurah never wrote a siddur. That wasn't our strength. Our strength was creating organizations.

JG: Did you see your work in the creation and moving forward with Breira as such a part and parcel of your *havurah*?

GS: Sort of.

JG: Yes and no.

GS: Yes and no. I mean, clearly we were bringing in people who this was politically important for them, or ideologically, or their way of expressing their love for Israel. But the style in which it formed, with a working committee of ten of us, with an egalitarian leadership, it took us awhile before we formed a typical organization. We were a working committee for quite a while. We expanded the first national leadership, the first national board, past the Arthur stage, as a board of our friends and contacts who wanted to be involved. We may have ended it at least a third women, so it was sort of the things that were coming out of the *havurah* movement as well, albeit some from the beginning unwillingly. It was pretty egalitarian leadership. Arnie was the first national chair, Rabbi Arnold Wolf. Arnold was really my rebbe. He taught at the rabbinical school (02:42:00:00), and I just admired him as somebody who had put all those things together — a traditional pattern of observance for a Reform Rabbi, a personalist theology, a completely progressive politics across the board, with civil liberties, Civil Rights, and Israel activism. The vote to make him Chair was seventeen to two. The two people who voted against him were himself and me. He said, "I can't do this. I'm not a Chair. That's not me. Look, you see the way I behave in meetings." But we thought Arnold as the best we had to be a representative, and certainly an intellectually powerful and wonderfully challenging person to the Jewish community. So, we picked Arnie, and he and I voted against him.

JG: Relatively early on, Bill Novak, who had come originally from Havurat Shalom and then became a member of the New York Havurah. Talk about what he called the "inability to unite for joint political action" on the part of the *havurah* as the "outstanding failure of the New York Havurah."

GS: Joint political action?

JG: Joint political action. What I'm trying to understand is the relationship between all of this incredible energy and creativity, which essentially was the product in many ways of the New York Havurah and its members — very political, very strategic, organizationally focused — and this comment. Others have talked about how political activity, as a focus of communal activity as a priority for the New York Havurah, faded over time.

GS: In the sense that we went off on single issues or what you would have thought of as single issue — Israel/Palestine as an issue emerged out of the *havurah*, but we didn't come and say, this New York Havurah is the Breira Havurah. There wasn't a political process in the *havurah*, if that's perhaps what Bill was saying. We didn't sort of vote on whether we should form a Middle East oriented peace or progressive Zionist organization. In talking about that first split, you could see there were people (02:45:00:00) who wanted to work inside the Jewish community as their primary emphasis, and there were other people who wanted to work from within the Jewish community on broader issues. So that split was there, and there was no point in resolving that split, so people specialized in what they most cared about. The Ezrat Nashim contingent did that, and other than forming a men's group out of jealousy, it was this consciousness raising group and a deep experience that our *haverot* were having, and we were just admiring them or being jealous of them. So we formed a Jewish men's group. We just had a reunion for that a year ago, some of us. It was a very good and powerful and serious Jewish men's group — mostly consciousness-raising. What does it mean to be a Jewish male? What expectations are on Jewish men versus other men? There was one of us who identified at that point as bisexual. We didn't know that and it was a safe enough space to talk about that. We had one rule which is we couldn't tell our wives or partners what we talked about, not even the subject. That was the one rule. We wanted that much security.

JG: And confidentiality.

GS: Confidentiality. It was a powerful experience, and we're still tied by that experience. We learned that from Ezrat Nashim. We didn't discover we were Jewish men until there was a Jewish women's group. Then we realized we have a unique experience. At some point, there were attempts to form a "Jewish Men's Movement." There was an interesting

book by a man named Harry Brod from Kenyon College on Jewish male experiences. It was definitely a subject, but we didn't organize. Almost everything we cared about, we then began to organize. We cared about Jewish education, so we created a *havurah* school, and then tried to describe how the *havurah* school is different from every other school that you could go to.

JG: Okay, so I think I want to move now to the concluding section, where we'll focus on the impact of the *havurah* on you personally, and also more broadly on the Jewish community. So, you've continued to be a member of the New York Havurah, which has changed over time since its inception. Is that correct?

GS: Right. That's right.

JG: And you also became a member of Fabrangen.

GS: Of Fabrangen — that's right. As soon as I got here. I always admired Fabrangen from a distance. (02:48:00:00) There are certain unique characteristics of it. It is completely egalitarian in terms of ideology — Max and Esther Ticktin made that a core — and egalitarian in terms of access to leadership and sharing of knowledge. There's an enormous valuing of whatever people's experience. Sometimes that can be a little bit boring or oversharing, and dare we say, just not so much as we've gotten older, but it's a very full community. It's almost a shul in a way that the New York Havurah never was, but I guess Havurat Shalom I don't know as well — the sort of egalitarian ethos. There are several rabbis who were members, but nobody was ever the rabbi of Fabrangen by design.

