

Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project

JOEL ROSENBERG

Interviewed by Jayne K. Guberman

August 3, 2016

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

Joel Rosenberg, 08/03/16

Jayne Guberman (JG): My name is Jayne Guberman. Today is Wednesday, August 3, 2016, and I'm here with Joel Rosenberg at his home in Watertown, Massachusetts. And we're going to record an interview for the Jewish Counterculture Oral History project. Joel, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Joel Rosenberg (JR): You do indeed.

JG: So as you know, today we're going to explore your experiences during the late sixties and early seventies with Havurat Shalom. I want to start by talking about your personal and family background to flesh out a bit who you were at the time you first heard about this experimental community that was being started in Boston. So let's begin with your family, when you were growing up. You were born in 1943 in California.

JR: Yes.

JG: Can you tell me a little bit about your family when you were growing up.?

JR: Well, most of my memories of my family — they used to be fairly vivid, but not so much these days. And I only knew my father for five years (00:01:00) and was only conscious from age three onward really, but I remember him being very affectionate and very kind to me.

JG: What did he do?

JR: He was a physician by trade. He also, as a hobby, made violins. He would often work well into the night on that and he was a very accomplished man in many ways. He read extensively, he was an investor in real estate for a lot of his career, and he was involved, I guess you could say, in organized Jewish life to a certain extent. My parents were not Orthodox Jewish. They had both had come from somewhat Orthodox backgrounds, as far as I understand it. I actually had a grandma who once served me a kosher meal when I was about eight years old, (00:02:00) which included chicken soup, and when I was asked for a glass of water — I'm sorry, a glass of milk — I was told I couldn't have it. So that was my introduction to Kashrut, basically.

JG: What about your mother?

JR: My mother — both my parents lived, in their early years, in Boyle Heights, California, which is a suburb of East Los Angeles. Both their mothers were friends. They were Hungarian immigrants who had come from Central Europe, from I guess what was

the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the time. They first settled on the East Coast. My mother was born in Brooklyn, and my father was born in Harrison, New Jersey, all in that New York-New Jersey northern area. They must have left — there was a period when my grandma could not support her kids, and they had to be put in a foster home (00:03:00) for a period of time, which I don't think my mother liked. My grandfather was — her father was a very irascible man who was sometimes physically violent. I see it now, kind of thinking back on it, in the traumas that I knew. Both my mother and her sisters had a certain degree of trauma from their childhood, and it's kind of taken me a long time to figure that out, but it's one of those things you get to know sort of retroactively [see addendum].

JG: Did you have siblings?

JR: I have two older sisters; they're both still alive, thank God. I have a sister who will be turning eighty-five in September, and another who will be turning seventy-nine in October, and they're both very dear to me, and I try to talk to them on the phone every so often. We often don't get the perfect time to do it, but in any case, my middle sister is probably (00:04:00) — I've called her my closest friends among my blood relatives. My older sister I'm increasingly appreciating, and remembering aspects of her in my childhood, and we talk on the phone every so often, and I like her a lot. She is different in lifestyle, in politics, in a lot of ways that I don't quite warm up to, but she's made a very coherent life for herself. And I'm pleased with that.

JG: Where did you live when you were growing up?

JR: Well I grew up in Westwood, California, which is just west of the UCLA campus. The UCLA campus was pretty new at the time. I know from family home movies — I have sort of a spliced together edition of movies from 1931 to roughly 1948 or '49, and so I have a lot of nice views of the backyard from there. (00:05:00) It was kind of — I call it a bucolic paradise because at that time the hills were these empty fields and very lovely groves of eucalyptus trees and other kinds of trees, so I look back on that with great fondness. And I remember — we had two backyards basically. There was one just outside the rear of the house, and then you would go through a brick fence, a brick wall via a fence, and there would be another somewhat larger backyard.

JG: What kind of a community was Westwood during this time?

JR: Well, I would call it probably mostly WASP. I would say there was a sort of ethnically mixed neighborhood. My rear-fence neighbors were the family of a film producer named David Weissbart. And his daughter Vicky was a friend of mine, and an

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older daughter of his, Bettyann (00:06:00) was someone I also knew. And in fact, Bettyann I knew into my adult life because she coincidentally was friends of other friends of mine. Anyhow, that's how I knew them. And they were Jewish.

JG: And socio-economically?

JR: Socio-economically, it was pretty upper-middle-class. My father earned a good living. He very likely got rental money from the properties he bought. But at the same time, I mention on my interview questionnaire that we were in for some financial instability after my father died. Because my mother had not really a means of making a living for herself, and she was often strapped for cash, so properties got sold off and art and antiques and various other things that my father had.

JG: How would you describe the Jewish environment in your home when you grew up? (00:07:00)

JR: My parents considered themselves Reform Jews. They were not keepers of Kashrut, my father definitely not. We even had Christmas trees, which was, I guess, part of the assimilated Jewish culture at the time. I know we had relatives who also had Christmas celebrations, more as an American holiday and as kind of a general custom of the time. It was certainly not out of worship of Jesus or things of that sort. But in any case, my parents considered themselves Reform Jews. They were members of the Wilshire Boulevard Temple, which was located near La Brea Ave in Los Angeles. And they were also founders of a temple in Brentwood, which is in West Los Angeles, called the University Synagogue. And the rabbi there was a man named Julian Feinberg (00:08:00) and I always had very positive — he scared me a little bit — I always had positive feelings towards him.

JG: So this was another Reform synagogue?

JR: Another Reform synagogue. Yeah, and actually I've gone in there in recent years, and my father's name is still on a memorial plaque, so it hasn't changed too much since then.

JG: What kind of Jewish education did you have when you were a child?

JR: Well, from about six years old on, I think I remember going to Sunday school. University Synagogue had a Sunday school. My memories from there are fragmentary. I don't have a lot of — I can't remember exactly what we were taught. But we were — at some point there was a session — there was more than one session in the day, and the

latter session was a Hebrew language class that I took, so I learned a little rudimentary Hebrew as a kid. I can't remember if it was biblical Hebrew or modern Hebrew or some amalgam, but in any case, I was exposed to the (00:09:00) language, and enjoyed it. Later on, from age eleven on basically, I was studying for bar mitzvah, and that involved afternoon Hebrew school and working with the cantor at the synagogue, Samuel Brody, who later himself became a rabbi. You can Google him actually. He's located now in the San Francisco Bay area.

JG: Tell me about your bar mitzvah.

JR: [*laughs*]

JG: I gather it was an interesting experience.

JR: Well, I've often considered it a failure in certain ways. First of all, I didn't actually learn Torah cantillation tropes, and so essentially I just read in a monotone voice some of the Hebrew of the text, of the biblical text. And then at some point I gave a *drash* (00:10:00) — I can't remember. It was kind of pedantic. I remember I told the cantor at one point that I was interested in Jewish literature, and so he connected me with a couple of sources. I think I remember Judah Halevi saying, "My heart is in the east though in the west I live," and that was one line, I guess, that stayed with me. But I didn't do it very expertly. It was kind of pedantic, and I don't know — it was just not something that I would approve of today if I were editing it.

JG: Was it significantly different from what other people were doing?

JR: Well, I probably hadn't attended enough bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies to get a sense of what to compare it to. But I did have a few friends whose bar mitzvah events I went to. But yeah, I don't know. My main concern from that day was the fact that (00:11:00) I unintentionally slighted my father and my father's relatives. My father had been dead for years, and it would have been very appropriate in the end part at least of my speech to mention the memory of my father. And my father's siblings and their wives who attended the event were very kind of miffed by that and reproved me about it for a good part of that day. And again, in retrospect it's a real source of regret to me that I never thought to mention him. There's a little bit of — I've thought about it recently, a little bit of the fact that I might have been angry at my father for dying when I was such a young age. And somehow, consciously or unconsciously, that crept into the way I handled the bar mitzvah, my role in the bar mitzvah. (00:12:00)

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JG: So how would you characterize your sense of yourself Jewishly in the years following your bar mitzvah?

JR: Well, after bar mitzvah, I didn't pursue Jewish education, I didn't take a Jewish studies course in college. I was an English major. I wanted to learn everything about especially the Western world at that time, which was the sort of main curriculum for English majors. So I was reading — and plus I took a course in Latin literature, which I loved, among my undergraduate courses.

JG: Where did you do your undergraduate?

JR: Oh, I went for a year to UCLA, and then I spent my latter three years of college at Berkeley, UC Berkeley.

JG: Why did you transfer?

JR: Basically I wanted to get out of Los Angeles. The option there would have been living with my mother or having a roommate and a part-time job. And I don't know, somehow a combination of factors led me to — plus I befriended someone at (00:13:00) UCLA who herself had spent time at Berkeley and was very positive about it, and she suggested that transferring might be a good thing for me. So I decided finally to transfer.

JG: So when did you find yourself at all interested again in Judaism and Jewish life? And what sparked that interest?

JR: Well, it started, I guess, in 1963 when I met my first wife. Her name is Louise Blaustein. And she came from a sort of unfrocked wealthy family. Her family, her immediate family, her mother and father had very little money, and that was because her father — now I'm forgetting his name, but his last name was Blaustein, and he was from this family in Baltimore that had come over and made — I think they were one of the founders of the American Oil Company, and they were basically oil millionaires (00:14:00) or billionaires. I don't know what their fortune amounted to. But they disinherited his son because he chose as his wife a very proletarian child of Russian Jews, a confirmed socialist. She was considered too radical, and maybe the Russian Jews were considered riffraff. And so it didn't work out well for them. And then Louise's father died at a very young age himself — he had a congenital heart ailment and Louise was about five herself when he died, and that gave us a little bit of a bond. We could share that. Louise — may I take a drink?

So I was explaining about Louise. Not long before I met her, she had spent a year on a kibbutz in Israel and had learned to speak Hebrew. (00:15:00) She occasionally gave me a few Hebrew sentences. She actually tutored me in spoken Hebrew. She was part of an Israeli exhibition dance group that used to perform at Hillels and various other Jewish institutions, and sometimes for the general public.

JG: You met each other when you were an undergraduate?

JR: I was an undergraduate. I was in my junior year at the time. I had just come back from a drive from Los Angeles to Mexico City and back. I eventually got my stuff together and came up to Berkeley. And she was going out at the time with a friend of mine, but was very kind to me, and very generous, and we wound up — he wound up breaking up with her, as it turned out, and she and I kind of drifted together after that. In any case, there are ways in which we (00:16:00) — it was eventually discovered, very incompatible. But she got me very interested in Judaism. And she had an aunt and uncle in Los Angeles, Uncle Norbert and Aunt Gertrude, and their two daughters, and they also had a son. And we used to go to their house for Passover quite often. And we would use the Reconstructionist Passover Haggadah. I always liked the part in the haggadah where the “Four Questions” were asked, and the leader of the seder says, “I’m glad you ask the questions you ask.” Anyway, they’ve done a more recent version of the haggadah, but that was something I was possibly going to work on as a translator myself, but we didn’t get around to it.

JG: During that time, through them, you also met Harold Schulweis right?

JR: That’s right. Well, Schulweis at the time was a rabbi in Oakland, which was where we lived. So on Friday nights, after a certain point, we would go to services there. I have to say that my active involvement (00:17:00) with Judaism came — I guess it was about a year or two into my marriage. The draft was heating up, and I was losing my married-person’s exemption. For a while, under president Kennedy, married men were not subject to the draft, but they rescinded that — by then Johnson was president. The war in Southeast Asia was heating up. I decided I wanted to be a conscientious objector.

JG: And you graduated in ’65?

JR: I graduated — yes, I went through a good part of my life as a mid-year graduate. In junior high school, I was in junior high on a Friday and high school on a Monday. It sometimes was a very difficult adjustment. And I graduated in January of ’65. The larger class that year would have been June of ’65. But in any case, I decided I wanted to be a conscientious objector, (00:18:00) realizing of course that Israel had partly a military,

essentially army-related life, and so Israelis were not thought of as pacifists, and probably the great majority of Jews would not think of themselves as pacifists. But there was a young man at — actually there was a draft counseling center I went to at one point, and he himself had become a fairly religious Protestant Christian. And we became friends, and he, in a series of conversations, convinced me that I had a valid and coherent case to be a conscientious objector, basing it on the teachings of Judaism — based on the reverence for peace which often comes up in rabbinic literature and also certain modern writers, Abraham Joshua Heschel for one, was someone I was very involved (00:19:00) in reading at that point. Martin Buber, at that point. Buber had been part of the Brit Shalom Movement in Israel in the 1930s that sought some kind of accommodation with Palestinians and something like a bi-national state — not a two-state solution, but a bi-national state — but it never worked out for various reasons.

JG: So how did conceptualizing your opposition to the war, in those terms, specifically as a Jew, affect you and your relationship to the Jewish community?

JR: Well, at that point I started doing a lot of teaching about Jewish teachings on peace. I was a speaker at synagogues. I befriended a rabbi at one of the synagogues. And at some point — I'd long had a curiosity about the rabbinate. By that point I had a fair amount of curiosity about the rabbinate, and I asked him what's involved in studying for the rabbinate. (00:20:00) And I decided I was curious enough that he set up an interview for me with the admissions rep of Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles.

JG: What appealed to you about the rabbinate at that point?

JR: Well, it would give me an opportunity to get deeper into my own tradition in a way I wanted to do. And somehow, each time I read a book by a Jewish thinker, it got me deeper into Judaism in ways that were very helpful, and it was also, of course, a draft exemption. Actually, in those days, I have a number of friends who sought exemptions by going into rabbinical school. But for me, I think my involvement with rabbinical school was fairly sincere. It was completely sincere, especially by the time I got there. I moved to Los Angeles in 1966. Louise and I were breaking up as (00:21:00) a married couple, and I plunged myself kind of wholeheartedly into learning Hebrew that summer. And then in the fall, I started with their regular run of courses, which were quite wonderful. I was learning how to read the Bible in Hebrew, how to read rabbinical Hebrew in the form of the Mishnah, eventually how to read Talmud, which made me somewhat conversant with both the Hebrew and Aramaic — rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic. And I have long since become what I would call an Aramaic junkie. I love reading the Talmud. Since 1983 I basically have been going through pages of Talmud, basically every weekend, but

often during the week as well. And I've been through now, about thirteen treatises of Gemara, studied in the original (00:22:00) and with an English translation side by side.

JG: You said in your Pre-Interview Questionnaire that you sort of fell in love with the Talmud page. What was —?

JR: Well, the Talmud page, you know, has this square of type in the center and then commentaries grouped around it in a different — what was called Rashi script. And I don't know, there was something about that, and plus even further marginal notations, cross-referencing things to other parts of the Talmud and to the Bible, and to Maimonides, etc. There was this complex interweave of traditions, you could say plural, on a Talmud page. And it represented, in a sense, the structure of Jewish tradition, the structure of Jewish thought, where we see ourselves as an ever-commenting population looking at that same material. I think of it also (00:23:00) in relation to the Passover seder, because there we sit at the table and we discourse on the meanings of the foods we're eating, and somehow all of us, in one way or another, first of all read the Haggadah which includes rabbinic commentary on parts of the Exodus story and so forth — and in any case, we become, in effect, a Talmud page at a Passover seder. And I think the same thing is true for any group of people who sit together and study. We basically — one of my favorite times of the year is Tikkun Leil Shavuot, because it allows us — I usually do it with the present members of Havurat Shalom, and we sit around a table and again we become commentators, and we become commentators on each other's commentaries as well.

JG: Were you actually enrolled in the rabbinical program at that point? (00:24:00)

JR: Yes. Well, at HUC I did two years full time in the rabbinic program. I earned what was called a Bachelor of Hebrew Literature degree. Had the Los Angeles school had a full five-year program, I would have completed my studies to be a rabbi, but they required at the time that students in the L.A. school had to move to Cincinnati and finish their studies there. I had no particular desire to live in Cincinnati. I visited there when one of my colleagues at HUC, one of my fellow students at HUC, was learning there, and he wasn't too happy with Cincinnati at the time, and I don't know, somehow I basically needed time to think about what I was going to do with my life.

JG: I also wanted to ask you about the sixties, the effect of the sixties on you, a time of obviously tremendous social ferment, particularly for young people. Did you continue to be involved in anti-war activism?

JR: (00:25:00) Oh yeah, oh yeah. I mean, I went to anti-war demonstrations. I continued to — well at a certain point I continued to write a Hebrew school or Sunday school curriculum based on teachings about peace. And I actually, when I joined the *havurah*, there were a lot of people there — some part of the history was the effort to found the *havurah* as a path to draft exemption as well. But the impetus to create a place of Jewish learning, and especially very intensive Jewish learning — I often have been of the opinion that that generation of the *havurah*, that very first generation of the *havurah*, was kind of a who's who of major scholars and activists and cultural people.

JG: We'll come to all this in just a minute, in great depth, but I wanted to (00:26:00) —

JR: But you're talking about the spirit of the sixties —

JG: The spirit of the sixties, the mid-sixties, and just how the anti-establishment message of the general counterculture resonated for you, and your involvement, if any, in the larger social movements of the sixties.

JR: Yeah. Well, it grew gradually, I think. When I became a member of the *havurah* I certainly wanted to be involved in the various things the *havurah* was involved with.

JG: But back in this period, before the *havurah*.

JR: Before the *havurah*, let's see, '60 —

JG: While you were in rabbinical school, essentially, at HUC.

JR: I myself was teaching in a Hebrew school, a Sunday school actually. And I worked at one point for the Bureau of Jewish Education.

JG: What I'm trying to ask you is to what extent did the general counterculture affect your thinking, what you were involved in.

JR: Well, somewhere in that era (00:27:00) I must have started calling myself a hippie. I even had a Buffalo Bill jacket with fringes. I actually wore a sailor's cap similar to this, and — I don't know, somehow I very much imbibed, you could say, the Age of Aquarius. I was sort of into the cult of free love, essentially the very open mentality of the people, let's say, that gathered at Woodstock in 1969. I was very much a fan of that, of the music. I loved the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, the musical culture — even though I also had old music allegiances, pre-World War II jazz, early post-war jazz. So (00:28:00) all of

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those were great influences for me, counting as well early European influences, through my English major and through my study of Jewish lore.

JG: In terms of Jewish identity, you described yourself at that time as sort of a floater, an amateur. What did you mean by that?

JR: Well I can't say — one of the things that was involved in applying to the *havurah*, was writing some sort of — well, actually, I had to write, when I became a student at HUC, I had to write kind of a spiritual autobiography. And I remember writing one for that application. I've never seen it since then, but I had to think out what my influences were in Judaism and so forth. In the *havurah* there was kind of loose talk of some kind of spiritual (00:29:00) autobiography being part of the entrance to the *havurah*.

JG: Let's get to that. So tell me how you first came into contact with Art Green.

JR: I can tell you the day. It was January 1, 1969. Art and Kathy came to visit the home of the assistant rabbi at Leo Baeck Temple, where I was also employed — Dick Levy, a lovely man who has had a long and very fruitful career. And anyway, he at that point was working as the assistant rabbi, or junior rabbi, at Leo Baeck Temple. And I lived not far from there, and he invited me over to his apartment to meet Art and Kathy. And there were about seven or eight other people there who were interested. I had read in an issue of the Reconstructionist magazine not long before that, I had read about the founding of the Reconstructionist (00:30:00) rabbinical seminary. But in a footnote to that article, it mentioned this experiment in the Boston area to create something like an alternative rabbinical seminary. And I got very interested in that. I must have mentioned it to Dick Levy, and so finally he invited me over to hear Art expound on this. I sat on the sofa next to Kathy, who is just an amazing person. I'm very fond of Kathy. I love her dearly. And she periodically, as Art spoke, would lean over and tell me some kind of witticism about the way it was, or — in any case, her human warmth really kind of helped me get through that. And I, of course, was very seduced by the prospectus for the *havurah*, which had a whole list of courses that I was very interested in. There were courses in Jewish mysticism, courses in Hasidism, in the *Song of Songs*, in Kabbalah. (00:31:00)

JG: This was a written document, the prospectus? Was it handed out?

JR: It was a bunch of stapled pages with information about the kinds of courses they were either already teaching or were contemplating teaching sometime soon.

JG: So what drew you to the vision Art was presenting for this community?

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JR: I guess coming to meet the community in March of that year. I went there, sometime in mid-March. There'd been a terrible snowstorm just before that. But in any case, I had written to the *havurah* saying I was interested in applying. At that point it was very competitive, because they could take in about twenty or thirty members, and there were 300 or so applications, as I remember. It was a very complicated thing.

JG: And where did all those applicants come from, to the best of your knowledge?

JR: All around the country. There were people —

JG: Because Art was out speaking about it?

