

Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project

JUDITH PLASKOW and MARTHA ACKELSBERG

Interviewed by Jayne K. Guberman

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Judith Plaskow and Martha Ackelsberg, 04/26/17

Jayne Guberman (JG): My name is Jayne Guberman, and today is Wednesday, April 26, 2017. I am here with Judith Plaskow and Martha Ackelsberg at their home in New York City, and we're going to record an interview for the Jewish Counterculture Oral History Project. Judith, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Judith Plaskow: Yes, you do.

JG: I'd like to start by talking first with you, Judith, and then with Martha about your personal and family background and flesh out a bit who you were at the time that you first got involved in the New York Havurah. Let's begin with your family and when you were growing up. You were born in 1947.

JP: Yes.

JG: In Brooklyn.

JP: Mmhmm.

JG: Can you tell us a little bit about your family?

JP: I had one sister, and my father was an accountant. My mother was a schoolteacher, a remedial reading teacher.

JG: Did you have extended family around?

JP: Yes, we did actually. We were quite close to my mother's family. My mother's sister lived in Westchester. She had four kids. We spent a lot of time with them. Yeah.

JG: So you moved to Long Island when you were three?

JP: Yeah, yeah.

JG: How would you describe your community, generally speaking?

JP: Booring. That was the main thing about it.

JG: How about demographically?

JP: It was white. It was 100% white for most of my growing up. By the time I was in high school there was one black family in the community, but it was surrounded by black neighborhoods on different sides. It was maybe a third Jewish, a third Catholic, and a

third Protestant. Those were the flavors then. Public school funding was an issue because there were so many Jews and Catholics, and increasingly there were more Orthodox Jews who sent their kids to private school — didn't want to pay for the public schools.

JG: What was the town that you lived in?

JP: West Hempstead.

JG: How would you describe the Jewish environment in your own home?

JP: I grew up Reform. We belonged to a Reform temple. It was serious. As a kid, I was very defensive about Reform Judaism. I had a lot of Conservative friends who thought of us as somehow less Jewish, but we actually went to temple a lot more than they went to synagogue. I went to twelve years of Hebrew school.

JG: You described it as classically Reform.

JP: Yes. It meant men did not cover their heads. If a man had walked in (0:03:00) with a *kippah*, he probably would have been asked to remove it. The main service was Friday night. We took out the Torah on Friday night. I think probably the only time there was Saturday morning was if there was a bar mitzvah.

JG: Did men wear a tallis?

JP: No. No. The rabbi did. But it was Friday night. They could have, if they took out the Torah they could've worn a tallis, but no, they didn't. The rabbi thought that anyone who was slightly more observant than him was completely irrational and superstitious and didn't belong in the modern world. You know, blah, blah. I mean as a kid, I didn't know that men did wear tallisim, so — I had no sense of what was there and what wasn't there. The Reform congregation was my reality.

JG: And you were using Reform prayer books?

JP: Yes, the old Reform Prayer Book. I actually have it on the shelf with my name on it.

JG: Did you have a relationship with the rabbi yourself?

JP: Um, that's a complicated question. Yes, in the sense that he certainly knew who I was. I both respected him and disliked him intensely.

JG: Why?

JP: Because he was dismissive of kids in general. He never saw who I was. I had a fight with my Hebrew school teacher when I was in seventh grade.

JG: About what?

JP: He was picking on me. The whole class knew he was picking on me. I actually dropped out briefly. The rabbi took the teacher's side. He could have asked anybody in the class. And I never forgave him for that. Also under my chuppah he said he had always wanted a rabbi in the congregation and now he had a rebbetzin, without ever knowing or caring that I had wanted to be a rabbi.

JG: It sounds like he was oblivious to all of this.

JP: Yes.

JG: To these things in general. How would you describe the attitude toward the roles of women and girls in this congregation when you were a child?

JP: Women were absolutely marginalized. They were on the bimah to light candles. (00:06:00) The service began with the blessing on the candles. Women did that. Otherwise, the only time women were on the bimah was Sisterhood Shabbat.

JG: What would they do then?

JP: Then they did everything. They did everything. And interestingly I actually had dinner a month ago with my rabbi's son. I was out speaking at Stanford. He, at a certain point, read all of his father's sermons and was telling me about the sermon about the ordination of women, which the rabbi would have delivered when I was in my last year of high school, saying that any woman who wanted to be a rabbi was probably psychologically ill, and should be examined.

JG: What you're describing is basically through the fifties and early sixties.

JP: Early sixties. Yeah.

JG: Did you have a bat mitzvah?

Judith Plaskow and Martha Ackelsberg, 04/26/17

JP: The rabbi did not believe in bar or bat mitzvah. But when boys' families insisted, he allowed them to have a bar mitzvah. The girls had a group Hebrew recognition service.

JG: What did that mean?

JP: It meant that we ran a service as a class one morning. We each read a paragraph or whatever of the service.

JG: Was the focus on confirmation?

JP: Yes. He was opposed to bar and bat mitzvah because he wanted kids to go through ninth grade.

JG: What was your experience with going to Hebrew school, Sunday school?

JP: It was a total waste of time.

JG: How much were you going?

JP: Well, I guess, for two years, I think seventh and eighth grade. Yeah, or sixth and seventh or seventh and eighth, I went twice a week, or maybe three times a week. I don't remember. But the rest of the time it was just once a week on Sunday morning.

JG: As you got older?

JP: Yes, and as a small child. I started in first grade.

JG: And that's when it usually started for everybody?

JP: Yeah, yeah. After Confirmation, there weren't very many people who hung in. I was actually the only person still there of my free choice. I kept hoping that I would learn something meaningful.

JG: And did you? Did you have any teachers who were —?

JP: I had one wonderful teacher. Lewis Brasz (00:08:57) his name was. I actually had him for three years. Fifth, sixth, and seventh grade. (00:09:00)

JG: What was wonderful about him?

JP: He took us seriously. He talked about real issues. We studied Bible with him. I had my first exposure to midrash with him, although he didn't call it that. He asked us to do midrash on the text and try to think ourselves into the text and expand on it. He's the one who told us about the Holocaust. He had been a colonel in the army in the Second World War, and I think he was involved in liberating a camp.

JG: And he told you about it?

JP: And he told us about it — in a way that wasn't too much but was respectful.

JG: Do you remember how you responded to that?

JP: I don't. I was obsessed with the Holocaust as a kid, but I can't remember exactly what relation that had to his telling us. Actually, it probably was as a result of him. I never made that connection before.

JG: Yeah. It sounds like you were fairly young when he was talking to the class about it.

JP: Yeah, yeah. Ten, eleven. But by twelve, I was reading the *Diary of Anne Frank* and everything that I could get my hands on.

JG: In a chapter of your book, *Goddess and God in the World: Conversations in Embodied Theology*, you described your interest in God and theology as going back to childhood. Are there particular memories that stand out for you as you think back on the evolution of your own thinking about it?

JP: I have very clear memories from when I was seven and I was at High Holiday services at the temple. There was a children's service in the morning. I was deeply moved by it. I promised God that I would come back in the afternoon. When I got home, a friend asked me to play in the afternoon, and I said I couldn't because I promised I'd go back to temple. And she said, "Promised who?" I remember feeling awkward. I knew that there was something peculiar about promising God, but I did say I promised God. That's certainly my earliest memory.

JG: A very personal relationship.

JP: It was partly about music. There was a particular hymn that I found extremely moving.

JG: What was that?

JP: “Hear Our Prayer,” I think it was. (00:12:00) And then I have a lot of less specific memories about thinking about God overall by ten, eleven, twelve. Also, there’s one another important specific memory. When I was about ten probably, it suddenly occurred to me as I was falling asleep that God could be a woman. I remember thinking to myself that we don’t know what God is. It could be that God is a woman. And how incredibly exciting that was. Sort of hugging that thought to myself for fifteen minutes before I fell asleep.

JG: Did you ever talk to anybody about it?

JP: I totally forgot about it for years. I think it was when I was in graduate school and started thinking about gender issues, that all of a sudden, I remembered that.

JG; Do you think it changed or influenced your own thinking and feeling and religious anything sort of over those years, even if you weren’t consciously thinking about it at that point?

JP: No. I actually don’t. No, I think it was a moment of having a thought that was too out there. There was nothing in my experience that reinforced it. What it says to me is that I was thinking about God, and that the idea of God was really important to me. And in retrospect it says, given how excited I was, what does it mean for little girls not to have an image of God as female. But at the time, all that was many years off.

JG: As you were becoming an adolescent, the country was caught up in the Civil Rights struggle, which you were very focused on. Was your family interested in the Civil Rights struggle?

JP: Yes. Yeah. I was ten when the Little Rock High School was integrated and I have a very clear childhood memory of my father pointing to the front page of *Newsday* and asking me whether I understood what was happening. I didn’t. And explaining it to me with deep passion in his voice.

JG: What was he explaining to you?

JP: He was explaining that Eisenhower had sent troops to allow black children to go to school — Negro children, of course, he said then. And that everybody was the same regardless of the color of their skin and of course they had the right to be at the school. It was very important. (00:15:00)

Judith Plaskow and Martha Ackelsberg, 04/26/17

JG: Was this also a period when you were starting to think about the Holocaust?

JP: Yes. Yes. For me they were very closely connected.

JP: How so?

JP: I was really interested in issues of oppression and victimization, and who was a victim and how does that happen and do people do that to each other?

JG: Have you in your own life witnessed or experienced oppression?

JP: No. Not really. The usual Long Island kid throwing blue stones at me and saying I killed Jesus, but it didn't go very deep.

JG: Blue stones?

JP: A lot of the driveways in our town were paved with small stones, and I remember a kid down the street throwing stones at me and saying, "You killed Jesus." It's like, Who is Jesus? I didn't even know who he was talking about.

JG: Wow.

JP: But, I wouldn't say that I had an experience of oppression. It's interesting because one of my closest friends is a friend since first grade, was a friend with whom I talked about these things. We both were very into the Civil Rights Movement and the Holocaust.

JG: Was she Jewish?

JP: Yes. We often asked ourselves why did this take in such a deep way?

JG: Where did all this thinking take you as you were getting into your high school years — about religion, about theology? Where would you say you were?

JP: As an adolescent, I wanted to be a rabbi. There were no women who were rabbis. My own rabbi was opposed to the ordination of women.

JG: What appealed to you about being a rabbi?

JP: That I could think about God all the time. *[laughs, nods]*

JG: *[laughs]*

JP: Right.

JG: You get paid for it.

JP: Exactly.

JG: Professionally.

JP: Exactly. Yeah. I don't think it was serving a congregation. No, it was being able to think about those issues.

JG: Real problems. Those issues.

JP: Yeah, yeah.

JG: But, did it seem —?

JP: It just didn't seem within the realm of possibility.

JG: Within the realm of possibility? It was a daydream.

JP: Right. Exactly. Right. I felt like (00:18:00) I wasn't one hundred percent sure that I believed in God. And I thought, to be a woman and want to be a rabbi, you really had to be one hundred percent sure.

JG: Given that you were a woman, you had to be all the more so. One hundred and fifty percent — as a woman.

JP: Right. Right. Right. Right.

JG: Ethical monotheism. That was sort of what you were being taught in the Reform movement. How did that relate to all of these questions that you were dealing with?

JP: Well, it was very powerful for me, because it combined belief in God with commitment to Civil Rights and thinking about oppression. It worked for me (00:19:00) really well. I loved the idea of ethical monotheism.

JG: Did you or your family participate actively in Civil Rights activism or protests or marches?

JP: I was at the March on Washington in '63. When I started college, I was in the Worcester Student Movement for Civil Rights.

JG: Did you hear King give his "I Have a Dream" speech?

JP: I did. It was an amazing moment. Yeah. I still remember it very clearly. And actually, the friend I was with, another one of my oldest friends, said that I turned to her and said, "We're doing something real for the first time."

JG: Even by just being present.

JP: Which I had no memory of — she just reminded me. I found it very powerful. It says to me that I must have had a lot of guilt already.

JG: And yet you said that you didn't actually necessarily connect your presence there, at the march, or Civil Rights activism, with your Jewish upbringing — sort of the teaching of, so to speak, ethical monotheism, Reform movement stands on prophetic Judaism and justice.

JP: The rabbi wanted the two of us to come home and talk to the Hebrew school about how we had gone because we were Jews. It's hard to separate out (00:21:00) my reaction from general dislike of my rabbi because I felt that I was there as an American. I was there as a human being. I wasn't there as a Jew. That's absurd. Of course I was there as a Jew. Aside from the fact that I was on a train with synagogues. *[laughs]*

JG: Part of what you're pointing to is the confluence of these ethical teachings within Judaism and general American values that were very present in society at the time.

JP: Right, right, right.

JG: Did you have anyone that you did talk to or could talk to about your theological concerns during those years in high school, about the place of women in Jewish life?

JP: Not really. I mean, even my close friends with whom I talked about the Civil Rights Movement, I had a sense would have thought of my wanting to be a rabbi as weird. I did have a male friend who wanted to be a rabbi. We talked about it with each other. He was

also in my Hebrew class. He ended up being a psychologist, actually. He might have been the one person I ever said it to.

JG: It strikes me as lonely for you.

JP: It was. It was in that.

JG: Did he take you seriously?

JP: The friend?

JG: The friend.

JP: Absolutely. We shared this wish.

JG: So you went off to college. You did your undergraduate degree at Clark University, which is in Worcester, Massachusetts. You started in '64?

JP: Right. '64.

JG: How did you decide on Clark?

JP: I skipped my senior year of high school. That really limited my choice of schools. Most schools wouldn't look at somebody who skipped their senior year.

JG: Why did you?

JP: I was miserable my sophomore year, and I felt my life would start when I went to college, so why delay? In fact, it was incredibly stupid. My friend and I talked about this. She also skipped her senior year. I don't know. As I say, I was waiting for my life to begin. And I thought, why postpone it? I don't even know. My father (00:24:00) was a member of Phi Beta Kappa, and he gave me a list of schools with Phi Beta Kappa chapters, and he said I could apply to any school east of the Mississippi and north of the Mason-Dixon line. I thought the Mississippi was at the border of Pennsylvania. *[laughs]* That's really how I ended up at Clark and not Oberlin, which would have made far more sense in terms of who I was. So I found Clark on a list of schools with Phi Beta Kappa chapters, and it sounded sort of interesting. I applied and got in.

JG: What did you study there?

JP: I started out as an English major. In my senior year, I switched my major to philosophy. They didn't have a religion department. Nobody knew I was interested in religion, and nobody said to me that you should apply to a school that has a department of what you're interested in. *[laughs]* So, right. I majored in English. But I spent my junior year at the University of Edinburgh, and that — two, three of my courses were in biblical studies. That was a fabulous year intellectually.

JG: Was that your first exposure to serious biblical study?

JP: Yes, it was.

JG: Tell us about that because it sounds like it was actually formative in your life.

JP: It was wonderful. I was taking the first and second year courses simultaneously. The first-year course was a general survey of an introduction to serious biblical scholarship. That's when I learned about J, P, D, and E, and a little bit of biblical history. A semester on Old Testament and a semester of New Testament, and then the second-year course looked in depth at certain books.

JG: Biblical books?

JP: Biblical books, yeah. I guess I was trying to figure out — I had gone to Edinburgh wanting to study Shakespeare. I also had a fabulous Shakespeare course, but I was trying to figure out what to do with the third course, and I asked the biblical studies professor if I could take both and he said yes. It was great to be getting an overview and in depth at the same time. The second-year course was small. Maybe there were a dozen of us in it. All the boys wanted to be ministers in the Church of Scotland. They were preparing (00:27:00) for divinity school. We would study together in the biblical studies library. We really developed friendships. We were a cohort. It was very rich intellectually.

JG: Had you ever been exposed to people — in a close relationship with people, who were such committed — more orthodox in their approach?

JP: No. That was really important. As I said, I grew up in a congregation where if you were Orthodox, you were a benighted fool. Here were all these — they weren't fundamentalists, but they were serious Christians. I liked them and I respected them. It really made me start seeing, I don't know, religion differently.

JG: Did it affect how you saw yourself Jewishly?

JP: It did in that the end of that year I went to Israel for a month, right after the Six Day War. During the course of the month, I went to services at HUC [Hebrew Union College] in Jerusalem and I realized I couldn't be a Reform Jew any more. That was the moment.

JG: Why was that?

JP: It seemed thin to me. It wasn't serious. It's hard for me to explain because it was really an emotional thing, something I had been probably coming to the whole year. There were basically no Jews in Edinburgh. There was an old synagogue with a few Jews. It was Orthodox. Women were up at the ceiling. It wasn't anything I would have gone into.

JG: It's interesting because you said earlier that your synagogue, and your rabbi for that matter, but your synagogue certainly, were serious Jews.

JP: Right, right.

JG: The thinness wasn't necessarily about how seriously they took their religion in a way. What —?

JP: It wasn't how seriously they took it. It was about the substance of it. It was what they were taking seriously. What was the *there* there? That was it, more. Somehow there was no there there — which is how I feel now when I'm in a Reform context. It's like, what?

JG: [*laughs*] So your college years also coincided with the period of tremendous social ferment in the United States.

JP: Yes, absolutely. (00:30:00)

JG: The Civil Rights Movement, and the general counterculture. Activism. The Vietnam War was ramping up, and the starting of second wave feminism was starting to happen. To what extent were you personally involved and interested and influenced by these larger social movements in your college years?

JP: Very much. As I mentioned, I was involved in the Worcester's Student Movement for Civil Rights. Not centrally, but I was certainly part of that. I was against the Vietnam War and I marched against the war, and actually when I was in Edinburgh I was in the Committee of Students Against the War, which was kind of funny, because it was at so many removes — (00:30:51) I remember having a fast against the war. There I was in Edinburgh. Yeah, so, you know, all of those.

JG: Do you recall the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*?

JP: That was when I was in high school. My mother —

JG: Towards the end of high school, right.

JP: Towards the end. My mother went nuts. Just absolutely loved it and tried to get me to read it — which I wouldn't because she wanted me to. I've often thought to myself, if only I had read it when it came out. But I certainly remember it. She just talked about it nonstop.