JG: Right. So, how else would you compare your experiences in the two communities? You've continued to be a part of both.

GS: Well, the New York Havurah was really an elitist group, and especially in the beginning, very well educated and very integrated into the Jewish community. In some ways, it was maybe insular in that way. Fabrangen is whoever walks in the door, and there's a lot to be said for that. There's a lot to be said for learning from everybody's experience who comes and wants to share their experience. So Fabrangen at its best is completely unpredictable and joyful in its creativity, even though it also was never a liturgically innovative community. Its strength was its egalitarian — the openness of the Torah discussion, which is still the center as much as the *davening* is. It was very, very productive. It was productive for Jewish feminist thinking. It influenced Arthur greatly, of course, and many other people. I love it — the form of a *havurah*. I'd rather pray with people I know and can get to know than with people I don't know. Some people prefer

just *davening* in a meditative kind of way, and it's almost better if they're don't know so much about the people around them. They're just in a space. They're in an ocean. It's spiritually strong for them. It's not particularly my taste, although (02:51:00:00) I understand it completely.

JG: What do you think are the most significant ways that these *havurot* have evolved or changed over time?

GS: Well, I would say the *havurah*/Jewish Renewal — because some of the people moved through that passage, and some were already connected to Reb Zalman from the beginning, like Richie Siegel — there was a background of Jewish Renewal within the *havurah*, more in Havurat Shalom, of course. That's had a tremendous impact on the Jewish community in many ways. I never thought there was a “Havurah Movement.” There were *havurot*, and we had a lot in common, and it was wonderful to get together, so inter-*havurah* sharing I was very big on. But there weren't any axioms or postulates about the *havurah* that made it into a movement, other than "small is beautiful," and "informality is a positive value." It was almost a style rather than an ideology, and I totally love the style and feel most comfortable in *havurah* style. But Renewal has more characteristics as a movement and has influenced particularly liturgy in a different, much more powerful way than the *havurah* as a *havurah* did. Where we have been influential is where I think we overlapped with the Jewish Renewal Movement. I was on the board of Aleph when that question was argued. Are we a movement? Reb Zalman didn't want to be a movement —

JG: Jewish Renewal, we're talking.

GS: Yeah. I was never on the board of the National Havurah Committee.

JG: Were you involved?

GS: I was involved. The first conferences at Rutgers I was the *mashgiach*. I had to learn how to be a *mashgiach* to be the *mashgiach*, because we had to *kasher* kitchens at Rutgers.

JG: Did you go to some of the events at the conference?

GS: I went to them, yes. I loved them — a lot of fun, great learning. It was a communal experience with a lot of friends. I once taught a class (2:53:31:01) Zalman, Balfour Brickner, and one other very intimidating person were sitting there as my students. That was quite an experience, to have Reb Zalman there thinking I could teach him something.

So I participated in them because they were adult learning — Lehrhaus House. They were wonderful, great experiences, particularly for kids at the beginning. They did a tremendous job of childcare at those (02:54:00:00) conferences. So I attended them, but they weren't compelling to me that I should come every year and be part of this as opposed to any other Jewish priority that I had. I mean, this is autobiographical, but I'm sort of a movement person and still never gave up trying to influence the community. Arthur asked me to be on the board of the Shalom Center, and then the Shalom Center merged with Aleph, or merged with B'nei Or to become Aleph. I was for a while on that board. Our issues in the beginning were, are we a movement? Should we be a movement? Reb Zalman thought not. He thought a movement is sort of the death of what we're doing. We should be a ginger group. We should be influencing all the movements rather than our own separate movement. But institutions need form to survive, and a form became a movement.

JG: Right. So, over the course of your career, you've been a Hillel rabbi, and you've been a congregational rabbi. In recent years, you've been the Executive Director of a pluralistic and interfaith organization, Clergy Beyond Borders, and now the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington. How have your experience of the *havurah*, and the lessons you've taken from that, have had an impact on your vision for your own rabbinate and for this work you've been doing more recently — interfaith and cross cultural?

GS: Well, I think the notion that you could create your own community, and you didn't have to be bound by what was there before, with a bunch of people who are your peers, was a great lesson for me. I was influenced strongly by my peers there. I'm just amazed. I was amazed and I'm still amazed by the energy and creativity of John Ruskay and Peter Geffen and Alan Mintz. I had real role models who are my age, who said, the Jewish community is missing this, and we can work to make it different. We have the capacity to do that. I had peer mentors in the *havurah* movement who are still important to me. Again, because of my lack of background, the *havurah* gave me the idea that you really can have an engaged community that's across the board. You can have those pillars. (02:57:00:09) It was holistic. The holistic vision of the *havurah*, I still believe in. It confirmed for me that you can have a movement and you can make a difference in people's lives that way. But it was hard to keep it together, and perhaps Novak in his comment was talking about that. We didn't brand ourselves in a political way as a *havurah* or as a movement. But, you know, there were many other side benefits.

