

Hannah Mermelstein by Claire Contreras

Oct. 23, 2022

Length: 1:16:16

In this interview, Hannah tells her story of how Kolot's acceptance of 'queers, anti-Zionists, and non-Jews' made it possible for her to return to organized Judaism after many years away. She candidly describes her "break-up with Zionism" and the decades she's dedicated to the Palestinian solidarity and education work that followed, including the more than 30 delegations to Palestine she's led. She recounts her time chairing Kolot's Israel Palestine committee in its most active years and how she navigated the tensions of the 'open tent.' Hannah details the deep network care that Kolot fosters with honest and raw stories of how the Kolot community has supported her and her family.

This interview has been lightly edited for readability

Claire Contreras 0:02

Okay [laughs] I thought it was gonna, like, ask me more questions. Cool. So the date is October 23, 2022. I'm Claire Contreras, and I'm in Middlebury, Vermont. And do you want to introduce yourself briefly and say where you are?

Hannah Mermelstein 0:22

Sure. I'm Hannah Mermelstein. I use she/her pronouns and I am in Mount Airy neighborhood of Philadelphia.

Claire Contreras 0:31

Great and we're recording this as part of the Kolot Chayeinu Oral History Project. Yeah, so the first question I would have for you is just to tell me about yourself and how you came to be a member of Kolot.

Hannah Mermelstein 0:47

Sure. So I— well since I'm sitting in Philly now, I'll say I grew up in the Philadelphia area. And I— I grew up in a synagogue— going to a Reconstructionist congregation, which there are a lot of in the Philly area. And I also grew up going to summer camp in the youth movement called Habonim Dror,¹ going to Galil— was the name of the camp. And it's a "liberal Zionist" youth movement, which I often put in quotes when I say that phrase now because I don't think that— I

¹ Founded in 1935, Habonim Dror is a "Progressive Labor Zionist Youth" movement whose mission "is to build a personal bond and commitment between North American Jewish youth and the State of Israel and to create Jewish leaders who will actualize the principles of social justice, equality, peace and coexistence in Israel and North America." More [here](#).

think it's sort of oxymoronic to be a liberal Zionist, but we can get into that later as well. And I spent many years not engaging with Judaism, still engaging with my Jewish identity, but not with organized Judaism, because of, first, sort of gender and politics, and then it became very much about Zionism. So that was more when I was in college but I was already sort of disillusioned by what I saw as like, religion being inherently not progressive, or, why bother defining my values in that way? And I came, sort of— and then when I started doing Israel Palestine stuff, I became even more, sort of, estranged from organized Judaism. And I remember I wrote an email to my youth movement, so this isn't synagogue related but to the youth movement, after the Second Intifada² started, which, I was in college at the time, it was in 2000. I was actually in Nicaragua at the time so I was seeing the media portrayals of what was happening in a new way because I was seeing US media, I was seeing Nicaraguan media, and I was also seeing British media, and all three of those and the way things were talked about was just different than I'd seen before. And at the same time, my mind has been blown by everything I'm learning about how the US has affected things in Nicaragua. So I sent an email to my youth movement and said, you know, we can probably all agree that Israel's response right now is disproportionate. So it was sort of at least like, I think, that acknowledgement among people, but I was wondering how do people even reconcile Zionism at all, like this idea of a Jewish state in a place where a lot of the indigenous population is not Jewish? And nobody responded to that email and that was— that was like— you know, that was sort of the beginning of my, I don't know, my breakup with Zionism, I would say. And so then that led to my thinking, there's no possible way I'm ever going to be involved in organized Judaism again. Maybe someday Judaism could be redeemed from Zionism³ in a way, but it won't be within my lifetime; I won't be involved in that. Fast forward several years, and we can talk more about my Palestine work, but I was living in Brooklyn. I was living with a friend who I knew through Palestine work who was also the educational director of Kolot at the time, that's Ora Wise. And she asked— I had done a lot of different educational work at the time and she said, 'Do you want to teach the B'nai Mitzvah class with me?' And I hadn't gone to any services there yet but I started to teach the B'nai Mitzvah class with Ora and with Ora's younger sibling, T. So we did that and it was a great experience. I still wasn't really going to services. I did start a— shortly after that— it was just for one year— and then shortly after that, I started going to high holiday services and started dating my now wife and she so she grew up without any religion, and has always sort of been interested in having that as part of her life, and then, particularly as we started talking about having kids she wanted her kids to grow up with some cultural competency that she felt like she didn't have with no knowledge of any religion, just something that they can then later, accept, reject, know about, in some way or another. So we

² The second Intifada – commonly referred to by Palestinians as al-Aqsa Intifada – began after then-Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon sparked the uprising when he stormed al-Aqsa Mosque compound in occupied East Jerusalem with more than 1,000 heavily armed police and soldiers on September 28, 2000. The move sparked widespread outrage among Palestinians who had just marked the anniversary of the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre, for which Sharon was found responsible for failing to stop the bloodshed, following Israel's invasion of Lebanon. 'Intifada' translates to 'shaking off.' More [here](#).