JG: Did her talking about it influence you?

JP: My mother had given me a very clear message when I was growing up that it was absolutely essential that a woman marry and have children — that you couldn't live if you didn't do that, but it was not enough. You had to have a life. You had to have your own career. That was an absolutely clear message from her always.

JG: Always.

JP: Yeah.

JG: So, you mentioned Israel, and that the Six Day War had just happened, which catapulted Israel to the forefront of many American Jews' consciousness. How would you describe what role if any, Israel had in your own sense of yourself as a Jew and its place in your own life?

JP: Not huge. I grew up — my immediate family was non-Zionist. There wasn't a lot of discussion of Israel. My extended family were serious Zionists. My aunt was always raising money for Israel bonds. That didn't really influence me. (00:33:00) Being in Israel that summer of '67 was an important experience, important moment for me Jewishly. I observed Shabbat for the first time when I was there, and that was very rich. It didn't really put Israel at the center. Israel has never been a particularly important part of my Jewish identity.

JG: Certainly not at the center.

JP: No. Certainly not at the center. But really, not even there all that much.

JG: Overall, how would you describe yourself at the time you graduated from college, especially in terms of your Jewish identity?

JP: So, when I graduated from college —

JG: In '68.

JP: In '68, where was I Jewishly? Clark did not have a Hillel. I went to services on the High Holidays. I wasn't particularly in — *[sighs]* religion was playing a more and more important — theology and thinking about religious issues was playing a more important role, but I've often said I'm a theologian first, and a Jewish theologian because I'm Jewish. If I'd been Protestant, I would have been a Protestant theologian. It's sort of interesting. It's not like I came — yeah. I don't know how to describe it exactly. I certainly, clearly identified as a Jew, but where I was going to be situated Jewishly, I had no idea.

JG: Where did you see yourself heading, in terms of next steps or career directions at that point?

JP: I went straight from college to Yale to get a doctorate in theology

JG: At that point, that had been clarified for you.

JP: Yes, actually my sophomore year of college on Yom Kippur, I decided that if I couldn't be a rabbi, I would get a PhD in Religious Studies. That —

JG: How'd you come to that?

JP: Actually, I had taken a — *[laughs]* in my sophomore year of college, I had taken one of those career aptitude tests, and I came out a singing forest ranger. *[laughs]* But I also scored (00:36:00) extremely high on intellectual interests, and so another thing that had been suggested to me was a career as a college professor. That was certainly a piece there. On Yom Kippur, it really came to me during *Neilah* actually. It was really a religious revelation in some sense.

JG: Where were you as this happened?

JP: I was at an Orthodox synagogue in Worcester. The Orthodox rabbi in Worcester, who was a lovely person, he came to Clark once a month and had invited students to come for the High Holidays.

JG: In the absence of a Hillel.

JP: In the absence of a Hillel. It suddenly occurred to me at the end of *Neilah*, that I could get a doctorate in Religious Studies. That was it. That was totally clear from that moment on.

JG: When you came back from Edinburgh, were you able to continue any kind of —?

JP: Yes, I was.

JG: — studies?

JP: Yeah, yeah. I switched my major to philosophy. One of the members of the philosophy department was actually an ordained minister. I forget what church. He was happy to do an independent study in theology. Yeah, yeah. I started preparing. And then I took a course on medieval philosophy. Yes.

JG: So you went directly from Clark to Yale.

JP: To Yale, mmhmm.

JG: And began that. What about your personal situation?

JP: And then, the summer I graduated from college, I took theological German at Union Seminary because I was going to need to pass French and German exams and I had French. And I took a theology course at the Jewish Theological Seminary. The Jewish Theological Seminary had a summer program. There was a party, like the second night, and I met a man who was teaching Talmud that summer, and I wanted to take his course too, but it partly overlapped with the theological German, and he said I could take as much as I could fit in. And he became my husband.

JG: At what point did you and Robert Goldenberg get married?

JP: We got married in June of '69. So it was —

JG: A year later.

JP: A year later. Right, a year later. Yeah.

JG: That brings us to the point —

JP: Right.

JG: — (00:39:00) where the *havurah* begins, so we're going to actually switch now.

JP: Okay.

TRANSITION TO MARTHA

JG: Martha before we continue, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Martha Ackelsberg (MA): Yes, you do.

JG: So let's turn to talking about your background and your family until the point that you got involved in the *havurah*. So you were born in '46. In New York City?

MA: Yes, I was born in New York City. My parents were living in New Jersey, but they came into New York for the hospital. The doctor my mother was seeing was in New York.

JG: I see.

JG: So where did you actually grow up?

MA: The first six years in Caldwell, New Jersey. My parents moved to Bloomfield when I was six.

JG: Tell us a little bit first about your family.

MA: My father was a chemist and my mother, when I was young — I mean, my mother had been trained as a psychologist and then did a little bit of social work. When I was young, she was home with the kids. I have a younger sister who is three years younger than I am, and a brother who is twelve years younger than I am.

JG: So through the fifties she was home, basically?

MA: Through the fifties my mother was home. Right. She was very active in the synagogue. She was in Hadassah and the Sisterhood. Very occasionally did a little substitute teaching, but pretty much she was home.

JG: You said both of your parents were the first in their families to graduate from college.

MA: That's correct. My father went to City. My mother went to Hunter. They met. There's a very famous story my parents told all the time. They met through left-wing Zionist stuff, through an organization called Avukah. My father was apparently giving some kind of talk at this event, and my mother walked into the back of the room, so the story goes, and my father stopped his talk and said, "Hello." [laughs] They got involved through progressive Zionist activities. They were both planning to make aliyah. They were part of a *garin*. Then that whole thing fell apart in the midst of World War II. Their parents wouldn't let them go.

JG: They would have gone earlier? During that period, they would have gone earlier?

Ma: They would have gone — they were planning to go. They graduated college in '40, '41, something like that. They were planning to make aliyah, and (00:42:00) well, '41, right. Their parents wouldn't let them go.

JG: The war.

MA: Right.

JG: Your father wasn't drafted?

MA: My father had flat feet. He was drafted. Supposedly, you could volunteer for something, and — he knew he couldn't be in the infantry. He and a cousin and he volunteered so they could choose, supposedly what they were going to do. And then when the assignments came up, A – L infantry, M to whatever. So my father was in the army in basic training in South Carolina for six weeks and ended up in the hospital, so he didn't — and actually, his story is that his unit that he would have been in was actually in Pearl Harbor. So anyway, that. But one of the stories of my growing up was this failed dream of my parents to be part of rebuilding the State and living on a kibbutz. That, I think, was part of it. I didn't know all the details, but that was part of the background of my life.

JG: How do you think it affected them?

MA: In lots of different ways, I think. It's interesting. Somebody says that it's the frustrated hopes of the parents that get acted out in the children or something like that. My sister and I are both very committed to issues around community and stuff like that.

My brother less so, but (00:44:00) he came along really much later. When I got involved with the *havurah* many years later, I thought my parents would be a little bit freaked out. My parents were, my mother in particular was a neat freak at various points. I thought she'd be freaked out if we were sharing plates or something. I don't know, whatever it was. And she said, "Oh, you know, we used to do that in Avukah. We all ate out of the same pot." I was like, who is this person? I realized that I was living out, in some ways, the life that my parents had lived, but I knew nothing about. It's just very weird. They sent both my sister and me to Israel when we were in high school. I went with USY. She went with — I can't remember who — probably Ramah. (00:45:00)

JG: Back up for a minute. Tell us a little bit about the Jewish environment in your house.

MA: Okay. We were members of a Conservative shul in Bloomfield. That's really where I grew up Jewishly.

JG: You were six when you moved there?

MA: I was six when I moved there. My father at various points was president of the synagogue, chair of the Hebrew school board. He arranged, when he was chair of the board, for people from the Jewish Theological Seminary to come out each week and teach the Hebrew school. Like, [*snaps*] the Hebrew school had been taught by old characters from the congregation, I suppose. At a certain point he hired Saul Wachs, who has become a very important Jewish educator. He was at that point a student at JTS. He asked Saul to hire a whole crew of people. And all these guys who were JTS rabbinical students came out and taught in the Hebrew school, and that's who I studied with until I was in sixth or seventh grade. I had a pretty — it was a Hebrew school. It wasn't a day school. Two days a week. At first it was once a week and once on Sunday and then it was twice a week and once on Sunday.

JG: How did you feel about Hebrew school?

MA: I liked it. It wasn't great, but it was interesting. We went to synagogue on Friday night. The shul had services Friday night and Saturday morning. But when I was a kid my father worked a lot of Saturday mornings. My mother didn't drive then.

JG: She didn't drive.

MA: She didn't drive.

JG: She didn't drive a car.

MA: She didn't drive. The shul was about 4 miles away. It was the other end of town. Either you're going to go by bus, and I was too little to go on my own by bus. At a certain point I started going Saturday morning. We used to go Friday night, after dinner. We would go to services.

JG: You had a Shabbat dinner?

MA: Yeah. We would say Kiddush and *Motzi*. My father took off from work, certainly on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I can't remember whether — I know we certainly had serious Passover observances (00:48:00) in the house. At a certain point they started building a *sukkah*. My mother would run herself ragged serving meals, and having people over, and whatever. Judaism was a very important part of my growing up.

JG: Did your family keep kosher?

MA: Yes. They kept kosher in the house, although, when we went out, we ate whatever anybody wanted. It never occurred to me that they were supposed to be in sync until actually when I applied to go to Israel with USY. I was in tenth grade, I think. I think I went the summer of tenth grade.

JG: What year was that?

MA: I think that would have been in 1962. I applied in '61 but I went in '62. And I remember their asking me at an interview, did I keep kosher? I said, yes, at home but not out. And all of a sudden, as I said it, I thought, this makes no sense. And then after that interview I started keeping kosher out. I thought, either I'm going to keep kosher or I'm not going to keep kosher. It hadn't occurred to me before. Some years later, I think my parents started keeping kosher out also.

JG: Do you remember what — was that your first experience in Israel?

MA: Yes.

JG: So you had been hearing about Israel?

MA: I'd been hearing about Israel basically my whole life. And I went, and actually, when I went, my parents gave me one name in particular — somebody who had been part of their group who had actually gone. There were a few people from the group who made aliyah individually, as opposed to —

JG: As a *garin*?

MA: As a *garin*. These people were living someplace — I can't remember — I think someplace outside of Tel Aviv. I was in Israel for six weeks. Everybody had either one or two weekends that you could visit somebody if there was somebody that you had to visit. I went and stayed with these people. I remember feeling completely disillusioned or disappointed. My view of Israel that I had gotten from my parents was of this — people who were going to make aliyah, be on kibbutz and live a life of the left, and these people seemed to me, they were living in suburban Israel, not any different from how you'd be living in suburban United States. I thought, what is this about? This isn't what I was hoping for (00:51:00) somehow. This wasn't the dream that I had somehow vicariously shared with them. It was not here.

JG: Was this on Pilgrimage?

MA: Yes. USY Pilgrimage.

JG: It was two years old at that point?

MA: It certainly wasn't the first year — I don't know how old it was. We did spend a week on kibbutz when I was on Pilgrimage. I loved that actually. I can still remember working in the cotton fields and setting up irrigation pipes, and we would sing. It was like an early *halutzim* or something. It was completely romanticized. It was a lot of work but I loved it.

JG: What was the message that you were getting through USY Pilgrimage — the narrative that they were teaching you?

MA: That's a very interesting question. I don't know. *[laughs]* I have no idea. I loved the kibbutz part. The other part that I really loved were classes. Morton Siegel was the head of it at the time, and he was an interesting character, but he was a great teacher. I had a class with him. I remember we studied *Shoftim*, Judges. I still remember that class. I still remember things that we learned from it. Studying that, and then traveling around the country and seeing these places, I found emotionally very powerful, that somehow I was connected with my people's history.

JG: Roots.

MA: Roots. Yeah, yeah.

JG: So you also — I just wanted to go back to one other thing. You said your town was very Christian. You were not in a majority as a Jewish person.

MA: I had no experience of what it was to live in a Jewish community, until I was living in Queens totally as an adult. Bloomfield was overwhelmingly Christian. When I was in elementary school, there was one other Jewish kid in my class. There were maybe a few more when I went to school that was a combined junior high-high school. There were a few other Jews there. I was by far the most observant. There was a lot I didn't know or understand, but I paid attention (00:54:00) to the holidays and no one else did. I was considered weird, and they didn't know what was going on — I kept taking all these days off from school. I was realizing before, when you were talking with Judith, I mean, my first experience with anti-Semitism as a kid, although I didn't recognize what it was at the time. One morning I was playing down in the basement of our house and the next door neighbor started pushing — there was a screen door, a window, a screen window — that was at ground level. And I saw our next-door neighbor, who was this older man, who was the grandfather of somebody in my elementary school, who was pushing twigs through the screen. I was thinking, what's going on? When my parents woke up, I went upstairs and I said, "Mr. Lawson is pushing twigs through the screen." My parents freaked out. It was Easter. It was Easter morning. They understood this to be a crown of thorns. He was basically saying —

JG: Saying I see you.

MA: I see you.

JG: I know who you are.

MA: I think my father went over and talked to him and he said that I completely misunderstood, and something must have happened. But twigs don't mysteriously come through a screen.

JG: Were you involved in youth groups?

MA: A little bit. I never got into USY. I was technically a member. I think I had to be a member to go on Pilgrimage. I was more involved in LTF, which was the Conservative movement's thing.

JG: Leadership Training.

MA: Leadership Training Fellowship, it was called. There was no group where I was. Bloomfield was *yenevelt* for most things Jewish. I think I was able to go to maybe regional or annual conferences occasionally, and I did almost like correspondence courses. I was able to do some enrichment learning through it, but not in a real social context because there just weren't enough other Jews (00:57:00) in the area. For me the main social Jewish thing was Ramah. From the time I was ten, I went to Camp Ramah. For six summers — '56 to '61, I guess.

JG: Which Ramah did you go to?

MA: I went to the Poconos. That was really transformational to me.

JG: Talk about that. What was transformational about that?

MA: First of all, I learned what Jewish observance was. Not that I took it on. There were a couple of Orthodox kids in the bunk who wouldn't even tear toilet paper on Shabbos. And I never heard of such — I didn't know you weren't supposed to spend money. I didn't know you weren't supposed to write. I didn't know you weren't supposed to do any of these things.

JG: The camp was *shomer shabbos*.

MA: The camp was *shomer shabbos*. The camp was also at that point seriously Hebrew speaking. I mean really — a lot of singing. My first memory of Ramah, my first night was singing "*Ashreinu Ma Tov Khelkeynu*," in the dining room. That kind of communal singing grabbed me and still does. I just love communal singing. That's the first place I experienced it. The learning there was fantastic. I just learned so much. The classes — there were classes every day. I loved that.

JG: What kind of classes?

MA: Hebrew. As you went up through the ages, we studied different books of the Bible, a little bit of philosophy as I got older. Just, you know, stuff that I wasn't getting anywhere else. And I think the other thing that I realized *post facto* is that I felt sort of normal there, which I had not felt at home. Not at home, but in my home environment. There were other kids who were smart and Jewish and liked sports, which I also did. It was like I had a *hevrah*, I had a community, which I just didn't when I was growing up. I felt pretty lonely, certainly when I was in elementary school, somewhat less so when I was in high school. At Ramah I had really good friends, and we would visit each other

during the year. I think there was something about knowing I was going to be able to survive somehow (01:00:00) as a human being. That's what it did.

JG: Were there counselors there also who had any particular impact on you?

MA: There probably were. There certainly were. There were counselors on whom one or another of us had crushes for sure. We thought, oh, this person — I remember one year, after camp, or another of us were coming up — at that point, I was in my early teens, I guess, maybe twelve, thirteen. I was coming into the seminary to Prozdor. A couple of us came in early, we were going to visit this counselor; we thought it was going to be just like camp. We realized that was over. That was for camp. But, you know, it was more just a sense of people. I saw that you could be a Jewish adult and I realized, by seeing these people, that were somehow — they were like nineteen, twenty — I realized for many years that I thought when I turned nineteen I was going to be an adult, and where did that come from? That was the age where you can be a senior counselor at Ramah.

JG: You also went to their Mador program?

MA: Yes.

JG: Can you tell us about that? First of all, what is Mador?

MA: A counselor training program that was meant for — mostly for people who had been in Ramah as campers, and this started — let's see, I was in '64. I think it started in either '62 or '63. It started shortly before I got involved in it. They were basing it on the writings of some educational theorist, Louis [see addendum] — can't remember his last name now. But anyway, it was a serious program that brought young people after freshman year of college and brought people from all the different camps to one place. I think it was in the Poconos. And, we learned some psychology, and we learned — I don't know, somehow it was supposed to make us better counselors than just going through being a CIT [Counselor-in-Training] one year, and a junior counselor the next year, and a senior counselor the next.

JG: And did it? You did go on to become a counselor?

MA: I did go on to become a counselor. I loved the program. I loved the people. Aryeh [see addendum] — a number of people that I know (01:03:00) were in that program. It had a major effect on all of us. At some point—I don't think it was then, but I think it was the following year — they sort of shifted emphasis and they got into this whole thing that the counselors were there to try to mold and shape kids' personalities and we were going

to try to address their difficulties and shape them into better people. I found that really inappropriate, and creepy. Also, as a result of that — they kept saying the idea is to be able to develop really intense emotional relationships with the campers, so you can have some impact on their growth and development. The Hebrew started falling out by the wayside because you couldn't really have serious, deep, emotional conversations with people in Hebrew. At least I certainly couldn't. People who'd grown up in day school maybe could have from one point of view, but not from the point of view of the camper. The camp became less Hebrew. I think all that stuff about molding personalities also fell by the wayside pretty quickly, but it was there for my last year or two of being a counselor. I found that pretty creepy.

JG: That summer was in the mid-sixties.

MA: That was sixty — I was a counselor '65, '66, and '67. Then I got married, so I wasn't going to go back to camp, but I think I was just as happy not to be part of that whole scene at that point.