JR: I think so. I think so. That part (00:32:00) you'd have to ask Art, but I'm sure he was doing a fair amount of proselytizing of it.

JG: So you wrote to them inquiring about the application process essentially?

JR: Yeah, I said, "Is there an application I can fill out?" I got a letter from Michael Brooks, who said there was no formal application form to fill out or anything like that. We believe it's best to come to visit the group, and we could get a chance to know each other.

JG: Was that true for all 200 or 300 applicants, or you think they were screening —?

JR: I'm not sure. I think they were screening already. Again, probably Art would know more about that. But yeah, they were screening people, and then there were people who came to visit the *havurah* who later were not invited to be members of the *havurah*. I myself, all through the weekend I was there, which was a lovely experience — but at the same time, I'd been very insecure and thought I was not hitting it off well. (00:33:00)

JG: I'd love it if you would — you actually wrote about this in a journal that you were keeping, in really rich depth. I'd love it if you would describe really what that process was like for you — coming from L.A. to Boston, you'd never been, never seen snow. It sounded like, from what you said there, it was —

JR: Yeah, I guess I'd seen snow once — it may have snowed once in Los Angeles at some point, very light snow — but that was my first experience of being surrounded by huge snow banks that had been plowed up along the road.

JG: So, walk us through that weekend, if you would.

JR: Okay, well, let me think. First of all, I arrived after an all-night flight. I, in general, take red eye flights and I was really exhausted. So I wasn't sure if I was all that mentally together that day, but I wandered down to (00:34:00) 598 Franklin Street, which was then the headquarters of the *havurah*. Art and Kathy lived in half the building, and three or four members lived in the other half of the building.

JG: This was a rented space?

JR: I believe so, yes, it was a rented space, and that also was the public part of the *havurah*. They had a big prayer room that was the place where services took place. And there was a *drasha* — I think maybe Buzzy Fishbane — Michael Fishbane — was one of the speakers that day, and of course he —

JG: Well, go back, because you arrived on a Friday —

JR: Okay, so Friday morning let me think. I got to the *havurah*, Art greeted me very warmly. I mentioned that I had had an all-night flight and was very exhausted. Was there a place I could lie down and take a nap? And so for a while I was napping, or resting. Finally, I went down to the kitchen. I helped peel potatoes for a cholent that Kathy was making (00:35:00) and got to talk to them more extensively.

JG: They're making this cholent for what?

JR: For Shabbat — the next morning actually, the next Shabbat meal, the noontime.

JG: Was it for the *Seudah Shlishit* the next day, or lunch?

JR: No, I think it was for lunch. In any case, I helped peel the potatoes. I learned a bit about *havurah* customs. I was introduced also to Stephen Zweibaum, I don't know if he's one of the people you're going to interview, but he was a member of the *havurah*. He had gone to college in Maine — very fascinating kid who was a child of Holocaust survivors. He spoke Yiddish with his parents. But he was very much a hippie and (00:36:00) had longish hair — and anyway, a very free spirit. And some time that morning, Zalman Schachter walked in as well.

JG: This was on Friday?

JR: On — let me think — it would have been that Friday. And he greeted me very warmly. We had some kind of connection. It might have been through — no, that came

later, because it was only later that I wrote an article on Hebrew calligraphy for the *Jewish Catalog*. But we made some connection over either calligraphy, because he was into it as well — he wrote ketubahs. I eventually became a writer of ketubahs. It was a scribal art that I devoted myself to for a while. I sold one or two, but I mostly made them out as presents for friends. In one case, I made one for a student of mine when I was teaching at Wesleyan University when he was getting married. (00:37:00) So, and the fun part was doing the illumination of the ketubah. Anyway, I've done about seven or eight of those. Some of the marriages are still intact, but I don't know. In any case, but that was one thing that connected me to the *havurah* community in a deeper way because it got me involved in writing for the *Jewish Catalog*. I wrote an article for the second volume about giving a *d'var torah*.

JG: I'm going to ask you about that.

JR: Okay. And, in any case, I was already into aspects of Jewish culture, but I had not made my mark in Jewish learning in any way. I had not published anything. In the early years of the *havurah*, I was encouraged to write for *Response Magazine*, which was founded by —

JG: I'm going to take you back to where we were. We're going to get to all of this stuff. I want to get to (00:38:00) — I would really love you to keep describing what happened —

JR: — that particular day.

JG: — that weekend, because what the admissions process was like is something I think people would be interested in. So what happened Friday night, for instance?

JR: Friday night, actually, was the warmest and loveliest part of my time that weekend. Michael Brooks and his now deceased wife, Ruth, were my hosts for Shabbat dinner, and also they put me up overnight there, both Friday and Saturday night [see addendum]. They were just wonderfully warm people, welcoming. Joe Reimer came over and, I think, John Ruskay may have come over that night. John was, I guess, also kind of applying to be a *havurah* member, but anyway, he eventually didn't become part of the Boston group, but I guess became part of the New York group. Let's see, who else. Well Joe Reimer (00:39:00) and his — no he wasn't involved with Gail at that time. They had not yet met. They were counselors at a summer camp that summer. But in any case, Michael and Ruth were lovely hosts, and I felt a strong rapport with Michael. In those days, he was into playing Gregorian chants on Friday evening, so we had a little bit coming from the phonograph of Gregorian chant. It also helped me to understand that being eclectic in

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one's religious influences was an okay thing. I have long since — well, that's for later maybe. Anyway.

JG: So the next day, how did Shabbat unfold for you?

JR: Well, Shabbat morning I went to the Franklin Street *havurah* and sat through the service. Buzzy Fishbane gave a terrific *d'var torah* (00:40:00) in which he called upon Near Eastern mythology and all the things which he is quite expert in and brought his perspective as a scholar. Art read a letter from Everett Gendler, who had at that point made a visit to Cuba, so he had written a letter, I think, that — it might have eventually gotten published in *Response*. I'm not sure. In any case, Art read an excerpt from that letter, and it was in general a very warm and also well-attended, a lot of the surrounding community came there for Shabbat. So it was a very full room that day, as it often was.

JG: What was your impression of the service itself? Was it something new to you or different from anything you'd experienced in the past?

JR: Well, yes. I mean definitely, because in the past I'd mostly been familiar with the Reform siddur. And they were using probably the Birnbaum siddur. It wasn't especially — (00:41:00) well, that's a story for a later time, but it was not explicitly a feminist text, but it was the traditional service. So there was *davening* there as this kind of freeform 'nananana —' that kind of thing I grew to really appreciate. I have almost a physical addiction to *davening* in the Orthodox manner these days. That's why when I honor my mother or my father's *yarzheit*, I go to a synagogue that engages in such *davening*, if possible. It's not always the case that it is possible. So introducing me to the full traditional prayer book was something that would grow increasingly on me as I went through the years. So I was very connected to the Birnbaum siddur for quite a long time.

JG: Can you just describe what was the (00:42:00) scene like?

JR: Well, it was people sitting on cushions. There often were jokes about — I remember Moshe Waldocks one summer got up, and he's a wonderful standup comedian, and he gave a joke about how the *havurah* has evolved because now they sit on very high stools. But in those days it was cushions on the floor — and still is actually, if you go to Havurat Shalom in Somerville. Are you visiting people in Somerville, at some point?

JG: Not contemporary members now. It's only focused on '68 to '73. Maybe we'll get there.

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JR: Okay, so I remember that day being part of a Shabbat lunch with the cholent and so forth.

JG: That Art and Kathy —

JR: Yes. Well, I think it was — maybe it was a communal lunch. I can't remember too much about that particular day. Anyway, yes, I did have lunch with Art and Kathy. Another person visiting that weekend was Gershon Hundert, who later became (00:43:00) a major Jewish historian of Polish Jewry. He was then studying for a doctorate at, I think, maybe Brandeis, but I'm not sure.

JG: You also mentioned in your journal that Martha Ackelsberg was there with her then husband —

JR: Oh right, Martha and David. That's right — David Mendelson. I actually became friends with his family and family circle later on because he and Martha broke up and — and eventually he married a friend of mine named Michelle — why am I blocking on names, Michelle Manning, I'm sorry. And Michelle was sort of connected to the *havurah*, not as a member, but as a person in the neighborhood. Anyway, she met David, and they hit it off and got married — eventually got divorced. He eventually passed away himself, sometime in the — (00:44:00) I guess late eighties or early nineties, probably early nineties. Anyway.

JG: And then later in the afternoon there was a *Seudah Shlichit* —

JR: Yes, well, actually, in between there, I took a Shabbos walk with Steven Zweibaum and Gershon Hundert and two other people — I can't remember who was along with us that day — and just walking through the streets of Cambridge and kind of enjoying that walk. But I was feeling very much, on the one hand, full of scrutiny, very full of stage fright there, and feeling like, oh my gosh, no one's talking to me, I'm going to be passed over as a boring person. Somehow there was just a lot of anxiety that I wasn't hitting it off with the group. But your anxieties can run away with you and they did that day. That night, Steven invited me to join him at a party (00:45:00) in Boston, and of course marijuana was very much the herb of the era, and so we smoked a joint and then went to the party and maybe smoked another. I just remember, first of all, it was very strong, and there was kind of a chair. I'm not sure if it was a hanging chair or a circular chair that Steven sat in across the room. And I remember just looking across at him and he had this Cheshire cat grin the whole time. It was actually quite a wonderful and funny experience, and I remember it being very funny. He was connected in some way with the hostess of the party, and I wound up getting into a conversation with a few of the people there. But

often under the weed I don't get so talkative, and so I often feel a little insecure about speaking (00:46:00) in that setting. But anyway, it gave me a little bit of a bond with Steven, and it grew and developed later on. He's visited Boston occasionally in recent years, and we get together occasionally. And at one point he did, well he did a movie interviewing Ruth Wisse, the sister of David Roskies, a TV movie — I'm sorry, a TV video that I think got bought up by public television. And anyway, there were various other people. David Roskies I got to know — well, I guess I wouldn't have gotten to know him that March, but in any case, that March visit —

JG: So how did the weekend end for you?

JR: The weekend ended — Art and I eventually sat down and talked, and —

JG: Late at night?

JR: Late at night. This is after Steven and I got back from that party. I've forgotten what time it is, but somewhere in that time (00:47:00) Art came and talked to me and said that they liked me very much, and there was a very good possibility I would be asked to join. So I was thrilled. I was very overwhelmed, and I was a little taken by surprise, because it reversed all of these anxieties that I had before. And anyhow, the anxieties were to continue even during my years at the *havurah*, which I'll detail more.

JG: But I recall also from your journal that you mentioned how uncomfortable in some ways the admissions process was for you, and you described it as a necessary evil, that you agreed in some way —

JR: Yeah, that's right. I may have had a conversation with Art about it. I may have also had a conversation with Michael Brooks about it. I can't remember. And now actually my memory is getting hazy here because I can't remember if I spent Saturday night at Michael's, which I think is not the case. (00:48:00) I think eventually, although I said differently, I think I stayed overnight at the *havurah* house itself, because I remember getting up very early in the morning because Buzzy was going off to teach somewhere and he was going to drive me to the airport. And anyway, that was the conclusion of my visit. It ended with some very friendly rapport with *havurah* people and it was continued.

JG: So how did you feel about the prospect of becoming a member, outside of your anxieties about being admitted?

JR: Well, I was delighted. I felt very proud in such a competitive situation to be chosen as a member.

JG: How did you find out you were chosen?

JR: Sometime — well, I'm not actually sure if Art told me I was admitted then, or if maybe I got a letter from Michael or somebody congratulating me or whatever. But I learned somehow within I week or so, I would say, and maybe even during the visit itself. (00:49:00)

JG: So how did you feel, and what did you understand yourself to be committing to?

JR: I was very much looking forward to it. At that point I was still taking a graduate course at HUC. I had a course that year — I think it might have run for two semesters — it was a course taught by Arnold Band, a professor of Hebrew at UCLA. It was a course on the writings of Agnon. We were reading him in Hebrew, learning about him from Band's Hebrew lecture on it. This is like me and two or three other people. So I was getting some Jewish learning done in that era. I informed the dean of the college, who was then Alfred Gottshalk, that I was going to be leaving HUC to join this group, and he tried to talk me out of it, and gave me this lecture where he basically said that I tend not to finish things. (00:50:00)

JG: Was he encouraging you to go to Cincinnati?

JR: That would have been the main option.

JG: What about the Reconstructionist rabbinical school? Did you give that any consideration?

JR: I don't think so, although I later had a very nice involvement with the Reconstructionist College. No, at the time, the *havurah* was my main attraction in terms of a Jewish community of learning that I wanted to be a part of. I guess my anxieties about being a member began when I arrived in June for an intensive eight or nine-day retreat that took place in Stoughton, Massachusetts. Everett Gendler was then I think house-sitting for Helen and Scott Nearing, they themselves being countercultural non-Jews but very much into the lore of vegetarian life.

JG: Back to the land.

JR: Back to the land — all that. I'm not positive they were the owners of the house, but in any case he was house-sitting there at the time, and that became our headquarters for this *havurah* retreat.

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JG: Was it a retreat for Havurat Shalom or a broader —?

JR: Just *havurah* members, new and old *havurah* members.

JG: So what happened at this retreat? What was it like for you?

JR: Well, again, it was compounded by the weed, and I remember there being lots of cavorting and frolicking. And Zalman actually was there. And somehow there were a lot of areas where I guess older members were in on certain jokes, and I somehow felt, you know, gosh, am I going to be able to integrate myself into this circle of old friends, because they were by that time very much old friends.

JG: We're talking about June —

JR: June of '69.

JG: So the *havurah* had actually started the previous (00:52:00) fall, fall of '68.

JR: That's right. That was their first year of existence.

JG: So you were —

JR: One year into *havurah* history. I mean I'm now sort of considered part of the older generation, but I felt very new about it, and again I was wondering, am I going to be able to hold my own with all these learned people around me, and are they going to see me for the shallow person that I am? And I don't know, there was a lot of that that went on in me. And a lot of it was insecurity about — I think gradually, in general, I never in general had insecurities about leaving home, and that was to compound for me, when I finally moved there in the fall, I basically — I won't get to describe in detail until you ask me more questions, but somehow I became just very filled with angst about (00:53:00) whether I had enough to contribute to the *havurah*. And that, you know, became a concern to me. Will I ever be able to give a *d'var torah*? Will I ever be able to lead services? And other ways in which all of that came to the fore for me. I suddenly sensed my lack of expertise.

JG: So how would you say you felt coming out of this retreat?

JR: Well, the retreat, as I said, had its times of anxiety. Another member, another new member of the *havurah*, George Savran, who used to have horrible migraine headaches,

came down with a migraine that week, and I remember we were bunking together or something — we were in the same room to sleep overnight — and he basically was going through this horrible experience and asked me to tell him a story. And I fumbled out some — I have no idea what the story was. (00:54:00) I felt like I was doing improv in a way that, again, I never was quite fully able to do it. I actually was in an acting class many years earlier that involved doing improv, I always found it very difficult. But there are ways of getting into it. Anyway, George and I formed a little bit of a bond at that point, and I connected with a few other *havurah* members. Again, I'm not fully sure. There was a lot of, I guess, deliberation as a group as well about very self-conscious things. You know, what models are we, what ways should we —?

JG: Was that going on during this retreat?

JR: I'm sure that some of the conversation — I don't remember the details very well, but I'm sure a lot of the conversation had to do with who are we as a group? What are our learning goals? What are our professional goals?" And so forth.

JG: So I want to actually start digging in to some of these different aspects of (00:55:00) *havurah* life, and of course, many people point to community as being at the very heart of the endeavor. How would you describe the *havurah's* ideal notion of community?

JR: There were several notions of community that circulated, at least during my first year in the *havurah*, and it was a lot more fluid in the first year, because first of all they had accepted — I guess counting the people they accepted, they had thirty-nine members, which was a large enough number to make the group unstable. And I think that was the popular wisdom of the time, and I think it's very true that that many people would oftentimes have very little ability to cohere as a group.

JG: You mean, when you say it was the wisdom of the group in general — not at that moment?

JR: Somehow through the course of the year we were confronting the effects of (00:56:00) our divisions as a community — the fact that different people had different ideas, and what a community should be.

JG: Can you articulate —? What were you trying to create as a community?

JR: Well, one idea was to be something of a commune. I think a number of people felt that we should create some situation where we were all living together, or living very close by, which, to some degree, was true already of the community, but true in a more

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intensive way, according to the people who wanted it to be that way. Jim Kugel, who came in that year, was very skeptical — well, basically, he wanted the community to commit to full-time activism in the inner city and living in the Boston inner city I guess was the option at that point. So he expressed that interest

JG: This was before the purchase (00:57:00) of the house in Somerville?

JR: No, this was after it because I first came there in 1969-70 —

JG: And the house existed?

JR: Yeah. The house was bought with Danforth Grant foundation — Danforth fellowship or something that allowed them the \$10,000 down on the property. And basically the house sustained itself through rentals and *havurah* dues and various things. So by then, they were in Somerville — we were in Somerville. I myself lived not far from there in Medford, down the road, maybe a five-minute drive, but I lived a distance away. And so anyway, there were these various ideas about the *havurah*, what it should be. And at some point a number of — it may have been personality differences, or some kind of friction developed in which a number of the members of the *havurah* that year essentially (00:58:00) moved out, or walked out, became — a number of them formed a household down the street on College Ave on the other side of Powder House Circle — eventually it earned the nickname “Dorton,” which meant “over there.” And so they were — we, the *havurah* folk, and they, the Dorton folk. And I wanted to maintain a connection with both groups, and I went over there and often tutored people in reading rabbinic Hebrew and Hebrew commentaries. I remember being the tutor of Jim Kugel, who eventually greatly surpassed me in learning, but he was just beginning as a Hebrew scholar — not even yet as a Hebrew scholar, but he was learning Hebrew. In any case, different people had ideas that they felt the *havurah* was not fulfilling, and I can’t remember the conversations about it, but I remember there were a number of people who either wanted a deeper, more intensive community (00:59:00) or wanted, maybe, some kind of professional education for the rabbinate.

JG: Do you remember something called the Havurat Shalom covenant?

JR: You’re going to have to enlighten me about that.

JG: I’m not sure how it was used exactly. I’m trying to find out. It was supposedly an articulation of the ideals of the community.

JR: Gosh, I don’t recall ever receiving that.

JG: Well, maybe not.

JR: Well, I may have and it may have somehow slipped out of my memory. I know there were talks about creating some kind of statement of who we are as a group. And I wrote some things in my journal that year that speculated a bit about that idea, about what our identity was, what our quest for models — models was a very important word at that point in our conversations. Anyway.

JG: Can you describe a little more who was in this community in terms of (01:00:00) the kinds of people that were involved in the *havurah*. You said there were thirty-nine members your first year.

JR: Most of the members were involved in some kind of either graduate study or — mostly graduate study, either for PhDs or — I don't think anyone was actually. Anyway, a lot of people were very involved in academics. And I had come to the *havurah* feeling like a floater, as you quoted me, feeling like I had no professional identity. I had yet not pursued much Jewish learning in intensity, even though I was able to read classical Jewish texts and — I don't know, somehow I had not yet started to produce writing about that material. Eventually, sometime that year I gave a *d'var torah* at the *havurah*, and people were very warm and welcoming. (01:01:00) I'd have to say the whole time the older members of the community were always very kind and hospitable to me and very encouraging for me to be involved in deeper ways.

JG: What kinds of backgrounds would you say — if you had to describe the community as a whole during that period.

JR: I'd say a fair majority of them had grown up in the Conservative movement. And of course, a number of the rabbis in the group, Art and Burt Jacobson, and Michael Swirsky, I believe, who was involved at some point, had been educated at the Jewish Theological Seminary, at JTS. So a lot of them had horrible memories of JTS. They had great memories of studying with Abraham Heschel, not so good memories of some of the other faculty, and they felt that a lot of the — first of all, because of pledges they had to sign about Kashrut and sexual ethics and so forth, they had to sign these various things. And a number of the teachers were very (01:02:00) anti — I guess it might have been Art who put it this way, they were “anti-body”, saw the body as kind of a temple of filth in certain ways, and that people had to be on extra guard to guard themselves against that. A lot of the teaching at JTS, based on the descriptions of it that I heard, were repressive in certain ways. They wanted it to be no part of either their own rabbinical practice or their role as teachers themselves.

JG: So you said that a number of people were involved in graduate studies elsewhere —

JR: Mostly at Brandeis and a few at Harvard.