³ Hannah wrote about what that would be like [here](#).

were going to High Holiday services together and there was one High Holiday where Rabbi Ellen Lippmann gave her Drash, I don't remember if it was Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, but it was one of those, and she talked about how Kolot needs to be a community that's more welcoming for queers, anti-Zionists, and non-Jews, and that's our family. So we were like, okay, we have to join. So we joined and I found in Kolot a community– not entirely, I mean, I still at that time did not feel comfortable just walking up to anybody within Kolot and being like, 'Hi, I'm Hannah, I'm anti-Zionist.' But I felt like it was a place I could be. And I told you this when we spoke last time that I found, that I knew Rabbi Ellen, a little bit, not very well, but I had my first really good experience with her as someone who really was able to, I don't know, to hold a community together around Israel Palestine stuff when she was leading a delegation to Israel Palestine, which was honestly mostly to Israel and I think one of the days that they were planning to go into the West Bank got snowed out or something, anyway, they had a visit to this northern city inside the borders of Israel that used to be a Palestinian village and way before that used to be Rome, it was like ancient Roman ruins, but it was talked about in the blog of the participants, you know, like 'we visited these ancient Roman ruins, and now it's this Israeli city.' And there was no mention at all of any Palestinian presence for hundreds of years in the meantime. And I wrote to Ellen, and said 'I was disturbed to read this.' And I didn't expect a response, especially not immediately. I didn't know her very well, she's in the middle of leading this delegation, which is, I know from experience, a lot of work. And she responded, and she said, 'what we talked about, like, the narrative of what came out in the blog was not complete in terms of even what we talked about when we were there. Thank you for bringing this up.' I don't remember if there was anything changed publicly or put out again, but I just remember feeling like, okay, here's a rabbi of a congregation who takes her time to actually respond to me, and to my concerns, and, again, made me feel more welcome. I think that was before– that was before we joined any event– I think before we started going to services there.

Claire Contreras 8:11

Yeah. That's a very interesting way to get– it's interesting to me that you started as an educator at Kolot before, like being part of it. Yeah, so you kind of mentioned that– we'll definitely get into your like, solidarity organizing stuff but before that, I'm interested in the journey to that political identity. And you've kind of mentioned that it occurred in college and that it wasn't like– that it changed from what you were raised as and from the summer camp that you're attending. Can you talk more about this journey to this political identity?

Hannah Mermelstein 8:48

Sure. Yeah. I think that all of the values– I got my critical thinking skills and questioning and all of that that led me eventually to become anti-Zionist, in part, from my labor Zionist youth movement that I was part of and other parts of my Judaism, which were all very Zionist but a lot of that stuff came from there also. Palestinians were sort of absent from my mind, for the most part, growing up. It wasn't– I mean, a friend and I joke like, you know, there are all these

different paradoxes about Zionism and so there's one about Israel, sort of, 'before Israel existed, what was there?' and it's 'there's nobody here and they're trying to kill us.' So like, simultaneously, Palestinians don't exist and Palestinians are terrorists. I definitely was more in the like, Palestinians don't exist part of that, like this is a Jewish country, and not only that but it was this idealized socialist utopia. That's how I learned to think of Israel. And at the same time, there was a little bit of awareness, you know, there was like, oh, yeah there should be a two-state solution. So there was some awareness, but not very much. When the Second Intifada started in 2000 that's when I started to question things a little bit more. But I wasn't hearing— I still wasn't hearing any Palestinian perspectives. So I didn't know— I didn't consciously know any Palestinians. I was, again, looking at US media, British media, and Nicaraguan media. So again, not Palestinians. Some were more sympathetic to Palestinian narratives than others, but it was not coming directly. And so, you know, I started to question and then I went back to my college campus. I went to Goucher College⁴ in Baltimore and Goucher is a place that has a very large Jewish population, not necessarily all⁵— I mean, a very Jewish population, but a large Jewish population and a very small Arab and Muslim presence. I mean, this is 20 years ago so I don't know how it's changed in the meantime but there was no organized Arab or Muslim presence at all, let alone Palestinian, and there was definitely among Jews. And there was— my senior year— so that was, that was my junior year when the Intifada started, but it was still, you know, going strong. And then my senior year, there was— I think for Israeli Independence Day the Hillel⁶ was setting up this table where they were giving out information and giving out like snacks and teaching Israeli dancing, which I had actually taught to many of them without knowing that some of that is borrowed/appropriated from Palestinians, not all, some of it comes from Eastern Europe and other places, but— and so I knew like this was their plan. And I was like, there's probably some way that Palestinians think of Israeli Independence Day that's different than Israeli independence. So I looked it up, the internet's fairly new at the time, but I'm like, 'what do Palestinians call Israeli Independence Day.'⁷ And that was the first time I encountered the word *Nakba*.⁸ And I didn't, like, I didn't know— again it wasn't really— I don't actually— I have no idea what my sources were, maybe they were Palestinian, maybe not. But again, it wasn't any relationships with Palestinians at that point and I hadn't been back since going with my Zionist

⁴ Goucher is a liberal arts college and graduate school in Towson, Maryland where every undergraduate studies abroad.

⁵ Hannah clarified this later, writing "I was trying to say they weren't all actively engaged in Judaism, but it was a large Jewish population."

⁶ Hillel is the largest Jewish campus organization in the world. Zionism is a core, enforced tenet of Hillel and campus organizations are not allowed to do anything that doesn't unequivocally support a "Jewish and democratic state." More [here](#).

⁷ Hannah wrote about this [here](#).

⁸ The 1948 war uprooted 700,000 Palestinians from their homes, creating a refugee crisis that is still not resolved. Palestinians call this mass eviction the *Nakba*, Arabic for "catastrophe," and its legacy remains one of the most intractable issues in ongoing peace negotiations with Israel. More [here](#).