JG: Let's talk about college. You went to Radcliffe. You were getting your BA in '68, so you were there in '64 to '68.

MA: '64 to '68.

JG: How did you decide on Radcliffe?

MA: *[laughs]* How did I decide on Radcliffe? I think I decided on Radcliffe on a similar basis that many so-called "decisions" were made in my life, which was to say that it was quite clear to me that's where my parents wanted me to go. I didn't really — I don't feel like I had a whole lot of choice in some way. It's not like I was thinking, Oh, where am I going to go to college? Somehow it was clear (01:06:00) that I was supposed to apply early decision someplace. We visited two places. Wellesley and Radcliffe.

JG: Women's colleges.

MA: Women's colleges. There were co-ed places, but all the big — the Ivies were all, at that point, still all male. I wasn't really interested in a women's college. I didn't think about it particularly. I loved the Wellesley campus. I thought it was gorgeous. We had a really nice student who took us around. I thought, this would be great; this would be really fun. I could see by my mother's face that she didn't want me to go there. She was really disappointed. I think she wanted me to go to Harvard.

JG: Classes were separate?

MA: Classes were together. So, I applied to Radcliffe and I got in. And that's where I went.

JG: What did you study there?

Ma: I studied Social Studies. I went to college planning to be in medical school. I thought I was going to be a doctor. I had taken one of those Kuder Preference Tests also in high school, and when I said I wanted to be a doctor, they said, well, you're not scoring high on social skills. Maybe you want to be a research biologist or something like that. You know, whatever. *[laughs]* You know, one of these things. I read *Microbe Hunters* and *Virus Hunters*. I read a lot of stuff. I was fascinated by science and particularly medical science. I thought that's what I was going to do. I remember going to my first meeting with my advisor. I had signed up, partly on my father's advice, for math, chemistry, biology, and I can't remember what the fourth course was going to be. She said, "Whoa, maybe you should check out a few other things." Plus, they had these sort of Gen-Ed requirements. So you had to take — so I ended up taking Biology, Philosophy, English, and I can't remember what the fourth course was. I loved the biology course. I had a terrific — I studied biology with George Wald. He was wonderful. It was hundreds of people in the class. I didn't get to know him. He was a great teacher. I took a philosophy course, which I really liked. And then, maybe I took chemistry. Can't remember. Then I took another social science course (01:09:00) in the spring on democratic theory and its critics, and I fell in love with it. I thought, wow, this is really cool stuff. I ended up dropping the second half of chemistry and deciding, no, this is what I want to do. I majored in what was called Social Studies, which was an interdisciplinary major. You could take courses in government, sociology, philosophy, economics —

JG: Social and political theory.

MA: Social and political theory. And I loved it. That grabbed me. I audited a couple of courses in biology. I ended up rooming with someone who went on to be pre-med. So I took a couple of courses that she suggested, audited a couple of courses that were really fun on cell biology or whatever. I didn't really look back.

JG: You found something —

MA: Found something —

JG: — that you felt passionately about. In an article on religion on campus in the sixties, Rabbi Ben-Zion Gold, who was the Director of Harvard Hillel at the time — had been since the late fifties — said that faith in what he referred to as “civic religion” was shattered in that decade because of the Vietnam war, the Civil Rights Movement, the counterculture. At the same time, he said that his observation was that this was a period of a new pride in diversity and celebrating different lifestyles and different religions. What was it like for you to be a Jew at Harvard/Radcliffe in that era?

MA: He was absolutely critical to that experience. He was an amazing person.

JG: Tell us about him.

MA: I was involved in the Hillel from the beginning, and developed — Paula Hyman and I became friends, I think, through Hillel, although we ended up both being Social Studies majors. We ended up taking a lot of classes together. Mark Rosenstein was also part of that Hillel crew. He went on to make aliyah and found really interesting organizations in Israel. Marc Saperstein was there. David Saperstein. It was a very vital time.

JG: Who was Ben-Zion Gold?

MA: He had grown up in Poland and came to the United States as a young man. He grew up in a hasidic community. I don't know what his story was of how he ended (01:12:00) up at Harvard Hillel. Maurice Zigmond, I think, was the senior rabbi at the time.

JG: Exactly.

MA: Ben was —

JG: The associate director.

MA: The associate. He eventually moved up to the directorship. He was both the sort of advisor to the Orthodox student community, which was very strong. They sort of had Hillel House —

JG: On Bryant Street.

MA: On Bryant Street. Every Friday night, they would have dinner here. Then there were services there on Shabbos morning and all the holidays, etc. He started a — what was it called? — basically a Conservative sort of non-Orthodox minyan.

JG: It became Worship & Study.

MA: It became Worship & Study. It wasn't called that when I was there. It was called, I guess, a Conservative — I don't know what it was called. I told this story many times. He insisted that Paula and I take on leadership — leading *davening*, which we were both— probably by the time we were sophomores or juniors. I remember sitting in services, because I was there for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It was too far to come home to New Jersey. I remember sitting next to Paula who was there on one of those occasions. It must've been Yom Kippur. She lived in Boston. She probably went home for Rosh Hashanah. We were whispering to each other — saying vis-à-vis the boys, nah, we could do better than this — but it never occurred to us to do that. He insisted. We had both thought, at that point, the line of the mainstream Jewish community, that if women start leading *davening*, the men will leave, and that would be the end of the Jewish community. That is what they were saying: This is the men's space, and if women start moving into it, it's going to be the end. When I was growing up in New Jersey — just to go back for a minute, that whole Hebrew school thing. Saul Wachs who was a cantor as well as studying, was who was teaching a boy, I remember — we were both 13 or 14 — and teaching him *trope* for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. They allowed me to sit in, but he was the one who was going to be leading the *davening*. (01:15:00) Then he got sick. And I ended up leading one year, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur even though I wasn't supposed to.

JG: But they let you?

MA: But they let me. This was junior congregation.

JG: Okay.

MA: But anyway, so, Ben-Zion Gold insisted that Paula and I were as capable as anyone else, and the world wasn't going to come to an end. And we should. Here he was, coming out of a hasidic community. He was in some ways a very important mover of what ultimately was going to be Jewish feminism.

JG: He was essentially pushing you toward egalitarianism.

MA: Right — when neither one of us was — I can't say that neither one of us wanted it, because in a certain sense we did, but we thought we shouldn't —

JG: A little uncomfortable.

Judith Plaskow and Martha Ackelsberg, 04/26/17

MA: It wasn't right. It was a little uncomfortable.

JG: Do you recall what he said that you found at all convincing? Jane Myers also —

Ma: Yeah. I had this conversation with her.

JG: — had this conversation with you. As you know, she was very close to Ben. She created this website for him. She mentioned to me that he developed a halachic argument that was based on *V'Ahavta l'Reacha Kamocha*.

MA: Ah.

JG: She was wondering if you recalled that at all, or anything he said that felt persuasive that helped move you out of this comfort and discomfort.

MA: I don't know. Maybe it did. I don't remember that specifically. All I remember is that I was thinking this couldn't be, and then all of a sudden we were doing it. I don't remember what the process was. I know that he was essential to it, but what he said to convince us, I don't remember.

JG: This was early. We're talking about before —

MA: This would have been '65, '66 or something like that. Because by '67, '68 we were regularly leading *davening*.

JG: There was this little community of more egalitarian —

MA: Oh, yes. I got a little bit distracted here. We started Friday nights having dinner at one of the Harvard Houses. Even if you weren't at Harvard — if you were at Radcliffe, you could still eat. They would arrange to get a (01:18:00) private dining room which all these houses had one or two of them — and we'd go from house to house different weeks. We would have dinner together. We would do some singing, and then we would go over to Hillel in time for — or actually no. We didn't go to Hillel. We went to Philips Brooks House, which was right near Bryant Street and the Hillel. So the Orthodox kids came from Hillel House, and we came from Harvard Houses to Philips Brooks House. I think we were on the second or third floor. Every Friday night, Ben arranged for some speaker, usually a member of the Harvard faculty, to talk about something or another. We would have wine and tea. I remember he sweetened his tea with wine. That memory just popped back.

JG: And singing.

MA: And singing. Yeah, we would sing. There was a whole bunch of Yiddish songs that we would sing that he taught us. We started, the year that I graduated, putting together a book of songs which we never managed to do, but someone did a couple of years later. So I've seen that. That was really — that was very, very rich. It was one of the central focus points of my life, and then, if you had an exam scheduled on Shabbos or *yontif*, and you didn't want to take it, you could ask for special arrangements. Then, what you'd have to do is go over to Hillel House at the time the exam was scheduled to start. So if you had an exam, let's say, 9:00 in the morning on Saturday. You'd have to be at Hillel house at 9:00, and right after Shabbos, you'd take the exam there, proctored by somebody until it was over.

JG: Saturday evening?

MA: Saturday evening. If it was Shavuot in May and it was 9:00 at night when *yontif* was out, you'd take your exam from 9:00 to 11:30, or whatever it was. So — *[laughs]*

JG: Just to sum this up, what impact or impact did Rabbi Gold and this whole experience have on your evolving attitude toward egalitarianism and women's roles and status in Judaism?

MA: (01:21:00) Obviously huge. Although I'm not sure I recognized it quite in that way because I had the experience of being part of — oh! It was called an egalitarian minyan. That's what it was called. I had the experience of being part of a serious egalitarian minyan. I'm trying to remember — I think that was true at Ramah as well. But this was sort of an adult experience, which was different. And it certainly gave me experiential ground to know that Judaism wasn't going to fall apart and men weren't going to stop coming necessarily — because men didn't stop coming if women took part, and there was a lot of energy and excitement that got generated.

JG: Yeah.

MA: Yeah.

JG: While all this was going on, while you were studying Social Studies also, with its real focus on social and economic issues of the day, social ferment was going on. The "Strike" happened in '68. What was its impact on you and to what extent were you involved in these larger social issues?

MA: I was very involved in PBH, Philips Brooks House, which was like the social service program. So I was doing some community organizing through that. I had been involved with PBH basically through my whole time, right. After the War on Poverty started, we were doing various kinds of anti-poverty organizing in Cambridge. I was also very involved in antiwar stuff. I don't think I was centrally involved in SDS, but somehow or another, I was part of that. I went to lots of demonstrations in New York, Cambridge, Boston, and Washington. I remember one antiwar demonstration I went to with my father. He came on the bus with us. (01:24:00) Yeah, so —

JG: It was very present.

MA: Definitely. Very present.

MA: It's interesting because when I first started, this roommate — a friend of mine who became a close friend — she was a history major, although was also pre-med. She was taking a course on Southeast Asian history or something like that from a guy who, it turns out, is quite conservative. He had this argument that was supportive of the Vietnam War. In my first semester, I thought, what was all this ferment about, and then somehow I heard the other side more clearly.

JG: Were you aware of the beginning of second wave feminism and consciousness raising and all these kinds of things starting to take shape?

MA: Not really when I was in college. This is a great story. When I went back for my — I don't know what reunion it might have been, twenty-fifth, I think, maybe it was. We were talking about our lives then, and I realized I had, aside from Paula, and maybe to some extent my roommate, with whom I lost touch pretty quickly, I had very, very few close in college, which really struck me in comparison with the students I was teaching at Smith, where people formed relationships that are lifelong. I was just talking to somebody the other day, and she said some of her best friends were people she met at Smith. We were talking about what that was about, and why it didn't happen. I was remembering, or we were remembering together, that my first three years at Radcliffe — Radcliffe dorms were a mile from Harvard Yard, and so you had to walk a mile back for lunch and come back again if you had classes in the afternoon. You could take a bag lunch if you didn't want to go back and forth. There were no buildings on campus that undergraduate women were allowed into where you could eat. So you could bring a bagged lunch. Oftentimes, particularly when it was raining (01:27:00) or cold, you'd bring a bag lunch to save the two miles walk. They assigned us a place where we could eat these bag lunches, which was the basement of Memorial Hall. But the basement of Memorial Hall was technically a study, so we were not allowed to talk. And for three

years, Linda Greenhouse was there at that point, I can't tell you who was there at this time. Women would go and sit in the basement of Memorial Church.

JG: Memorial Hall.

MA: No, Memorial Church. Sorry. It was on campus. Memorial Hall was a bit off. Memorial Church. We would sit in the basement of Memorial Church and eat our bag lunches and not talk to one another. It was not until my senior year that they opened, not a regular dining hall, but like a cafeteria, where we could go and eat and talk. What we were realizing was: it didn't occur to us to complain or to ask that that be changed. Two years later, it would have been unthinkable, but I think we were all so grateful to be there. It was clear on some level that we weren't supposed to be there. There was a 4:1 male:female ratio, we were sort of grudgingly accepted, and they were going to give us a place to eat. We would sit there and eat.

JG: Wow. A really different time.

MA: It was a really different time. And it changed [*snaps her fingers*] like that. That's what's so amazing.

JG: So you graduated in '68. Where were you headed at that point?

MA: I graduated in '68. I was headed to graduate school at Princeton. I didn't really think about the fact that graduate school was preparation to be a college teacher.

JG: At least in those fields.

MA: At least in those fields.

JG: Political — political philosophy.

MA: Political theory. I knew I loved studying and reading and writing and I thought, oh, it'll just be like continuing undergraduate school. Boy, was I in for a rude awakening. Anyway, I went to graduate school. I also got married (01:30:00) two weeks after I graduated. I moved to New York with my then-husband.

JG: It was someone you met at where?

MA: I had met him at Harvard. He was a senior when I was a freshman. Then we broke up. Then we got back together. [*rolls eyes, laughs*]

JG: You got married at that point?

MA: We got married right after I graduated. He [David Mendelson] was, at that point, a third-year medical student at NYU [New York University], and I was going to be commuting down to Princeton. We lived on Thirty-fourth Street, a block from Penn Station. He took the crosstown bus, and I took what became Amtrak.

JG: To Princeton.

MA: To Princeton, yeah.

JG: You were heading off in this direction without having a real sense of exactly what you were going to do.

MA: Right.

JG: So now we're at the point at which people were getting involved in the *havurah* pretty much.

MA: A couple of years later.

JG: Sixty —

MA: Except I got involved in the *havurah* in '70.

JG: You were in school during those years?

MA: I was in school for those two years and during that time got involved with the women's movement in New York. That was the big thing. I have no idea what we did Jewishly between '68 and '70. I have no memory. Maybe when we went out for Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, we must have gone out either to New Jersey to my parents or down to Washington to his parents. We certainly were not part of any shul in New York that I can remember or think about. But I was going down to Princeton four days a week, and at that point, I got involved with a consciousness raising group in New York City and the women's health movement, which is what I talked to Joyce [Antler] about.

JG: So Martha, we're going to begin with you as I mentioned to you before the lunch break. The New York Havurah was founded in the fall of '69, and you and your husband became involved in August of 1970?

MA: Correct.

JG: How did you first learn about the *havurah*?

MA: I think we learned about the *havurah* from Art Green. David and Art were very close friends. We had visited (01:33:00) Art and Kathy a couple of times at Havurat Shalom.

JG: How did David and Art know each other?

MA: I think they had been at Ramah together, years before. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure. I think that's probably where they knew each other. I think they were actually counselors together at some point at Ramah. Maybe David was a swim counselor. Art might have been somebody in residence. I don't remember. But, yeah, anyway, we had visited them a couple of times at Havurat Shalom and really enjoyed it. I think Art told us that a *havurah* was starting in New York and we should check it out. And then — I think it must have been the summer of '68 or summer of '69. No, must have been summer of '68 — we visited Ramah. I'm not sure. I think it was through Art, and maybe bumping into Alan Mintz at some point. I can't remember.

JG: Where was that connection from? Also from Ramah?

MA: Yeah. Because we had done, certainly the summer of '68 and possibly the summer of '69, we went to Ramah Palmer for a weekend, or a day, or something like that, to visit. He had grown up in Ramah in Connecticut. David — David Mendelson — had grown up through Ramah in Connecticut. We had a lot of connections. Those people [see addendum] — some of them went to Palmer. Some of them went to the Berkshires. We went to either or both for visits and we saw people there. Somehow I heard about it. We heard about it. And they suggested we join.

JG: So, I just want to pause once again. Tell me, how would you describe your Jewish identity at the time? What was the main appeal for you of this community as you were hearing about it?

MA: As I'm thinking back, we didn't really have a Jewish community at the time. We were living on 34th Street in Manhattan. There was no shul nearby, and if there had been a shul nearby, I can't imagine that we would have wanted to go to it. If we had a place where we were — we must have gone to one or another of our parents for *yontif*, but we certainly didn't have places we were regularly going anywhere; we didn't feel that we

were part of a Jewish community. Hearing (01:36:00) that something was forming and that it was going to be political and engaged, and it just — how could we not at least want to find out about it?

JG: The original brochure for the *havurah* — do you remember that there was a brochure?

MA: I don't think I ever saw a brochure.

JG: There was a brochure that was circulated as an attempt to —

MA: To recruit?

JP: To recruit?

JG: To reach people and to recruit people. This is what it said: “Free from ties with other institutions, the *havurah* will aim to create a new kind of leadership for the Jewish community and to serve as a model for a new form of Jewish life.”

MA: Hm. Interesting. What I remember as the self-identity, at least of the New York Havurah was that it was going to be a place where the people who you prayed with would be the people you studied with would be the people you did politics with. That's the way we always defined ourselves. I wasn't aware — I certainly knew that Alan Mintz and John Ruskay and Peter Geffen had been meeting with Gene Weiner. I had heard about Gene Weiner for years. I don't think I ever met him. He was sort of the mentor to those who founded the newer *havurah*. Maybe they had that image for themselves, or he had that image of himself.

JG: They created the brochure.

MA: They created that brochure. I don't think that was the sense. If that was communicated to me, I don't remember it. I don't think it was central to how the *havurah* saw itself, at least in the early years when I was a part of it. One of the things I remember — there were critiques of the *havurah*. There were critiques. You're the young people. You have all the energy and enthusiasm, and the blah blah blah, and you're taking this away from the Jewish community. We said a couple of things. One was, we have to be part of communities that work for us. Otherwise, what's the point? And, if this model works, other people can take it out and run with it.

JG: It's a replicable model.