JG: I wanted to ask you something. My understanding is, when you first, for instance, learned about how the *havurah* was conceptualized and structured, there were two tracks — there was a three year (01:03:00) leading to a title of *haver* and a four year leading to a rabbinic —

JR: No, it wasn't divided quite that way. Basically, I think I might have already learned about this in a conversation with Art that first weekend when I visited the *havurah*. I asked him about people. Somewhere I asked the question about graduate study, and I asked if there was a possibility I could be involved in graduate study. And he said there are a number of people who are members, including some new members, who were especially valuable members of the community, and we basically wanted them to work this out in tandem with their graduate studies. And other members we were asking to give full-time to the *havurah*. So it wasn't that they were forbidding me from going to graduate school. I could have done it maybe one or two years down the line, but somehow that early, that first year, (01:04:00) I felt a sense of rootlessness that wasn't helped by this sort of two-tiered system.

JG: So what was your early experience of the dynamic or relationship between those who were part-time and those who were full time?

JR: In terms of personal interaction, I don't think it mattered very much. I eventually became very good friends with David Roskies who, probably of all the people who taught things at the *havurah* that first year, he's the person I gravitated to the most warmly in terms of — basically I was his houseguest in Montreal, in '69 and '70. I was up there for like two and a half, three weeks.

JG: So this was during that first year?

JR: During the first year of the *havurah*. And so basically he and I were housemates for that period of time, and you know, I imbibed fully and with great enthusiasm (01:05:00) his passion for Yiddish and Yiddish language and literature and culture. And I'm still, although I never became a scholar of Yiddish, I've become a translator of Yiddish in certain circumstances. And I've recently written an article in which I use Yiddish texts.

JG: Where did your knowledge or familiarity with Yiddish come from?

JR: I'd first taken a course at Hebrew Union College taught by a man named Abraham Ziegelbaum. And Ziegelbaum, I think — I'm not positive; I've tried to google this and figure it out — I think he was the brother, a brother of Shmuel Ziegelblaim, as it was pronounced, a Polish Jew who became part of the government in exile and then very famously committed suicide in a public way to protest the lack of Allied concern for the Jews of Eastern Europe, and especially in Poland. And so Jews were being put in ghettos and in concentration camps (01:06:00) in that era, and nothing was being done about it by the Allies. Nothing was done to discourage it, and he was very concerned about that and eventually had to make this public statement. It might have also been a source of depression on his part.

JG: Did you have any knowledge of Yiddish or familiarity with Yiddish from your own childhood?

JR: No, actually, probably my grandparents, if they spoke a foreign language, it would probably have been Hungarian. And I never learned Hungarian, except once when I travelled to Hungary, I learned a few words. No, so Abe Ziegelbaum was my first — he, in his heyday, had been an actor in the Yiddish theater. He once performed a scene from a play in Yiddish at HUC, which again inspired me to want to learn Yiddish at some point. So I took first a Yiddish course from him. He used a kind of watered-down textbook. It wasn't a very deep introduction to the language. (01:07:00) And when I studied — I eventually studied Yiddish with David Roskies and he used Uriel Weinreich's *College Yiddish*, which is a wonderful language textbook because it basically plunges you into Yiddish culture, almost from the first chapter of the book. It's a really interesting introduction to Yiddish. So I learned to read Yiddish a fair amount, and I learned to speak Yiddish not so well, but a little bit to speak Yiddish. And when I was in Montreal with David, we wandered around neighborhoods, went into bakeries and other places, where people spoke Yiddish. And then David — I guess it would have been spring of 1970, early spring of 1970 or late winter in that time, helped me translate my first published article into Yiddish. I wrote an essay called "The Jew as Poet." (01:08:00) So we sat down, kind of struggling through it sentence by sentence, but he was a really immense help on that. And eventually it led me to produce one more article in Yiddish for a journal called *Jugentruf*, the *Call of the Youth*. And *Jugentruf* had a small circulation, but it was kind of the definitive place for scholarly-oriented Yiddish readers and speakers. So I wrote a — actually a satirical piece for that magazine and also a poem. This is after a year of studying with Art and David and Gershon and a whole bunch of people, studying the writings of Nachman of Breslov. So I had compiled this manila folder of notes on Rabbi Nachman, which I called a dossier, and wrote a poem about Rabbi Nachman. (01:09:00) I could read the poem at some point if that would be helpful.

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JG: Sure! Do you have it now?

JR: I have access. Can I get up?

JG: Sure.

JR: I sent my copy of this poem to Abe Ziegelbaum and he wrote back saying he found it very strange. [*Begins to read poem in Yiddish*] — “*Der Dossie*”

Can I read the Yiddish? Or should I? [*reads poem in Yiddish*] (01:10:00) [see addendum]

(01:11:00) [*continues in Yiddish*]

(01:12:00) [*continues in Yiddish*]

JR: (01:13:04) Sorry — do you want to hear it in English? I wrote a translation, too.

JG: Yes.

JR: Was it coherent? I hope that came out okay.

“A Dossier on Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. Notes on his utterances on alphabets, and words. That woman, for example, is like language and vice versa. That fire in the tongues of seventy nations burns in translation with the flame of lust. A note on Nachman’s lineage — his childhood fasts, his unnamed fear of being swallowed by a woman, by the holes in everything, by everything. His lecture number sixty-four on the perils of philosophy, on what is nothing, or on Moses, or his silence. An account of his boat journey to the land of Israel in disguises to prevent being swallowed up by Turkish streets, by unbelief, by armies of the night. A bill from Feldheim’s, for Nachman’s collected sayings, Xerox articles from Ledger on the final years spent in Uman where Nachman, won unenlightened Jews (01:14:00) back to, back to, back to, Reb Nachman telling tales. Translations of his dreams, that too? A note that says, all characters in Nachman’s tales, the seven beggars, the king, the wise man, and the fool, the man of man, the room of rooms, the house of houses in the town of towns, all laughing with the world, all were Nachman, and only Nachman. Starving, dying, dreaming, telling stories, tying points of light together with the notes of song. I hear the dead *Hasidim*, barred from Uman by Soviet, all clapping hands and forming letters of the alphabet on the hillsides of the holy land. Hauling me out from behind, from my manila folders back to humanity and faith, back to the nurse and blueprint of the universe, back to the holy tongue, back to

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mother Eve, back to the tongue-tied Moses, back to, back, to back to Reb Nachman telling tales.” Thank you. (01:15:00)

JG: So, that was published?

JR: That was published in *Jugentruf*, yes.

JG: I want you to take us back to one question about the members for a moment, and that is to what extent is the idea of the *havurah* as a seminary important in the year that you joined?

R: Well, we called ourselves Havurat Shalom Community Seminary and maybe also House of Study. I’m not sure. I was no longer sure I wanted to be a rabbi. If I wanted to pursue Jewish learning, I wanted to do it as an academic, for a doctorate.

JG: When had that happened, and how?

JR: Well, probably over the first year in the *havurah*, when I saw various people pursuing the options of graduate study, I was inspired by what they were doing, what they were working on. I still had not figured out what I would make my doctoral work (01:16:00) about, but I wanted my Jewish learning to somehow be a part of it. So I didn’t apply for graduate school — let me think, I applied for graduate school, it was about a year later, 1970-71. That’s a story maybe for eventually, but you were asking, I’m sorry.

JG: I was asking to what extent the idea, the status of the *havurah* as a seminary was important to you or to others?

JR: I think it would have been important for others. I think, in general, selective service essentially, basically, de-fanged the peace movement in the sense of creating a lottery system. So a lot of people who were anti-war just for draft reasons, or anti-draft, kind of dropped out of the picture. (01:17:00)

JG: You mean because they got good numbers?

JR: They got high numbers, which meant it would take a long time for them to be eligible. I myself in 196 — maybe would have been ’68, by invoking a 4D exemption —

JG: 4D was — what kind of deferment was it?

JR: It's a ministerial deferment. Had I continued to be a student at HUC, I would have had to do some kind of internship. I had a friend who became a rabbi from HUC who wound up being a prison chaplain on a kind of two-year service basis. And I would have had to do something like that, or work in a hospital — do some kind of service for the community. But still that would be our way of honoring our service commitment. The aim to create a rabbinical school kind of faded, and I'm not quite sure — we never actually had an ordination of (01:18:00) rabbis. So we were all kind of using the term *haver* that basically — we were talking about a new kind of Jewish leader and what that meant. And in some ways, that could have been a leader outside of the professional structure of the synagogue. And in general, I'd say that one of the main thrusts of *havurah* culture has been to create Jewish life outside the professional structure. So being the *havurah*, there were certain ancient models for the *havurah*. Jacob Neusner wrote about the early *havurah*, the rabbis who were essentially pledging to tithe their produce in strict measure and to do so scrupulously. It also pledged them to certain laws of purity and dietary restrictions, and well — the full 613 commandments and so forth. But there were these groups called *havurot* (01:19:00) And Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, also talked about para-synagogue groups, groups adjacent to the synagogue that were part of the synagogue community but formed a smaller, more intimate study group that would be called *havurah*.

JG: And that had been talked about already in the sixties?

JR: Yes, that was already in the discourse. And I'm not sure how far back Rabbi Kaplan may have been writing about this, but it might have been an idea he proposed as far back as the 1930s or onward.

JG: But would you say that members of the Havurat Shalom community were aware of this larger discourse around the idea of *havurot*?

JR: Yeah, we were aware of it. And interested in — there were actually also in late antiquity, there were communities of Jews, sometimes fairly (01:20:00) ascetic communities, sometimes communities alienated from the Jerusalem priesthood, who would go off in the desert and form something like a counter-sect to the Jerusalem hierarchy. So that was, to some degree, a bit of a model, but all of those things kind of flowed together, I think, without any precise definition after a while. But still it was an inspiration.

JG: So in your year when you started, '69 - '70, the second year of the *havurah*, were there many people there because — outside of the issue of the draft — were there people who were there because they wanted to become rabbis?

JR: Yes, well I think so. I have to think about — I know a number of my colleagues were earning degrees in Jewish education. Another was studying for a doctorate in education at Harvard, at the School of Education, so they were intending to become educators and cultural activists and so forth. (01:21:00) But I don't know. Somehow I'm not sure I remember the full career of the rabbinical idea because it never actually got enacted in our community. But you know, we were obviously all committed to learning in very similar ways, and that was part of our code, I guess, as a community.

JG: We'll come to that in much more detail soon, but I wanted to come back to the question of the house, which as you said was purchased in '69, and the *havurah* moved from Franklin Street in Cambridge to Somerville —

JR: Somerville, College Ave.

JG: What role would you say the house played in the creation of community?

JR: [*laughs*] Oh, I think a great deal. First of all, later on I may want to talk about the mythology of Uncle House.

JG: What was Uncle House?

JR: Well, I actually have a video that talks about it. In '69-'70, at some point (01:22:00) I decided I wanted to have a stricter diet. I had not been careful about Kashrut and for six months I kept a kind of vegetarian diet. And there were two members of the *havurah*, Steven Zweibaum and — I'm sorry, there was a member of the *havurah*, oh gosh, Steven Epstein who was very much a hippie of the era, and he got into cooking rice and beans and various kind of vegetarian, almost vegan things at times, and I would go over there for a dinner meal every night, and I became part of that group.

JG: Where did he live?

JR: He lived — let me think —

JG: Nearby? In the neighborhood?

JR: I think he might have lived in the house, I'm not positive. Yeah, I think he might have lived in the house at that point. (01:23:00) And there was a fellow visiting us, a high school student named Louis Fudderman — I'm sorry, hold on — oh gosh, anyway, Louis. He was a Jew from Great Neck, very bright kid. And somehow between him and

Steven, and I think it may have involved an acid trip at some point, dreamed up this mythology about Uncle House. So there was this whole Uncle House folklore that developed that had to do with things we found in the basement, a cat who used to hang out in our basement we named Krishna Cat. So there were all these kind of parts of the folklore and the mythology of the house. There was a man who used to live in the *havurah* house named Bagdasar Bozean, an Armenian, who sometime in an earlier era had gotten a visa to go to the Soviet Union to visit his Armenian homeland. (01:24:00) So anyway, he became a part of the folklore. Eventually it became an illustrated book, I even did some of the illustrations — Louis did some of the drawings. I did some of the drawings.

JG: Do you have that book?

JR: I do, again, would have to hunt for it, maybe when we take a break.

JR: So, there was a young fellow who was kind of a precocious early graduate from high school and I think at some point he was taking courses at Columbia University. And he found his way up to Somerville into the *havurah* and we had a spare room, and somehow he ended up living in the room for the spring part of the year — an incredibly bright person. And he, first of all, brought a lot of kind of Beatles lore into the house because he was a big fan of the Beatles, and he used to play — we had this big, rickety piano on the second floor of the house and he used to play Beatles songs on it. At some point the piano was not working fully, and he (01:25:00) figured out a way of repairing it with ice cream sticks. Anyway, the sort of click punctuated songs played on this piano, but he was very into late sixties music. He, in fact, gave me a present of an album from the Rolling Stones around that time. I think it was some time by my birthday in 1970. Anyhow, he and Steven Epstein and, to some degree Steven Zweibaum, but I think it was mostly him and Epstein and I — I played a role in that — he concocted this whole story, this whole narrative about Uncle House, and it made the house kind of into a storybook figure. And we each had names, the kitchen crew that made these vegetarian dinners every night. (01:26:00) He made his nickname Major Mushroom, and Steven who was kind of a dominating fellow became Commander Kitchen, and I was Admiral Avocado, as I was called, or sometimes Admiral Clavato Avocado — there was a brand of avocado that came out of California called Calivato, and anyway, somehow I earned the nickname Clavato. I think that might have been Epstein, who was a bit dyslexic. But in any case, it was a fun mythology. Eventually he wrote a story and illustrated the story. I, at one point, made a sketch picture of Steven, and I think I did one of Louis as well, which is part of that — I can play you the video. You'll get a better sense of what I mean.

JG: Are all these in the video?

JR: A lot of it is in the video, but Louis (01:27:00) eventually put it all together into a book with pages. And I have that around, I've been looking for it. I was not able to find it before our session. But I'll see if there's some way of either sending you that or getting Louis to make a copy and send you that because he and I are still in touch.

JG: Was the mythology of Uncle House well-known in the community?

JR: Not really, it had this private circulation among the members of the kitchen for quite a while. But somehow it sort of developed and other people in the *havurah* knew about it, but it wasn't like they welcomed it as part of their own mythology. And so, I don't know, it kind of existed as this parallel mythology about *havurah* history in which *havurah* is never mentioned, but a lot of its figures are there. This one kind of cartoon drawing about both the members of the house and Krishna Cat, I think, (01:28:00) was in that, and a number of other sort of visitors from the New York Havurah. Rabbi Neal Confer I think was part of that at one point. And a number of other people, James Sleeper — Jimmy Sleeper — who edited this book that published my first published writing, called *The New Jews* — very much about the Jewish counterculture — anyway he was a visitor at the house occasionally. I still correspond with him by email about various things. And actually, Louis and Steve and Neal were about to go off — after the spring of 1970, during that summer, they conceived this project to go off and found a kibbutz in Israel. And eventually they located a place that became the kibbutz. It was called Kibbutz Gezer, near the archaeological site of Gezer in Israel, and they made that work for a few years. But Louis then (01:29:00) lived in Israel for a while, and Steven as well. I think maybe Steve Epstein, no I'm sorry, Steve Zweibaum was a part of that as well. Anyway.

JG: So we were talking about the role of the house in creating community. So can you talk about the house as a gathering place and the role it served in that?

JR: It was a work project for some of the year because the house we moved into I think was grey or bluish grey and somehow the house needed an exterior paint job, so we all got involved with painting a section of the house. I signed up for — I would do this section, someone else would do this section. Painting the house yellow, which then became the trademark color of the house over the rest of its history, (01:30:00) happened I think sometime in that year. So there was that aspect of it. There were about three members who typically lived in the house. I eventually, in the second year of my involvement in the *havurah* lived as a tenant in the house. And then later, in 1974 when I came back from active graduate study — I was still writing my dissertation — but I came back and moved into one of the attic rooms in the house, and eventually both attic rooms.

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JG: Was the purpose of having tenants in the house, people renting rooms, was that a way of generating revenue for the house?

JR: Yeah, it would help generate mortgage payment and we also assessed, I can't remember what the amount was, but we assessed yearly dues from members, sometimes according to their ability to pay. So that was our main source of revenue and how it functioned as a (01:31:00) property we owned, in fact. All the way up to the present year, they are badly in need of, I think, a 10,000-dollar donation from various members, totaling 10,000 dollars because the house underwent a lot of damage. There was some kind of flood in the kitchen and it ruined a lot of parts of the kitchen and the other rooms. And so, anyway, they're working on that renovation work. But, mainly as a household member, and again, this is true both of my time there in 1970-71, and later on from '74 to '81 when I lived in the house for quite a while, there was a bit of a two-tiered thing in terms of *havurah* members who came from a block or two away, or down the road, or even some other suburb, and you know, would be there at the house for services, for communal meals, (01:32:00) which happened once in a while — but again, there was this kind of two-tiered membership in terms of the people who lived there being on the front line in terms of visitors and in terms of kind of interacting with people in that setting.

JG: What was that like for you when you were there?

JR: Well, you kind of get used to it. Somehow, as I obviously eventually grew very comfortable with having this attic room in the house, I could go up to the third floor if I wanted to avoid it. But we occasionally got people who — first of all, I always liked it when people visited. There was a kind of certain strand of clannishness to the *havurah* that either wanted to make it a smaller community or not make it too big of a larger neighborhood and community place, but somehow that all went into the hybrid identity of the *havurah*. (01:33:00) And I myself loved it when people were there. At least for services I really liked the idea of the house being crowded, and people I could talk to if we had a communal lunch afterwards or something of the sort. I don't know, somehow it was my way of getting to know people. The second year I was in the *havurah* I taught an adult education course on modern Jewish thought, and I met and became close friends with a number of people who came to that course —

JG: Who were not members, you're saying?

JR: Who were not themselves members.

JG: From the community?

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JR: Yes, they were from the community. But they became friends of mine. And in one case, a girlfriend of mine, but in any case.

JG: How did the house function as a gathering place for actual members of the community? What were the occasions on which people would come together?

JR: There would be a periodic communal meal.

JG: Not on a regular basis?

JR: Somehow I remember it being not on a certain date of the month but (01:34:00) it would just be we'd try to have one at least once a month. That's what it averaged out to. I'm not sure who was in charge of the rules of creating a communal meal, but there was a schedule of that, sort of. There was also a schedule of annual retreat, because we would often go away in the warm months of the year. In one case we rented Camp Swig — I'm sorry, Camp Ramah. Camp Swig is in California.

JG: In Palmer?

JR: In Palmer, Massachusetts, that's right. And another time we had a *havurah* retreat in a town on the New Hampshire border. It might even be Methuen, Massachusetts. And actually at that one, that was my first experience of writing a ketubah, because Dovid Roskies was getting married to his then first wife, and her name was Dina. And in any case, I wrote the ketubah (01:35:00) for them, and I don't know if I was a wedding poet at that point, but I had sort of a career as wedding poet for a number of *havurah* weddings, *havurah* people weddings. And that actually embraced a larger geographical area of *havurah* communities.

JG: So when were the members of the community actually in the house?

JR: So, in the house, most of the time Shabbat morning. There eventually developed — I'm not quite sure how it evolved. I think it eventually evolved that we'd have Friday evening services as well.

JG: But the beginning —

JR: In the beginning, no. It was mostly people going back to their houses, well — I'm not sure if there was *davening*. People mostly did Shabbat at home.

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JG: So Saturday morning the community got together for services, and were there any meals associated with that?

JR: Sometimes a communal meal, a communal lunch. (01:36:00) It was not on a regular basis, but I think that became part of the custom.

JG: How about *Seudah Shlishit*, which you went to, for instance, when you came?

JR: I remember our having, yes, I remember our having them at the *havurah*. I think that custom eventually was abandoned, but for a long time that was the custom in the *havurah* to have a *Seudah Shlishit*.

JG: Did people use the house for *simchas*?

JR: Let me think — a typical *simcha* would be an *aufruf*, people called up to the Torah — sometimes a bridal couple and nowadays a same-sex couple. It has evolved over the years, but yeah, that was a typical celebratory thing. I'm trying to think, I'm not sure if we actually had bar mitzvahs or bat mitzvahs there, but that would not have been out of the question. And I think maybe even it has gone on in recent years.

JG: (01:37:00) Were there agreed upon communal norms regarding Kashrut or the kinds of foods that would be served, meals that took place in the house?