youth movement. But I and three other students, actually, all of whom grew up in my movement, there's a lot of ex-Habonim anti-Zionists because we're all taught to be socialists, and then we're like, wait, this is incongruent, eventually. So four of us put a table next to the Hillel table and gave out these tiny little slips of paper that were like, you know, 'Israeli Independence Day: also called *Nakba*'⁹ and 'this many Palestinians were expelled from their land in 1948.' That was a huge moment for me, just like sitting there and being like, okay, I'm not with these people anymore, and there's a new thing I'm learning and I needed to kind of get that out there to people. So that felt big to me after but I still— so at that point I wasn't calling myself anti-Zionist yet necessarily. I was not calling myself Zionist, but I didn't exactly understand everything, and the last piece kind of fell in place for me that I really didn't understand was around refugees. And that meant— so after I graduated from college, I did a program called the Jewish Organizing Initiative in Boston. And at the end of that— it was just like community organizing and some Jewish learning, there were various perspectives among people in that group as well, but it was mostly Zionist. But at the end of that year was the first time that I went back and called it Palestine. So that was when like, I went to the West Bank, I worked with a group called the International Women's Peace Service¹⁰ to help to accompany olive farmers to their olive groves when those groves were near either settlements or settler roads, so either they were at risk of being attacked by either settlers or Israeli soldiers. And so that was huge and eye-opening for me. I thought I was going once and it was very personal, it was like, I need to figure this out about my own Jewish identity. I would go up to everyone I met and be like, 'hi, I'm Jewish,' and they're like, 'great, can we go— can you come with me to my olive grove now?' Like they didn't care, or maybe they did, like I'm sure I made a lot of people uncomfortable. I didn't know any Arabic otherwise, I learned a couple of phrases and that was it. So I probably made a lot of people uncomfortable but, definitely, anyway, that was my first trip there. I was there for a couple of months, it was a pretty intense time. Well, actually, the first time I went was not as intense as the second time I went. So the first was for me personally really important. And I kind of, you know— everyone would say to me, like, 'thanks for coming, but like, go back and share this information,' like 'tell the rest of your American people what's going on here.' And so it became kind of a mission for me that was bigger than just figuring out this about myself and my past and my identity, but really became more of this activist charge for me that then became my life for the next, like, many, many years. So I ended up going back again, the following year, or not even, you know, several months later, I went back again and I both— I worked with the International Women's Peace Service again and I also did a program with a group in Bethlehem

⁹ Hannah writes about her experience searching for the ruin of a friend's pre-Nakba home in "Shifting Sands: Jewish Women Confront the Israeli Occupation."

¹⁰ IWPS, founded in 2022, is working together with Palestinian activists against the brutal occupation of Palestine. More [here](#).

called the Holy Land Trust,¹¹ that organized like a little bit of Arabic class, living with a host family, and volunteering with an organization. And they're a Christian organization and most of the families that they partnered with were Christian Palestinian families. I had one of the only Muslim Palestinian families and the only one in a refugee camp. Most of them were fairly wealthy families in the Bethlehem area. And that was what really sort of opened my eyes to what it meant to be a refugee and like the conceptions and misconceptions I had, and also cemented my idea of Zionism— of my opposition to Zionism, and not just like— a lot of people will make the distinction between 1948 and 1967 as two sort of major years where the first one's where Israel became a state and then the second one's where Israel conquered the rest of— like, took land from Jordan and Egypt, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and occupied it. And they'll, you know, they advocate going back to the pre-'67 borders, but this is— when I, you know, lived with a Palestinian refugee family, that's when I was like, there's no difference, like, what is the difference between '48 and '67? Zionism, the whole project is the same. It's sort of a meaningless distinction to make, and, but still, like so all of that, I mean, it's this took a few years of my transition politically, but there would still be little things that would crop up that I just hadn't thought about since I was a kid and so I hadn't yet reconciled them in my head where I'm like, oh, yeah, but there was that one battle where like, Israelis took, or they weren't Israelis, yet, it was like pre-Israel, but like the Zionist army, took these tractors up the hill with their lights on to try to fool— and then then they would turn the lights off and drive down the hill, and then do it again— to fool the invading Arab armies into thinking that they were bigger than they were. And it's this sort of fledgling Israel fighting against these larger Arab armies. I had a lot of stories like that in my head that I'm like, wait, that's not actually true, or, I don't know, a lot that kept cropping up throughout those years. But anyway, so that's yeah, that's a little bit about that transition.

Claire Contreras 18:43

Yeah. And, then ultimately, you're on Kolot's Israel Palestine committee. You were the chair—

Hannah Mermelstein 18:50

Yeah, so—

Claire Contreras 18:52

—would love to hear about that, and get into that, and what it was like.

Hannah Mermelstein 18:56

Yeah, so then for a lot of years— so as I said, when I first started doing Palestine work it was very much my own, it was sort of my own, you know, internal thing. Then it became really about the people that I was meeting and it was no longer like, it didn't matter anymore that I was Jewish, or

¹¹ Holy Land Trust is a non-profit Palestinian organization committed to fostering peace, justice and understanding in the Holy Land. We are deeply committed to exploring the root causes of violence and seek to develop solutions to address them. More [here](#).

I didn't need to tell everybody, anyway. And also because I didn't want to keep reinforcing this idea that only Jews can have an opinion about Israel Palestine. It became about the relationships I had with Palestinian people and organizations and I spent many years leading delegations of like North Americans going there to learn and then to hopefully become active in their communities once they got home. And I sort of started working a lot within Jewish community, and then I kind of moved away from that. I was too frustrated, it doesn't— and strategically, like I'm not sure that it's really about convincing Zionist Jews to not be Zionist Jews anymore, but really like convincing a larger population of people who aren't necessarily involved to stand in solidarity with Palestinians like it doesn't necessarily hinge upon like the oppressor group giving up that identity. And so it was I'm not working within Jewish communities, it doesn't matter— or it's not for me. And then my activism became more like community organizations and stuff. And then as I got involved in Kolot, just personally, where I felt it was a place where I could be. And you know, I struggled with whether I wanted to get involved in this work or not because on the one hand, I wanted it to be a place where I could just kind of relax and be comfortable and not have to deal with it, and that in other aspects of my life, I was doing almost entirely Palestine-related activism and education and I didn't necessarily want to bring that into my spiritual life. But then I also felt I needed to— I wasn't sure, that— at first it was that I wasn't sure that— I didn't fully trust the community like I didn't know who was there but I was like, my voice needs to be there I'm not sure it's otherwise there like, I don't know, but I need to get my voice in there. And Rabbi Ellen invited me and lots and lots of other people to be part of these initial conversations across political perspectives about Israel Palestine, I think, as she was thinking about leaving, retiring and thinking of, you know, how we get these conversations out in the open so that the community doesn't fall apart over this issue in her absence, which a lot of people were worried about. And so I became more involved. I talked about that strategic piece of like, why even bother with Jewish communities, but I definitely have like another strategic piece around which is like, even if we're not necessarily bringing everybody along to the same, you know, to be exactly like me, at least like neutralizing Zionism within Jewish communities can be helpful. So that's kind of the organizing piece. But what surprised me in my work at the Israel Palestine committee was that it then became— it really was about the growth of the community and sort of figuring out what the community looked like around Israel Palestine. And it wasn't the same as, you know, my organizing in other— like my activism in other spaces, especially when I became the chair of the committee because then it was, I said this at one of the public events we had that like there are people I really fundamentally disagree with on this issue but that I don't think should be kicked out of Kolot. And so like, how did those things come together? Like, what does that mean, in terms of what Kolot should be? I do think that Kolot— and I thought at the time that a lot of people that have very similar values they just have different amounts of knowledge and different ways that those values come out that leads to sometimes conflicting political opinions. But I was trying to, with the survey that we ended up doing that we can talk about, I wanted to get at those underlying values because I did think that Kolot could be— could both talk about Israel Palestine more than we were and could be more concrete in the