JG: *[laughs]* Yes. So, looking back at this holistic vision for the *havurah* community, social activism and justice, prayer and learning, what do you see as the *havurah*'s greatest strengths?

GS: The New York Havurah? Or the *havurah* movement?

JG: Both.

GS: Hmm. Cindy, my wife, of course is late to this. We've only been married for thirty-one years. She met everybody already when the other folks had kids. We didn't. This was a remarkable group of people, is a remarkable group of people, although unfortunately we've lost a couple. So despite my concern about elitism, there was something to be said for people who were very bright, very focused, and demanding in some ways of each other in our study. It was an enormous influence, a great learning experience. I think it was for everybody who was involved, and there were deep friendships along the way — which, of course, made the learning even more powerful, and the experience a much greater joy. Now, as I said, the New York Havurah was a place that birthed a lot of new pathways for the American Jewish community, a surprising amount for a small group of people. So it had an impact. In all three *havurot*, because a lot of people in both of them became Jewish scholars and writers in their own right. There was an influence on the ideas of American Jews and the spiritual practices of American Jews, particularly non-Orthodox Jews. There are certain things where we infiltrated at least the habit of thought. There's a long article about the use of the phrase *tikkun olam*. *Tikkun olam* as a concept is a *havurah* concept, the way it's used nowadays. Of course, it's an (3:00:00:07) ancient text. It's in the Gemara, used in a totally different way most of the time, except for the one instance where Hillel ordains the prosbul so that poor people can borrow money in the year before the Sabbatical Year. So there is a use of the term *tikkun olam* in the Talmud that fits what we're talking about, but we popularized it. There's a word study by a man named Jonathan Krasner that was published about the concept of *tikkun olam*. You see it in English, as an English word. When did it emerge? It emerged in the late seventies, early 1980s, and now it's a habit of thought for Jews and non-Jews, who say, Oh, we admire you because you have the concept of *tikkun olam*. I've heard this from dozens of clergy people — repair the world. What a beautiful word, the “traditional” Jewish value of *tikkun olam*. The word, as it's used now, for human beings to be active in the repair of the world is a *havurah* development and popularization. This was semi-conscious on my part, because I went to Borowitz and said, “I want to study this concept which I've heard about at the *havurah*. I want to see how it's used. And he says, the way you're talking about it, I don't think it's ever used. We had the advantage then. Bar Ilan had put the response literature on computers, so you could check whether it was ever used like that. *Tikkun olam* — never used in the way we use it in modern times. He said, “What you're talking about is *mipnei darchei shalom*, for the sake of the paths of peace we do certain things.” I was one of the major popularizers of the phrase *tikkun olam*, and every time I hear an Orthodox rabbi talk about it, or hear a president, like Barack Obama, talk about it, I smile because I know that this was a discussion we had in the New York

Havurah in the early seventies, where we used the phrase and then began to apply it to organizations.

JG: Do you recall how it even came to the surface as a phrase to be considered?

GS: Well, there's one scholarly article on that. It was used in Atid, the Conservative youth movement at the time, and therefore people raised in it might have used it like that. Shlomo Bardin, the educator, might have used it the way we use it now at the Brandeis Camp, but we just talked about it all the time, from the mid-seventies on. It was on the stationery — New Jewish Agenda was the first organization that used it on the stationery. Each time we changed the stationery, we changed the definition. You had to explain what it was. We are the Jews (3:03:00:11) devoted to the pursuit of *tikkun olam*, parentheses, "the better ordering of human society in the natural world." Whatever we thought. "Ordering human relationships." I was writing those things, and I was aware precisely of how it was used in the Talmud, which was frequently with respect to divorce law — how women could be abused by Jewish law by being divorced without their will, without them even knowing about it. So, *mipnei tikkun olam*, (3:03:25:00) we have to alter Jewish law for greater social harmony and to not disadvantage women. But it was such a technical use, and we were trying very hard to connect it with its Talmudic usage, and a little bit with the way it was used by Kabbalists in the Sixteenth Century.

JG: So, now we're 2017. 2018 will be the fiftieth anniversary of the first *havurah*. As the challenges of the twenty-first century come into clearer view for the American Jewish community, do you see a role for *havurot* and the major lessons of *havurot* as being useful as we move forward?

GS: I still believe in the holistic model, and I do believe that there's something to "small is beautiful" and the intimacy, but that doesn't have to be a free-standing *havurah*. I think that the shuls that have utilized some of that in the ways they organize with people, who are meeting and having a deep Jewish experience with other people in their homes in an ongoing way, I think it's still necessary and I think it's still valid, and I think it's a good model for children. Hebrew schools are much better, and so are rabbinical schools. Everything we do, we do better, but I think the style and the insights of the "small is beautiful," the intimate, holistic community, are still valuable.