MA: It was a replicable model. I certainly didn't see myself as part of this as a way to train new leadership of the Jewish community. I think that is something that did in fact happen in a lot of cases among people who were part of it, but (01:39:00) that wasn't my perception of what the *havurah* was about.

JG: And you weren't in it to become a quote unquote "leader."

MA: No. I was in it just to find Jewish community for myself.

JG: Judith, actually you became part of the *havurah* several years later —

JP: Fall of '74.

JG: '74.

JP: Yeah.

JG: or '73.

JP: '74. I went back and tried. '74.

JG: By that time, Martha was teaching?

JP: Yeah. She was at Smith already.

JG: How did you first hear about it?

JP: I think through Martha, actually. Through Martha and Paula. And Jewish feminism.

JG: Jewish feminism. We'll get into that a lot later. What were you involved in doing at that time?

JP: Robert and I had been in Montreal for three years. We would have been part of the *havurah* earlier but were living in Montreal. And we moved back in the summer of '74 and immediately got involved in the *havurah*.

JG: Were you teaching in Montreal, or were you still finishing?

JP: I had been an adjunct in Montreal and I was finishing my doctorate. Yeah. Mmhmm. Oh, and we came back because we were both teaching in the religion department at NYU. The dean dissolved the department after we had been there for a year. We both came back to teach at NYU.

JG: Not because of — *[unintelligible]*

JP: No. Because of a fight with the Chair dating back to something that had happened in the late sixties. *[laughs]*

JG: So, Martha, you just mentioned the pillars, in a sense, of how members of the *havurah* thought of themselves, the critical pieces. I want to look at each of those now and delve into them.

MA: Okay.

JG: The first being community, which was sort of the central linchpin of the whole thing. For many people, community was considered the heart of the *havurah* endeavor. As you mentioned a few minutes ago, you said you spent a little bit of time visiting at Havurat Shalom in Boston. What, if anything, do you think distinguished the New York Havurah's early vision from Havurat Shalom.

MA: Havurat Shalom, as I understood it was called Havurat Shalom Community Seminary. It was founded as an alternative rabbinical school in a certain sense. We always thought of them as the spiritual ones, Havurat Shalom. They were serious about *davening* and God and I don't know whatever else.

JP: Kabbalah.

JG: Seekers. (01:42:00)

MA: Seekers. They all saw themselves as seekers. Most of in the New York Havurah I think did not. Not in that sense. I think the community was critical. I mean, the New York Havurah when I first joined used to meet once a week. Thursday night, I think, we had a communal dinner that one or two people made. We met in an apartment that was the *havurah* apartment, and then there would be some kind of discussion about something or another afterwards. And once a month, every single month, we went away on a retreat for Shabbat. We left Friday afternoon and came back Saturday night. Most of the time we went to places within a couple of hours of New York. High Point State Park in New Jersey was a favorite one. There were some ones in southern New York State. A couple

of times we went out to Long Island. That was really the critical piece. Everybody came to all of those. We did Kabbalat Shabbat Friday night. That's when we *davened*, if we *davened*. Kabbalat Shabbat Friday night. Shabbat morning we would *daven* together. We would have conversations late into the night. We would have study sessions. We would walk. We would play. Whatever. Being part of that and building community was a really big piece of it. I remember a number of conversations. John Ruskay and I were the two people who were studying political science at the time. We were all in grad school.

JG: Or the seminary. Which is kind of grad school.

MA: Right. Some people were in the Seminary [Jewish Theological Seminary] but a lot of people were in grad school. He was at that time, too. We would occasionally bring an article by Philip Slater, something about community or the place of community for people to study together and talk about because we were both trying to argue that we can't create community out of nothing. You create community out of doing things together.

JG: You and John?

MA: John and I were arguing that. We were often thinking about what was it we were doing together as a *havurah*.

JG: And was the doing — did you mean by that doing something beyond coming together as a community?

MA: Yeah. Yeah. Politics took on an important place there as something that we did together. We went a number of times to anti-Vietnam War demonstrations together in Washington. That's when I first met people from Fabringen when we stayed with them and went to an antiwar demonstration. And we studied together, which was really important. (01:45:00)

JG: We're going to come to that.

MA: All right. The community piece. So we went away once a week — or once a month, I'm sorry — for a retreat, and then we went away Sukkot and Shavuot also. And we *davened* together certainly on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Not initially, I think, but that came along a little later. And then we started *davening* together Shabbos morning. But the *davening* was always a kind of—

JP: [laughs]

MA: Wasn't the most critical piece for most of us.

JG: I want to go back to how you actually became a member. What was the deal for you? What was the process of becoming a member? It was very early on.

MA: It was very early on. I didn't realize what was going on entirely. I believe — Alan Mintz and John Ruskay came over and had dinner with David and me at our apartment. I think that was an interview, but it wasn't clear to me that that's what was happening. I think also they were mostly thinking of David as the one. It was mostly they were interviewing David and I was there. I don't think — I mean David was Art's friend. The New York Havurah, much earlier than the Boston people, accepted women as independent members. The Boston *havurah*, the Havurat Shalom — initially the only way a woman could become a member would be if she was married to a man. There were a couple of single women in the New York Havurah. Women's membership was officially taken seriously and equally. I think that this dinner was more focused on David. But whatever — they got me along with him.

JP: *[laughs]*

MA: *[laughs]* I slipped in. I had met John probably in Prozdor before. We vaguely knew each other.

JG: Who else was involved in the *havurah* at the time that you came in? In conjunction with that, how would you describe the basic kind of person who was involved?

MA: A lot of the people had been involved in Ramah. I'm trying to think. It was John, Alan Mintz, Peter Geffen. Peter, I knew from Ramah. John, I knew from Prozdor. Peter I knew as well. John, I guess, I knew a little bit from USY. (01:48:00) Phyllis and David Sperling were there. I was just remembering with Phyllis last week. That I first met them when I was a counselor. David was *Rosh Aidah* and Phyllis was *Rosh Omanut*, head of the art program. So they were part of it. Shira and Alan Sugarman — also, longtime Ramah people, Shira in particular. She and all her family and her parents had been there. She grew up in Philadelphia, and I went to Poconos, so. Liz Koltun. She knew David from Connecticut Ramah. Dina Rosenfeld, who came from a totally different background. She was then finishing up as an undergraduate at Brooklyn College. She came from a hasidic background. She and I joined the *havurah* at the same time. She also came in August of '70.

MA: Did she have a partner or husband?

Ma: No. She did not at that point. She was one of the independent women.

JP: And Liz

MA: As was the case with Liz. Let's see: Harvey Bordowitz. Chaim Shimon. I think he eventually made aliyah.

JP: Was Paula in it with John?

MA: Paula was not. We brought Paula into Ezrat Nashim. And the person now known as Noam Tzion. I can't remember what his name — Noam Sachs. He made aliya and became Noam Tzion. And Josh. I can't remember. Another Josh who was a rabbinical student. I think that was basically who was in when I came in.

JG: So it was like how many people?

MA: About fifteen maybe. Twelve or fifteen people — something like that. It was relatively small.

JP: Jay wasn't a member then? Jay Greenspan?

MA: No. He did come in, but I think after my time.

JP: So different. The group had shifted so much over time.

MA: It changed a lot. Yeah. Oh, Gershon and Ruth Hundert. I think they came the second year that I was there. I don't think they were part of it the first year that I was there. They were definitely there while I was still living in New York because Gersh taught a class that I was part of, and that was a very important piece of my experience.

JG: So, Judith, you joined in the fall of '74.

JP: Yeah.

JG: (01:51:00) What was involved for you at this point?

JP: So, I mean, Robert also went to Ramah for twelve years or something, so he knew everybody. I do not recall being interviewed or feeling like we were being interviewed [see addendum]. But we knew so many people in the group. I do think they had some

kind of discussion of us and there was some sense of being accepted into the *havurah*, but I don't remember any kind of formal process.

JG: That's, in fact, one of the critiques about the *havurah*. The so-called "elitism" that characterized early period and that was typified by that application for admission. Do you have a sense what the grounds were for admission and more particularly for rejection in the *havurah*? Why would people be rejected from the *havurah*?

JP: Personality. I do remember one discussion. People didn't like someone. They found that person a very difficult person. It wasn't about their Jewishness or level of knowledge or anything. That's the one case I remember because it was somebody you would have thought would have been a member.

MA: I know that there were people who applied in some way and were not accepted. There are people I also would have thought would have been accepted. I haven't a clue why. I wasn't part of that process. But I think in the ones where I was part of the process, it was really about, since community was such a critical piece, were they going to fit? Was this going to work? Were we going to be able to spend this kind of time together and not be at each other's throats?

JG: These were small intentional communities.

MA: That's right. Small intentional communities. Right. It wasn't like, oh, you're not good enough to be with us. At least that's what it felt like from the inside. I'm sure from the outside it felt like, oh, we weren't good enough to be in, or whatever. But I think it was more, is this going to work, personality-wise?

JG: When you look back on it, did it seem to work? Or how do you feel about this whole Admissions issue when you look back on it?

MA: I think it did. I think it did. Oh no, there was another. Burton Weiss. He was another person who was part of it from the very beginning. Yeah. (01:54:00) It's hard for me to say. I sort of feel like I was never — I shouldn't say never because my memory is not that great. I don't remember being central to any sort of interview process. I'm not sure exactly how it worked and how I know that people felt hurt. That's never good. But what could or should have been done differently, I'm also not sure.

JG: I just want to clarify what the policy was toward admission of women from the beginning, as you understand it.

MA: As I understand it, women were fully — were meant to be fully equal members and anyone who wanted to could join. There were a few more single men than there were single women. I think it was more unusual for single women to be part of it. More women came along as part of a couple. But officially, anyway, yes. Women were —

JG: Did that change over time as it got more into the seventies that women were coming in as members of a couple?

JP: Yes, but it wasn't the sense that the women weren't coming in coming as [full] members. Couples were coming in. Women were members of couples, but there wasn't a sense that the women were somehow secondary or snuck in.

JG: Martha, as you mentioned, the *havurah* had rented an apartment after some discussion about various other things, like places in the country, and other alternative situations for the *havurah*, they decided to rent an apartment on Ninety-eighth Street.

MA: Ninety-eighth Street.

JG: Ninety-eighth Street.

MA: Broadway and Ninety-eighth.

JG: The *havurah* apartment served as a central meeting place, and also someone lived there, right?

MA: Mmhmm.

JG: What role would you say that apartment played in helping to create community?

MA: It was really critical. It was place where you knew you could always meet there. It sort of felt like ours. Classes always met there. When we had — a couple of times we had Rosh Hashanah-Yom Kippur *davening* opened up to the community and the floor was just packed (01:57:00) full of people. It's very different than had it been in somebody's — other *havurot* that we've been a part of met in people's houses, and that's very nice, but it's a totally different thing. This really felt that it was the *havurah*'s place, and it gave a central, grounding to it.

JG: Is this where the Thursday evening meals —?

Judith Plaskow and Martha Ackelsberg, 04/26/17

MA: Yeah. Meals were there. They were cooked in the kitchen. Shabbos morning *davening* was there. Classes met there.

JG: It was very central.

MA: Yes.

JG: Can you describe at all the aesthetic of the place?

MA: *[bursts into laughter]*

JG: Such as it were.

MA: Seventies minimal.

JP: Graduate student.

MA: There might have been a little furniture. There was at least one couch, and probably some chairs. But most of the time, almost everybody sat on the floor.

JG: On cushions?

MA: *[laughs]* No, they had cushions at Havurat Shalom. We didn't have cushions. There were some chairs, because people would occasionally sit around on chairs. There were kitchen utensils there and stuff, so you could cook. There were some cushions I guess to sit on.

JP: There was a big table by the time I was there. Was there a table?

MA: There probably was.

JG: There was.

JP: Yeah, for the meal.

MA: I kind of remember sitting around the floor, but we might have sat around a table. I don't remember. I do remember that Sharon Sperling's baby naming was there, as was Shira then-Sugarman's.

JP: Ilana, you mean.

MA: Ilana. Ilana.

JG: Her daughter.

MA: Her daughter, right. David and I carried over our stereo system — *[laughs]* a turntable and speakers so that we could play the Bach. What's the thing that's like *Barchu*? I'll think of it. Anyway. A very famous piece of Bach in place of *Barchu* for her naming. We thought it was just, you know. I'm sure his father was there, who was a little bit freaked out. I don't know if it was the music on Shabbos or the music we had chosen, or whatever. That was kind of (02:00:00) a sort of thing that we learned to do there — that you could just, if something moved you, you could bring it, and the group would accept it.

JG: As you mentioned, there were weekly communal meals there, which were certainly part of the community-building aspect of the New York Havurah. By then you and other women — you weren't there yet but you were — had been part of consciousness raising groups, etc., where certainly the consideration of women in gender-specific roles were things that you were thinking about. Did this carry at all into how things happened in the *havurah*? How did meals get prepared? Who made them? Who decided who did what? Who cleaned up? All of those kinds of things.

MA: We rotated who made meals. That was completely gender neutral. Good old Chash, every time it was his turn, made hot dogs and baked beans. That was it.

JG: Who was this?

MA: Chaim Shimon. Harvey Bordowitz, who we called Chash, short for Chaim Shimon. He would have this big aluminum pan, cans of baked beans and chopped up hot dogs. That was his meal that he made for the *havurah*. Whoever cooked also, I think — I don't remember how it got cleaned up. It was not that the women were in the kitchen cooking and or cleaning. It was gender neutral.

JG: New York Havurah was known as the one with the good food?

MA: Yes. Because food was a very important part of building and maintaining community, so we always ate very well.

JG: It wasn't always hot dogs and—

MA: No, no. Partly the reason I remember that is because that really stood out. He was a lovely man, but he sort of didn't —

JG: He was not a foodie.

MA: He was not a foodie. It's what he knew how to cook. He wanted to take his turn. He wanted to take his turn, so that's what he cooked. People really did their best to make a nice meal, and we really enjoyed eating, cooking and eating. When we'd go on retreat, we'd bring lots of food, and everybody would make some of their favorite dishes, and we'd eat really, really well on these retreats.

JG: What were the general principles around food?

MA: Kashrut.

MA: Certainly in my early years there was a lot of meat. Chicken. Beef. I remember one tragic situation. I can't remember which place we were at. Alan Mintz, I think it was, made his famous *cholent*. He made really great *cholent*. It was winter, (02:03:00) or early spring or something like that, and we left it out on the porch thinking it would be cold, but, there were all these windows, and it got overheated or something like that, and we realized we couldn't eat it. That was really a tragedy, but it tells you that there was *fleisch*, you know. We'd have meat Friday night. Meat Shabbos lunch. Lots of times when we were driving back Saturday night, at least one car had to stop for grease, which meant somebody was going to buy French fries, and maybe, I don't know, hotdogs, hamburgers, non-kosher stuff, but certainly French fries. This was part of the ritual of the return from the retreat.

JG: Not everybody, it sounds like, kept kosher in their private life.

MA: The *havurah* space was kosher. I think, pretty much everybody probably kept kosher at home, but whether they kept kosher out, probably not everybody did.

JG: Within the *havurah*, did people invite each other to each other's homes over this period?

MA: Yes. There was a real — I mean some people were obviously closer friends than others. Not everybody would go to everybody's house, but there were certainly friendships, close friendships that formed within the *havurah* during the period where people would go to one another's homes.

JG: Was it the kind of thing that on most Friday evenings, people were eating at each other's homes or not necessarily?

MA: You know, I can't remember. Dina still teases that you know — Dina Rosenfeld was a good friend. She came over quite often. My cooking abilities were fairly minimal at that point. She was just teasing me the other day when we saw her. Broiled chicken, rice, and steamed green beans. That was basically —

JG: They were memorable.

MA: *[laughs]* Right. You know I think some of the others we would have had over or would have gone to other people's houses. Even coming in the second year, the people who had been there in the beginning were sort of closer friends. In a sense, those who came in a bit later maybe got to know each other a little better because we were all newbies together.

JG: Yeah. So, as you mentioned, there were also community meetings that took place often on these Thursday evenings, or a program that happened. Can you talk a little bit about how the meetings functioned? What kinds of things would get discussed at the meetings, and how did they work? How were decisions made in the *havurah*? (02:06:00)

MA: That's a really good question. When we were visiting Chava [Weissler], she told us that had discussed this with you. She said she found notebooks from Fabrangen from the earlier years, and how these meetings always ended up in tears, or something like that. I don't remember much about meetings that were anything other than discussions about something or another. We must have had some meetings that discussed if people wanted to join, would they be able to. Times we went down to Washington for a demonstration, we must have had to discuss whether we were going to go, how we were going to go, where we going to stay — all that kind of stuff. I assume that's when it happened. There wasn't any other time for it to happen. We didn't have email and that kind of stuff. But I think if decisions had to get made, but it was probably some modified form of consensus. I don't remember serious disagreements within the *havurah* about anything of any real substance. There probably were, but I don't remember them.

JG: In Havurat Shalom and also Fabrangen to some extent, there was, as part of this push towards community, the sense that people had to be quote "open to each other" and processing feeling any kind of disagreement. That led to the emotionality of it.

MA: I don't think we did that much of that, not in the first years. Not the couple years that I was part of it.

JP: By the time I came in, the group was traumatized by the breakup of a marriage, so I think there was a sort of backing away from too much intimacy, because there was a fear of what it could lead to, and sudden realization of what it could lead to.

MA: Yeah.

JG: It sounds like that breakup actually changed —

JP: Yeah. Yeah.

JG: Something changed.

MA: Yeah. Changed dramatically.

JG: How would you describe that? What changed?

MA: Before it happened — it happened between the time that I moved back to Northampton and the time that Judith came in, so sometime between '72, and '74. When we would go away on these retreats. Most of the time it was just like one big room. We would all be rolling out sleeping bags on the floor, or there would be a few separate rooms. Sometimes married couples would get a separate room. Sometimes they didn't, (02:09:00) whatever. People would stay up late into the night talking or doing whatever. Sometimes one member of a couple would go to sleep and another would stay up or whatever. It was almost like puppies in a litter, just kind of —

JG: Interesting.