mission statement, which still hasn't changed, as far as I know. But the mission statement has some very concrete language around other things, particularly a newish paragraph a few years ago that was added about Anti-Racism, but the Israel Palestine paragraph was still like, 'we have no consensus. We have lots of different opinions,' and that was it. And while that's true, I was wondering if there were any value statements we could make that might unify us even when it's not like 'we're an anti-Zionist congregation who participates in BDS.'¹² That's not what it's gonna be and that's not what it should be but something that we can agree on, that's kind of underneath that. So, yeah, I mean, I started getting involved in the Israel Palestine committee, because I wanted to be— like my voice needs to be heard. And then it sort of ended as. I really feel like I am helping to shepherd this community into its future around this issue.

Claire Contreras 24:28

Yeah. Do you want to get into the survey now, and talk about that experience and what you found?

Hannah Mermelstein 24:35

Sure, we did a few events— we spent like a couple of years, a lot of it was trust building within the group because we were intentionally unlike other committees, where it's like okay we're gonna be Anti-Racist Working Group of like everybody who at least like in some way agrees on this thing, or like whatever else affinity groups. This was the opposite of that, like, let's bring together people who don't agree. So there was a lot of internal trust-building that had to happen. I think some of our most successful stuff was when we did story-sharing within the group. Each person told their own personal journey of coming to wherever it is that they are on Israel Palestine and I think people were able to hear those stories in a way that's different than just a political argument. And, then we brought a couple of those things to the community, like a couple of public events and then we sort of kept coming up against what does the community want? What does the community believe? Trying to make guesses. They kept being like we need to be balanced as a working group, and I'm like well, what does that mean? Like, do you mean, we need an equal number of Zionists and anti-Zionists? Or do you mean, we need to be representative of the community? Because I think that being representative of the community, whatever it is that that looks like, is the important part. And so how do we find out what that means? Well, let's do a survey. So we had someone help us who does that for a living and so he helped us. We looked at a survey that had been done at Kehilla in the Bay Area which was another progressive synagogue and I think maybe one other one that we looked at. And we also looked at some of the— we had done an event where we had, like, a spectrum exercise where we read a statement and then people go to agree, disagree or somewhere in the middle, and so we took some of those statements and put them on the survey. And we were trying to get at people's experience and comfort level with discussing Israel Palestine, their political beliefs, their values,

¹² Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) is a Palestinian-led movement that works to end international support for Israel's oppression of Palestinians and pressure Israel to comply with international law. More [here](#).

their language around it— I'm trying to think of some of the other— and then like tactics for change, and what kind of programming they want to see. So it was kind of all of that that we asked. And it took several months, it took several revisions within the group and a lot of discussion of how much we're putting our own desires into it, or you know 'I don't like the wording of this question.' Well, why don't I like the wording of this question? Is that a thing that needs to be— is that just a me thing or is that this is not the best wording for the community? But it came out I think a really good survey. And the results were, I think, really positive and surprising in certain ways for me. But also not in other ways like, one of the biggest questions at Kolot and one of the biggest conversations is around this idea of an 'open tent.' So everyone talks about Kolot as an open tent and usually when people talk about that they're mostly talking about Israel Palestine, like your opinions on Israel Palestine, that we're kind of an open tent. What does that mean? So it's not written anywhere like that's not in the mission statement that we're an open tent but that's just sort of how it's talked about. So does that mean that all positions are welcome? Not really, like in practice a really right-wing Zionist wouldn't really feel comfortable at Kolot. Is that a thing— like, do we want that? Do we want that perspective in Kolot or not? So what are the parameters of this open tent? And also a question that I think is really interesting is what's the importance of the open tent? Is it important in and of itself or is it important because of what it includes? So what I mean by that is— and we got this on the survey of people's like 'the most important thing to me about Kolot is that there are varying perspectives on Israel Palestine'. Is that what you think? Or 'the most important thing to me is that opinions that aren't otherwise accepted in other Jewish communities are accepted here.' Like is that the part of the open tent? And for me, that's the part that brings me in. And for some people, it's the other one, it's 'I personally am a liberal Zionist, but I really like that this community has non-Zionists and anti-Zionists in it.' And for me, it's the open tent that brought me into Kolot but not because of the presence of everybody but because it's the only place where there could be anti-Zionists as part of it. So it's just a slightly different perspective on that. And there were statements around the open tent like 'the most important to me because we have varying perspectives,' or 'it's really important to me that we engage on this issue,' or 'I want Kolot to align with my own personal opinion,' or 'I don't want Kolot to take an opinion at all on this,' like all of those different statements. So it was interesting to see people's reactions to those. One of the things I found the most interesting about the survey was we tried to have statements where we had people agree to disagree one to five, or whatever. But we had statements that corresponded with each other and in some ways were like the opposite of each other. So there was one that was 'supporting Palestinian rights is an important part or like a core part of my identity and values.' And then there was another one that was 'supporting Israel as a Jewish state— there was a caveat— even when I disagree with some government policies, it is an important part of my identity and values.' And there were more people who agreed with the Palestinian rights statement than the Jewish state one. And it's people's own self-definition around all of these things but people said that's important to their values. So whether or not they're talking about the same thing when they say that it's still— that's a value statement that the community could make. So stuff like that I