JR: I think in general, I'm not sure where the rule developed, but our meals were basically supposed to be dairy or parve. I don't recall meat meals. I know the first year of the *havurah*, before I became a member, Reb Zalman taught a course on *shechita*, on slaughtering of animals. And it was based on the philosophy, if you're going to eat it, you might as well be the person to kill it. And so I'm not quite sure — I never was a participant in the course — I'm not sure I would have been, but anyhow.

JG: Was there any sort of impulse towards vegetarianism at that point, with Everett Gendler —?

JR: Yeah. In general, our communal meals eventually had to be vegetarian or dairy. (01:38:00) I don't think there was a vegan persuasion that much in the early days. Probably Everett would be in that category, of anyone. And Zalman, Art, I think is vegetarian these days. Anyway.

JG: Can you describe in any way the atmosphere or aesthetic of meals that would take place in the house? Sort of what contributed to making the meals *havurah* meals?

JR: It was usually potluck. People would bring stuff. There was this kind of trio of tables in the dining room area, what it had been when it was a private house — it had been a dining area. And then kind of next to it is the sunroom which became a place of prayer. We put up a basket, our own *aron kodesh*, and I guess that might have been bought at Pier Nineteen or some type of store like that. And I think Richie Siegel's mother (01:39:00) braided this beautiful hanging before the ark. But in the dining room, these tables usually formed the shape of a horseshoe. And people would sit around, but it wasn't always face-to-face. Somehow I don't think we ever made a circle of the tables. But people would eat in that setting. And again, as I said, it was a potluck.

JG: Do you recall other things that contributed to the atmosphere of the meal, like singing?

JR: A lot of singing, a lot of *niggun* and a lot of *zemirot*.

JG: Can you tell me about that?

JR: I mean, first of all, I loved, probably — I loved *niggun* more than I loved *zemirot*. Partly because — for a long time I wasn't familiar with the lyrics of a lot of *zemirot*, which I learned along the way. But I don't know, somehow the spontaneous singing, and the kind of humming, “ya da da” kind of singing (01:40:00) was a very much important part of my experience there. And I remember actually we had a song called the Kotzker Song. I left a page blank in my journal for that, but I actually can sing for you the Kotzker Song, because it became kind of a symbol for the *havurah* whenever we got together.

JG: Please.

JR: On reunions we'd sing that. Let me just find that. I hope I'm still sitting in the proper place.

JG: What's the origin of the Kotzker song?

JR: I know it from memory. The origin is the followers of the rabbi (01:41:00) of Kotzk. I think the tradition was that they had made up this song and used to sing it. Well, it went like this and it was in Yiddish. [*sings in Yiddish*] Anyway there was an end to that, but the chorus was (01:42:00) always — the second verse, it was all based on the word *regel*, foot. And probably had to do with the three pilgrimage holidays made on foot in the ancient Land of Israel. But it eventually became — in a way, by saying one goes to Kotzk

instead of to Jerusalem, it was a way of saying that holiness transfers around charismatic individuals, around a charismatic teacher, which the rabbi of Kotzk was. I only learned in the last few months, reading the diaries of Y. L. Peretz that, according to him and his memoir, an extraordinary memoir, there was a tradition among Kotzker hasidim that they didn't pray, that somehow I'm not sure how that worked in their ritual life. So anyway, the second verse has to do with *l'hitragel*, to make a habit. (01:43:00) [*sings in Yiddish*] That's what I forgot in the second verse. Anyway, and then the third verse, after singing — there was — [*more Yiddish singing*] and so on. Actually, it was just three verses. [see addendum]

JG: Why do you think this became such a popular song?

JR: To discuss the sociology of it I'd be hard-pressed, or the anthropology of it. You know, it's buried (01:44:00) in that dynamic, that somehow it just became a thing we liked to sing. And it became basically a theme of our reunion after periods of disunity, of coming together from great geographical distances. Somehow at *havurah* reunions that song got sung. I actually like to sing. I made up a harmony to it, which I might have said partly in my singing of it before. But I did kind of a harmony for it, and the song had a real resonance. And there were certain ways in which some songs — and this is true in general for me and my relation to Hebrew texts — it's almost like a physical addiction. And so I love it for that reason, and I love kind of the meeting of eyes and faces and smiles when we renew that song periodically.

JG: You've spoken a number of times already about the role that Yiddish was playing within the *havurah*. Can you talk about that for a minute?

JR: Okay, well (01:45:00) as I said, the first year of the *havurah* I was studying Yiddish with David Roskies. And I mentioned the book we used, *College Yiddish*. By the end of that year, we were up to the point where we were reading with not perfect expertise but reasonable expertise, and with David's help, reading Yiddish poetry. And we studied the poems of Jacob Glatstein, we studied, gosh, who were some of the other poets — gosh — “The Green Aquarium,” Sutzkever, Avrom Sutzkever, who actually lived in Israel, lived in the Tel Aviv area. I got introduced to Jacob Glatstein probably very near the end of his life when he came to give a talk or a reading at Harvard. And Roskies also later introduced me to Isaac Bashevis Singer. There's a photo (01:46:00) in the Roskies family home in Montreal that shows Singer holding a baby, and what that represents is *pidyon ha-ben*, the redeeming of the first born, because Singer was from a priestly family, and also he was qualified to do that. And Ruth Weiss's older child — oldest child, I think — was the child in that photo. So all these things again kind of stick in my memory as isolated bits of my memory.

JG: And were Yiddish songs very much a part of the repertoire of songs being sung at the *havurah*?

JR: Not so much, apart from the Kotzker Song. I don't remember extensively. No, I think most of the songs, as I said, were *zemirot* and — there's a *niggun* that came from the 1937 movie, *The Dybbuk*. I've actually written a long essay about the movie, *The Dybbuk*, and there's a *niggun* there that (01:37:00) the followers of the *Rebbe* of Merapol would sing. And it went, “yai dai dai dai —” [*sings*] And sometime in the first or second year that I was in services, Barry Holtz led services and made that part of the *kidusha* prayer in Shabbat morning services, and again it came alive that way in a very beautiful way for me.

JG: I wanted to ask you about the *havurah* as a Shabbat inviting community, as it's sometimes talked about in those terms. What did that mean?

JR: I guess it often meant that people were invited to each other's separate households for Shabbat dinner. I was often in that situation. As I said, everyone lived roughly within (01:48:00) a square kilometer of the *havurah* house, so it was fairly easy for people to walk back and forth. And I don't think we've ever done a — as far as I can remember, if other people have a memory of this, but I don't think we ever did a Friday evening dinner, Erev Shabbos dinner, at the *havurah*.

JG: So that tended to be a time when people were invited.

JR: Yeah, then and also sometimes to lunches at people's houses. I think before — I'm not sure, I think every week now. I have not been a visitor there in a regular way, so I'm not sure what their weekly practice is, but I think in general there's a small vegetarian communal lunch at the *havurah* on Shabbat, on Shabbat morning.

JG: Did it tend to be the case that everybody had a place to go for, let's say, Erev Shabbat dinner?

JR: I think so. I don't remember feeling displaced or lonely or out of it in any way. And often we members of the household (01:49:00) would have Shabbat dinner together. And as I said, a lot of visitors happened through the house, so we often had people over for the Friday evening dinner as a household, not as a *havurah*. I — well, maybe you could ask questions on that.

JG: What were you going to say?

JR: Well, I was thinking of the people who were not made welcome at the *havurah*, at least not intentionally. And that's kind of a whole chapter in the story of the *havurah*. And that's where members of the household were on the front line quite often because we were often being the ones required to ask certain people to leave, or not to come around. And I remember three specific instances of that. One was a case of a fellow in New York who wanted to do a magazine article about the *havurah*. He was a gay person, a member of probably (01:50:00) a fairly active LGBT community before it was being called that in New York City. And he wrote for a magazine I think that was a gay publication. And he came to the *havurah*, and there was some way — I don't think it had to do with homosexuality. I think it had to do more with personality. But he was very much asserting himself in ways that were kind of horning in on conversations and saying inappropriate things, and at some point members of the group got very uncomfortable and we had to ask him to leave. And it was myself and one other member, I think, that were charged with that duty. And what happened was, sometime within a month later or so, he published this very nasty article about the *havurah* and how homophobic we were. And it was certainly not in our intentions at the time. You know, I've had gay friends all my life, bisexual girlfriends. I have a great gay brother-in-law. (01:51:00) But it's ironic that we were called homophobic when the *havurah* eventually became a mecca for the LGBTQ community and a major gathering place. In more recent years, you find people in all those categories as members of the *havurah* or active visitors.

JG: When you say that he was eventually asked to leave, how long a period had he been around before that happened?

JR: He'd been there for — I have a feeling he might have come on Shabbat, and it might have been by the end of the weekend. I'm not sure. Again my memory is fuzzy there, but I don't know, there was some point that he'd overstayed his welcome and we had to deal with it. There was another case of a person, and I'm going to call her — recognizing that I'm making an allusion to a nonfiction work, I'm going to call her by the fictitious (01:52:00) name that the subject of that book — it was a book by Susan Sheehan called *Is There No Place On Earth For Me?*, and it was about a woman whom she called fictitiously Sylvia Frumkin, and Sylvia was probably something like a paranoid-schizophrenic. And we had such a person. It was a case where she had come on — I was convinced in my head back then that this was the same person, but I have no way of knowing that or demonstrating that — but she was there on Shabbat, and we were often so absorbed in our own activities and duties and *havurah* things and so forth that I only belatedly noticed around Tuesday that she was still there. She was kind of holed up in the library room of the *havurah*, which, I guess, a lot of people never used the library in that three or four day (01:53:00) period. And she was there. She had actually a very disturbing

body odor. And when I asked her who she is and why she was there, she grabbed a book off the shelf — it might have been a siddur — and began sort of shuffling and *davening* from it. In any case, she fairly soon was asked to leave. And I remember her coming by and giving this ringing denunciation of the *havurah* and saying that we were in cahoots with Rose Kennedy to do her in. It was this kind of strange, wonderfully mad story. I had this mixture of fascination with her and at the same time a feeling of, good gosh, there but for the grace of God go I. And I often felt that about unwanted visitors at the *havurah*. And there was a third case where there was a fellow — again, I don't need to mention names here — who used to come to the *havurah* on (01:54:00) a fairly regular basis and kind of latched onto it as, you know, he considered it his community, but again was saying inappropriate things or something. I don't know what the social etiquette was that he was violating, but he was making people uncomfortable. And eventually they asked — they, as a group — he actually asked to address the *havurah* in a meeting, because he was being told that he was not welcome there. And he asked to address the *havurah* as a group. And I think I know this because I think I was sitting in on that meeting. But if that was the case, it probably would have been when I visited the *havurah* in spring of 1972. And so I was, as an old member of the *havurah*, kind of permitted to stay in on this meeting where they met with him. And there was a woman named Harriett Mann — she was a Jungian therapist, who was a very capable individual — and she was the one who kind of laid down the law.

JG: She was a member?

JR: She was a member of the *havurah*, that's right. (01:55:00) And she kind of essentially laid down the law that he was not to come around.

JG: And did he honor that?

JR: I think he did. Again, others may have more precise memories of this person's involvement. He thought he was being discriminated against because he was epileptic, and he had serious epilepsy. I think he took it as a major part of his identity that he wanted people to recognize. He was a bright person. He was a college-educated person. I think he'd gone to SUNY at Binghamton as an undergraduate. But there was this kind of Dostoevskian streak to him, and that was the mood of talking with this individual.

JG: Many people have commented on the consistent need to engage in group processing as a salient memory that they have of their experience at Havurat Shalom. (01:56:00) Where did that processing go on, and what role did community meetings play in that?

JR: Could I maybe read something from my journal, if I can find it?

JG: Did you keep a journal throughout the time you were at Havurat Shalom?

JR: I've been keeping journals since my first year of college. And I would write in these law notebooks, and so I kept a handwritten journal, and sometime around — I don't remember when it was. Oh here, actually this is maybe worth sharing. Sometime around 1969-70 — no it was long after that, I decided I wanted to put it down in a word document. So I eventually created this, you know, electronic version of my journal. (01:57:00) I have to confess, I edited some things out of the old handwritten version, and I don't want that to be part of the record. At least, I don't want to grant access to those. But there are ways in which I kind of made it read a little more smoothly. And this was kind of a reflection about our deliberations about *havurah* identity.

JG: When is this from?

JR: This is from, hold on — not sure if there's a date. I don't know if I date things before or after in this. (01:58:00) Actually this is pretty long, I'm not sure if we'll get through all of it.

JG: Well, if you can't find the date, but it's from that year '69-'70?

JR: Yes. Yeah, it would have been written sometime in the Spring of 1970. So I wrote: "To speak clearly about *havurah*, let alone about the '*havurah* ideal,' has become very difficult for a member of Havurat Shalom. One reason for this difficulty is that the *havurah*, being experimental in nature, is a protean and in any case protean preacher. What was true about the community in September is no longer true in December. And December's "definition" will of necessity not be accurate come springtime. This fluidity has become both bane and blessing. For members of the *havurah*, the challenge of providing a thread of constancy to our identity as a group amid our changes of mood and purpose has become a necessity, indeed our one constant. Some of us (01:59:00) nurture the notion that this is a key ingredient of maturity, to encounter change without succumbing to despair. This despair can be minimized. It crouches at the door of every meeting, every work session, every prayer. Surely this is not unique to the *havurah* but maintaining a *havurah* brings it into focus. Herein for me lies the *havurah*'s chief value. On the other hand, having pushed myself thus far to 'define,' I must give voice to a natural resistance to define that has affected all members of the *havurah* at one time or another. This resistance does not stem from anti-intellectualism; our minds work in spite of us, but from a growing distrust of manifestos and polemics and prescriptive "models" for Jewish life. The search for 'models' is, I suppose, necessary, but I find it a bit sad to contemplate. It bespeaks a paralyzing self-consciousness (02:00:00) in American Jewish

life. In the absence of real work, real living, one looks for ‘models.’ I suspect the Eastern European shtetl, the hasidic *shteibel*, the Israeli kibbutz, or the urban middle class in contemporary Israel have not been overly preoccupied with the search for models, though there’s perhaps ascending order of likelihood in the first three. The awareness of model comes after the fact. It emerges and is at best only a statement about the present. Few people in the *shtetl* quibbled about the goal of the village. The core — I’m sorry — the *shtetl* quibbled about the goal of the village. The goal was survival, and perpetuation of divine word. The search for models has been implicitly present in almost every choice of action in specific circumstances in Jewish history: in politics, education, the regulation of the community’s inner life. This was also true of the *shtetl*, but a ‘model’ has rarely been an end in itself. (02:01:00) American Jews of this generation have not been unfortunately enough — *unfortunate* enough to have to view survival in physical terms. That by another means of reckoning could be to our disadvantage. So the search for models proliferates.” Should I keep going?

JG: I don’t know what comes next, so you judge.

JR: If you find it helpful. “Members of the *havurah*, however, are not strictly speaking Jewish ‘survivalists.’ If anything, the value of the *havurah* as an instrument of Jewish survival in America is too heavy a question for us to be bothered with at this point, and members of the *havurah* would resist being cast in such a heroic role. The task at hand, in fact, has been the creation of Jewish life free of utilitarian values for the larger Jewish community. Most of us grow uncomfortable at the role of ‘young idealists’ for the older generation to *kvell* over. Most of our missionary work has tended to backfire. (02:02:00) Those of us who have gone out into synagogues to speak of the shallowness of synagogue life, hoping to shock or disturb, hoping to raise serious questions for congregants to ask of themselves, have in the end only elicited smiles or pats on the head, many praises for our ‘good work.’ Many of us see us as winning the young people back to Judaism. Many have offered to introduce us males to their daughters. Only a small handful, if any, have felt stimulated to remake their synagogues into livable, creative, intellectually and spiritually fulfilling communities. The message, if there is one, has been lost in the applause.”

JG: So that — that question of the relationship to the outside or the larger Jewish world — was one theme.

JR: Yeah, and there was a certain self-consciousness. At a certain point, we did (02:03:00) crave the publicity, or at least we treated it as kind of a serendipitous thing, that people from the outside were interested in us. I think *Time Magazine* did an article on the *havurah*. And so we welcomed that publicity and maybe invited, implicitly invited

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through that, people to come to the *havurah* and visit. But in any case, I can't say there was any concerted plan of publicizing our mission as a group, or even representing it in a definitive, manifesto kind of way.

JG: And yet there was clearly also some discomfort with that role.

JR: — with being in that role in the first place, yeah.

JG: What are the kind of internal themes or tropes that came up in this self-processing aspect of communal living? What were the kinds of issues that people were struggling with? (02:04:00) Do you recall?

JR: Do you mean as a household or as a community?

JG: As a community.

JR: Well, I guess it became a matter of what our communal activity would be. For many of us, it involved teaching in synagogues. For many — and actually there was a project that did get formed to create kind of a drop-in center for Jewish youth in Brookline. In fact I remember one of the visitors, probably someone you're going to have in your oral history at some point, is Michael Paley.

JG: Michael Paley?

JR: Of course, I know Michael Paley. He's a very dear person to me. And again, I clutch up, often on names. Anyway, Michael came there. He visited first as a high school (02:05:00) student. I think he was in high school in Brookline. And eventually he went on to study to be a rabbi, and became a very distinguished and accomplished rabbi, and I think was a Hillel director, has done a lot of good things for the community. I think, amazingly, our neighbor two houses down from here has a ketubah that was written for them — not one that I did — it was a ketubah that was signed by Michael Paley as the rabbi. But in any case, I'm not sure what the tangibles were, I mean beyond that. I can't remember other visitors to that community center, but it was basically a rented space, and we would open the place I think maybe one night a week, something like, maybe a Wednesday night, and people would drop in.

JG: How about internal (02:06:00) to the *havurah*, what were the key issues?

JR: In terms of teaching each other?

JG: No, just in terms of relationships within, or the kinds of issues that would come up at community meetings that needed resolution — these kinds of competing issues, visions, etc.?

JR: [*laughs*] A phrase that keeps going around in my head is “getting into each other’s *kishkes*.” And that became kind of a buzzword at some point for — let me think, what would that mean. It would mean truly baring ourselves to one another in a personal, interpersonal way. I — actually it grew out of a suggestion of mine in the first year — was it the first year? No, the second year of the *havurah*. Now I can’t remember, might have been the end of the first year. I had the idea — I had, as a rabbinical student at HUC, been required to do a weekend of sensitivity training, and that particular session I was a part of at HUC went really wonderfully. I got to know better a lot of students whom I didn’t care for that much initially but (02:07:00) through that weekend of talking to one another, getting into each other’s *kishkes*, it was a transforming experience for me. And I suggested, first to Burt — Burt Jacobson was a roommate of mine that first year. We lived in an apartment in Medford the first part of the year — no, I guess the whole year. And Burt was kind of interested in it, and he pushed it as an idea. And eventually the *havurah* hired a sensitivity trainer to come in and get us all to bare our soles in a communal setting. And it was unfortunate. There were a number of things where a member spoke very frankly to another member about his feelings, and the other member was immensely offended, and in one case walked out of — effectively walked out of the *havurah*.

JG: In a very personal way?

JR: Very personal, very interpersonal way. It was very — she (02:08:00) felt very alienated by what was said to her. And it was problematic because her spouse was a fervent and active member of the *havurah*. But there was a lot that went right about the *havurah*. I remember actually, the leader of the session asking me to arrange people in a room according to the way I saw them in my life. [*laughs*] And so I brought to the center of the room Art, Kathy, Richie Siegel, possibly Joey Reimer, maybe Barry Holtz, a number of people that I considered very central to the *havurah* that I didn’t necessarily feel as much a part of that inner circle. So I was basically saying this to dramatize my own sometimes feelings of alienation from the *havurah* group as a whole.

JG: Alienation or marginalization? (02:09:00)

JR: Marg — well, I don’t think I was being consciously — as I said before, members were always very generous to me and very encouraging. But somehow I was marginalizing myself, and I kind of tended to get into the habit of that to a great degree,

at least the first year I was involved in the *havurah*; the second year not so much. The second year, I first of all grew to be closer friends with new members from that year and other people who became part of the *havurah*. But that first year was very difficult. And again, I may have suggested on your questionnaire that I — in retrospect I feel that I was experiencing the first waves of something resembling clinical depression. I had big problems getting to sleep at night, and that first of all made me incapable of participating (02:10:00) in morning classes, and so I missed a good deal of Art's class on the hasidic masters. He gave what I heard was a lovely *shiur* every day about — I think it was every day, but it might have been on alternate days, I'm not sure. In any case, he taught wonderfully. He's a brilliant teacher, but I somehow excluded myself from that. I think I felt embarrassed about offering an opinion, about raising my hand and offering an opinion because I still felt like too much of a neophyte.