MA: Totally trusting, falling all over one another. It just felt — there was a kind of closeness and trust that were very much, you know, it felt like you could — I don't think it really felt that you could talk about anything, because probably there was a lot people didn't talk about, but there was a sense of intimacy. Once it became clear, I think, that people had been intimate in other ways outside of — I mean, clearly there were people sleeping together. That — Alan Mintz. Not Alan Mintz. What was the other Mintz? There were a number of other people whose names I left out of that list. But anyways there were people sleeping together. That was not a big deal. But when someone who was married slept with someone who was not married, and that marriage eventually broke up, and a new couple got formed, I think it sort of broke the spell. I think we all felt like, oh, this is completely safe because everybody knows nothing's going to happen. When something did happen, there was the thought that something more could happen. I think

people got scared. It was not much talked about in the group. I was already out of it more. I was still at that point coming down for the retreats, maybe not every month, but pretty regularly. There was definitely a pulling back — and a, well, we didn't really mean for this to happen. Some people were very, very judgmental at the same time. It got very tricky.

JG: Do you feel like the *havurah* recovered from that?

MA: Yes, I do. I think it took a long time.

JP: I'm not sure it ever recovered. I don't agree. It certainly never recovered that sense of intimacy that you described. (02:12:00) Now, of course, we were getting older, having children. We were starting to get real jobs. There were a lot of other things going on. But it certainly never went back.

MA: No, it never went back to that. I don't know how much it had to do with the almost limbo state of our lives. Graduate school, when I think back to it now, graduate school on the one hand is a kind of crazy time. On the other hand, there was time. We had time to go one evening to a *havurah* class, another evening to a meeting, once a month away on retreat, maybe another time to a meeting. And I was doing this women's health stuff. It's like, who had that kind of time, certainly once you got a job?

JG: Certainly once you had children.

MA: Once you had children. I don't know how much longer it could have lasted. Also people started moving away. Either they got jobs or had children, and people needed more space, so they would move to New Jersey or whatever. And that initial group started to break up.

JG: We've talked about the Shabbat retreats. Before we sort of leave community building, I want to just touch on Weiss's Farm —

MA: Oh, yes.

JG: — which was a time when the *havurah* actually came together with the other main *havurot* of the period.

MA: Right, right.

JG: Were you both involved?

JP: No, I was not.

MA; I was. Yeah, yeah.

JG: So tell us about Weiss's farm.

MA: Weiss's Farm — it was certainly going by 1972. I'm not sure when it started, but I know that I was going from Northampton. They were inter-*havurah* retreats that were held in this former chicken farm in central New Jersey.

JG: Who were the Weisses?

MA: I don't know. I guess they were the owners of this farm. I don't think it was a chicken farm by the time we went there. It might have been a farm when they first bought it. They were supposedly inter-*havurah* retreats, but mostly the people were from the New York Havurah and Fabrangen. Very few people from Havurat Shalom. We always thought of them as the elitists, and they didn't want anything do with the rest of us. That's where I met Chava.

JG: Weissler?

MA: Chava Weissler, and that's where I got to know Max and Esther Ticktin, (02:15:00) although I had met them before, and Arthur Waskow. They met three times a year on U.S. holidays, so Columbus Day, July 4th, and I don't remember when the third one was. It might have been Memorial — I don't think it was Memorial Day.

JP: It would've been too close.

MA: It may have been in February. It might have been Washington's — what we called Washington's birthday back in those days. I still have pictures of building a *sukkah*. Often Sukkot was around Columbus Day. I remember building a *sukkah* with Sharon and Michael Strassfeld. They did come from Boston. Art Waskow and Phyllis [Sperling] were part of designing of this thing.

JG: And the first *Jewish Catalog* was published in '73.

Ma: Yeah, we used the model from that. They were great fun — it was study, it was *davening*, and just realizing we were part of a kind of looser network of community, so people who weren't doing exactly the same things, but were doing similar kinds of

things. We could talk about them. Some of the early discussions of “new halachah” happened there. When was Esther’s —?

JP: It was in an issue of *Response*. So it was ‘73?

MA: So that was around the same time.

JG: What are you —?

MA: Esther Ticktin’s article about —

JP: “A Modest Proposal” — it was suggestions for a new halachah based on “remember the stranger.”

MA: Men who are part of our community should not *daven* in a community that would not accept women in a *minyan*.

JP: They should not —

MA: Not allow themselves to be counted in a minyan or accept an aliyah in a community —

JP: And they would not dance with the Torah on Simchat Torah if women weren’t —

MA: If women couldn’t — if people weren’t treated equally in that community.

JG: Do you remember discussing this with her there?

MA: I’m thinking that probably something, discussion around that probably did happen, and I can’t remember specifically, but it was all happening around this time. (02:18:00) And Esther and Max were really very, very important to those gatherings. They were, you know, half a generation, somewhat older. They were roughly the age of our parents. It just felt really important to have them there. They were just so wise and sensible.

JG: And warm.

Ma: And warm. Yeah, wonderful, wonderful people.

JG: Do you remember, were there political differences in the orientation toward political action or political activism or issues that sort of came up?

MA: I don't remember that in particular. I think the New York Havurah and Fabrangen were fairly closely aligned politically, in terms of what we thought was important, what wasn't. Fabrangen was founded in part by people in Washington who were part of Jews for Urban Justice, so I think there was probably a bit more active engagement by people from Fabrangen in local political organizing and politics in Washington than there was for us, the New York Havurah in New York City. A bunch of people were involved in Soviet Jewry activism. That's how Dina met people from the *havurah*. Dina met David, maybe, and got involved. I forgot exactly how. David Sperling. And people were certainly engaged in the confrontations at the Jewish Federation, saying stop spending your money on hospitals and nursing homes and put more money into Jewish education. In general I think our political stances were fairly similar. Probably Havurat Shalom, if you asked them what they believed, yes, they'd be similar too, but our sense was they just weren't as engaged as the rest of us.

JG: Breira was founded in '73. Do you recall discussions about perspectives on the Arab-Israeli issues?

MA: That for sure. There certainly were conversations about that. Breira was founded out of the New York Havurah. Gerry Serotta came in, got involved too. He wasn't there my first year, but he was certainly — yeah. There were conversations about Israel and I think (02:21:00) a lot of us were on the left. And Breira was not anathema, as far as I know, to anybody in the New York Havurah. I may be mistaken. But I don't think so. We were all more or less aligned.

JG: Let's turn to the question of prayer.

JP: *[sighs]*

MA: What are you thinking?

JP: I'm just thinking how that's now a right-wing position.

MA: Yeah.

JP: Breira's position.

Ma: Not quite right.

JP: But, yeah.

MA: Certainly mainstream.

JG: Let's turn to *tefilah*, prayer. So, Martha, in the beginning there, how do you describe the attitudes towards *tefilah* and the place it had in the community early on?

Ma: I think very early on, people didn't know what to do. Most people were not interested particularly. There was nothing really compelling about it. We sort of felt like it was part of what it is to be Jewish and we should be connected to it. It wasn't happening. I think Fabrangen probably was *davening* Shabbos morning from the beginning. Certainly Havurat Shalom was. We were not. I don't remember what happened that we started. I know there was a small group of us, four or five, who said, let's get together Shabbos morning and see if we can do something with this that's going to bring it alive. We wanted to see what it was going to be like. I don't remember how it started, but I remember that it started sometime after I got involved.

JG: Do you remember who was involved in that early *davening* community?

MA: I know Alan Mintz was. Dina started coming in. She must have stayed over. She was living in Borough Park at the time. I don't think she would have travelled. She must have stayed over Friday night. Who else? David came certainly sometimes.

JP: Must have been Alan Mintz.

Ma: I said, Alan Mintz. He was the first person. But I can't remember — there were more people, but I can't remember who they were. John probably came occasionally. Maybe Peter. Chash might have been there. Noam probably came. Noam was at the *davening*. It was small. Maybe five or six people. Liz might have (02:24:00) come sometimes. [see addendum]

JG: Men and women?

MA: Yeah, men and women. Mmhmm.

JG: You said this was tremendously exciting. What became so exciting about it for you?

MA: I think the idea that we could figure out what we wanted to do and react to things that were happening. The fact that David and I could imagine bringing Bach to Shabbos morning was like, Oh! There are things here that could be meaningful to us if we figured out how to engage with them. We spent time talking about various of the prayers we were

reading. It's funny, I remember that it was really important and that I really enjoyed going. Partly, I just liked the people, so it was another occasion to be together, the few of us there were. There must have been something there which I can't now put my finger on exactly about, you know, this can be alive which had always — not always — but largely seemed pretty dead.

JG: Schleppey, as it were.

MA: Yeah. But what happened there, one Shabbos morning — oh, another person who was there Allan Gordon. He was another person who would come. So it was probably more like fifteen or eighteen people as I think of these more names. Lewis Mintz it was. Yeah, okay. We were sitting around, talking. We had just done *Nishmat*, which is one of my absolute favorite prayers, and one of the people, men, said, "Oh, I love this prayer. It sort of evokes everything, all the different parts of the body, and at the moment of ejaculation," blah blah blah. I don't remember a thing of what happened after that. I don't remember a word. I do remember that shortly thereafter I found myself in the room next door staring out the window, and Dina, who was also there, came in and ended up staring out of the window and (02:27:00) realizing — we had both realized somehow or another that we didn't want to be in that other room. Or we weren't meant to be in the other room. We didn't know what had hit us. We decided oh, maybe we should start a class looking at the situation of women in Judaism. Because at the *havurah* you can start classes and have a class on whatever you want. I was in one on beginnings, and Gershon taught one on Hasidism or something. We decided we'd start a class on women in Judaism. It was the two of us and Liz.

JG: Liz Koltun.

MA: Liz Koltun. I think, we invited all the women, but I don't think they were all interested. Phyllis didn't come initially. Ruth Hundert, I don't think came initially. And then we thought of other Jewish women we knew who might want to join the class even though they weren't part of the *havurah* — Paula Hyman was one of them. Leora Fishman.

JP: Arlene?

Ma: Arlene. And Leora had this friend, Betty Braun. She brought her along.

JG: Leslie.

MA: No, Leslie was not in the beginning.

JG: She was not in the beginning.

JP: Toby Brandriss?

MA: Toby Brandriss, who was then Toby Gottlieb.

JP: [*simultaneously*] Gottlieb.

MA: And maybe Maureen. There were about eight or ten of us, I believe. We started studying texts about women in Judaism. We met however often *havurah* classes met — once a week, probably. At some point we asked Judy Hauptman — who was then teaching at the Seminary [JTS] or studying at the Seminary. Maybe she was already teaching. I can't remember — to teach us some Talmud. I remember she taught us this passage, "If a man finds a fly in his chicken soup, he can divorce his wife." Stuff like that. [*laughs*] Anyway, we were studying all this stuff. And then, at some point — so this must have been like seventy — When was the first women's [conference]?

MA: We went to the RA [Rabbinical Assembly] '73, so this must have been the fall of '72.

JP: The first conference was February '73.

MA: '74.

JG: The class was created in '71.

MA: No, no, because I was — right, right. I'm getting confused about the years. Because the spring of '72 we went to the RA.

MA: (02:30:00) So this class had been going on. Sometime around Christmas or New Year's time, or something like that, we found out that one of the guys in the *havurah* had sent a letter to some of his buddies in Boston, and they were going to have a meeting. We didn't see the letter. We were told, something about the future of Judaism in the United States, or something like that. All guys. We were not pleased, so we contacted some of the women in Havurat Shalom and ended up deciding to meet in Boston together — the same time that these guys were meeting. I don't know whether they were meeting also in Boston. I think they were meeting also in Boston. We started talking about we had been studying —

JG: Do you recall who from Boston was there?

MA: Who from Boston was there? Cherie Koller-Fox for sure. Probably Sharon Strassfeld. I can't remember who else. There were a number of women. We were having a conversation about, we had this class and we weren't sure really where to go, basically?

JG: Was this with members — there was a Jewish women's consciousness raising group. Elaine Cohen was part of that. And others.

JP: Eva was part of it.

MA: No, Eva was in New York. Eva wasn't in Boston, actually.

JP: She was in Boston. At the first conference, she was in Boston.

MA: Maybe it was. I don't know who they were, to tell you the truth. Might have been. Anyway, they were sort of pushing us and they were saying, this is really interesting. You're doing important work here. You need to go public with this. We said, How can we go public? We're just a study group. We don't really know what we want. When I think back on that, it's a really important moment because we said, all we can say now, is that we want women to be treated equally. But, if we're saying that Judaism has really been created by men for men, we don't know what we'd really want if we would have a chance for women to really get in there. It is going to take us a lot more studying to figure that out.

JG: A fully formed vision.

MA: We didn't have an alternative vision. All we had was, in a sense, access. (02:33:00) We knew that wasn't all of what we wanted. Some of us were saying we shouldn't go public until we have a fully formed vision. And they were saying, That's nuts. We don't know how long that's going to take. I was one of the people who thought we shouldn't go public yet, but they convinced us. And we went back to New York. I think this was like in January.

JG: Of '72.

MA: Of '72. Maybe it was even later. Might have been February. And Liz, who had grown up in Park Avenue Synagogue, who knew Judah Nadich, who was then president of the RA. We decided if we were going to go public, we needed to have a name. We had a lot of possible names. Jewish Women's Study Group of the New York Havurah didn't

sound like it had a real, you know — Someone came up with the idea of Ezrat Nashim, which was kind of a pun on the women's section of the Temple area, but it also meant "help for women."

JG: Because the women's section was called the Ezrat Nashim.

MA: — was called Ezrat Nashim, right. So, Liz, on behalf of us, wrote a letter to Judah Nadich and said, We're a group of women, largely coming out of the Conservative movement. There were a few who weren't. And we'd like to make a presentation at the RA, which was the next month. He wrote a very nice letter back, saying thank you very much, but the program for this has been a year in planning, and we really don't have time. What did we know from? Nothing. We thought, oh, they're blowing us off. This is really obnoxious. We printed up — we got xerox copies of — we said, we're going to go anyway. We'll just crash the meeting. We got 50 or 100 copies of a couple of Trudy Weiss Rosmarin's articles in the —

JP: *Jewish Spectator*.

MA: And Rachel Adler's "The Jew Who Wasn't There" from *Davka*, and we wrote up a one-page thing, which is now in the Jewish Women's Archive called "Jewish Women Call for Change." And we took two cars and went up to the Concord.

JG: Where was this?

MA: March in 1972.

JG: But where?

MA: The Concord. Kiamesha Lake. We get up to the Concord. The fact is they were really nice to us. They gave us — we must have driven up early one morning. (02:36:00) That's what it was. We said, We want to talk to the rabbis. They said, Oh, there's no time, but all right. There's going to be a lunch break or something here. They let us advertise. Oh, and the day we arrived we had called the *New York Post* and the *New York Times*, of course, before we went, and they both came to Paula's apartment where we were meeting one night and they took pictures of us and they took a story from us. *The Post* published it on the morning of March 14, 1972. We arrive at Kiamesha Lake at the Concord and there's a story with a picture of young women calling for change at the Rabbinical Assembly. They gave us a room. There must have been like a hundred rabbis showed up to hear what we had to say. We called for equal access, and we gave out the stuff we printed up. Some of them said you're going to destroy the Jewish community,

and all this kind of stuff, and some said they wanted to take information and whatnot back to their congregations. We had another meeting in the afternoon for the women. They had no role at the Rabbinical Assembly convention. No women rabbis at that point.

JG: They were the *rebbetzins*.

MA: They generally had flower arranging — literally, flower arranging. Fashion. *Ich weiss*.

JG: This is what they were engaged in?

MA: While the men were at the RA, so we again called this meeting and, again put forward our proposals, and I remember Leora Fishman was one of the people who was speaking. The iconic moment at that session was this little old lady stood up, and it turned out, it was — I don't even know her name.

JP: Adele.

MA: Mrs. H. L. Ginsberg

JP: It was Adele, right? I think it was Adele.

MA: I don't know. Anyway, she stands up at the end of the presentation. She says, "What I want to know is, where have you been all these years?" It was truly amazing. And then, there was a horrible snowstorm, and they said, You can't drive to New York. They put us up. They put up the ten of us. They gave us two rooms or three rooms or whatever it was. They put us up in the Concord for the night (02:39:00) and then we drove back the next morning. I was driving one of the cars and it spun around and I thought, this is the end, but no. There weren't enough cars on the highway. But we were fortunate we ended up on the shoulder and didn't get hit. And then after that, Ezrat Nashim. People had taken these things back to their congregations. People started writing to us. We put, I think, Arlene's home address at the bottom of these things. They started writing to us and said, I've heard from my rabbi, or whatever. I want to join your organization. We wrote back and said, we're not an organization, but start something in your community. And I guess a lot of them did.

JG: It was a grassroots phenomenon, actually, at that point.

MA: Yeah.

Judith Plaskow and Martha Ackelsberg, 04/26/17

JG: You weren't giving that, study this.

MA: We didn't do anything other than provide these three articles. The only thing Ezrat Nashim published was — we started collecting baby naming ceremonies for girls. That was put together in a pamphlet and that got sent to people.

JP: That was when I was in Ezrat Nashim, so that was already —

MA: '75.

JP: '76.

JG: There was also the special issue of *Response*.

MA: Liz was the editor of that, so that totally —

JG: How did that come to be, to the extent that you can recall?

MA: I don't know. Bill Novak must have asked Liz to do it.

JG: To put together —

MA: To put together a special issue. And then she asked people, because your piece from —

JP: Right, from the first conference.

JP: February of '73. So I think a number of things in that issue were from the first conference.

MA: Yeah. Rachel had a piece in there.

JP: Maybe some, like Carol Christ's piece had already been published elsewhere. Probably some people wrote for the issue.

MA: Esther's piece was in there, right?

JP: Yeah.

JG: That first conference in '73, a year later — or less than a year later — so that was organized by the North American Jewish Students Network?

MA: Right. That was organized by Network with a very substantial input from people who were in Ezrat Nashim. Some of the people, like Dina and Arlene were part of Network as well as part of Ezrat Nashim. (02:42:00) We were sort of jointly involved in planning that conference.