thought was really interesting. There was also a real desire to hear from Palestinian voices in programming and so that led us to doing a couple of programs where we would have film, a Palestinian film and we also did a— we had Sa'ed Atshan, who's like a queer Palestinian scholar, come and speak to the community after that as well. But those were a couple highlights, I would say from the survey. And we had an event afterward and people were really— like, people were nervous, I mean people were nervous about the conversation about the survey. Also, we had many, many pages of answers to our open-ended questions on there. So there would be like, how do you define yourself and people would be like 'none of the above' and then they'd write like a paragraph so it was just really interesting stuff that we then used. And when we got together to present the survey results, we pulled a few of those statements out for people to discuss in groups. And, I mean, I think it went really well. So I hope that that stuff continues to be used. It kind of— COVID hit, I had another baby and then we moved to Philly so— and I was sort of the shepherding the group at that point, there were— we did have a retreat, we had a couple of new members, we had some new leadership, but I think it's sort of fizzled out a little bit after that. And then Franny left, Franny Silverman, who was the— what was her— like, leader of social justice and education and action? Or, I'm not sure what her title was but she was our liaison and a very, very active one who sort of made the work go forward. So all of those factors contributed to that sort of— I mean, it's still there, like, the stuff is still there and I hope it gets picked up again.

Claire Contreras 33:07

I'm curious what it was like to be in this community as one of the people coming with the more controversial opinion, and then also, being the chair of this already, like, controversial-ish working group? And the other elements of Kolot being social and cultural.

Hannah Mermelstein 33:33

Yeah. Well, it's interesting within the group, I wouldn't— I wasn't necessarily in the minority. I mean, it's hard to— I think there's like a lot, you know, there was a spectrum, both in terms of politics and in terms of experience. I was one of the people who had more experience, with a couple of other people, but who had spent a lot of time there and had done a lot of work. And then there are other people who sort of had very varying political perspectives but didn't have a lot of like connection to the place or experience with it. And had been afraid to engage before and were like, okay, now I'm gonna do this, we're gonna have these conversations. But what I saw— I felt a responsibility. I felt a responsibility to sort of accurately represent both our working group and the community. I also— I didn't feel like I was alone. Like, I had a couple of people who were very much my allies both politically and in having a similar perspective about what we wanted to do for Kolot. But it was like, you know, it was nerve-wracking at times. It wasn't relaxing, it was different than going to Shabbat services. I mean, Kolot was— speaking of being relaxed on Shabbat I tried a little bit to go— like the year that I did the Jewish Organizing Initiative fellowship that was in Boston I went to synagogue a few times and I liked the singing

and everything but every time like, the sermon would start I would just tense up and be like 'don't talk about Israel, don't talk about Israel,' like, 'I hope it doesn't get mentioned.' I was never relaxed thinking like, 'okay, whatever comes out of his rabbi's mouth is going to be fine if not inspiring.' I did not— I never felt that way until Kolot. And, and then particularly now also with Rabbi Miriam, where I trust her so much as a leader, and obviously Rabbi Ellen, as well who founded Kolot. But just, you know, that they feel like my people in a different way. And I think it feels like that to a lot of people, it's like, these feel like my people and it's for different reasons. For me it was around the Israel Palestine stuff— and queer, but my queer identity is more accepted, I think, in Jewish spaces, not all Jewish spaces, but in more Jewish spaces than my anti-Zionist identity would be, or is. So, yeah, I don't know how to answer the question. Right. So it was a different sort of engagement. I sometimes was like, why am I even doing this? We had— there were some frustrating conversations where I mean, I mentioned I wasn't necessarily in the minority but I was also really used to being in the minority around it. I was used to having these conversations and the Zionists in the group sometimes had a really hard time because they hadn't ever been challenged before. I mean, it's the same thing that I feel like Black folks talk about when they talk about white people trying to engage in Anti-Racist work where they like, you know, we as white people don't have the stamina, we don't have the experience, we don't know how to have these conversations. And then it's like, just tears and I'm being persecuted by this conversation kind of thing. And there was definitely some of that that I then had to, you know, how do you manage that as a leader, giving everybody space and not letting the conversations be derailed at the same time? So there were some times when I was frustrated and I'm like why am I even doing this? But I always came back to it.

Claire Contreras 37:32

Yeah. Specifically related to Israel Palestine, what do you hope for Kolot to do in the next 10 years or in any timeframe you— what is your big idea for Kolot's role in Palestinian solidarity?

Hannah Mermelstein 37:54

I wouldn't say, I don't know that it's a role in Palestinian solidarity necessarily, at least not right now, but it's— I don't know, it's hard. Some of my own thoughts about it are conflicting too. I would love to be— and I'm not there anymore, I'm in Philly now, so I say this also about my current synagogue that I've joined— but that I would love to be part of a synagogue where everybody does agree with me about this. Not necessarily about everything, but like, yeah about most things political like that's like, a community where I feel like I can then breathe and relax and be myself and that feels like I have some integrity being part of it. I don't want to be part of a community that's Zionist. Do I want to be a part of a community that's kind of mixed? Well, I am, I mean Kolot is and so I chose to be part of that. And like I said, I don't think that— I don't think it's like let's kick out all the Zionists now. I do think that the demographics are gonna shift it. I think politics are shifting among younger generations anyway, especially younger, progressive folks that Zionism is not— I mean, in my generation it was we were progressive