JG: Do you see a relationship between the independent minyanim of recent years, and *havurot*?

GS: Yes, very much so. There's a wonderful one here in Washington called Tikkun Leil, which means Tikkun Leil Shabbat. So, they've combined. They don't meet every week.

They're not a *havurah*. They're a *davening* group. But they have a speaker from either within the community or the general community on what they think of as a *tikkun olam* subject. So, it's part of their *davening*, with just the Friday night community. They've picked up an element of it. The minyanim (3:06:00:00) picked up the creative services and the intensity of being able to pray in a small group, like a *shteibel*. We didn't invent the "small is beautiful" either. Very little was innovative, but we did what Jewish communities at their best do. For centuries we've done this, which is to pick up the best elements of the counterculture, in our case the counterculture of the sixties, the "small is beautiful," the egalitarian ethos. They're picking up what's best about the cultural things that can enhance Jewish life. They're doing the same thing, but the era is different.

JG: For most of your career and your life, you were focused on the internal Jewish community. Now, in recent years, and in your most recent professional work, you have chosen to move into a realm that's interfaith, and, as one of your organizations is called, crossing borders and crossing boundaries. I'm wondering what took you in that direction. What drew you in that direction, and how your life experiences, especially as they relate to the *havurah*, brought you there and inform what you do today?

GS: Hmm. I thought you might ask about something like that, because we weren't particularly engaged in interfaith work. We, it wasn't just me, a lot of people in the *havurah* had met Dr. King and had worked in the South with him — or, if not him, with Andy Young, with other people in the Civil Rights Movement. I came from the South. They came from the North. We felt a real involvement with issues of Civil Rights, particularly because of the age we grew up in. But we didn't do interfaith particularly. I can't think of any joint work that we did with congregations, or Union Theological Seminary, which was right across the street from JTS. I can't think of any of the rest of my friends who are doing what I'm doing now. It's possible that it relates more to my biography and having grown up in the South. My immediate (03:09:00:00) community was heavily Jewish, but we were very distinctly a minority. So in some ways I think it's accidental. On the other hand, when I studied pastoral counseling after rabbinical school, I had to write an essay for the class. It was essentially write your own obituary. I actually wrote what ended up happening. The last ten years, I worked in an interfaith setting, and the stuff that I did within the interfaith community, I did within the Jewish community. So in that sense, it's part of my plan, or God's plan. I also strongly identified as a Prophetic Jew in the Reform community, that we should be *Or L'Goyim*, or *Or Goyim*, as it actually says. I discovered that in my work that there is tremendous interest, particularly from Christians and Muslims, in an actual Jewish people being involved in interfaith. There is tremendous philo-Semitism, and we do have something to teach in the way that we address texts, in the way that we do midrash, which is fascinating. I heard an African-American preacher on the Martin Luther King interfaith service use as his text

the midrash of the angels disputing with God about whether the world should have been created or not. "There's this midrash," he says. And he talks about this text about whether or not the world should have been created. I think that's one of the things we're supposed to do as Jews, so I feel like I'm doing what God wants me to do in this work. I was just lucky that there was a job in which I could do it. I don't know how much of it I would have done if this job weren't available, but we work side by side with our fellow religionists of different flavors in everything else that we do, so why shouldn't we work on these kinds of questions, too?

JG: Well, thank you. I want to thank you very much, Gerry. It's been wonderful to talk to you, and we really appreciate all of your insights and your introducing us today, really, to the New York Havurah.

GS: Well, you'll hear the back story, I think. I mean, you'll talk to Peter and Alan. They could really tell you what happened in that first year. Burton Weiss became an active member of the *havurah*. He then eventually came out. At first he declared himself bisexual within the community. (03:12:00:00) In fact, Peter Geffen, who was fooling around with a camera, did a film with Burton talking about homosexuality in the Jewish community in a very positive way in 1973, '74 or so. I brought that film to the rabbinical school, and one of my poor professors, who I'm sure was a closeted gay man, showed up at this thing. He was very conservative, conservative politically, conservative in all kinds of ways. I think the film was very helpful to him. There were little pieces of it that also came out, but Peter and John can talk about whether this whole thing with Burton Weiss — Burton eventually became an active, gay, Jewish activist. So we had a piece of that. We did, in our own way, also pioneer in a gay liberation within the Jewish community. We created a film. Peter created a film. We showed it at the rabbinical school long before the issue surfaced in rabbinical schools. It was part of the Jewish women's movement to sort of expand issues of gender and to think about who we excluded. We thought of it as issues of exclusion in those days. New York Havurah, I'm not trying to promote it particularly, but we were also early on that issue.

JG: As in so many, so thank you and we look forward to continuing to fill in those gaps.