JG: Talk about that conference a little bit. Hundreds of people came to that conference from all over.

JP: I think there were 400 people. 400.

MA: Yeah. That was amazing.

JP: Amazing.

MA: That was really an amazing experience.

JG: This is something beyond the small grassroots efforts that was happening.

MA: That was grassroots too. North American Jewish Students Network was totally grassroots.

JG: True. But it wasn't a little local thing.

MA: It brought people from all over the East Coast. I made my first tallit for that conference. I remember. I learned how to tie *tzitzit*. That was the conference where we had a huge discussion in the middle of the night.

JP: — the night, about how to accommodate both Orthodox and non-Orthodox women in terms of the *davening*. I was part of the conversation because of my relationship with Martha and Paula. Maybe I had a relationship with you [*looks at M. Ackelsberg*]?

MA: We had met a few years before.

JG: Judith, were you involved, had you become part of Ezrat Nashim —?

JP: No, because I was living in Montreal. But I knew about it through Martha, and I guess the first minute of the conference, I remember Martha introducing me to Leora and Paula.

Paula had just found out she was pregnant with Judith. I became part of that conversation about how to handle the *davening*.

MA: The Orthodox women said you can't say *davar she'bekedusha*

JP: You can't be a minyan.

MA: We weren't going to *daven* making believe we weren't a minyan with 400 women. We said, how do you resolve this? And what we came up with really worked. It mattered in terms of having aliyot, for example. Would we be able to say *Barchu*? And were we were going to be able to say *Barchu* for an aliyah?

JP: And Kaddish.

MA: Those people who considered themselves a minyan, we agreed, would say those things, and those people who didn't want to, didn't have to answer amen. And those people who felt they could say *Barchu* while having an aliyah could say it, and those who didn't want to, wouldn't. Whoever felt comfortable saying *amen* would say *amen* and those whoever didn't, wouldn't. (02:45:00) Everybody wanted to come up with something that would work, and it didn't feel like you had to do the most Orthodox common denominator to make Orthodox women feel comfortable. Because everyone else would feel uncomfortable. That was a really important moment which we have talked about on various occasions since, trying to explain to younger women that you can come up with compromises that don't give away the fundamental principles of egalitarian Judaism. You don't need to give up your principles in order to be part of a larger whole. In the contemporary context, it often feels that way.

JP: It was certainly the first time that I was ever at a *davening* of all women. Paula read Torah.

MA: Yeah.

JG: Was she reading Torah elsewhere?

JP: I don't know.

MA: I don't know.

MA: After that, I learned how to read Torah. Arlene taught me.

Judith Plaskow and Martha Ackelsberg, 04/26/17

JG: How did she know how?

MA: Her father was a hazan, so she knew all that stuff.

JG: He had taught her?

MA: He had taught her. He had taught her. She, for many years, once the *havurah* started having regular Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah *davening* —

JG: You mean in New York?

MA: — in New York. She was often the hazan or hazanit. She had — has — a gorgeous voice. She knew all the —

JG: *The hazanut.*

MA: *The nusach.*

JG: Was the New York Havurah — what was its practice in terms of women, *minyan* with women, *aliyot* and women?

MA: We almost never had a Sefer Torah. That solved the aliyah problem.

JG: Would you do Torah reading, even if?

MA: We must have had Torah discussion.

JP: There was certainly Torah reading on the High Holidays because I had my first aliyah in September of '83 on Rosh Hashanah at the New York Havurah.

MA: Eighty-three or seventy-three?

JP: I'm sorry, '73. Robert and I came in for the High Holidays. I had my first aliyah. I think Paula might have been reading Torah, or maybe she was the *gabbai*? I remember her being —

MA: She always did the haftarah on the first day of Rosh Hashanah.

JP: That's true.

Judith Plaskow and Martha Ackelsberg, 04/26/17

JG: Paula did?

JP: Yeah.

JG: What was that like for you (02:48:00) to have your first aliyah?

JP: It was so moving. Yeah, it was amazing. Yeah.

MA: I was just remembering that one of the things that came out of Ezrat Nashim and this whole thing — I don't remember exactly when that was, but I think it would have been before '72; I was pretty sure I was in New York — some of us went to — what's the name of Riskin's shul?

JP: Oh yeah, right. Lincoln Square.

MA: Lincoln Square. Downstairs. We were invited by — I don't remember if it was Riskin or his successor. We led a women's minyan there, for the first time.

JG: What year do you think this was?

MA: Sometime between '70 and '72.

JG: Women's *tefilah*.

MA: But before women's *tefilah*, we led a women's minyan. A number of women from the shul — it was for the them, and they came. There were women — to us they seemed ancient — forties, fifties, sixties — who had never seen the inside of a Sefer Torah.

JP: Blu Greenberg had never seen the inside of a Sefer Toah, until that first women's conference. I remember sitting there, overwhelmed, moved, and also in a rage that Blu Greenberg had never seen the inside of a Torah.

JG: Hard to imagine at this point.

JP: Yeah.

MA: Yeah. That was true for this whole slew of women in Lincoln Square Synagogue. People were just overcome with having the opportunity to have an aliyah, to see the Torah, to march around with it.

JG: Were they wearing a tallit?

MA: I don't think so.

JP: That was later.

JG: What did you say, Judith?

JP: It was later.

JG: Later.

MA: There were some men standing outside trying to figure out what was going on there. There were some women standing outside. They just weren't sure what to do with this. That was an amazing event also.

JG: When did you have your first aliyah?

MA: Must have been at Harvard Hillel, actually, now that I think of it. I was bat mitzvahed on a Friday night. When I reached bat mitzvah age, we did not have Shabbos morning bat mitzvah for girls. It must have been at Harvard Hillel.

JG: When this small group started *davening* more regularly (02:51:00) at the New York Havurah, were women having aliyot?

Ma: We didn't have a Torah.

JG: Oh, you didn't have a Torah. So it wasn't —

MA: So it wasn't that. But one thing I do remember was that the first time we *davened* together on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I guess Arlene must have been *davening*, because it was Rosh Hashanah *nusach*. There were other people who knew Rosh Hashanah *nusach*, but I remember Dina saying, "That is so beautiful. I've never heard that music before." I said, "What do you mean you've never heard that music before? That's Rosh Hashanah-Yom Kippur *nusach*!" She went to a hasidic *shteibel* in Borough Park, and the women were up in a separate room. She never heard! The rebbetzin used to be up there in front of everybody and looking down and telling them what page they were on. They couldn't hear a thing. She had never heard *davening*. It was inconceivable to me. This was the world that we grew — it's so weird to think — it's amazing to think

how much has changed. There's still way more to do, but a lot has changed — probably not in those communities, but —

JG: When you went away for Shabbat retreats at the New York Havurah, you didn't have a Torah with you?

MA: I don't remember. If we did, women would have had aliyot. I'm pretty sure. I don't remember.

JG: Someone mentioned — I could be wrong — I believe someone mentioned that there were discussions and decisions that had to be made that would result in both the Sefer Torah arriving before Shabbat and also all the food — those kinds of issues.

MA: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JP: Yeah, I have a vague memory of there being a Torah.

MA: Oh, actually now I do, too.

JP: Carrying it in a car or a blanket.

JG: Someone had to bring it up.

MA: Right.

JP: Right.

JG: But it means that some people were having aliyot.

JP: Right.

MA: Right.

JG: When did women, in your recollection, start wearing the tallit or *kippah* during *tefilah*?

MA: I started wearing tallit at that Jewish Women's Conference. That's when I made my first tallit.

JG: They had one at the conference? Was there a tallit-making workshop?

MA: No.

JG: Oh.

MA: I made it for the conference. Dina and I went shopping. I think she made one also. I don't think she ever used it. We each bought cloth. I am not from the great seamstresses, but I took a piece of cloth and managed to put a hem on two sides, and tied four pieces of white cloth.

JP: You still have that?

MA: I think I do still have it, as a matter of fact.

JG: How did you decide to make a tallit instead of purchasing a tallit?

MA: I think I must have identified the tallit that existed — mostly what was around; this was pretty early; people had the silly white silk with the blue bands on them. I just didn't want that. It seemed like if I was going to have a tallit, I should make one.

JP: Arlene made her tallit fairly early. She was important. Not that everybody had hers. It had a hood. It was very sophisticated design.

MA: She designed a tallit for women.

JP: She was important in spreading the idea that women should wear tallit.

MA: Yeah and make their own.

JG: Judith, you mentioned that the *havurot* were what you call breeding grounds for liturgical change. Perhaps you meant later. But how so? What role did you think *havurot* played?

JP: That's interesting that I would say that cause that isn't my — I mean for me, it wasn't until we founded B'not Esh in 1981 that I really understood liturgical change. I think what I meant was that we were free to bring back what was happening in B'not Esh to our *havurot* and to create more change out of that — what Martha was describing before about bringing Bach. That wasn't my experience.

MA: Magnificat! *[laughs]*

JP: My experience of the New York Havurah was more traditional egalitarian *davening*. And it was not that that gave me a glimpse of other possibilities.

JG: How was this for both of you? In Fabrangen and certainly Havurat Shalom, for one thing, there were many neo-hasidic elements brought through Art, through Zalman, through Shlomo Carlebach, as well as elements from other religious traditions, Eastern traditions in particular, or even Quaker traditions — silence, silent mediations, those kinds of things. (02:57:00) Did the New York Havurah experiment with those kind of innovative rituals or ways of approaching *tefilah*?

JP: I don't think it cared enough about *davening* to do that.

MA: I don't remember that at all. It's interesting. What I remember about Shlomo — I do remember one of our Thursday night meals, somebody invited Shlomo to come. He joined us for the meal. We had a discussion of what to do — we had a cockroach infestation problem. We were talking about what to do about the cockroaches, whether to bring in roach traps or call an exterminator. What I remember is when it came time for Shlomo to do whatever it — he started talking about the cockroaches [“cockroaches” in Yiddish accent] and how the cockroaches were also God's creatures, or whatever. We all felt terrible. *[laughs]* We did do singing.

JP: Absolutely.

MA: We did sing. That was very important to us.

JG: Singing *niggunim* or what?

MA: We sang *niggunim*. We sang — who can remember?

JP: I remember Danny Shevitz pounding on the table singing *Tzur MiShelo*.

MA: *Zemirot*, certainly. Friday night *zemirot* for sure. I think, you know, we also just did singing when we got together on occasion. Certainly Zalman [see addendum] came with his guitar that night. But I don't think — Alan Gordon might have been into meditation. There were a few people sort of into mysticism, but more our response was, let's have a class about it, rather than let's try to do it.

JP: Exactly! I remember a class with Danny Shevitz about Kabbalah my first year, but we didn't think, how should this impact our *davening*?

JG: What are we going to do with this?

JG: So there wasn't sitting on the floor, singing and humming, as part of your —?

MA: I don't think so.

JG: Okay.

MA: I mean, might have been. I do not remember that.

JP: I mean, we went to Havurat Shalom and we sat on cushions on the floor. It was clearly not what the New York Havurah was doing.

MA: Right. *[laughs]*

JG: I want to come back to briefly mention some of the strategies that Ezrat Nashim (3:00:00) and people associated with Ezrat Nashim did use to reach out. We've talked about some of the grassroots efforts that sprang up around the country — a publication of a special issue of *Response*, edited by Liz Koltun in '73. But there were other things as well that I just want to mention, like *Lilith*. *Lilith Magazine*.

JP: Right, mmhmm.

JG: And the beginning of feminist seders. Rosh Hodesh groups. All of these things were starting to —

MA: Right. I mean, Arlene came up with Rosh Hodesh — the idea of Rosh Hodesh — with the idea of reclaiming Rosh Hodesh as a celebration for women.

JG: Tell us about Arlene. First, what's her last name.

MA: Arlene Agus.

JG: I don't think we've said that.

MA: Arlene Agus grew up — I believe she grew up Orthodox in Brooklyn. Her father was a hazan. I think she went to Flatbush Yeshiva.

JG: Was she a member of the *havurah*?

MA: She was not initially. She was a friend of Dina's. When we formed this women's study group, Dina invited her to join, which she did. And through that, as she came into the *havurah*. She was an incredibly creative and talented person. She taught me, certainly, how to *leyn*, and *trope* for *Shir HaShirim* [Song of Songs] and *Eichah* [Ecclesiastes]. Basically, I did learn *haftarah*, but everything else that I know she taught me.

JG: Was this significant in that many people point to the fact that part of the reason that women were slow in some ways to move forward with all these different aspects of participation was because they didn't know how to do it.

MA: Right.

JG: They had never been taught. Women needed to learn how to learn.

MA: Right.

JG: How was that happening? In the New York Havurah, Arlene Agus —

MA: She taught whoever was interested in learning. It was already in that issue of *Response*. It was certainly in the Jewish —

JP: [*talks over people*] It was certainly in Liz's anthology.

MA: The issue of *Response* came first. Then about a year or two later —

JG: — '76, I think.

MA: *The Jewish Woman: Feminist Perspectives*. Certainly, by then, Arlene had written this article, "This Month is For You."

JP & MA: [*unison*] "This Month is For You."

JG: This what?

JP: Rosh Hodesh is a women's holiday.

MA: Reclaiming the tradition of women (03:03:00) celebrating Rosh Hodesh. Traditionally there was some, basically, midrash that Rosh Hodesh was a holiday for

women because they hadn't voluntarily given up their jewelry for the Golden Calf. She really encouraged what became Rosh Hodesh groups all over the country — women getting together once a month and talking about their lives. It was kind of a CR [consciousness raising] group within a Jewish context. The other thing —

JG: — and using Jewish metaphors.

MA: Yes, yes, for sure.

JG: — to get at these experiences.

MA: And sort of what are the symbols of this month, and what does this month bring us, and what do you bring to it? She also designed a tallit which would be for women, which was actually almost like a jacket, but it had fringes on the four ends. It was sort of a jacket. It had sleeves. Somewhere I've got the model of it. And the top of it you can throw over your head, if you want to cover your head with a tallit, and the two fringes would be hanging down the front, and two in the back. It was amazing. People have taken that up. There are copies of that tallit all over the place.

JG: Did you ever have one?

MA: I never did.

JP: I never had that one either.

MA: A friend of ours did. A friend of ours in our *havurah* in Northampton wanted a new tallit. I can't remember what she was celebrating. She was looking around and she saw — we must have showed her that model. She asked somebody to make it for her, and that person has one also. So they spread around. I think somebody told us there might be one in the Jewish Museum.

JP: The other thing that was happening is, I was asked to speak at Hillels and sisterhoods. Members of Ezrat Nashim spoke to Sisterhoods.

MA: People were speaking all over the place.

JP: There was a period when we were telling people, put the money for the Mathilde Schechter Dormitory in escrow until women were admitted to the Seminary.

JG: What was this?

JP: A women's dormitory.

MA: It was a women's dormitory named for Mathilde Schechter, who was Solomon Schechter's wife. They were building a new dormitory at the Seminary.

JP: The sisterhood was very active in raising money.

JG: It was intended for men?

MA: Yeah.

JP: Yeah.

MA: I remember, (03:06:00) my mother, who, in her middle and later years became really quite a wonderful activist, got furious when she heard about this. She sort of helped us think of this idea of telling people, the next time they call you to raise money for The Mathilde Schechter residence hall, tell them you'll send money when they accept women to the rabbinical school.

JG: Did people do that?

MA: Yeah. I don't know how many.

JP: I remember speaking about it. People being quite shocked

MA: A bunch of us were speaking all over the place.

JG: What kinds of receptions do you recall getting in those early days?

MA: Mixed. Mostly a lot of the women were excited and enthusiastic, and some people were basically saying basically Western civilization was going to fall apart, that men were going to leave the synagogue.

JG: Why do you think men would leave the synagogue?

MA: Just like they'd left the Catholic Church, as they say. There are certain areas that men expect to be in charge and if they're no longer in charge, or they're no longer totally in charge, all of a sudden they feel like they don't want to be there.

JP: Don't want to be there.

JG: It devalues it.

MA: It devalues it.

JP: In fact, that has happened to some extent.

MA: In non-Orthodox synagogues.

JP: In non-Orthodox —

MA: In non-Orthodox synagogues.

JG: What impact, if any, did Ezrat Nashim and all of these activities have on the New York Havurah in the mid-seventies, this period that we're talking about? What was the response within the *havurah*?

MA: That's a really interesting question.

JP: A very interesting question.

MA: I'm not sure, to tell you the truth. We were off doing our thing. I don't think they had any objections to it. I don't know that the men were particularly excited about it. I don't remember.

JG: This was big.

JP: It was egalitarian space. That was the bottom line.

JG: What was?

JP: The *havurah*. It was already an egalitarian space and in that sense it was a base from which we could go out. But I don't think we were yet imagining demanding more (03:09:00) more substantive changes that we would bring to the Havurah.

MA: The men didn't find this threatening. They were already egalitarian, so what was the big deal? It's not that, "what was the big deal," but there was no issue.

JG: Are you saying that by and large, they meaning the New York Havurah felt like they were already doing this. This was not like a critique of them, but the rest of the world.

MA: Right.

JP: Right. I think Esther Ticktin's "Modest Proposal" was really important here in that it was saying to the men in the *havurah* movement you have to bring this to the rest of the community.

MA: Only you can do it. We can't do it.

JP: By refusing to have an aliyah, for example, in an Orthodox synagogue.

MA: Or in a Conservative synagogue that didn't give aliyot to women.

JG: Do you recall any discussion of this — for instance, Esther Ticktin's piece?

JP: No, Esther's piece was never really discussed. We've talked about this with Esther many times. It never got the attention that it deserved. It never became something that everybody was talking about. I think men experienced it as threatening.

MA: It was making a demand on them —

JP: — to give up their privilege in a lot of Jewish spaces. They weren't willing to do that.

MA: Most people weren't willing to do that.

JG: It would involve taking a very public stance.