except for Palestine, PEP was what everybody was. I mean that's not what we called it ourselves, but that's what Palestine solidarity folks called a lot of people. And I feel like that generation is like, sort of, moving on and like changing some opinions or getting older. And that the younger generation is more— is less Zionist and so I think it's sort of naturally going to shift. I also think that with, you know, with the survey that we did I do think there is room for getting a little bit more concrete about what our values are, like what Kolot's values are around Israel Palestine without necessarily taking political stances in the sense of like, you know, 'we believe in a one-state solution' or something, it's not— it wouldn't be that or even, you know, 'we participate in BDS,' or whatever it is. So I don't know, I don't know what I would hope. And again, like I've not been around for the last couple of years. So I won't call— I want it to be representative of Kolot and I think that we sell ourselves short when we think that people aren't ready for the conversation and or we can't make any statements at all. For one of the things on the survey was 'I'm against the occupation.' Now again, that could mean different things to different people but the statement was 'I'm against the occupation' and almost 90% agreed with it. When we were going over those results someone was like 'I don't think 90% of Jews would agree on anything ever.' Like how is that— you know, that's a huge thing. That is a thing we could say as a community. 'We are against the occupation,' we won't necessarily go into defining every single thing that that means, that requires more community conversation but things like that I think could be specified a little more. So I guess that's where I would see the role is not being afraid to take a few stands that really do reflect the community and just having more conversations where people start to feel like, you know, they can talk more, they can be themselves and I think people will be pleasantly surprised.

Claire Contreras 41:54

Yeah, we kind of brushed over your, like, in-depth experience leading delegations to Palestine. Was that something you did at Kolot as well?

Hannah Mermelstein 42:05

It was not something I did with Kolot. I came to Kolot, as like, right sort of after I stopped doing the Birthright Unplugged¹³ delegations but I was still doing other delegations. But I didn't— no, I didn't do any with Kolot. I was in library school¹⁴ by the time I was there, I wasn't doing— I wasn't spending as much time in Palestine. And there wasn't another delegation— like I mean I've thought about it. Like every community I've been in I'm like, 'could I do a delegation to Palestine with them?' I think about that at the school I work at now.¹⁵ It wouldn't be anytime soon, it

¹³ Birthright Unplugged, founded in 2004 is an education and movement building organization that supports justice organizing work largely in the United States and offers travel-related support services and programs in Palestine for teens from both the West (Unplugged) and Palestine (Replugged.) More [here](#).

¹⁴ Hannah attended Queens College for her Masters in Library and Information Science.

¹⁵ Hannah is currently the Lower School librarian at Germantown Friends School, a private, Quaker school in Philadelphia.

would have to be like after I'm there for a long time, but, you know, they have international travel and it's a Quaker school and there are lots of Quaker connections to Palestine. But in any case, no, I didn't do delegations with Kolot. But the delegation stuff came out of my experience doing human rights work where people would say to me 'great, thanks for being here. Go back and tell more people.' So I'm like okay, how do I tell more people? Well, I could organize a lot of people to come and then they could all go back and tell more people. It's just a way to multiply the story. And I really like organizing logistics, maps, and schedules and it just fits with my skill set and was something that was being asked for. So the first delegation I did was actually with a group called Boston to Palestine and that was only my second trip there. I helped to lead the Boston to Palestine delegation that was happening. So I was still working with the International Women's Peace Service. And then also did a little bit of the delegation stuff where I just met a couple of Palestinians and asked them for help organizing some more meetings. And then as I got to know people I had more contacts in different places. And we had the ide— so one of my colleagues from the International Women's Peace Service and I were talking and she was like 'well, yeah, my aunt'— she was she is both Arab, her dad is Iraqi and her mom is— well her dad's Iraqi Muslim, although not religious, and her mom was is an American Jew and someone on her mom's side of the family was going on some synagogue trip to Israel, and she's like, 'what is— there's this, you know, Zionist trip to Israel like with the synagogue' and I was like, 'yeah, there are like 1,000s of those.' And, and then I told her about Birthright Israel¹⁶ and which had started a few years before at that point. I had started— shoot, I got a low battery notification, I might have to get my mind off to pause for a minute—

Claire Contreras 44:55

[Interrupts] Yeah, you can—

Hannah Mermelstein 44:58

— but so I told her about Birthright Israel, and she's like, 'oh, we should do something to counter that. Can we take those kids who are getting a free trip anyway on Birthright Israel and like, bring them over to the West Bank?' And that's where the idea of Birthright Unplugged came from. So at the very beginning, it was trying to get those same people, like young Jews who were going on Birthright Israel to extend their trips because they were allowed to do that. They get the free plane ticket so it's like, extend your trip and stay. So we were like, extend your trip and stay and come with us on this trip in the West Bank and then partly with Palestinians within 48, like within the borders of Israel. So we did our very first trips, we had four people and five people, two weeks back to back, like very small. Those were our pilot trips and that was the launch of Birthright Unplugged. As we went on with that we found that we didn't want to center Jews in

¹⁶ Taglit-Birthright Israel, also known as Birthright Israel or simply Birthright, is a not-for-profit educational organization that sponsors free ten-day heritage trips to Israel, Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights for young adults of Jewish heritage. Birthright is staunchly Zionist and BDS movement calls on American Jews to not go. More [here](#).