JG: Somebody mentioned — I think it might have been Bill Novak, although I'm not sure about that — the idea of intimidation as being a quality that was somewhat pervasive.

JR: That's interesting that he should say that. Did he mean that he was feeling intimidated himself? (02:11:00) Or he saw it going on among members?

JG: Saw it going on.

JR: You know, at no point can I say I was consciously intimidated by any member of the *havurah*. I was a little bit afraid of Art because of his charisma, and because of his extraordinary immersion in the lore and literature of what we were studying. And so I felt a little bit scared to open my mouth in discussions. The few times I did, Art was very friendly to it and very hospitable to it. But anyway, it was sort of more a chronic discord that I had to work out with myself. And I think, as I said in the questionnaire, I think I was battling demons that came from another place, and a lot of my way of evaluating those years has to be seen in terms of my personal struggle. (02:12:00) I can't say it was all about me, because it wasn't, but to some degree I often felt myself irrelevant to *havurah* history, and had I not been there, it would have gone on to be the brilliant, conflux of minds that it eventually was remembered as being, and still is in many ways.

JG: So in that sense you're saying that there were some people you feel were indispensable to that mix.

JR: The people I put in the center of the room were definitely the indispensable people, but there was not necessarily any logic to it, because I'm sure there were people I left out of that central group that deserved to be there. I don't know. Again, I can't remember the

sort of fringe details of who got in that circle and who didn't. But that was one exercise in that sensitivity training thing that we did.

JG: Were there other kinds of exercises that you remember the group undertaking as a group (02:13:00) to try and work out the tensions that existed between the ideals of individualism that were pervasive on the one hand, and the notions of community and communal living that — the notion of creating an intentional small community and what that entailed on the other hand?

JR: Well, first of all, I think we were always dealing with what emerged *de facto*, that somehow everything that — all the minds that flowed together, which I consider a really brilliant era, a certain corner of Jewish history, this amazing conflux of minds. But I don't recall ever sitting down and talking about how we work out the interpersonal dimension or how we work out a relationship, because I guess a relationship between an individual and a whole community is something that has to be thought about, but I think everyone thought about it in ways (02:14:00) unique to their personalities and their preoccupations.

JG: I wanted to ask you about another aspect of life at the *havurah* that you brought up a couple of times, and yet I don't find very much about it in the literature about the *havurah*. And that is drug use and also changing sexual norms that were pervasive in the general community. And you mention it several times in your journals, you mentioned it today several times. Can you comment on this? What role did the attitude towards drug use have in the community? What role did it play in the community?

JR: Well, the drug of choice would have always been cannabis, would have always been marijuana, or hashish in some cases. I remember actually swallowing a tiny lump of hashish and having this partly scary but very interesting experience on it. In fact, it was probably the night that Uncle House was born (02:15:00) that I had swallowed that little fragment. But so people brought the weed [see addendum]. We never actually, apart from that retreat where everybody smoked the weed, I can't remember us making it part of the communal rituals of any kind. And a few of the members had done acid trips. Zalman in his years of involvement with the *havurah*, one year of involvement, but even before that, was doing acid trips with Timothy Leary. And actually I think one of the things that caused him to separate — I remember him telling me this in a conversation — to separate from the Lubavitch community was he went to the Rebbe for his permission to do this, and the Rebbe turned him down. And the Rebbe said don't do it. So he had kind of a split loyalty there. Again there were a number of other (02:16:00) members of the *havurah* who had done an acid trip. I had taken mescaline the spring that I applied to the *havurah* in Los Angeles. I took it with a friend, a mescaline capsule, and that was a scary experience, but it was also interesting and meaningful in other ways [see addendum].

JG: Do you think that people were using psychedelics as a way of exploring their spiritual journeys?

JR: I think so. Well, certainly if there's anyone I would have ever wanted to drop acid with, it would have been Zalman. And I know I somehow felt a confidence in him. I wasn't sure I could do it in the presence of any other veteran of psychedelics. Somehow he seemed like the welcoming arms to cradle in through an LSD experience. And I don't know, over the years I've looked back warmly on it, but (02:17:00) it never worked out that he and I did a psychedelic together. And I actually, after the mescaline experience, never went — I tried taking peyote once but it didn't quite work.

JG: Somewhere one commentator referred to Art Green calling the environment of Havurat Shalom as "post-drug." Does that ring right for you? In what sense would that have been —?

JR: I'm not sure. Did he mean post-general practice of drugs? I'm not sure. I'd have to hear from him what that meant. But I think a lot of people felt partly, often because of their experience with drugs and psychedelics, that they could take that and put it to work in a more spiritual way. They could find through meditation, through — actually meditation became, in the period I was there, in the early *havurah*, meditation became an activity every morning. And actually, (02:18:00) I guess, one of the times when I was living in a bedroom of the *havurah*, I would come downstairs and Art and Kathy and various — Barry Holtz, his then-wife Janet Holtz, would be sitting in the prayer room engaged in meditation.

JG: And was there someone who led that effort to sort of bring meditation into the *havurah*?

JR: Well, it was a practice at most of five or six people, I think. At least, those sessions, is what I remember. I sat through some of them. It was only later that I undertook meditation in a more serious way through Carol and getting involved with Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, in which I kind of tapped into the Buddhist tradition. I sometimes think of myself as a Jew-Bu, but only if it doesn't make me any less of a Jew, because I consider myself fully Jewish. At the first one I went to, there was a guy with a *kippah*. I later learned that he was a rabbinical student at Hebrew College in Boston. Art is now the head of the rabbinical school at Hebrew College. (02:19:00)

JG: And the founder.

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JR: And the founder, yeah. So, yeah, that was part of it.

JG: What about the impact of women's lib and the sexual revolution in terms of relationships?

JR: Well, first of all, it was a phenomenon that members' wives did not usually lead. I'm not sure if they were part of Torah discussions in the services. I can't remember when that became a normal thing. But members' wives were somewhat less active as leaders within the group than I remember it being in a later era. And there was kind of — I know there's been some hackles raised because people have said there was a male hierarchy at the *havurah*, (02:20:00) and I don't believe that was the case. If anything, I'm a big fan of the double X chromosome and it's taken me years, especially my time with Carol, to fully appreciate that women are often better attuned to the social realities of the moment and the surrounding context. Men are often — we often think in very linear categories. It's taken me years — also meditation experience to get beyond that. But could we go back to the end of your question? You were asking — oh, about the role of women. Increasingly the *havurah* became more involved with feminist women. I remember being at a conference of the World Union of Jewish Students that met in the Poconos in 1971, I think. Late summer.

JG: It was right after you left the *havurah* the first time, no? (02:21:00)

JR: Yes. Okay. So it would have been in 1971. I had probably come back. I had been living in Santa Cruz, California for that time but I went back to Boston for a visit. And — wait, I'm sorry. Can you remind me of —

JG: We were talking about women's roles.

JR: Women's roles, okay. So that summer, late that summer — I know what it was — I went to this thing in the Poconos and eventually went back —

JG: For WUJS, you were saying.

JR: For WUJS, yeah — World Union of Jewish Students. It was the first time I encountered people who were very outspoken and, in a sense, radical feminists. I think maybe Alicia Ostriker may have been part of that at the time. I can't remember. But there were various women who spoke in a very outspoken way about the demand for gender equality. And I think I'm sure I inherited a lot of the unconscious (02:22:00) gender hierarchy that males were in in those years [see addendum]. There was a period in my life when I referred to adult women as “girls,” and I mean, there were a lot of ways in which I

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was not, or I didn't know how to say "him or her." It took me a long time, especially being a prayer book translator for a gender non-specific prayer book.

JG: For the Reconstructionists.

JR: For the Reconstructionists. It took me a while to learn gender-neutral language and to think in those terms. But over the number of years I became very impressed by many of the leading feminist women in Judaism. And my sympathy is complete. I made a joke once, to a fellow graduate student at Santa Cruz. This was a woman who — not Jewish — she was a woman who considered herself a radical feminist. I remember saying to her once, and it elicited a laugh, I have great respect for the aspirations of your people. (2:23:00) And anyway, I'm glad she took it as a joke, and I meant it as a joke. But still there were a few years of negotiation, I think, that went on in the larger society, as well as in the larger community of counterculture people, as to the role of men and women, the respective dynamic relationship between men and women and how that affected things. I think they've had to undergo it as well since, with the gay community and mediating between hetero and gay — that too.

JG: So when Havurat Shalom began, it was a male-only membership?

JR: I guess officially that was the case [see addendum].

JG: It was a seminary.

JR: Yeah, it was a seminary. That's right, and which I think then became kind of a constriction on our identity. In some ways, it put a cramp on the relationship of men and women (02:24:00) in the *havurah*.

JG: And the women who were in the *havurah*, if I'm understanding, in the beginning were either wives or girlfriends of members, essentially.

JR: That's right.

JG: Within the membership of the *havurah*, I'm not talking about the people in the community who came to morning services or something.

JR: That's right. These were, you know, these were very learned and accomplished women. And some of them were in graduate school, earning graduate degrees. Kathy Green, who was not in graduate school but was a constant member of the *havurah*,

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always spoke articulately and sensitively and pertinently to all of our group deliberations. So women did participate in discussions, in group discussions.

JG: Even about what the meaning of the *havurah* was and what the vision for community was?

JR: I think so. I'm having trouble now kind of remembering specific conversations.

JG: That particular year.

JR: But yeah, I mean I think over the years, this became true more for me when I came back in '74. (02:25:00) And first of all, I think women grew more confident about exercising leadership roles. Women were eventually leading services, women were eventually teaching classes. So it somehow evolved that way in a spontaneous sense over a number of years, and I was part of it basically.

JG: Well, there was a lot going on in the society at large, and the beginnings of Jewish feminism were happening in that same period, the founding of Ezrat Nashim in '71, '72. There were many things happening to promote feminist consciousness in those early years of the 1970s, early to mid 1970s. I'm sure those effects were being felt within the *havurah* as well.

JR: Yes. I think so. Again, I can't remember any specific discussions about women, or relations between men and women, in a *havurah* discussion, but again, I think all of this got worked out on the interpersonal level (02:26:00) and sort of in communal practice, kind of spontaneously. I don't know where the markers of a transition or a line occurred, but somehow eventually it was a much more open and fluid community.

JG: So I want to turn to talk about the *havurah* as a spiritual community, which is one of its paramount values, the creation of such a spiritual community, and how Shabbat observance was such a central and important component of this. Was there a consensus about how Shabbat was observed in the *havurah*?

JR: Probably not. I think each leader of prayers had a different style, a different way of bringing his or, eventually his or her, personality into it.

JG: To the service, you mean?

JR: To the service, to leading the service. (02:27:00) Yeah, in terms of spirituality, first of all, it's taken me years and years to read enough hasidic literature to get a real sense of

what, especially what the spirituality of early Hasidism, was about. And Art has been a major teacher on this, on this scale, on this issue. He recently published a book called *Radical Judaism* and hearkened back to the Baal Shem Tov, the circle around the Maggid of Mezrich, and the early Shneur Zalman of Yadi — these various early masters of hasidut who were involved basically in a community of meditation. I eventually translated — it was part of our reading for Art's course on Hasidism, part of our reading to read *Likutim Yekarim*, (02:28:00) which is kind of a very badly printed, written in Rashi script, book that dealt with the practice of meditation and prayer. Eventually Art and Barry Holtz put out a book of some of the translations of the material. I forgot who published the book, but in any case they put out a book called *Your Word is Fire* and it hearkened back to the teachings of these masters.

JG: How would you describe the attitude towards *tefilah* or towards prayer, in the *havurah* community?

JR: I guess I'm drawn back to the Baal Shem Tov in the sense that he taught two slightly contradictory things. One was that every letter of prayer, every word and letter of prayer, was like a separate being calling out to you for your complete and total allegiance and communion. *Devekut* would have been (02:29:00) the operative principle there. And at the same time, he was very gentle about the kind of self-punishing attitude among hasidism, in which he wanted to be very encouraging. So he wrote that when a person is learning Hebrew, God doesn't care if one stumbles over the Hebrew or says things incorrectly. It's like a father teaching a child to read. And somehow that idea — if you're not fully there, if your heart is not in it, if your *devekut* is not ripened in some way, God forgives it because it's all part of the learning process of meditation. And those teachings have been vitally important to me over decades now.

JG: When you first came into the *havurah*, had you been attuned to this sort of neo-hasidic way of approaching prayer or was this something you were exposed to and (02:30:00) and imbibed there?

JR: I probably didn't hear the term neo-hasidic until recent years. But that is, in effect, what it was, except we weren't hasidim. We didn't wear the garb of the hasidim, and we weren't necessarily all even completely halachic Jews. But we were part of a spiritual community that moved along those lines, moved along the lines of meditation, of *devekut*, of connection with God. One of my favorite teachings of the Baal Shem Tov goes to this effect: if you are reciting something and praying something, and the *yetzer hara* seizes hold of you, the evil impulse seizes hold of you, you should not be too concerned, because the Devil only wants you to be depressed about your failures and by that means one brings someone around to abandoning God. (02:31:00) And in effect, he

says, the next time the Devil tries to do this, you say, I don't worry about simple mistakes, because my task is to engage in joy, in *simcha*, in the presence of the blessed Holy One, so in effect one is saying, Begone. Don't be a depressing influence in my life. Also the *simcha* part of it was a very important dimension.

JG: In fact, you wrote for me that Shabbat morning services were of what you called, "extraordinary spiritual depth." What did that phrase mean?

JR: Again, it was the chanting, the rhythm of reciting prayers in an undertone, and the shokeling that sometimes happened with that. There was some — again, I have at times a physical addiction to that. But it is at the same time spiritual. And (02:32:00) recognizing that I am a physical body, but with a spiritual nature, has been a goal and a task throughout my life, especially in recent years.

JG: Yeah. Was that new for you at that point in your life? Had you experienced anything like that previously?

JR: I would have to say it was new for me. At least it was new as an option that I never knew existed. And as I began to weave myself into the culture of that neo-hasidic spirituality, it became more and more important to me. Now, in the dining room — I'm not halachic in the sense that I only put on *tefillin* once a week, on Monday morning. And most of the time, I *daven* to myself three times a day, when I'm out on walks, sometimes with him. [*points to dog*]

JG: Him being the dog.

JR: Him being the dog, yes. I've worked out ways to kind of meditate between attending to a dog and attending to prayer. And I know (02:33:00) people of the Artscroll Siddur community would be horrified by that lapse of — disrespect of prayer, in a sense, but still reciting the prayers is important to me.

JG: But in the *havurah*, that wouldn't be considered disrespect in any sense.

JR: Not at all.

JG: Maybe it would have epitomized it.

JR: Well, I can't say I did it back then, but over the years — and the Monday mornings that I put on tallis and *tefillin*, sometimes other days of the week, but I *daven* in front of a page from — I guess it was the frontispiece of a book, *Shaarei Orah*, which was a primer

in Kabbalah, especially for the beginner. It's ironic that Kabbalah is often thought of as such an esoteric system. In truth, it takes many years of reading the *Zohar*. I've read forty or fifty pages of the *Zohar* (02:34:00) in the original, and try to read a little each time. I take it in small doses because it's a lot to think about. It's a lot to wrap one's spirit around to do it. But anyway, it's a diagram of the *Sefirot*, moving from *Keter* all the way to *Malkut*. I've made that as well into a breathing exercise where if I'm out for a run or a walk, I will essentially say the various names and epithets associated with God at each level of the *Sefirot*. The hardest one for me being the *Sefira* of *Din*, of *Gevurah*, the harsh side of God, the judging side of God, which is also associated with sacrifice in the Temple. There's all these themes that, in fact, recreate the scope of world history and Jewish history in the traditional Jewish reckoning of the world, moving from the highest realm of *Keter* (02:35:00) — Art has written a book about *Keter* which I really want to read one of these days. I read a little bit of it and I really want to finish. But in any case, these highest realms, which in fact are very loving and encouraging — the sphere of *Keter* is also called *Hasadim Tovim*, works of lovingkindness, *Eyn-ha-Rahamim*, the fount of mercy, *Shelosh-esrey Middot ha-Rahamim*” the thirteen attributes of God. And all of these things are encouraging you to merge with this original world soul that was also sometimes akin to nothingness, the sphere of *Ayin*, nothing. But it's not *ayin* as a deprivation. It's *ayin* as an effulgence of divine presence. So God is both all there but also not there in any way that can be conceptualized. (02:36:00) And it's symbolized at that level by the letter *alef*. *Alef gadolah* is another name for *Keter*. Again, all of this of course being part of my — I guess you could call it academic education in Jewish mysticism, because I've read a fair amount of Gershom Sholem and the historian Joseph Weiss, other historians of Jewish mysticism that have made a very big impression on me, a very important impression.

JG: And did the start of all that happen within *havurah*, your interest in —?

JR: Yes, absolutely. Yeah, it would have been in those early years. Again, I've grown much more conscious of it in retrospect, at least what it all added up to. And I've realized — I mean at times, at one point in my journal of '69-'70, I spoke disparagingly of the idea of radicalism, largely because I think radicalism in those days meant the postures of political radicalism — of going to anti-war marches, of shouting slogans, (02:37:00) doing a lot of things that, you know, are not true radicalism. They're kind of an ersatz radicalism. But to be a radical Jew I now understand more fully. It's to treat every portion of the world, every moment in one's life, every realm of one's existence as filled with divine presence. And that's something I give myself over to wholeheartedly. *Devekut* is still a very important part of my identity, or at least the search for it.

JG: Can you talk about what that means?

JR: Well, just, the ability to commune, the ability to adhere to God, or to feel connected to God.

JG: That's the *Devekut*.

JR: Right. I actually read Aryeh Kaplan's book on Jewish meditation, and I realized, I read some of it — we were not supposed to do this, but I brought it to IMS [Insight Meditation Society] during an IMS retreat — so that in the daytime I'd be sitting in front of a Buddhist statue, (02:38:00) meditating, and actually, over a period of four or five days, the community creates a silence that is quite majestic. It's quite an amazing conflux of spirit that is wordless, totally wordless. And at the same time — *Devekut* became an important experience for me then, and actually I found myself —

JG: In the insight meditation?

JR: In insight meditation, I found myself in my head doing in my head the daily Jewish prayers. Now there are times — actually Aryeh Kaplan tries to encourage the meditator to focus only on one focal point, being God or some aspect of spirituality that would make one shut out the rest of the world [see addendum]. And meditation retreats at IMS are quite the opposite. It's getting into the world, hearing the world (02:39:00) flow through you, hearing the sounds of the streets and the chirping of birds, to be into, in a pantheistic way, kind of taking that into oneself. And that's the type of meditation I most identify with, especially now.

JG: Yeah. Many people pointed to the creative tension between tradition and innovation in Shabbat services at Havurat Shalom. Can you talk about that a bit?

JR: Between tradition and —

JG: Tradition and innovation. The kind of experimentation that people did, whether it was in how to give a *d'var torah*, things that'd be included in the style of the service, or —

JR: I guess I was identified with giving a *d'var torah* for one particular one that I offered. It was in the first or second year — it might have been the first year — but basically I developed this idea that — the parashah was *Mishpatim* — (02:40:00) anyway, began with the Ten Commandments, moving into the law code parts of Exodus. And I made this presentation to the *havurah* about the fact that the Bible up to that point had been mostly stories — histories, ancestral stories, primordial stories of the early generations of human

kind, and so forth — and in a sense, the reign of *aggadah*, of legend and myth and all of that. Somehow at one point, after the Ten Commandments, the Torah text becomes laws. So I decided — actually, Rashi in his commentary on Genesis, raises the question of, do we begin with the beginning or do we begin with the first commandment, that all of Israel were commanded to sacrifice (02:41:00) a paschal lamb in Exodus:12? And that's the first place where Halachah, in a sense, comes in, although there is the prohibition on eating the thigh sinew that comes from Jacob being wounded in the thigh and so forth. But still, it begins in earnest at *Mishpatim*. And yet, when I started looking at it in this new way that suddenly kind of got into my head, the stories hadn't stopped. It's a story about a man who is wrestling in the field and is killed by another man. A person transgresses against his neighbor, defiles a woman, all these kind of if-then, causalistic law in a sense, and yet they are stories, they're little mini-stories, and those stories are part of — I say this (02:42:00) as well as a reader of Talmud, because every kind of inch of Talmud is posing a certain situation as an anecdote — Shimon says to Levi, this and that. They're all these ways in which people get reckoned according to their behavior in a certain situation, which, in itself, is, in a miniature way, a story. Anyway, the *havurah* really enjoyed that *drash*, and somehow I think got identified with giving good *drashes*.

JG: Had you given *drashes* before?