MA: Arthur Waskow tells a story about that — very Arthur Waskow, or whatever. He was on an El-Al flight to or from Israel. There were a whole bunch of hasidim on the flight and they saw a man with a long beard, and they asked him if he would make the tenth for a minyan. And he asked: "Do you count women" and they said, No. He said, "My Halachah doesn't allow me to *daven* with you."

JP: That's the only example of that I've ever heard.

MA: — only story we've ever heard of. Of course, I believe that's what happened.

Judith Plaskow and Martha Ackelsberg, 04/26/17

JG: What's the actual relationship — how would you describe what the relationship was between Ezrat Nashim and the New York Havurah? It started —

MA: It started as a class within the New York Havurah and Ezrat Nashim always saw itself as part of the New York Havurah — (03:12:00)

JP: Yeah.

MA: — even though it, in a sense, grew beyond it.

JG: Did Ezrat Nashim —

MA: And then it became a women's group within the New York Havurah.

JP: Right. By the time I came back to New York in '74, Ezrat Nashim was kind of a CR group, women's talk group. We did the baby naming ceremonies booklet at that point, but it really stopped being an activist group. But we definitely thought of ourselves as part of the New York Havurah. Most of the women in it were members of the New York Havurah.

JG: When you say it served somewhat or largely as a CR group within the New York Havurah, what kinds of issues were up for discussion? We could talk about what happens in a general CR group, so?

JP: Right. When I was in it, I don't think it was any longer really focused on Jewish issues. We might have been talking about things that you would talk about in any group, about work-family relationships. We did talk about the absence of naming ceremonies for girls, and what to do about the birth of a daughter. That was the one substantive Jewish issue that I remember talking about.

JG: Were there any other Jewish women's rites of passage, such as miscarriage or —

MA: We talked about having some kind of ritual for menarche for miscarriage, for birth, for —

JP: — weaning.

MA: Weaning. None of that stuff existed at the time. People have developed stuff since.

JG: And much of that was being passed around by word of mouth.

MA: Some stuff.

JP: Right.

MA: Right.

JP: Right.

MA: Things like the Jewish Women's Resource Center were created. They started collecting this kind of stuff — ritualwell.org.

JP: Women's seders.

MA: Yeah, women's seders.

JP: That was also early. There's a women's haggadah in Liz Koltun's collection, and maybe even in a *Response* issue. Aviva —

MA: — Cantor Zuckoff.

JP: — Cantor Zukoff, who was the cofounder of *Lilith* did a women's — (03:15:00)

JG: Seder?

JP: Haggadah.

JP: Yeah, very early.

JG: In the mid-seventies?

JP: Yeah, early seventies.

MA: She was involved with Network, too. She was one of the people who was —

JG: Why did Ezrat Nashim become more of an internal New York Havurah consciousness raising group as opposed to an activist women's organization?

MA: I don't think we ever wanted to be an organization. We were founded as a study group. People were starting to spread out. I was in Massachusetts. Leora eventually went

up to Massachusetts. Betty Braun — I don't know what happened to her. I think there was also — we were still stuck in that place that we were at, that I was describing to you that weekend in Boston. We could articulate what we wanted in terms of access. Equal access is not a difficult concept to get through your head. That was something for the most part that people needed to do on the local level. They were going to organize in your shul in Chicago, or Huntsville, Alabama, or Houston Texas. You didn't need a national organization for that. Beyond that, trying to re-imagine, revision what Judaism would look like when women are not just being brought in from the sidelines, but something more, I don't think anybody — at that point, we didn't know how to do that, and I don't think there were very many people —

JP: Interested.

MA: Who were really interested. I kept raising that question, and you know, it was like—

JG: Meanwhile, women were starting to be ordained in the Reform movement. Sally Priesand in 1972. Sandy Sasso in the Reconstructionist several years later.

MA: Right.

JP: Right.

MA: Right.

JP: Right.

MA: JTS had this big celebration congratulating itself on twenty-five years of ordination of women — acting as if this arose out of the head of Gershon Cohen. (3:18:00) They had invited us; and there was a whole row of women from Ezrat Nashim sitting in the back of the auditorium with smoke coming out of our ears. At some point, there was sort of an acknowledgment that Ezrat Nashim had something to do with it.

JG: Sounds symbolic that you were sitting in the back row.

MA: Judith couldn't make it that day.

JP: I couldn't make it and I didn't want to make it. But I would say the same thing — I don't think that any of the women in Ezrat Nashim when I was in it, except Paula, were interested in the feminist transformation of Judaism. I wouldn't have been able to

articulate that yet myself, but certainly for most of the group, what they wanted was access. They just weren't interested.

JG: Was it that they weren't interested or that they literally couldn't envision it?

JP: The thing is, even when we got to a point where we could envision it, the people who were in Ezrat Nashim were not the people who became involved in —

JG: Taking it to the next level.

JP: Taking it to the next level.

JG: So what led to the formation of B'not Esh in 1981 and how do you see that in relationship to Ezrat Nashim? What had happened since just a few years earlier?

JP: So that came from the first National Havurah Institute in 1980. I taught a class on Jewish feminist theology. I had been teaching women and religion for several years at that point, but I never had the opportunity to teach a class that focused on Judaism. I wasn't sure anybody would take it. And in fact, several people came to the institute in order to take the class. There were three feminist classes, and many of us took two. You could only take two.

JG: Because they —?

MA: There were only two class slots.

JP: A number of us were in two of the three classes. Sue Elwell was doing one on women's history, and Chava did one on the *tekhines*. We had a group of women focusing on feminism.

MA: Not only women, but it was mostly women.

JP: It was mostly women. It was incredibly exciting. We decided we needed our own space to explore this further.

MA: We said, what would it be like if we could have just these kinds of classes for a bunch of time, and people who were really interested in doing them. [03:21:00]

JP: And the people in my class were totally interested in thinking about how Judaism had to change if women were really going to be equal participants. That's what the class was about.

JG: Push that envelope.

JP: It was right after that class that I wrote "The Right Question is Theological." So I sort of formulated the questions at that point. That was in the summer of '80 and then that fall, a group of us met in New York and decided to start. We didn't know it was going to be an ongoing collective.

MA: We thought we would transform Judaism in a weekend.

JP: [*simultaneously*] weekend.

MA: We wrote a letter inviting people to a new Yavneh. [*laughs*]

JG: So what happened? What did it become?

JP: There were sixteen women there the first year, and we had each come feeling like this was going to be the space that was truly home, where everyone was going to be the same as us. And we ended up spending Shabbos morning crying in the hall because everybody felt marginalized.

MA: [*simultaneously*] Marginalized.

JP: Some people were thrilled with the idea of doing a traditional *davening* led by women, and other people felt like I didn't come here to do a traditional *davening*.

MA & JP: [*laugh*]

JP: We ended up that first Shabbat — everyone brought —

MA: — after hysterics on the stairs.

JP: Each of us would bring what was most prayerful and important to her, and we would weave that together. And we did that. We did not meet in '82 because it had been so painful. But in '83 we called the group together, greatly expanded. At that point we invited everybody who was Jewishly and feministly knowledgeable and interested in women's spirituality.

MA: That we knew.

JP: That we knew.

MA: It was like a snowball sample, but we must have invited fifty women, something like that.

JP: And twenty-six came, I think. We have been meeting continuously for thirty-six years.

JG: So that group was the nucleus?

MA: Basically. There are still eight who were part of that original sixteen, one of whom is living in Israel, so she doesn't come that often, (03:24:00) but a lot —

JP: Most of the group.

MA: Was there —

JP: Was there —

MA: — the second year. '83 or '84. A few more people since. More than a few, but whatever.

JP: Yeah.

JG: At what point did you begin to think deeply and engage in ideas of liturgical innovation — God language?

MA: Pretty much from the beginning.

JP: From the beginning — in the sense that from the very beginning, there were a number of people who wanted that, who brought it to that first morning service. We were talking about it explicitly even if we didn't agree, arguing and trying to work things out. And at the end of '83, we made a decision that people would take turns leading the *davening*, and whoever led would do whatever she wanted, and that the others would agree to be present and we would talk afterwards whether it worked.

JG: A very *havurah* —

MA: Very important moment.

JP: Yeah.

MA: It allowed us to expand the possibilities other than feeling like I can't do anything that's going to upset this person or that person. It allowed people to keep pushing the envelope. And sometimes they pushed farther than a lot of other people were comfortable with. But, whatever. We learned that we can survive.

JG: Did that ever result in people shutting down a particular direction, saying —?

JP: Yes. Yes, it did. Mmhmm, yes. There were things that were done once that we didn't do again.

JG: Such as what?

MA: I can't really.

JP: We are not free to talk about it.

MA & JP: *[laugh]*

MA: Right from the beginning, we were talking about God and God language.

JP: I think I read from *The Color Purple* the first year.

MA: The first year. I still, whenever I hear the so-called "God chapter" from *The Color Purple*, I hear Judith's voice reading Alice Walker. *[pauses]* There was a tremendous amount of creativity in that group. Marcia Falk wrote her work out of that. Faith Rogow wrote tons of songs for and out of that. Judith's book, of course — books.

JG: Very important. I want to go back to the question (03:27:00) of discussions of egalitarianism within the *havurah*. Judith, you were the one who mentioned that there were some debates about what constituted genuine egalitarianism that took place at various Havurah Institutes and Shabbat retreats. Can you flesh that out somewhat? What happened over time in terms of these questions?

JP: Well, I think there was an ongoing debate within the institute. I don't know that it's been resolved even now, about: was there a halachah of the *Havurah* movement? Was the

havurah movement egalitarian? There were always numerous Shabbat services. Actually, numerous services daily. Could you have a non-egalitarian minyan announced as part of the *havurah* offerings?

JG: At the Summer Institute?

JP: At the Summer Institute.

JP: I don't remember what year it was.

Ma: It didn't come up initially. When the institutes were first started —

JG: In the eighties.

MA: In the 1980s. 1980 was the first one. I think egalitarianism was so basic that nobody said anything about it and nobody challenged it. All the *davening* was egalitarian. Period. And at a certain point —

JP: — it was early though. It was '83. It was early that we had that knock-down, drag-out fight. The women and Arthur Waskow were arguing that egalitarianism was the halachah of the movement, and I said, "Women's humanity is not negotiable." Steve Shaw said, "Everything is negotiable."

MA: [*pauses*] I think the institutes still — I don't know what it was at that point. I don't feel like the institutes then were in this mode of trying to open up and bring in Orthodox Jews. I think in the last decade in particular, in the last 15 years —

JG: In the 2000s —

MA: — in the 2000s I think, as the leadership in the institutes has shifted from our generation to the younger generation, somebody pointed out, I think probably rightly, that the younger generation (03:30:00) are people who grew up in the Hillels, which were multivalent in some way, but which were operating to some extent on an Orthodox common denominator. Anyway, some of those younger people really wanted to bring in their Orthodox friends to the institute. They thought, the institute is really terrific. Why shouldn't these people get to experience it? But the only thing that's going to allow them to experience it is if they can have a *mechitzah* minyan. Otherwise they wouldn't feel comfortable. And some of us said but what it is to be at the institute is to have egalitarian *davening*.

JG: That is the halachah.

MA: That is the halachah, you know.

JP: And if we went to an Orthodox synagogue, we wouldn't expect them to count us in a minyan because we were there.

MA: If we went to JOFA [Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance], we wouldn't expect them to have an egalitarian minyan if it would conflict with their practice. They couldn't see that. That's the same — when was that? There was a conference at Yale, quite a number of years ago, when Paula was still at Yale. We were all there, and the same thing happened. There was a Jewish women's conference at Yale, and these young women wanted to have a minyan with a *mechitzah*.

JP: They wanted to *not* count themselves as a minyan.

MA: They wanted to have a minyan but not do *davar shebekedusha*. They weren't going to do *Barchu* and stuff like that. We, and Paula, and I don't know who else —

JP: The three of us.

MA: — the three of us were like, AHHH. And we told them the story of the first Jewish women's conference, that this can be resolved, that you don't have to do that. They wanted to have a Kabbalat Shabbat that everyone could be at, and in order to do that they wouldn't constitute themselves a minyan. Even though, again, there were going to be hundreds of people there. There are ways out of this. *[moves hand in an X shape in front of body and shakes head]* They wouldn't. They wouldn't hear it.

JP: It's a very live issue still. It happened at the synagogue in Northampton, which was going to allow an Orthodox minyan in the library.

MA: I said, I really don't think it should happen. If they want to have an Orthodox minyan, let them have it in someone's house, but not under the cover of the shul, (03:33:00) and they said —

JP: Nazi.

MA: They said I was basically being a terrorist, you know. *[laughs]*

JG: An issue, as you say —

MA: It's an issue at Ramah. All the Ramah camps now have an "egal" minyan, and what's called a "*B'li*" minyan, without counting women.

JG: What do you mean?

MA: *B'li* — without counting women.

JG: *B'li* women?

MA: Women can come, but they won't count. This is the Ramah that it turned out Alex was growing up in. We didn't know this. It's like — *[laughs]*

JP: *[sighs]*

MA: Three steps forward, but some back.

JG: Yeah. Okay, is there anything else you want to say about that for the moment? One final question I have for you before we move to our sort of final reflections, and that is the issue of social justice and political activism, which, as we've discussed — Meredith Woocher, for instance, said the *havurah* was founded and grounded in what she called the nexus of political and religious values. It was true for many people. Many commentators have pointed out, as we have here today, to the antiwar activism, the Civil Rights movement. Both of you were very engaged in second wave feminism, the women's health movement, abortion counseling, activism on behalf of LGBT issues, and other sets of rights issues that were starting to percolate in many cases in the sixties and seventies. How, if at all, do you see these areas of social justice activism as having been a part of the New York Havurah sphere of interest and engagement during its years of full-fledged activism?

JP: LGBT?

JG: LGBT? Women's activism?

JP: It was gay and lesbian at that point.

JG: Yeah.

JP: I think it was marginal. Right?

MA: Yeah, I would say. I was very involved in the women's health movement in New York, and I went to those meetings, once or twice — whatever it was, once or twice a week. (03:36:00) I remember thinking of myself as having three networks. One was graduate school. One was the New York Havurah. And one was the women's movement. While certainly the women's movement piece more than touched the *havurah*, certainly in terms of Ezrat Nashim and all that kind of stuff, the women's health activism that I was engaged with was pretty much totally separate. It felt like I was being pulled in these different directions. It didn't really feel like an overlap. I certainly told Dina about the classes that we were teaching. I think she came to a couple of them, what we called "Women and Their Bodies." We weren't quite on the *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, level of consciousness yet. But it felt apart, not in the sense that I had to keep it apart, but that there weren't a whole lot of other people in the *havurah* who were particularly interested in that. You know, *gai gezunterhait!* Fine. I'm not sure to what extent I ever really talked about it with people, or whether I thought of it as connected with my Jewish life, with my life in the *havurah*. It felt to me, I think, pretty separate. A number of the people I was involved with in the women's health movement were Jewish, but a number of them were not. It felt —

JG: Separate.

MA: — separate, yeah.

JG: That bring up anything for you, Judith?

JP: I would say the same thing. During the period that I was in the *havurah*, I was co-chair of the Women and Religion group of the American Academy of Religion. I was starting to teach classes in women and religion and collect articles. I had two communities. There was my AAR community and my New York Havurah community. And again, even though I was part of Ezrat Nashim, I didn't really feel as if people shared those intellectual interests particularly. And in fact, we did some reading, and we were a little bit of a group, but I remember some women complaining that stuff was too academic, and they couldn't really understand it.

JG: The AAR community that you were part of (03:39:00) wasn't particularly focused on Judaism?

JP: No. I think I was the only-no, there was there was Ellen Umansky.

MA: Ellen Umansky.

JP: And that was it.

JG: So it still remained a place where it was bifurcated in your personal experience?

JP: Right, right. It was really only at the first Havurah Institute that I brought them together. That's what was so incredibly exciting about that.

JG: What's happened since, do you think? Have you been able to keep them together somehow?

JP: I think in the *havurot* that we've been part of, we have — because we brought what we learned from B'not Esh into the *havurah*.

MA: It's interesting. For all that we were trying to create in those early *havurot* — a kind of total, intentional community. I sort of learned since to be suspicious of that as a goal, even though emotionally it calls to me. You know, we were pulled in different directions and people had different things that they cared about. We had enough that made a center for us to come together very powerfully, but it wasn't going to be the whole life for any of us.

JG: It wasn't necessarily forever.

MA: Or forever. Even at the time, when it was so central to so many of us, I don't think — it wasn't the whole for really anybody.

JG: In that sense, it differs to an extent from Havurat Shalom. In the very early years when it was conceived of as an alternative seminary, for some people, their full-time work and student life as in the *havurah*.

MA: That's right. Whereas we — some people were finishing up undergraduate, some were in graduate school, some people were already working, some people were about to work. There were always pulls, which probably — I don't know — made it more possible in some ways to be deeply connected where we were because we weren't trying to be everything for everybody. There was a time when we were all thinking about that — what should or could community be for people? What could or should marriage be for people? I remember having lots of conversations about whether (03:41:00) people should expect to have all their needs met in their relationship, or was that too idealistic or foolish or, you know, it's sort of related. It's like how do you have room for the complexity of people's lives and different things that matter to them, and at the same time find a place for people to come together really deeply.

JG: And not try and force it to be in one space. Yeah.

MA: It's interesting. I never really thought about that.

JG: So let's turn to some reflections. We're getting into the space anyways. You were both involved at a very different time in your lives. Martha, from '70 to '72. Judith, from '74 to —

JP: Seventy-six.

JG: Seventy-six, and later from '79 until, as you said, “until the *havurah* faded out.” So during that period of your involvement you were both in heterosexual marriages. You hadn't yet come out. You weren't yet together as a couple. Can you give us just a quick overview of when and how those profound changes happened in your own lives, and how, if at all, your experiences in the *havurah* contributed to your changing life circumstances and identities?