our work and it was also right as the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement¹⁷ was starting, and Palestinians were starting to call on young Jews not to go on Birthright Israel. So we're like, okay, we don't feel comfortable anymore being like, go on Birthright Israel and then extend your trip. Don't go at all, find another way here and come on Birthright Unplugged. And so Birthright Unplugged became less focused on that, extending Birthright Israel and coming with us, to more anybody who wants to learn a little bit more about what's happening and then take that work back home. And so we did our own trips and then we also contracted out with different groups. And we did that for like, four years, maybe that we did that every summer, every winter, we did two trips each. And then like a year after we started it we started a program called Replugged¹⁸ where we work with Palestinian kids and took them back to the places that their grandparents were from within Israel to like their destroyed villages and to the sea and to Jerusalem because those are the three places that— like refugees who talk about wanting to go back, that's what they talk about. They talk about their villages, they talk about things like, 'I've never seen the sea,' like people in the West Bank— it's like really close, they've never been able to go— and then Jerusalem. And there's sort of a loophole in Israeli law where kids are not technically prohibited from traveling into Israel before they are 16 but they just can't go because obviously, they can't go alone. So we could serve as international chaperones and get them there. We had to obviously build a lot of trust with Palestinian community organizations to be like, 'give us your children. We're taking them into Israel.' People were like, 'what? That sounds scary.' But we had some really good relationships with a couple of groups that we started with. And then that sort of led— so we had both programs, Unplugged and Replugged and then I kept doing— there was the Health and Human Rights Project, which was started by a group called American Jews for a Just Peace, AJJP. So that group started at the time when Jewish Voice for Peace¹⁹ was not yet— now JVP is anti-Zionist but at the time was kind of like nervous about taking certain stands that might alienate some of their membership and AJJP kind of split off from JVP for that reason. So, it was a much smaller group based out of Boston, they did this thing called Health and Human Rights Project and I did many delegations with them, also. And then, a friend and I started one called Students Boycott Apartheid, where we had, like, college students meet up with college students in Palestine and do some workshops together and some traveling. And, and then as I was— when I became a librarian or when I was in library school we had the idea— or a fellow librarian was actually like, 'why don't you do a delegation of librarians?' And I was like, why didn't I ever think of that? And that was more— like, it was both

¹⁷ More directly from the Palestinian BDS National Committee [here](#). Hannah wrote about the importance of BDS [here](#) and spoke about it [here](#).

¹⁸ The Re-Plugged program within Birthright Unplugged is for Palestinian children living in refugee camps. They visit Jerusalem, the sea and the villages their grandparents fled in 1948. More [here](#).

¹⁹ Jewish Voice for Peace is a national, grassroots organization inspired by Jewish tradition to work for a just and lasting peace according to principles of human rights, equality, and international law for all the people of Israel and Palestine. More [here](#).

the educational aspect but also connecting professionally with our counterparts over there.²⁰ And so that was new, like, it was a lot of new context to me. I did not know libraries and archives and everything and Palestine. So that was like, a lot of new stuff. And I worked with a Palestinian American friend and colleague who's like really involved in archives work and who has a lot of contacts. So we sort of planned those delegations together. And yeah, that's my delegation work. So all in all, I led probably about 30 delegations.

Claire Contreras 49:42

Wow. Okay, I can pause the recording, if you want– if you need to get your charger.

Hannah Mermelstein 49:45

Yeah, [stands up] I'm gonna grab my– I'm gonna grab my– wait, can I plug-in here? It might not be long enough– I'm actually going to take my whole computer and turn my video off so it doesn't make you seasick and–

[Recording paused. When resumed, Hannah has relocated within her home.]

Claire Contreras 49:56

Sweet, back to recording. So, we've been recording for about 50 minutes, I think. And I want to get back to Kolot and kind of more about, like your experience outside of the Israel Palestine Working Group in Kolot. And since this project is just about documenting what it's like to be in Kolot at this time– even though I know you left in 2021, I think, so the time that you were part of Kolot– what is Kolot like? What did it mean for you, especially coming back to organized Judaism? Yeah and also about raising a family in Kolot which is another part of your Kolot experience.

Hannah Mermelstein 50:53

Yeah. So in the summer of 2021 we moved to Philadelphia and I– so it's been a year, almost a year and a half, and we are still grieving the loss of Kolot in our lives. It's, like, unexpected that that would have become such a huge thing. I mean, we knew we would miss it. But it's like, kind of the only thing we miss from Brooklyn. I mean, there's, you know, there are other things but it's like, that is the one part where I wish I could have that community forever. And I don't know, I mean, I think Rabbi Ellen built such a strong foundation of people coming from different– people coming there because they felt alienated from other organized Jewish life for lots of different reasons. I think it was a lot of queer folks involved at the beginning, but I think, you know, lots of other– also the interfaith piece because her wife is also not Jewish and that was like, she was almost not able to get into rabbinical school because of it. And so it's sort of a community of people that feels like, I don't know, more intentional in some ways than I think

²⁰ This ended up becoming Librarians and Archivists with Palestine (LAP,) a network of self-defined librarians, archivists, and information workers in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. More [here](#).

other more mainstream Jewish synagogues would feel. I mentioned to you last time that we—some people would talk about how like Israel Palestine or whatever other reason was the reason that they're at Kolot versus another synagogue. For me, it was the reason I went to Kolot versus nowhere. So, it wasn't like, I'm synagogue shopping and I find Kolot because it's a little better than this other place or something, which I think is the case for a lot of people like, they're synagogues shopping for— they want some kind of community. But for me, it was really— it was Kolot or nothing. And what brought me in, I don't know. I mean, I have a strong Jewish background. And when I was a kid, before I started evaluating everything and like critiquing everything, I was the kid who sat in the services and sang quietly because it wasn't cool to actually enjoy it, but I did enjoy it, so I would sit there singing under my breath. And like no one else was, none of the kids were singing because it wasn't cool. But I loved it, I loved everything about it. Other than starting to, you know, understand some of the words or read them and be like, I don't know about this, like, it doesn't resonate— and Kolot and many other places I think at this point have found ways to make it resonate— but it just felt like my people in a lot of ways. So both a lot of young, queer, progressive people, a lot of anti-Zionist, folks. And, yeah, the actual joining of the community was my wife saying, hey, we're gonna have kids, like, I want to be part of a community. Kolot has a very strong network of care and when COVID hit we had a baby, our second child was born in April 2020.²¹ So it was the worst time in Brooklyn and we did not have laundry. And we didn't— this was still in March but we didn't know when the baby was coming like she ended up being like two and a half weeks late so she could have very well been a couple of weeks early and right at the beginning of when COVID was starting. So we did not have laundry in our house and the laundromats all shut down in our neighborhood even though they didn't have to, they were considered essential services so they were allowed to stay open but every single one of them shut down. So we're like, what do we— what do we do? When people are like, 'I'm doing my laundry in my bathtub!' And we were like we're not doing our laundry in our bathtub! We can't do this. And so we put a— Kolot had a mutual aid form, like a lot of communities did and so we put out something being like, 'who wants to do our laundry? Can somebody do our laundry?' And this, this amazing couple,²² who we'd never met who lived three blocks away from us did our laundry for months. We didn't know any— because we were in Bay Ridge, and nobody else— there weren't a lot of people— like most people were sort of like Park Slope or maybe other places, that's where Kolot met. So we're in a different neighborhood in Brooklyn which was not as close and we didn't know there were other folks there and it was this amazing couple, like these two women whose kids were almost grown. You know they were excited to help out. And then when Fern was born we were like 'are you still cool?'— they'd already been doing our laundry for a few weeks or for maybe a month? We're like 'is this still