JR: Not in that way. I think that might have been my very first, but I'm not positive. I did speak at a *Seudash Shlishit* once. And I read a part of my journal there that I had written down in — I think it was Yiddish but maybe Hebrew, no I think it was Hebrew. I shared that aspect of my spirituality with the group then, which again was received very warmly and hospitably. But somehow, I don't know, it led to Sharon Strassfeld eventually asking me to write a (02:43:00) piece on giving a *d'var torah*, which I haven't reviewed recently, but it's in the second volume of the *Jewish Catalog*. The *Jewish Catalog*, of course, is a very important evolution of *havurah* culture. It grew up maybe I think as a master's thesis that Rich Siegel and George Savran were working on at Brandeis, when they were students at Brandeis —

JG: In Jewish communal service? In NEJS?

JR: Let's see. George would have been studying Bible — he got his degree in Biblical literature there — and Richie was probably doing a degree in Jewish education, I think. Maybe communal service, I'm not sure. He eventually became a Hillel director himself, a portion of his career. Anyway, they got the idea from a book called the *People's Almanac*, which was kind of a lore in contemporary culture, and so forth. So we would create, they would create, (02:44:00) and as it turned out, it became a communal labor of creating a guide to Jewish practice, a guide to community living and what it meant to be

part of a community. A lot of the definition of *havurah* comes from the *Jewish Catalog*, its major expression. The *Catalog* changed a bit as it evolved to just Sharon and Michael editing it. I think there were certain discords about — I don't want to get into, other people can tell you better than I. But it's still become a very important book in the wider Jewish community.

JG: That many people in the *havurah* contributed to.

JR: I was actually only in the first two. I would have done something for the third — I don't know what I would have written on — but anyway, I did one on calligraphy for the first volume, and on giving a *d'var torah* for the second.

JG: Do you remember any other innovative practices or experiments that had to do with how service was conducted? (02:45:00) For instance, using sort of Quaker-style silence for a portion of it, or *davening* in English, using English words instead of —?

JR: Oh, well there was that. I think Art really pioneered in a lot of that. I mean, he was often — if he was leading prayer would sometimes read the English translation of the prayer rather than the Hebrew. I remember Art being a not-so tuneful singer. But there was a way that Art's *nusach* in *davening*, his custom in *davening*, grew into a very distinctive texture for me in my mind. I often miss that. Quaker meeting — Quaker silence would have been part of that early morning (02:46:00) meditation group and their practice [see addendum]. Quaker meeting style kind of evolved quickly in *havurah* history as being the way that people would share their thoughts about the parashah in the week in the Torah discussions.

JG: Can you just talk about that?

JR: Well, someone would give a *d'var torah* and then open it up to the group for discussions and people went around the room. Some people had things to say. Other people had things to say. That kind of spontaneous discussion of Torah as a group practice came into our community at a fairly early era.

JG: Was it in your first period there that that was —

JR: I think so. I'm trying to think back to that service that I attended where Buzzy was the speaker, and I can't remember if there was kind of Quaker meeting commentary from members of the group, but I suspect there was. I think it would have been a very important internal dynamic of *havurah* to have it that way [see addendum].

JG: Do you have a sense — was there any consensus about what (02:47:00) it was okay to focus on and what — were there any things that were not okay to focus on in terms of a *drash*, in terms of personal relevance, sort of outside of classical interpretations? Did any norms develop within the community?

JR: I don't know. Again, if they evolved, they would have evolved spontaneously and not wholly consciously. I don't remember norms being spoken or kind of put upon us as a rule that we should do this or that. I think there developed a certain inter-communal taste of what was appropriate to say to the group. I think people developed that more or less instinctually and learned how to address a community of people they knew well, but often addressing strangers who came to the *havurah* for a service.

JG: Can you articulate at all what that understanding was? (02:48:00)

JR: Just, gosh. I guess it was a feeling of a certain kind of etiquette. Certainly no one — it would not be received well if someone engaged in a personal attack on someone else. I can't imagine that happening, anyway. But somehow it was a fairly easy kind of conclusion to draw pre-emptively.

JG: Would people either bring up in a *drash* or in a discussion sort of contemporary issues?

JR: I think so. Again, I'm not sure [see addendum]. I know we were part of a war in Vietnam in those years, and that may have come into our discussion. It was also the years of the struggles for racial justice and that came into discussions. Everett's letter from Cuba, which essentially dealt with this pariah state that had developed in the Caribbean and its role, and I think there is still a sizeable (02:49:00) Jewish community in Cuba. So I don't know, all of that became part of our lore — teachings about peace, teachings about spiritual development. I mean, there are all of these ways which, you know, the Torah portion encouraged us to think in metaphors borrowed from the reading of the Torah itself.

JG: So another intrinsic part of the *havurah's* concept of community had to do with the role of study and learning, very central to the notion of community there. Can you talk about how the (02:50:00) *havurah* envisioned the role of teachers and learners and the relationship between them?

JR: Well, eventually, anyone who would want to teach a course could do so. But there was this cadre of particular teachers during my years at the *havurah* — certainly Art, Buzzy Fishbane, who taught biblical subjects. Basically, I can describe the courses that I

was doing. So Art taught this course on the Hasidic Masters. Everett Gendler taught a course on — essentially we used as a central text a book by Johann Bachofen, eighteenth century German, eighteenth or nineteenth century German writer, who wrote *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right*. It's a book I've come across recently because I study a lot of Walter Benjamin's writings, and he mentions it very favorably. But anyway, it's essentially a feminist theology, or feminist mythology, (02:51:00) worked into the inherited cultures of Bachofen's time. And Everett, I think, was trying to adapt a segment of that into Jewish culture, or at least think in terms of teaching sort of deep rooted mythological feminism. And maybe we read some of *The Great Mother* — was that the name of the book? Yeah, *The Great Mother* by Erich Neumann. And anyway, there were a number of these books that were out in very respectable academic presses that we made part of our study. I can't remember if we got into actual Jewish texts in that class, but in any case, it was kind of the ground plan. When I first visited that weekend, I first visited the *havurah*, Art was doing a course based on (02:52:00) Joseph Campbell's book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, and sort of myths of the hero and how it worked out in Bible and Jewish lore. So that was again kind of a significant subject. Eddie Feld at that point was teaching a course on Buber. Well, let's see, who else. David Roskies, as I said, taught Yiddish language and lit that year, the first year. So I was in a course taught by Buzzy Fishbane and Steven Mitchell, who has become since then a renowned translator from many languages. He's done a version of the, I think, the *I Ching*. No, the *Dao de Jing* — he's done a version of that. Anyway, he's a fairly extensive translator of many classical texts, world texts, both Eastern and Western. Anyway he was the co-teacher in that session and we studied the *Book of Job*. (02:53:00) So we got into the *Book of Job* in a very deep way that year. And I remember that what we got — we got into reading Nietzsche, and Nietzsche in connection with Job. I have a few entry items in my journal about Nietzsche and his influence in our thinking about all that. George wrote a paper, and I wrote a paper, both of whom were well-liked by Steven. I don't know if I talked much with Buzzy about my written work. I wrote about — basically a ten-page paper — about the relationship of the *Book of Job* to Greek tragedy, and using, at times, the philosophy in Nietzsche in there. So it got us into intellectually very ambitious things which we would not have gotten at rabbinical school, at traditional rabbinical school — certainly not in Orthodox, but to a great extent, either Conservative or Reform as well. (02:54:00)

JG: And would the teachers consciously try and create the connections between Joseph Campbell and Jewish mythology, for instance? Or —

JR: I think that in that particular course that Art was presiding over, teaching, that was the aim. Of course it was not known — it wasn't widely known at the time that Joseph Campbell was a notorious anti-Semite. [*laughs*]

JG: Oh no!

JR: Actually, he had figured into — I, at the age of thirteen or fourteen, had gotten into reading James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, and later Joyce's *Ulysses*. But with *Finnegan's Wake* there was a book called *A Skeleton Key to Finnegan's Wake* that was co-written by him and Henry Morton Campbell, and that became a major book in my teenage years, for me to kind of go back and forth between the text of *Finnegan* and so forth.

JG: What made you think of that?

JR: Why did I think of that? (02:55:00) I guess it was a Joseph Campbell connection, because Campbell was a co-author of *Skeleton Key*.

JG: I see, I see.

JR: Sorry, I should have made that clear.

JG: You just said the word “presided over” when I said “taught,” and I’d asked you about the relationship between teachers and learners —

JR: Well, I think the relationship was very fluid and very two-way, I think. Good teaching, I’ve discovered over time at Tufts — I was a bad teacher for a number of years at Tufts because I lectured, and I realized that students basically connect with the material much better not only if we make it into a class discussion, but if *they* make it into a class discussion. So I now routinely assign students to be discussion leaders, at least for one session a week or for one part of a session a week, to themselves present their own questions. It shows me, on the one hand, what registers with them, and so forth. But I think that was so kind of elementary and so well-known (02:56:00) in *havurah* culture in those years that there was never any theorizing about it. It was just the natural rhythm of what you do when you sit down and study a text together or study an issue together.

JG: How did the classes at the *havurah* compare to the style of classes you had at HUC, the teaching style at HUC, for instance — in the rabbinical school there?

JR: HUC was much more based on recitation. We would prepare a segment of Bible text, or a section of Talmud or Mishnah, or whatever we were studying, and recite in class. And read in the Hebrew, in the case of Talmud sometimes in Aramaic, and there was actually — one of the other ways I had Abe Ziegelbaum as a teacher was he was the tutor in Talmud. So I had to go to early morning sessions with him teaching, or presiding over,

our — “presiding over” maybe is (02:57:00) — in a sense, teaching in that era was much more one-way rather than two-way. So I think my exposure to the *havurah* meant that teaching was much more an inter-group dynamic than it was the pouring out of information from one expert, so a lot depended on our responses to the material. The second year I was in the *havurah*, Art gathered a group of us together to study the collected sayings of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, and also reading some of Rabbi Nachman’s tales, and that’s where I developed my dossier. But in any case, I took notes for that, usually handwritten notes — they were always handwritten notes — and I don’t know, somehow it developed among us a kind of communal personality, you could say. Art dedicated his book on Rabbi Nachman to us, to the people of that group. So I feel (02:58:00) a sense of connection through that. We took a course at the *havurah* on the early writings of Christianity, especially the Gospel stories, and to some degree the book of Acts. And so that led me into a lot of reading about Judaism and Christianity in late antiquity. So I poured myself into this partly as one who was going to be an aspiring scholar and wanted to learn as much as I could about late antiquity, but I wasn’t yet formally a graduate student or studying it.

JG: How often did classes at the *havurah* meet?

JR: I’m not sure. It might have been every other — two days a week, three days a week. I don’t think it was every day. I think it was a thing people did intermittently. But again, other people can tell you maybe better than I.

JG: Were there people who were thought of as teacher-types and people who were thought of as student-types? (02:59:00)

JR: [*laughs*] Well, I would consider Art and Buzzy, above all, maybe to a lesser extent Everett, but Everett, too, was a major teacher. They knew so much, and they poured forth what they knew, and they shared it generously. And we had at times very little to do but learn at their feet. But at the same time, you know, our responses to the material, our questions about the material, were important. Art, at one point, drew me aside and suggested that he and I study Zohar together. This was around the time when he and I were talking about creating this house of study for adults — creating a Lehrhaus at the *havurah*. At some point, Art and I might have gotten through one or two sessions of Zohar together, and I even remember the passages, because it dealt with *Song of Songs*. But I was very inexpert in reading Zohar at that point. I have to say, I’m much more (03:00:00) of an expert now than I used to be. Again it’s part of being an Aramaic junkie. Still, getting into the rhythm to see what it meant to see the Bible, to see biblical experience has something happening internally in the mind of God, in the identity of God, that somehow we were all — and that would include us as *Knesset Israel*, as the

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end, as the receiving community of all the lore and wisdom of the divine and the Torah and Moses and so forth — that we, as recipients, were also letting it flow through us and that was an important part of it for me.

JG: So that would also seem to be, Art's invitation to you —

JR: I was very touched, very honored by it. I remember being sort of tongue-tied getting through this passage. Art read the passage in Aramaic and I sort of understood it. My Talmudic Aramaic didn't quite (03:01:00) equip me for the vocabulary of Zohar, which is actually in some ways much more elementary than Talmud Aramaic.

JG: So given the *havurah's* commitment towards a sort of egalitarian, non-hierarchical ideal, even in the relationship between teachers and students, how did that work in fact — the practice — when there were issues of authority and expertise at stake?

JR: Well, there often, there was basically an appointed person — I remember Larry Laufman, an early member of the *havurah*, being on this task in the years, some of the years I was there — of a kind of a *gabbai*, you could call it. The person who kind of managed the day to day business of getting things done, having a meal at a certain time. Somehow Larry often read us the agenda of what we were to be doing, so that was one form of leadership, although it was an appointed position, and it was a person who was exercising a responsibility, to be a kind of coordinator (03:02:00) and so that was coordinator-type leadership. And there was leadership in learning and teaching as well that I think just flowed from the great amount that the people we were receiving from knew and were communicating. But I can't say — certainly there was no rebbe of the community. Art would come the closest to that definition. Maybe if Zalman had been in the *havurah* a few years more.

JG: He was there how long?

JR: He was there just in the first year.

JG: Because he was in the Boston area that year, is that right?

JR: He had been pursuing a graduate degree at Boston University, and I think also maybe working as a Hillel director. I'm not sure. Anyway, had he continued he might have gravitated toward rebbe-ship. But I don't think so, in truth. There's a part of me that says, no. I think both Art and Zalman would have (03:03:00) seen their role as collective, rather than you know, an individual leading. Yeah.

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JG: When you first joined, in the first year, two years you were there, was there in any sense an established curriculum or sense of any particular body of knowledge or skill set that they wanted everybody to essentially master?

JR: Not really. And maybe this was the difference between us and a traditional seminary. At a traditional seminary, what — first of all, had I gone on at HUC, I would have had a course in codes, and therefore reading either Maimonides or Karo's *Shulchan Aruch*, and maybe commentaries as well, and becoming more expert in Halachah. So Halachah was not really a subject in *havurah* learning until Nehemia Polen came in as a member. Nehemia had great learning (03:04:00) in the *halakhic* parts of —

JG: When did he come in?

JR: Well, he was already in the *havurah* in the year I came back to it, 1974. So I don't know if he — I can't remember if he was there in '73, but he lived in the house and was very much — he'd gone to yeshiva, I think in Baltimore. Anyhow, he became a major teacher in the *havurah* during those years.

JG: Was there a way to help people who had weaker skill bases when they began at the *havurah*? Learning opportunities?

JR: Well, my nearest experience with that was being a tutor to various people who were less experienced in reading Hebrew and Jewish texts. So being a tutor of Hebrew in those settings was one of my — I can't say it was an (03:05:00) official responsibility, because it was mostly with the people of Dorton, so it wasn't actually officially a *havurah* activity. But it gave me an opportunity to be a teacher in that setting. I can't remember anyone ever sitting down with me and teaching me greater intricacies of a text or — I had actually at HUC had a very thorough introduction to biblical Hebrew grammar. It was taught first of all by Arnold Band, secondly by Wolf Leslau, he was a major Semitic language scholar. He specialized at some point in his career on Ethiopian Jews, and therefore was a reader of ancient Ethiopian texts, Ge'ez language text. I actually studied Ge'ez in transliteration once and found it a very beautiful language. It's very similar to Hebrew in many ways.

JG: You're a language guy.

JR: I love language. I have studied in my lifetime some thirty languages. I can't say I'm expert in — maybe English. (03:06:00) I don't know. But I can speak Hebrew and French and badly German, but I can read German. I wound up getting into a lot of these foreign language sources when I was writing my dissertation for Santa Cruz.

JG: So at the end of the first year, my understanding is, Art Green wrote a letter to the community calling the *havurah's* academic program the *havurah's* most serious failure. So this must be just before you came.

JR: Huh. Before I came?

JG: Well, at the end of the first year.

JR: In Cambridge, you mean?

JG: I assume.

JR: That's interesting. I never knew that. I have no knowledge of it, but I can't think that there was ever any sense of our learning, in the first two years I was there, that our learning was deficient in any way. I mean, I was getting a tremendous amount out of it. And I have a feeling that the teachers were (03:07:00) getting a tremendous amount out of it.

JG: You don't remember at what point the *havurah* basically decided that it really wasn't a seminary, it was a community? That may have had to do with how important a particular curriculum was, as opposed to classes that people wanted to teach and take.

JR: The sense of curriculum I think of as having been much looser. And somehow the seminary idea I think basically faded into the air after a certain point. And I can't remember when that point was. Somehow people weren't talking about becoming rabbis anymore.

JG: But the first year, when you went, that was still in the air?

JR: Well, it was in the air, but again — this is what got me excited about it in the first place — it was in the air to study these various alternative subjects, like Kabbalah, like Hasidism, as serious subjects, even early Christianity as a serious subject. (03:08:00) But there wasn't any sense — I actually went to Rabbi Joe Polak at BU [Boston University] and asked him what he considered a respectable rabbinical education, and he reeled off — I still have it in a file somewhere — he reeled off to me the various books, books of codes, and legal codes, and parts of Talmud, a whole range of traditional Jewish texts that he considered part of the indispensable curriculum for the rabbinate. He was doing it kind of off the cuff himself as I was asking him, but still there was a sense there that a yeshiva-trained rabbi knew what to teach in a yeshiva. We were not a yeshiva. And I'm not sure

even whether we approximated the group dynamics of kind of the relationship of a yeshiva community. Again, reading Peretz's memoir, (03:09:00) I got more of a sense that what one learned from one year to the next, got sent arbitrarily to this teacher or that teacher, mostly around Zamosc, which is the town of Poland where he lived. But, you know, and maybe some of that dynamic — [*dog barking*] sorry he sometimes, he's okay, he just has strange dreams sometimes.

JG: I want to turn to another aspect of *havurah* life and that has to do with social activism. This is clearly a period of tremendous social activism on the part of American youth (03:10:00) generally, including American Jews. And you had been very involved in anti-war activity before coming to Cambridge and Boston. How did you find the political atmosphere at Havurat Shalom?

JR: Well, probably all of us were liberal or left-wing in some way, in our politics. I can't think of anyone who wasn't. I wasn't always conscious of it. I remember in November of — early November 1969, we all went down to Washington for a big march that assembled 500,000 people. Really amazing event, which also had its share of discord — eventually police shooting canisters of tear gas. We ourselves got caught in an auto garage with a teargas that exploded not far from where we were. We went into the garage to avoid it, but it really burns the eyes, and it really (03:11:00) wrecks havoc with a person if you're right in the midst of it.

JG: You're talking about an anti-war protest?

JR: This was an anti-war demonstration, and there were marchers in the streets and police using their billy clubs. It was a very at times brutal event.

JG: Do you remember who you were with?

JR: I think I was with — Joe Reimer was one of the people I remember being there. I think Neal Kaunfer, who was a member of the New York Havurah; he was also one of the founders of Kibbutz Gezer, anyway, he was there. My friends Howard — I'm sorry, I was friendly with Pegin who had been sort of a sometime-girlfriend of mine during that fall, and so I knew her. We had kind of cooled our relationship for a while, and it kind of got reborn again in Washington. But there was a lot — I'm trying to think of who the main *havurah* people were who were there, because I remember we drove from Boston and drove back together. (03:12:00) Maybe David Roskies was part of that. Again, I'm not sure. There were — eight or ten members of the *havurah* were involved in the action. We met at what became the Shalom Center, I'm not sure. Arthur Waskow was one of the people who was very involved as an organizer and as a spokesperson in that event. But I

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remember basically just sitting on a hillside listening to — it might have been Joan Baez, I'm trying to remember. There was a lot of good music that was part of that. And of course Nixon was sitting there in the White House, having perpetuated the Vietnam War in nasty ways that would still be with us for another six or seven years.

JG: Some members complained of a lack of political awareness and interest within Havurat Shalom.

JR: That's possible. I mean, it's possible that (03:13:00) people felt more of a connection to just the vocation of study, spirituality. And I can picture that. I don't remember being in specific conversations about that. Jim Kugel, I do remember being in a conversation about it with. He, I think, said this at a *havurah* meeting that he felt we should be much more involved with inner-city projects, with ghetto communities in downtown Boston, and that also the *havurah* should be a lifetime commitment. He eventually went on to be a major Jewish scholar, biblical scholar of his own, biblical and rabbinic scholar. So he eventually drifted back into academia. He had actually gotten a Masters' from Yale in comparative lit before he came to the *havurah*.