MA: [*sighs*] So, what do I want to say here? Well, I could say a couple of things. I think the levels of intimacy we had in the *havurah* and were made possible in the *havurah* enabled me to see that I did not have the intimacy in my marriage that I wanted, and I then realized might have been possible with somebody else. That was partly encouraged, facilitated, whatever, by my falling in love with somebody whom I had met through the *havurah*. But anyway, two years after I left here and moved to Massachusetts my marriage — we had been going to counseling — I realized it just wasn't going anywhere, so (03:45:00) we got a divorce. Shortly thereafter, in the years following or whatever, I came to increasingly see that I was attracted to women more than men, and at some point in that process, started coming out to myself and everybody else —

JP: [*laughs*]

MA: — most of whom, Judith and various other people, knew a long time before I got up the courage to tell them. I remember Chava was a part of this. At some point, it might have been —

JP: It might have been '80. I think it was around the time of the first institute.

MA: Nineteen-eighty, I guess it was, somewhere around there. I had fallen very hard for a woman who lived on the other side of the country, and didn't go to something I was supposed to go to so I could be there. Chava was going to be at this thing. She was asking

me why I wasn't there. I said, all right, I'm going to have to take a deep breath. I forgot what words I used, and I told her. The fact is that the *havurah* was such a heterosexual community. Especially after that incident of a few years before, I was really nervous. I thought I might get read out, which was part of the reason I kept it so to myself for such a long time. I said, "I don't know how they're going to take this," blah blah blah. I told her over the phone. She said — I could picture her saying, "You know, Martha, more people know than you think." And I said to her that I felt like I had been wandering around for the last six or eight years, however long, with a big plastic garbage bag on my back, and all of a sudden I realized it was clear and everybody could see, and I was the only one who didn't realize that they could see into it. That's sort of my — coming out into the *havurah* community felt like a huge risk. People laughed at me afterwards, but I really didn't know how it would be —

JP: Well, and the reality was that we were —

MA: But that's different. That had more to do with a marriage breaking up.

JP: We experienced it as homophobia (03:48:00) at the time.

JG: I didn't follow that.

JP: So, right, yeah. So — *[pauses]* Martha and I met at a Kent fellowship conference in 1970, so we had been friends for many, many years before we became lovers. I think that a lot of our friendship was around Jewish feminist issues, and certainly we were two co-founders of B'not Esh. It was our seeing each other at Phyllis Sperling and Herman Sand's wedding. We said, If we don't send out this letter, it's never going to happen and we made it happen. So I think all that was really important in our relationship. But I left my marriage in the fall of 1984. People were really, really angry at me and at us. I think we experienced it at the time as more completely about homophobia than it probably was. But some of the same dynamics that had played out twelve years earlier, or ten years earlier, were being played out again. We actually became very close to the other couple who were really there for us during that period. It was before I left my marriage, the year before, we did a workshop at the Havurah Institute on gay and lesbian issues. Martha was the lesbian, and I was the ally. *[laughs]* It was not a totally easy issue there. For a long time, and I think some people would say still, there was access. You know, people were not —

MA: Shunned.

JP: People were not shunned. They were not made to feel unwelcome. But there was certainly no sense that the organization was going to have to change in order to fully integrate gay and lesbian, (03:51:00) and then bisexual and transgender people. It was bumpy. At the same time, it was a really important space. But I do think part of the reason we stopped going —

JG: To the institute?

JP: — is the feeling that there wasn't really an intention of integrating feminist and GBLT on a deep level in anything but access.

MA: There were always a couple of feminist classes. It might've been the last year that we taught, or one of the last years that we taught. The theme of the institute was social justice, something like that. There was a complete disjuncture. None of the "social justice" *[air quotes]* events had any kind of feminist —

JP: Gender analysis.

MA: Or gender analysis. We realized at a certain point, after talking with people, they did not see feminism as a social justice movement. They did not understand that not having a feminist perspective on social justice issues meant that you were missing something in terms of your social justice analysis. It didn't seem like people wanted to hear what we had to say or could hear what we wanted to say from us. It would have been easier for them to hear from people of a different generation.

JG: Has that happened since?

MA: I don't know.

JP: I don't know.

MA: We don't know because we haven't been. I think that was a big part of it. It's the same thing we were talking about before. On the one hand, the feminist movement has made enormous changes and advances, and at the same time, there's a sense in which people so take elements of it for granted that they don't realize that there are still really powerful and important issues that remain to be addressed. If you don't realize it, the people who are saying, "but, but, but, but" — they just sound like nags. It's a very strange moment. Obviously since the election of Trump, that's different. I think there's been a greater awareness of the unfinished work in a whole range of arenas (03:54:00) that is now possible to talk about in a different way. There are a lot of people within the

context of Judaism, as in so many other areas of the world, who say, Well, we've got it. What's the problem?

JG: So what happened subsequently that caused the New York Havurah, as you say, to fade out? When did it happen?

JP: It happened so gradually that's it's hard to say. We were living in the Upper West Side from '74 to '76 —

MA: You and Robert.

JP: Robert and I, from '74 to '76, and it was very much still a going concern with classes and retreats and everything. Then we went to Wichita, Kansas for three years. When we came back in '79, we moved to Queens, so we weren't involved as centrally.

JG: Just because of distance?

JP: Just because of distance. I think it was already beginning to attenuate. I think a lot of people, like us, had moved. The Shevitzes had moved. Actually a lot of people who were in the *havurah* from '74 to '76 had gotten jobs.

MA: Gersh and Ruth were living in Montreal.

JP: Yeah, they came to Montreal just as we left. For a long time, it still had retreats on Sukkot and Shavuot and met on the High Holidays. That was certainly the case when my son was — certainly through the '80s, that was true. Then it stopped meeting on the holidays, and then it met for retreats, and then it only met on Shavuot. It was never given a decent burial. It was sad actually. We were in another wonderful *havurah* for seventeen years that fell apart. We had a last meeting together where we talked about our memories and we sang our favorite songs. It was a beautiful day and a fitting end. I remember thinking at the time that it was really sad that the New York Havurah never did that.

JG: The *havurah* still meets for some things.

MA: It meets for lunch on the second —

JP: Second day.

MA: The first day of Rosh Hashanah —

JP: Right.

MA: Unless it's Shabbos. For a long time after that, it was meeting on Purim for a while.

JP: Oh, yeah. (03:57:00) It might still be meeting on Purim.

JG: You just mentioned this *havurah* that you were a part of for seventeen years. How did "*havurah* Judaism" continue to shape your experience and lead to the communities that you affiliated with all of your —

JP: We were part of Havurat Ha-Emek and a *havurah* in the Pioneer Valley in Northampton. I was a member for thirty years, from the time I got involved with Martha until she moved. It's still meeting. And you were involved for a few years before that.

MA: I think I joined Ha-Emek in '81 or '82. I can't remember when it started. It started either late seventies or early eighties. When I first was there I asked to join, and it was really all these young families, and they said, It's not for you. I was a single woman at that point. But then, later, around eighty — maybe around 1980 I guess it was, I joined. And then I was a member until I moved in 2014. And they, you know, that started — there was nobody from either Boston or New York. Where they got the idea from, I don't know. I mean, Saul Perlmutter and Shoshanna Zondermann, Arnie Zar-Kessler and Laurel Zar-Kessler (03:58:00) were some among the early members.

JP: I'm sure they knew about the others.

MA: Right. But nobody who was one of the original members of our *havurah* had been part of those other *havurot*, but they had heard about them. They started it. It was mostly — initially they were young marrieds and were just having children, and it's still going for a lot of the same people who haven't moved away.

JG: How did it compare from the New York Havurah in terms of how it conceived of itself and what it did?

MA: It was very different from the New York Havurah. First of all, it met twice a month, usually for Shabbat morning *davening* and lunch. Sometimes it met for — that's what it did in the early years — sometimes it met occasionally for Friday night dinner (04:00:00), *davening* and dinner.

JP: There were retreats —

MA: Once, twice a year, we'd have a retreat for a weekend, but it was never meant to be the kind of intense community that the New York Havurah was. For most people it did not replace a synagogue. Most of the people who were members were also members of one or another of the local synagogues, which I found hard initially because I feel like I was a "*havurah Jew*," and when people wanted to have their baby naming ceremonies in the shul rather than the *havurah*, that felt to me, like, how can you do this? It's true. Being one of a relatively small number of Jews in a small town, it feels like you sort of need to be a member of the local shul and support it. Everybody in the *havurah* was a member either of the shul in Northampton or the shul in Amherst. So, you know, it was very important. It was a kind of alternative community, but not all-encompassing, or even trying to be anywhere near all-encompassing. More of a place for alternative *davening*. Interestingly, shortly after I joined — so this must have been like in the early eighties — there were tons of people who were constantly asking to join, and we were a small group that was meeting in people's houses, and people didn't want to grow exponentially, and so a couple of people put an ad in the newspaper and said: Alternative Jewish communities now forming; Come if you're interested. A few members of the *havurah* went to this place. Dozens of people showed up, and they seeded three or four *havurot* out of the meeting, two or three of which I think are still going. That was the way our group dealt with the sort of elitism thing, and they were very, you know, some of them were having meals together. Some of them were singing groups. But they worked for the different people. And then increasingly, when the *havurah* started, it was using, not the old, but the *New Union Prayer Book*, and then somebody discovered the Sudbury Siddur. (04:03:00)

JP: Oh, yes.

MA: So we started using that.

JP: Then *Kol Haneshama* —

MA: And then *Kol Haneshama* came out. People were bringing more and more poetry and songs. We started bringing back things from B'not Esh. It got more and more creative. The *havurah* created a whole booklet, which we still have of poems, songs, readings, liturgy, whatever, so people could use whatever siddur and pull from this book, and people were still constantly bringing new things. We did have — did we have classes? We didn't really have classes. Sometimes on the retreat we'd have study sessions. Occasionally on a retreat, we'd borrow a Sefer Torah from someone, but generally we'd just have a Torah discussion, rather than —

JP: — the reading.

MA: — a reading.

JG: What about the other *havurah* that you were mentioning?

JP: Su Kasha was a gay and lesbian *havurah* that everybody in it except for us was a member of CBST [Congregation Beit Simhat Torah].

MA: They started as an offshoot of CBST, Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, the gay synagogue in New York. At that point, which was the mid-eighties, CBST was overwhelmingly male dominated and pretty Orthodox in its liturgy and practice.

JG: Gay men.

MA: These were people who wanted something a little freer, where women could —

JG: Egalitarian?

MA: — where women could be recognized as human.

JP: We went to a session on gays and lesbians in Judaism at the Ninety-second Street Y, where Herschel Matt was speaking. It turned out to be a month before he died. And there was tea and cake afterwards.

MA: There was a question and answer session, and people were asking about —

JP: — where could you go not to CBST, and we suggested synagogue on the Upper West Side, and two women came up to us after and they said, We tried that. We didn't feel welcome there. What made you mention it? We're starting a *havurah*. Are you interested? We came to, I think, it was the third meeting.

MA: Yeah. (04:06:00)

JP: That ended up meeting for seventeen years. That was amazing.

MA: We brought a lot of stuff from B'not Esh back to that.

JP: That met once a month. Twice a month up north, and once a month here.

JG: Did that feel substantially different, to be meeting with other people who identified as LGBT? Given what you were saying before.

JP: It certainly meant that we talked about it a lot.

MA: We talked about it a lot.

MA: We've talked about this a lot. For us, the feminist identity has been much more important over the course of our whole lives than the gay or lesbian one. For many of those people, their identities as lesbian or gay were absolutely —

JP: — primary.

MA: — primary. It was fine being there. We liked them a lot. There was a lot of discussion, but I don't think it made as big a difference to our lives as it did to some other people's lives.

JP: I think the intimacy of it was very special.

MA: Yeah.

JP: And that was about its being gay. People were willing to go much deeper than was true in Havurat Ha-Emek.

MA: And in conversations and discussions. We had some really powerful discussions about sex and sexuality, which Judith ended up writing up in some of her pieces. We had a whole, over time, study of Leviticus 18 and how we would rewrite it.

JG: Can you say what Leviticus 18 is?

JP: So that's the piece of Leviticus that lists prohibited sexual relationships, among them, a man lying with a man —

MA: — that's traditionally read on the afternoon of Yom Kippur. We actually spent a lot of time reimagining what we would say if we were to write a new sexual code, and that was fantastic. We did that on a couple of occasions as part of a speaking gig. We tried it in various places. It was always interesting but nothing like what came out of that group. I think that was partly the intimacy and the trust that was established there.

JP: That also had retreats. I mean the first year, sort of kidding around, we said people are welcome to come up to (4:09:00) Northampton for a weekend in the summer, thinking that one or two people were going to come up, and everybody came. That became an annual thing.

MA: People came up to us every year, so it was like fifteen years.

JG: So, larger question, in a sense — the New York Havurah and the larger *havurah* movement as we've been discussing it, were significant sites for feminist exploration of Judaism and Jewish life. So when you look back over the past half-century, what role would you say the *havurah* played in the development of Jewish feminism, and how did the evolution of Jewish feminist thinking affect what it meant, at least for you, to be a "*havurah* Jew?"

JP: I think the most important thing about *Havurah* Judaism for me was the sense that you could create the Jewish life that you wanted. You weren't dependent on the institutions that were there. When my son — he went to day school through sixth grade and then he went to a magnet high school, and we were trying to figure out what he would do Jewishly until he could start Prozdor in eighth.

MA: In sixth grade.

JP: And I thought no big deal. We'd get a bunch of kids who stopped day school in eighth grade and have a study group. I started calling around to parents of the Schechter school kids who were out and saying, We have a group, and they were responding to me like I was some kind of lunatic who had called them up on the phone. Create your own class? What are you talking about? And I realized that I was a totally "*havurah* Jew." To me it was obvious that if you had a Jewish need, you created what you needed to fulfill it. In a sense that's what Jewish feminism has been — taking the power to define and redefine Judaism. I see them as completely feeding into each other.

MA: I mean, ditto. It's interesting. The New York Havurah sort of faded out for a variety of its reasons. It's a different kind of situation. It's interesting that our *havurah* in Northampton (04:12:00) after that bubble in the early eighties of so many people who wanted to get in and our not knowing what to do with it, by the nineties, as people were moving and we were trying to get new members, there weren't really that many people who were interested in joining. We kept trying and at a certain point we realized, fine. This is working for us. We'll age together. When there aren't enough of us left to keep the *havurah* going, it will end — I think part of the reason that happened was because the *havurah* and *havurot* had such an impact on the Jewish world. We started *havurot*

because synagogues were too big and alienating and lifeless, and all of those people who said to us, back in the seventies, that you're going to destroy the Jewish community; you're taking the future out of it. No, in fact, they saw that we had something that worked and they started imitating it. Synagogues all over the country have created what they call *havurot*, which are smaller groups of some sort or another. They do different things in different synagogues, but they allow people to form communities and feel connected. In Northampton and in Amherst, the synagogue is much more lively and vibrant than they were forty years ago, partly because of the songs and the liturgy and energy that have been brought to them by people from *havurot* and the feminist movement and what else. So that the synagogues, at least some of them, have changed to be at least something in the direction of what we had in those *havurot*. The whole do-it-yourself moment, which was so critical to the sixties, with the *Whole Earth Catalog*, the *Jewish Catalog* — no one is into doing that kind of work anymore. People don't want to do for themselves. They want to have somebody do for them. I think it's a combination of all of those things. Part of the reason it works is because of how much the *havurot* changed the face of American Judaism.

JG: Would you say that (04:15:00) that the *havurah*, which set out to transform American Judaism, that it basically succeeded in that vision?

JP: Very incompletely — in the same ways and not that feminism has both transformed Judaism and not.

Ma: It certainly had a way bigger impact than any of us thought it would have forty years ago.

JG: Fifty years ago.

MA: Right. *[laughs]*

JP: Who's counting?

MA: Who's counting, but, yeah. I mean, yeah. I think it's had a much bigger impact than we thought it would, and, at the same time, there's a huge amount left to be done. There are a lot of synagogues not as lifeless as those felt, but maybe there are. I think the model of participatory do-it-yourself Judaism, which was so critical to us and which we found so fulfilling and enlivening, is still alive and well. I mean, in New York you have Machon Hadar; you have Altshul, and all these different kind of like *havurot* who think they've created it, who think they've come up with the idea of it. And you've still got some old-style synagogues that obviously work for some people.

JG: You also have the rise of the phenomenon of independent minyanim.

JP: Right.

MA: They are basically *havurot* — they just don't call themselves that. They're aspects of *havurot*. A lot has changed. That whole conversation about what transformation could mean — do we want it? If so, why? How? That's happening maybe in a few little places, and not happening in a lot more. So, just like the feminist movement to some extent is maybe not exactly stalled, but people think that — to some extent that might be true in the Jewish community. Some people are thinking we have egalitarianism now. (4:18:00) We have somewhat more participatory synagogue services. This will do it. Which I think probably is not the case, but I don't know who's having that conversation now and what form it's taking.

JP: What's interesting though when I think about it is consciously trying to change the Jewish community as Jewish feminists. With the *havurah* movement, we weren't. We were sort of withdrawing. We were separatists in the *havurah* movement, yet the impact has been about equal. It's interesting.

JG: It still leaves us with the notion that you don't have to complete the work, but —

JP: Right.

JG: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

JP: *[laughs]* I think

MA: — I think we've covered a lot.

JG: Thank you so much. It's been absolutely wonderful. (4:19:00)

Addendum

Pg. 23: (reference to “Louis” was Louis Newman), who was not so much an educational theorist (though he may have been that, as well), as a former director of Ramah in Wisconsin. We were presented with his idea of the bunk as a “home/haven” which was to be a kind of “safe space” from which campers could then go out and face challenges in the rest of the camp.

Pg. 23: Reference to Aryeh was Aryeh Davidson.

Pg. 33: “People” is in reference to those who had been at Ramah in Connecticut.

Pg. 39: I realize now that the interview probably focused around David because they already knew me. But at the time, I don’t think I realized that, and I felt almost a bit like a “fifth wheel.”

Pg. 51: Others involved in the *havurah* at that time included Allan Gordon, Archie Ruberg, Burton Weiss, Harvey (Haim Shimon, aka “Chash”) Bordowitz, Josh (Guttoff?)

Pg. 64: I was referring to Bach, *Magnificat*.

Pg. 65: I misspoke here; it was Shlomo Carlebach, not Zalman.