JG: At some other *havurah*, like the NY Havurah, or Fabrangen, for that matter, political activism was much more at the center of their (03:14:00) self-conception. Where would you say it figured in Havurat Shalom's sense of self and purpose?

JR: My main experience of it was the March on Washington. I can't remember any other major group — I once had been to a peace march in Washington, a year before, a year or two before coming to the *havurah*. But that was my main sort of public activity, was that one demonstration.

JG: Did you personally stay involved in either anti-war protests or political activity of any kind during your *havurah* period?

JR: Yeah, I can't remember going. I think, no. I'm not sure [see addendum]. Jim actually became a director of the Jewish Peace Fellowship. I had once been offered the opportunity to do that, and I had too many other commitments and didn't take it on.

JG: At what point was that?

JR: This was (03:15:00) I think '69-'70.

JG: So same period?

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JR: No, it would have been '70-'71, I think, because I had worked as an assistant to Rabbi Gold at the Hillel at Harvard. And so he came to work there at the Hillel, what was then the Hillel building —

JG: Who did?

JR: Jim. He came to work, I think —

JG: On Bryant Street?

JR: On Bryant Street. And he did draft counseling. He was the head of the Jewish Peace Fellowship there, so he stayed very active. I don't think I was doing draft counseling there, although I did a fair amount of it when I was in California. But again, draft counseling is not the same as anti-war, but anti-war also has to be done by the diplomats, and that was a long, complicated process.

JG: Another key event that happened during this same period was the Six Day War, which happened shortly before (03:16:00) you got involved in the *havurah*. And you had just traveled to Israel for the first time that summer prior to joining the *havurah*.

JR: Well, the war was '67.

JG: So, the following summer, two summers later.

JR: Two summers later. I was there in 1969. Yeah, first of all, that was a generation of Israeli culture and Israeli history that I strongly identify with. I guess I would have had to be a soldier or some kind of conscientious objector. I'm not sure where it would have carried me if I'd been an Israeli at the time. But that early generation included veterans of the Six Day War who are among the most brave and self-sacrificing people. There were of course a great number who were killed, but they were part of a peace movement. There's a book called *The Seventh Day* (03:17:00) which is — the Hebrew title was *Siach Lochamim* and I have both editions at my office. But in any case, I identified very strongly with that group in particular, and I think when I first visited Israel that year, I might have seen in a movie theater the movie *Matzor*, which is a 1969 movie, I think, that starred Gila Almagor and Dahn Ben-Amotz. Amotz was himself a folklorist and scholar in his own right, but he was also an actor. And it had to do with a love relationship between a woman who was a widow of the Six Day War and this fellow who was a building contractor, played by Ben-Amotz — it was kind of about their love affair — while at the same time she was being assiduously watched over by the army buddies of her late husband. They were horning in on her life, she was under a state of siege

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(03:18:00) from them, and somehow it became a whole metaphor for Israel itself being in a state of siege. It was a quite wonderful movie.

JG: Makes me want to go back and see it. How would you describe the feeling, within the *havurah*, in general about Israel and Zionism?

JR: I think there was a very friendly attitude toward it. Certainly, a number of our members eventually moved to Israel. Jim Kugel now lives in Israel and teaches at Bar Ilan. There are others — David Roskies has a permanent apartment there, in Tel Aviv.

JG: When was it that the group left to form Kibbutz Gezer?

JR: That would have been — 1970, '71. I remember being at a going away party for the people. We met at a big steamship in New York Harbor, and lots of champagne flowed, and so forth. And Louis and Neal Kaunfer and Steven Zweibaum were among the principal people there. (03:19:00) Louis's mother — I'm sorry, Steven Epstein's mother was there. So, in any case, they went off to form Kibbutz Gezer. I once visited Gezer years later — I was there in '77 — and I used that time to visit Kibbutz Gezer. By then, Louis, Epstein and others had left the community.

JG: And gone where?

JR: And come back to New York or the States. Louis eventually earned a degree in economics at Yale and now is a professor at Brown University.

JG: What was the feeling within Havurat Shalom when this group left to essentially make aliyah — form another kind of intentional community?

JR: I think there was probably a friendliness toward it. It was not — it didn't kind of flow from *havurah* energy that this project happened. It (03:20:00) flowed probably most of all from Neal Kaunfer, who I think first came up with the idea of creating a kibbutz there. And so that early generation of the kibbutz — you know, a lot of the Uncle House crowd, the three Uncle House principals, basically were all there — except for Clavado Avocado, me. And I've often wondered what my life would have been like if I'd lived on a kibbutz in Israel. Kibbutz culture was very appealing to me, the socialist idea of sharing communal resources and needs.

JG: Did you ever consider it actively?

JR: Not in a direct way, no.

JG: Was there any tension within the *havurah* over the place of Israel in people's lives, in Jewish lives, conceptions of Judaism?

JR: (03:21:00) I'd say the core — again, the people I would have placed in the center of the room, and it would have included the Strassfelds if they had been there that year when I was asked to do that exercise — I think they have a very strong commitment to Israel. I confess I've been to Israel three times. I've not been back since 1981. And part of me is — nowadays — just afraid of confronting how rightwing Israel has become. In those days, the Labor party, the Labor alliance was very prominent in parliament. And that era has passed — with the election of Begin the era passed. And Israel has — not consistently, but in waves — moved gradually to the right, and now to the far right. And I find it a very repugnant aspect of Israeli history which I don't know the outcome of. Signs are not good, I have to say. (03:22:00)

JG: But at the time it was not a contentious issue, in your experience.

JR: Yeah, and I remember a discussion we had at a *havurah* reunion in the early nineties. It was a *havurah* reunion in which I said I hadn't been back there since '81, which was not that long a distance past, and I got chided for that by one or two of the members. Sharon, I think. She didn't light into me, but she expressed displeasure at the fact that I didn't think of Israel as a major center of my own geographical migrations, or my own relationship to the country.

JG: Or Jewish life?

JR: I was very much involved in Jewish life. And I, I was by then —

JG: I mean, Israel as central to your Jewish life.

JR: Well, I'm thinking back now at my father assembling his fellow doctors, fellow physicians, which is actually on my fourth birthday, when he gathered together a bunch of doctors (03:23:00) to raise money for the nascent state of Israel. And that's a fixed memory in my mind. But I'm not sure what one would do, aside from being in Israel, certainly either as a citizen or as a frequent visitor — I guess somehow it didn't form. I've always prayed for the survival of Israel, and I've always believed myself to be a strong supporter of Israel. I now support a two-state solution, which it looks like, under the Netanyahu government, is not going to see the light of day. Again, I have a mixture of despair, but at the same time deep involvement with the fate of Israel. And I read all the time, especially in the *New York Review* and other publications, but I read any article I

come across that deals with Israel that's written by a fairly responsible person. I like the writings of David Schulman, who's written a lot (03:24:00) for *New York Review of Books*, and he's been involved in a peace movement in Israel, but I think even his recent essays have been discouraging. But anyway. He actually was very interested in developing a non-violent protest movement among the Palestinians and encouraging the Palestinians to be non-violent — if necessary, to bring upon themselves billy clubs and so forth. But I think even as a matter of military strategy the current Israeli government has a way of preventing such demonstrations from either happening or mushrooming. And again, that's part — there's a very disturbing movie called *Five Broken Cameras* about a filmmaker who is trying to photograph activity of Arab protest in the West Bank, and he was constantly being confronted by military authorities and told that he had to move out of the area.

JG: This is recent. (03:25:00)

JR: Yeah. They're cordoning off a certain area now as only open to Israeli settlers. Anyway the gap between the settler community and more cosmopolitan Israel is growing ever wider, and I'm very disturbed about that.

JG: I wanted to look at the issue of self-reflection for a minute. We've mentioned it a number of times over the course of our conversation because this was a very self-reflective group as a whole, and you certainly were, as a writer, a very prolific writer. So in addition to keeping the journal, you were encouraged to write, even starting back then, for a number of different publications.

JR: I wrote a lot for *Response*. That was probably my main avenue for publication in the early —

JG: Can you tell us about *Response* and what role it had in the *havurah* at the time and in the evolution of the *havurah* movement?

JR: Well, as a historical phenomenon, it's to the credit of Bill Novak, (03:26:00) who — he himself very cosmopolitan guy, essentially — cosmopolitan within the Jewish world, and also wanting to bring together Jewish countercultural figures, but also people from — Yitz Greenberg and Blu Greenberg, who come from an Orthodox community, but still are open to counterculture in certain ways.

JG: And Bill himself was a member of Havurat Shalom for a long time.

JR: I know Bill is partly — yes, was a member. And he and I were pretty good friends in the early seventies, but we drifted apart — maybe as far as the late seventies. Actually all through the seventies we were fairly close friends. We drifted apart, not through any discord, just somehow it was — entropy, I guess I would call it [see addendum]. But he did, I think, a wonderful thing in creating this magazine because it carried poetry, it carried essays, it carried interviews, it carried reflections on all aspects of contemporary Jewish life (03:27:00) in America, and to some extent in Israel. Bill, of course, is an expert interviewer, which he's had to be as a ghostwriter. In any case, that's part of it. I was actually at the bris of BJ Novak, now a celebrated actor. I wrote a poem for that bris, the one time I wrote a poem for *a bris*. I did it once also for the baby-naming of a girl, Nehemia's oldest daughter. But anyway, I became sort of *havurah* poet —

JG: You sound like you were the poet of the movement in many ways.

JR: [*laughs*] I wouldn't go that far. There were others. And then in the early eighties — '81 was the first issue — David Roskies and Alan Mintz created the journal *Prooftexts* — it's a journal of Jewish literary history — and encouraged me to write about Bible, which I was then into. And I once reviewed a book on the modern (03:28:00) Hebrew language for them, and reviewed occasionally some books for the journal, and produced, as my first major piece of writing on the Bible, I studied the Garden of Eden story, which was the first chapter of my book, *King and Kin*. Well, anyway, we existed on several levels, which on the one hand, belletristic areas, and on the other, scholarly areas. I've since changed fields. In the mid-nineties I became a historian of Jewish experience on film and have written a book which I'm trying to get published now dealing with six films that were made between 1920 and 1947 and the way they interacted with an era of catastrophe, which effectively began in 1914. But anyway, that's been my (03:29:00) more recent preoccupation.

JG: And I want to get, in just a minute, to how you came to your history of consciousness —

JR: Sure.

JG: So I just want to take a minute to review, since we're talking about self-consciousness — I mean self-reflection — the fact that there was a great deal of self-consciousness, as I understand it, in the early *havurah* community about what kind of community the *havurah* intended to be, wanted to be, and a lot of the feeling — several different issues, kind of key issues around with things revolved in the early years. And so I want to talk about a few of those and just get your thoughts on their import, and to what extent they were perceived as challenges, and how, if at all, the *havurah* tried to address

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them. (03:30:00) One was the issue of the admissions process, which you talked about from the very first writings in your journal, and the notion of inclusivity and exclusivity within the *havurah*.

JR: I think the *havurah* over the years has become a — I think membership in the *havurah* was often just a matter of people who lived in the neighborhood and lived nearby willing to commit the time and energy.

JG: Eventually.

JR: Eventually, yeah. Somewhere in the mid-seventies it evolved into that. It was much less a community where people had to “apply.”

JG: At that point, it also sounds to me that many, if not most of the original members had departed for other —

JR: A lot of them, a lot of the core group, yeah. At least while I was away in graduate school in Santa Cruz, a lot of the earliest community started to drift apart. (03:31:00) Art moved to Philadelphia, began teaching at Penn. There were other people who migrated. Zalman eventually was in Philadelphia as well, was a part of P’nei Or, which I think was then called *B’nei Or*, so there was these various communities of Jewish Renewal that dispersed and bore fruition in other locations. And so when I got back, there were a fair number of new people. David Kronfeld, Nehemia was another. I’m trying to think of — anyway, a fair number of people who were members, either on a short term or long-term basis.

JG: So you basically were there for two years, then you left for graduate school, came back in ’74, and were a member until around ’81.

JR: I left in ’81. Actually my sense of identity as a member (03:32:00) was a lot different in the latter days than in the former days. I’m not sure I psychologically felt myself to be a full member. I think I paid annual dues. I know I paid rent.

JG: You lived in the building.

JR: Yes. So I was both a tenant and at the same time an active member in the sense of participating, giving *divrei torah*, leading services sometimes. Anyway a number of people came in in those years who were very dynamic and helpful influences in the community. Les Bronstein, I don’t know if he’s going to figure into your research —

JG: The project is focused right now on —

JR: — just the early years. Anyway, I have to think that out though, how I felt my identity, as a member of the household, on the one hand, and as a member of the *havurah*. And there was something different about the texture of it in my own experience. (03:33:00) I felt like an older member — maybe it was a generational thing, that the new people coming in were much younger than me in age. The average age of the people in the early years would have been — well, Art was born in 1940, I think. Buzzy, Kathy, Burt Jacobsen, a number of those members were older than I. Kathy was probably not. The others are older than I. And so I was a war baby, and the generation that came after were baby boomers, and I think that made for a difference, both in the texture of the *havurah* and for the way group discussions went. I can't put my finger on it precisely, but again, as I said, it was something I felt as a different experience from what I had known before.

JG: And how did it change the nature of the community?

JR: Well, I think it became more (03:34:00) open. People, again as I said, people who lived nearby and who wanted to come to services and wanted to participate in communal meals, at some point wanted to pay dues and become active members — it became a shul. It became a synagogue, which it still is. But it's also a synagogue that's a *beit midrash*, where study takes place in ways maybe that don't happen in informal ways at a contemporary suburban synagogue. I think at a suburban synagogue, there's a class, and the leader comes in and leads the class and lectures or presents information. But I think at the *havurah* it was always on a much more informal basis. But people were participating — especially women were participating more and more. And eventually gay people were participating. And most recently, transsexual people have been part of the *havurah*, and a very important part. I mean, again, (03:35:00) it's part of the evolution. I can't say I'm fully in allegiance to the bi-gender God that is expressed in the *havurah* prayerbook. At times, it's a real exercise in mindfulness to me to come to a *havurah* service, and I still, in my head, chant the traditional service, but still join in whatever group recitation happens.

JG: What is the *havurah* prayerbook?

JR: It's produced by the current members of the *havurah*. It's been out for years. Aliza Artz was one of the main coordinators of it. But in any case, it's — I should know the title. It has a title with the word “shalom” in it. And essentially, it involved — and this is where I felt myself drawing a line, at least inwardly — changing the biblical (03:36:00) text. Feminizing the masculine verbs applying to God, so that God is in effect bi-gendered. I think God is bi-gendered also, but sort of through the language of kabbalah I

arrive there. I've occasionally taught the preface to *Shaarei Ora*, this primer on kabbalah. I've taught that in the *havurah* itself, and I also used it as a major guide in my own preparation of the Reconstructionist prayer book [see addendum]. But I, as a translator of siddur, I was more into a gender-neutral representation of God. And they were more into — almost within the same, two consecutive strokes — of moving from a masculine representation of God to a feminine. And so when I'm there, I often have to in my head think out the prayer service in a traditional way, but still integrate my responses and my rising and sitting, and on (03:37:00) Yom Kippur bowing down to the floor — all of that, in coordination with *havurah* ritual. I should also mention that *Purimspiels* have been a very important part of *havurah* culture.

JG: Right from the beginning.

JR: Right from the beginning. The first *Purimspiel* I was at in 1970 was an amazing, wonderfully drunken event. Probably cannabis played a role in some of those. And certainly when I was living there between '74 and '81 both cannabis and — actually, I was a borderline alcoholic in those years too, so I drank a lot. But the *Purimspiel* was always an opportunity to engage in satire, to turn the world on its head, to introduce the carnivalesque, and that experience still goes on at the *havurah* — is a very important part of *havurah* culture.

JG: Yeah. So to go back to (03:38:00) my little list of issues to discuss, the other is the very notion of power in this egalitarian, idealistic community and how that played out in reality, or what the tensions were around it, or authority.

JR: I don't think power was ever a central word in our vocabulary. Both power and authority have very much been soft-pedaled, throughout *haruvah* history, probably since its earliest days. It was not a concept that became an operative principal in any way for us during our own evolution as a community.

JG: To what extent do you think the community lived up to that idea?

JR: Well, I'd be hard-pressed to think of any particular person as a center of power or authority. Certain people, I think of Aliza as a major leader of the *havurah* — [see addendum]

JG: In the mid — Aliza Artz, (03:39:00) you're saying. So later.

JR: Aliza Artz, so in the later years. A fellow named Larry Rosenwald, who's a professor at Wellesley commutes in to *havurah* services and he plays a role, major role, in the

havurah. I have this semi, basically twice a year tradition of teaching a text, one on Tikkun Leil Shavuot and the other on Erev Yom Kippur. That's been a major part of my own relationship to the *havurah* has been through that. I don't think of myself as exercising any sort of power over the members. Again, I don't have the sociological or anthropological vocabulary to understand where the power lay. To some degree, we saw the world as the power lying outside of us. It was the centers of power in Washington, or for that matter, Jerusalem and other places, where, (03:40:00) at times, power groups evolved we either did not approve of or felt some resistance to.

JG: What about the notion of intimate community? An intentional community and permanent community, as there was, among the deliberations in those early years, the question of whether Havurat Shalom was going to conceive of itself and act as a permanent community for its members.

JR: I think it's that way now for many members. I mean, many current members are committed to it on a long term or lifetime basis. I don't think — first of all, I think so many of us were in flux in our careers and in our learning and in our professional accreditation — all of that, that it took us in a dispersed way out to other places. So I think the notion of an intentional community that would stay together as a group on a permanent basis never quite gained traction in those early years. (03:41:00) And, I mean, in a certain way I think the present group is a lot more stable in that sense. It is a neighborhood shul. People are part of it and consider it a lifetime commitment. But living together as a commune was floated as an idea, and I would say pretty quickly rejected, or was allowed to inhabit the hinterlands of our ideological reflections. One is, I can't figure out how it would have ever worked out logistically. Would it mean we'd buy a major piece of property and all live on it or in it? You know, a retreat center of some sort? I'm not quite sure what would have been the dynamic of that, but how do you set up that kind of group when especially so many of us were in motion and moving about?

JG: And pre-your adult family life, for many people — children —

JR: That's right. That's right. Actually I think a major (03:42:00) transition came when members of the old *havurah* started marrying and having children. Somehow it became a much more child-centered culture, and in ways that I can either not relate to or felt excluded from because I wasn't married and a parent. And so, I would date that to roughly through the 1970s, that families were growing much more into nuclear families with kids of their own, and in a sense, their identity as a household.

JG: So, I want to take this sort of final portion of our time to do just some final reflections on what all this has meant in your life, and also where you went from there. So as we've

been saying, the first period of your membership, the one we've been focused on mainly, '69 to '71. At that point you left to go to graduate school. Why did you leave and what were you — at least briefly?

JR: (03:43:00) This was a phenomenon of my own disorientation. Also my own need to be eclectic and polymath in whatever I can devote myself to. That's what led me to the study of many languages and so forth [see addendum]. But I wound up applying to four different graduate schools in four different fields. And in fact, switching my application in one of the applications from one department to another department. So I was pretty scattered in my goals at the time, but I was exploring. And so I applied to Harvard in graduate study in religion. I applied to Brandeis, first in Judaic studies — I guess I was going to study modern Jewish thought with Nachum Glatzer or maybe study mysticism with Alexander Altmann, who was a professor in that. And then eventually I ended up gravitating to (03:44:00) Alan Grossman, who was a professor of English and knew a tremendous amount about English poetry, and he was sort of a charismatic light at Brandeis University at the time, and he was willing to accept me. Anyway, I got into Brandeis in — I guess it would have been Judaic Studies. I applied to Berkeley in Comparative Lit where I would have become a student of Robert Alter. He eventually did become my teacher, but not in that setting. And I applied to UC Santa Cruz in the History of Consciousness. And I'd read Norman O. Brown's *Love's Body* in 1970 and was head over heels in love with that book. And I loved the innovative way in which he presented scholarship in that book and the kind of —

JG: What was the —?

JR: It's the fruition of his own experience of psychoanalysis, and his relationship to psychoanalysis. (03:45:00) But it transforms ideas of Freud and Marx and, you know, various path breakers in Western, European thought and so forth [see addendum]. Anyway, it's done in this kind of free associative way. It's done in these little chunks, paragraphs at the top or bottom of which he would list a bunch of sources [see addendum]. So in that sense it was a little bit scatterbrained in its orientation, but he was a very careful and wonderful weaver of ideas in that book. And it made me a big fan of his. I also read his book *Life Against Death* which is also a primer of Freud, about Freud. I'm not sure if I consider myself — I've never undergone Freudian psychoanalysis. I've been in conventional therapy with a face to face therapist, not sitting on a (03:46:00) a couch, lying on a couch. But, in any case, I wanted to become a student of Norman O. Brown, and there were other leading lights out there I was to discover —

JG: At Santa Cruz.

JR: — at Santa Cruz, whom I was later to discover. And in fact, my relationship with Norman O. Brown got very complicated. First of all, I went out there after having gotten accepted to the program, he had actually had some acquaintance with Zalman Schachter. And so I had lunch with Norman O. Brown and he urged me to kind of develop — he said he was worried about me not having intellectual companionship at Santa Cruz and he urged me to maintain a connection with Zalman and other kind of non-traditional thinkers, counter cultural thinkers, perhaps. Eventually I was in a seminar taught by Norman O. Brown, but it was kind of (03:47:00) aimless and wandering. It wasn't a very good class, in that sense. He was then a fan of the writings of Mao, so the Marxist side of him and the Freudian side of him are all kind of intermingled in interesting ways, but it was something that didn't transfer well in a class setting, so I felt kind of alienated from that seminar. Santa Cruz also had kind of an odd system of not grading students. There were no course grades. Professors were supposed to write evaluations at the end of the course as to how the students did. I myself was a student-teacher in those days and had to write evaluations, but it got to be very complicated. So I kind of aimlessly floated around between lit courses and — who was eventually my main teacher at Santa Cruz was a Shakespeare scholar named Harry Berger, Jr. And Harry Berger — he's still alive, he's in his nineties now, a brilliant thinker about Shakespeare and (03:48:00) Western culture, and in general an incredible polymath himself. And he's written on everything from Renaissance studies to Robert Frost. He just goes all over the board himself, and he became for quite a while, my advisor. And I changed advisors when he had to go on leave, on a sabbatical. I was in a big crisis about what I wanted to study there, and it got worse and worse, but I also made the improbable step of trying to do two doctorates simultaneously. When I came — this was another thing I was sort of encouraged to do by Norman O. Brown — I decided to go back to an old teacher of mine, the Talmud teacher at Hebrew Union College, and asking him if I could do a Master's thesis in rabbinic thought or some aspect of rabbinic literature, and he said, sure, let's do that. And eventually he talked me into doing it as a doctorate. And I thought maybe I could write (03:49:00) two doctoral dissertations simultaneously. I was still late in the game flirting with the idea of doing a dissertation on William Blake. But I then eventually turned in this amalgam — and it was under the HUC doctorate program — that the bible scholar in the program found a very undisciplined work. It was very free associative in my own way, and he kind of disowned it or at least said it needed major revisions in order to be acceptable. And I was in a bad place in 1973. That was the second to last year I was there. 1972 to 1973 was a real crisis for me. I turned thirty that year. I was wondering what to do with my life. I went to UCLA and had a conversation with Arnold Band where he raked me over the coals for my aimlessness in my studies, and so I was feeling really (03:50:00) bad. I was having incredible insomnia. I was sleeping two hours a night plus trying to keep a job teaching at UC Davis, which involved 130-mile commute in two directions — so wreaking havoc with my life, I was not sleeping well, and I basically

crashed. And I fell into a really deep depression, which I've only in later times come to think of as clinical depression in a serious way [see addendum]. But it illustrated the importance to me of a good night's sleep. That's been an important regimen in my life in recent years. Anyway, I think some of that began in my early *havurah* years. I was experiencing depression then and didn't know it. And in some ways, traumas from my early family history have somehow sifted, only in recent years in my thinking, into my own psychology. Ways that my mother and her sisters (03:51:00) were traumatized by their father have somehow had its imprint in my life. And so those were part of the demons I was wrestling with in those years. Anyway, I eventually adopted a new advisor, a lovely fellow named Murray Baumgarten who was a professor of English at Santa Cruz. He introduced me to Robert Alter. I think maybe by that time I had written an article on study of the Bible for *Response Magazine* and Alter had read that and was very favorably impressed by it, and he agreed to become a reader of my dissertation.

JG: What was your dissertation going to be about?

JR: Well, I decided finally I was going to learn Bible in earnest, and essentially I had been an autodidact on Bible, but by 1974-'75, I was doing a tremendous amount of reading, both in Hebrew and in English and eventually in German, about biblical literature and biblical history. (03:52:00) And so I wanted to do that, and '74-'75, when I went back to the *havurah*, I was doing my studying at Harvard Divinity School library and writing my dissertation. It was a complicated period, but it eventually led to, again, a dissertation that some of the readers — Norman O. Brown in particular — found problematic. I had a four-member committee, and three of the four members were willing to pass it, which would qualify me for the doctorate. Norman O. Brown would not. Anyway —

JG: Why did you come back to Boston?

JR: I was not sure what to do in 1974. I had a choice, either moving back to my family in Los Angeles, but by that time I'd formed a lot of good friendships in the *havurah*. Somehow I wanted to move to a town where most of my friends were, (03:53:00) which in this case was there, at that point. I have a lot of friends from HUC who I've maintained contact with over the years, one of whom lives now in the Seattle area, who's still a very good friend of mine. He and I offered a paper together last fall. But in any case, that was the decision, to move back where I knew the greatest number of people. Anyway, it led to me getting very deeply into reading every kind of major book about biblical history or biblical literature that I could lay a hold of. I did a kind of tremendous amount of reading. I did a kind of free-associative paper for my orals. It was sort of interspersed — I wouldn't call it stream of consciousness, but it was written a bit in the style of *Love's*

Body in which I integrated Freud — not Freud, but Marx, and I was kind of a sort of a Marxist in those days, although nowadays I'm a Walter Benjamin-type Marxist, (03:54:00) which is a different thing. But I believe that class struggle and the gap between rich and poor in the world is a terrible thing, and that we have to battle it in whatever way we can. Anyway, but that was sort of part of my ideology of learning in those years. I don't know if I'm answering adequately what you're asking.

JG: Would you say that your *havurah* experience had any impact on where you eventually ended up in your decisions on where your area of focus would be?

JR: Well, I've had a lot of encouragement from certainly from David and Alan, about the stuff I was writing for *Prooftexts*. And somehow in the early nineties I switched fields. First of all, because, starting around 1990, I taught a course called "Jewish Experience on Film."

JG: This was at Tufts?

JR: Yeah, this was at Tufts. And actually students (03:55:00) encouraged me to do this, because I used to bring in film scenes or metaphors for a lot of my discussions in earlier classes I was teaching. And a couple of students suggested I do a course on Jewish film. So I acquired a little tiny video screen and a kind of portable TV which took videocassettes. And using videocassettes, I taught the course for a long time that way. Eventually they started having film exhibition rooms at Tufts. But in any case, by 1995, largely through the encouragement of Alan and David, I wound up writing for *Prooftexts* about Jewish film. I did a long article about Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not To Be*, which is a satire by a noted satirical filmmaker, internationally known filmmaker, a satire on the Nazi occupation of Poland — why and how that could become a subject of film. (03:56:00) He reaped much criticism for it, but it's a brilliant film and it uses the image of a Jew in a very interesting way. It uses Jewish experience indirectly in a very interesting way throughout the whole movie. So things like that have been my preoccupation, and sort of dealing with other films in my own personal canon of important Jewish movies, although I can't claim that my book has any canonical respectability, but it's basically getting deeper into these films that I taught.

JG: So some final questions —

JR: I hope I haven't been too longwinded.

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JG: You have not. So in the midst of this period when you were back in Boston, it must have been in '78, you published two pieces, one was a *d'var torah* for the *havurah*'s tenth anniversary —

JR: Oh, that's right.

JG: — as well as a piece that was published in *Genesis II*.

JR: That's right.

JG: (03:57:00) — an appreciation that you just sent me the other day. In the *d'var torah* you meditated on what you called the task at hand, the relationship between creating a counterculture and creating a culture.

JR: Well, the polarity of that, and this got developed especially in that article for *Genesis II*, was first of all, the one thing we had in common was an impatience with the staleness and the lack of imagination in the organized Jewish community, and we were offering some kind of alternative to that. But as I grew deeper in my commitments as a scholar and as a student, basically as I grew deeper in those commitments, I realized that we should be doing scholarship that would be Jewish culture. We should be doing works of the imagination that were part of Jewish culture. (03:58:00) It was one of our members, David Kronfeld, who wrote a whole novel about his experiences in the *havurah*.

JG: What's it called?

JR: Gosh —

JG: I'll look it up.

JR: You may have to research that. I can't remember it. David Roskies wrote a novel in which I am a character in the novel, called — can I just go search for it? I think it's called *Yiddishlands*.

JG: *Yiddishlands*.

JR: So you know. Anyway, he basically writes about that early two years in Somerville and the people that coalesced there. He actually asked me to send him the 1969 journal and I did, and it kind of helped him piece together (03:59:00) *havurah* history for himself. And he wrote back a very nice letter. I have to search for it, but he wrote back a very lovely letter about the stuff that I sent him. And I don't know. But so works of

imagination, to me, were very important. I still consider myself a Jewish poet [see addendum]. I do write a lot of poetry on not especially Jewish themes. It's developed into poems I write for Carol, usually on her birthday. And actually she asked of me once not to do a poem that was a tribute to her in some way, but to explore some theme in my imagination that I wanted to get deeper into. So I've made those November poems in that — I do write her a Valentine's Day poem, and that is a non-Jewish holiday, but in any case. Somehow I've kept going, my writing of poetry. I also write about life cycle. I wrote about (04:00:00) turning fifty. Actually I've written poems on turning thirty, forty, and fifty. I was having a senior moment in the sixty decade, but I got it back in the seventies, so I wrote a poem more recently about turning seventy.

JG: Interesting vantage point. So when you look back at the *havurah's* vision regarding community, and social justice, and prayer, and learning, what do you think, looking back, were its greatest strengths and its greatest weaknesses?

JR: I think the strengths flowed from the individual strengths of the members. I think it flowed from, you know, again, this kind of accidental historical unity that developed, these streams flowing together at one point, in concert. I think all of these people have gone on to produce incredibly distinguished works in scholarship — those who became scholars, they've done far more than I have in scholarship. (04:01:00) And, I don't know, I have to say that our greatest mark was as a group of Jews who thought seriously about being Jewish, thought seriously about the role of Jewish history in a diasporous society, and to some degree about our relationship to Israel. All kinds of serious Jewish thought is coming out of this. It's been my ambition to write a book with no footnotes [*laughs*] and so one of these days, I either want to write a book on the *Book of Genesis*, which I've taught for years and have just an informal reader's guide to the *Book of Genesis*, but talking them through — because I believe there's not a wasted word in the whole Book of Genesis, every tradition is there for a reason. And somehow in seeing the arrangement of traditions in biblical stories and story cycles, I've (04:02:00) learned an incredible amount about biblical history. And so I'd like to bring that to bear in a book, if I last that long. I like being a septuagenarian, but it makes you a little more uncertain about what the future brings.

JG: True. How would you say that the *havurah* has continued to shape your Jewish life and in what ways has your Jewish life really diverged from what it was in the *havurah* period?

JR: I'm not a current member of the *havurah*. I do feel myself to be a friendly visitor of the *havurah* when I go there. I guess I'm really there, I guess, three times a year — Shavuot, Purim, and Yom Kippur. And another old member, middle years member of the

havurah, is Deborah Cash, and she's now head of a major (04:03:00) dance alliance. Basically she's a scholar of dance and very involved in the arts in the Boston area and an incredibly bright and accomplished person. Anyway, she maintains kind of a sometime relationship — she and her husband maintain a sometime relationship with the *havurah*. I basically don't have a shul. I'm not sure if it's because I've gotten so into the practice of *davening* alone, or *davening* with my dog, or *davening yahrzeit minyans*, but I only have a shul kind of sporadically and when the opportunity arises. And I don't in general indulge in Torah discussions on Shabbat. Most of it is what I learn at home, and also I'm part of a study group (04:04:00) of old *havurah* members, one old *havurah* member, Ronnie Levin, who lives in Newton. We usually go to their house once a month — we had our wedding there — we go there once a month to study some texts. We've been reading through the *Book of Judges* and for a while we were reading Heschel, a lot of things just as members of the group are inspired to present a text and think it through with people. And I don't know, I'm atypical in this respect. I think all the old members of the *havurah* have, I think, commitments to shuls or minyans, some kind of prayer community that they're a part of. Michael, of course, was a rabbi in New York. I know a lot of people have this very deep relationship to organized Jewish life that I have somehow drifted away from, other than the fact that I'm a scholar, a professor of Judaic Studies and head of (04:05:00) the Judaic Studies program at Tufts. You know, I can't say that I'm — I don't know, again, I'm a drifter in that sense, even now.

JG: A consistent thread. And finally, what would you say the impact of the *havurah* movement has been on American Jewry in the larger sense?

JR: Certainly it has created things like the National Havurah Institute. It's created a kind of inter-*havurah* movement of great vitality and stability. I've taught sometimes at those *havurah* institute sessions. I think they're helping to remake the face of Judaism in that way. I mean, I think Jewish culture is the sum total of what it is. There is this organized synagogue life, and there is this kind of (04:06:00) para-synagogue life, I guess you could call it, of people who want to get deeper into learning or commitment in some way.

JG: Do you see the independent minyanim of today as being an outgrowth in some ways of the *havurah*?

JR: To a great extent, yeah. Newton Center Minyan I think grew out of the *havurah*, and certainly in New York various *havurah*-type groups have developed. That Upper West Side community is very much a center of *havurah*-type people and activities. But again, it goes city by city, and it's mostly in the big cities that I'm most conscious of it. But I think it exists. I'd have to think more, I realize I'm beyond interview on this, but I'd have to think more about, you know, what the actual, ultimate cultural input or cultural

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reverberations of *havurah*-type movements have done, and what (04:07:00) that has created in a large conceptual way. In a certain way, I'm reluctant to think that it can be theorized, except by a person. Maybe some confident historian will deal with this. Certainly using your archive materials will be really helpful in all this.

JG: I hope so. Well, we want to thank you so much.

JR: I'm so grateful.

JG: It was such a pleasure to talk to you.

JR: I'm so glad to be here.

Addendum

Pg. 2: The abuse might also have been sexual. The three sisters who survived death from natural causes into their adult life, including my mother, suffered from severe depression, most likely without knowing it. One sister was financially dependent on my mother and worked in menial jobs in department stores. Another (to my surprise) lived at least into the 1950s in a mental institution. (I was told she suffered from tuberculosis.) The hushing up of trauma was, in some sense, a measure of it. It's taken me some 70 years to understand better its effects on me and my sisters.

Pg. 13: I was wrong. It was only Friday. Saturday night I slept at the Havurah.

Pg. 22: Please excuse the lack of text.

Pg. 32: The song here is “The Kotzker Song,” traditionally sung by followers of the late-19th-century tsaddik, Menahem Mendl of Kotzk, known as the Kotzker Rebbe. It was taught to us Havurah members by David (Dovid) Roskies, who, like me, had joined the Havurah in 1969. I did my own translation of the song, which made up a page of my 1969-70 diary. The late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, of blessed memory, wrote a book about the Kotzker Rebbe, called *A Passion for Truth*.

Pg. 41: So, use of weed was common but not necessarily for all members.

Pg. 41: For about an hour, I thought I’d gone permanently insane. But in other ways, it was a worthwhile experience.

Pg. 43: I had grown up as part of traditional male culture. In the fourth grade, there was briefly a feud between the boys and the girls, and I and a close friend sided with the girls, which, to my surprise, the class approved of, and elected me as classroom president. But let’s not fool ourselves, male bias was so built into our society that I surely made it to adult life still in its grip.

Pg. 44: Not officially, and in fact there was one member, Debbie Wolman, who became a member, because her boyfriend was a member. The group did not object, and I’d guess she pressed it as an issue of principle — for which we should all be indebted — but Havurah women of the inner circle never officially became members. The lesson here, as I noted in my own case, is that traditional gender roles die hard, even for the most educated and enlightened.

Pg. 48: But Insight Meditation is not wholly compatible with more recent theories of Jewish meditation.

Pg. 50: The Quaker meeting style of discussion was probably always a practice from the beginning and evolved of its own accord.

Pg. 51: It surely was not my invention. I’m sure it was always there, even for so revered a scholar as Buzzy. I can’t remember what ensued after his brilliant presentation that memorable day in March of ’69, but I’m sure that communal talk was both the cradle for it and the response to it.

Pg. 51: Oh, I’m sure. It was axiomatic that a *d’var torah* was meant to address contemporary life and experience.”

Pg. 59: As noted, I gravitated more to writing and teaching in the years since. But my main commitment throughout the late ‘60s was peace and anti-war education, an

orientation I had in common with Jim Kugel, who became head of the Jewish Peace Fellowship, which was then housed at the Harvard Hillel on Divinity Ave.

Pg. 63: Early Havurah members still in Somerville were moving to Brookline and Newton, buying homes, having children, and being taken up with the business of normal life. Bill was not unique in this respect.

Pg. 66: A vitally important influence on me is 13th-century Spanish Kabbalist Yosef Gikatilla's primer on the ten *sefirot*. The ten stages of divine emanation. Each chapter deals with one of the *sefirot*, moving from lowest to highest. Each level is associated with a cluster of divine names and attributes, mostly words culled from biblical and rabbinic tradition, which collectively amounts to a portrait not just of the inner life of divinity but also of Jewish tradition. Printed editions of this work either highlight the words or place them at the end of a chapter. I thus culled them and wrote it out as a two-page chart in English. I mostly don't teach it to undergraduates, but it plays a vital role in my own spiritual life and was fundamental as a system underlying my prayer book translation. I also taught it to Havurah members when they were preparing *Birkat Shalom*. The Reconstructionists required of me that I produce a siddur that is wholly gender-nonspecific, but a true ben in that the Havurah folks were not constrained by that and have, in their own way, created something marvelous. A true bend in the spacetime of Jewish tradition, that may be read centuries from now, at least alongside the hundreds of innovative prayer books that have come out in the past two decades. But when I'm *davening* at Havurat Shalom, especially on the High Holidays, I still have trouble coordinating the bi-gendered prayers with my own adherence to the traditional siddurim. I bring with me the Harlow *mahzor*, which the Hav also provides for use throughout the day, and even the Hav keeps copies of the Birnbaum siddur the Sephardic edition, for use on other Jewish holidays. So, on Yom Kippur, it's a real exercise in mindfulness — saying, in an undertone, the traditional prayer while answering "Amen" to the bi-gendered version. I might be the only person in the universe faced with this dilemma.

Pg. 67: She and her husband Meredith are among the 36 people in my life whom I regard as *tsaddikim*.

Pg. 68: It's what changed me from being a biblical scholar to being a film historian on the cinema of Jewish experience over the past 24 years.

Pg. 69: Various other pathbreakers in the modern era, including a writer close to my heart since age 14: James Joyce. I bought *Finnegan's Wake* and *Ulysses* at that age from a sympathetic bookseller, and I'm still reading them 61 years later.

Pg. 69: Brown's *Love's Body* is written in isolated chunks of thought or theme, and at the bottom brief lists of his sources. The book free-associates in a Joycean way, and for me it validates the way our brains perceive reality. The Hebrew Bible was written or redacted that way. The Talmud was written that way, Maimonides' *Guide*, the *Zohar*, and even modern physics hovers between incompatible modes of reckoning that might forever remain fragmentary.

Pg. 70: Clear-cut clinical depression. I was ashamed to be suffering depression, to be taking amitriptyline—at least until I discovered the widespread use today of such meds by practically the entire bourgeoisie, who are giving themselves and their kids Prozac, Clonopin, and Effexor. I don't mean to be cynical about this. I think America needs at least a general stock-taking about what it all means. I'm a big fan of these medicines, which can, as it did for me, enable people to get on with their lives and have some hope. But we need to think of the whole history of the past hundred years, when such, when women were disappearing into mental institutions that treated them as schizophrenic, like my Aunt Frieda. I mentioned earlier the traumas my mother and her sister underwent. That, too, is part of the story we need to be exploring as a society.

Pg. 73: My friendship with David — we call him “Dovid”— has more recently started me thinking about conversation we used to have about the role or mission of the Jewish poet. As you noted earlier, a lot of people think of me as a Jewish poet. But the art of poetry doesn't sit still for any nation or people — its very anarchy is what keeps it alive. But I also write a lot of poetry on not explicitly Jewish themes. This includes poems I write for Carol, usually on her birthday. She once asked of me not to write poems that were tributes to her but to explore ideas about life, about reality, about the world — anything I happen to be preoccupied with as November rolls around. I also write on the gentile holiday of St. Valentine's, and this time they are about her or about some issue we have both been thinking about.