²¹ More on this experience can be found [here](#).

²² The couple was Audrey Elias and Kelly Baxter Golding. In later correspondence, Hannah told Claire, "So we would leave our IKEA bag full of laundry outside their door and text them, and they'd text when it was ready to be picked up, and each time, it came back with a tiny perfect toy for Ellen, our older kid who was 4 at the time. They were things Audrey and Kelly just had around their house. Ellen still remembers which toys are her 'laundry toys.'"

okay? Can we send you stuff that's been spit up all over?' And they're like, 'yes, absolutely! We're in this for the baby clothes. We don't have young kids anymore. We want to see those baby clothes!' And they were— and it was amazing. So just that, like that network. And then there were times like when Ellen was born. So when our first one was born, she's six and a half now, we had a meal train and lots of people from Kolot contributed to that. Gretchen, my wife, was part of the committee— I'm blanking now on— I think, Gemilut,²³ I think the committee is called Gemilut but she was part of that committee. So she would do things like bring food to people or like when people hosted shivas like when somebody died, they would help out. And just having that kind of network and community for like lifecycle events was really amazing. We did a baby naming ceremony with our older one. And then the younger one, it was actually the first positive Zoom event that happened. There had been some funerals but there hadn't— this was like the first week of May, when she was, you know, she was eight days old and we did a baby naming for her. And a lot of people came, even people we didn't know super well because they were like, 'oh, my gosh, we get to'— like no one was Zoom-ed out yet, it was like early 2020 so people were still into it. And it was the first really positive celebratory thing that happened on Zoom for Kolot was like our baby's naming. Yeah, I mean Kolot has been a huge part of our family's becoming.

Claire Contreras 58:01

Yeah, yeah.

Hannah Mermelstein 58:02

And even— I mean, also— so with our— I— before I— so I gave birth to our older child, and then my wife gave birth to the younger one, but with the older— we were trying for the first one we have been trying for a while like she tried for a while and then I tried for a while and I ended up— but— so I had a miscarriage before my first one. And when I did we reached out— we had a meeting with Rabbi Ellen and we also said like, 'is there anybody in the community who we could talk to, like, are there other people who have had this experience who are willing to talk with us?' And so she put out an anonymous request in the community and this person, who had her own baby who was just a couple months old at the time came— who had had a few miscarriages herself— came and met me at a coffee shop. And we just talked and it was amazing and that was also through Kolot that I was able to have that. And yeah, I mean it's been like the whole— the whole journey of our becoming a family was very tied with Kolot.

Claire Contreras 59:14

That was really beautiful. Are there ways that this network of care expands? Like, how does Kolot engage with the Brooklyn Park Slope community?

Hannah Mermelstein 59:25

²³ Gemilut Chasadim, its full name, translates to “the giving of loving-kindness” and is a common Jewish practice for life-cycle events.

Yeah, I mean, I wasn't as involved in that as other people but I think Kolot very much sees itself as like a Brooklyn synagogue that's very involved in its community, very rooted there. Which I think is also an interesting sort of counterpart to Zionism to be rooted in your own diaspora community and not like, have your eye somewhere else. It's like this is where we are, this is our community. And so there have been a lot of things that Kolot has been involved in like local organizing efforts that Rabbi Ellen did a whole lot of work with and that Miriam has, is continuing, as well. So like workers' rights stuff– I think other people could talk about it more and will I'm sure in this project because I was not as involved with those, but yeah for sure. It was very Brooklyn based.

Claire Contreras 1:00:23

Very cool. I'm wondering– I'm wondering two things. I have another question that I'm wondering about– but also how long do you have today? I want to respect your time as well.

Hannah Mermelstein 1:00:41

Yeah, no, I'm good. My family is at the science museum. There'll be there for–

Claire Contreras 1:00:42

[Interrupts] Oh, awesome!

Hannah Mermelstein 1:00:45

– another like, hour.

Claire Contreras 1:00:47

Okay, great. The next topic I wanted to talk about was like, in your experience at Kolot, where are the biggest points of growth that you've either seen and experienced or you would hope for? Like, what are the cracks in Kolot? I think someone else in the project referred to it as that.

Hannah Mermelstein 1:01:16

Yeah, um, I mean, my involvement has been so specific and so it's interesting to think about, like, as the community. I mean, I think one area of– I don't know if it's a crack, it's just– but an area of growth would be like actually getting their own space. Because the– you know, renting space from different places and then like the place that is rented now is not really accessible, like, just physically. So there's definitely that. I think about accessibility in general and it's definitely something that's on the radar that people are thinking about, but I think that's one that's one area. I think, also, this is another thing that's very much on the radar but it's another area of growth for most American Jewish communities just with the sort of inclusion and leadership of people of color within the community. So there's a lot of really strong, amazing members of Kolot but all of them– like, I don't know that I know any Kolot members of color who aren't deeply involved in that work to make– they all, I think, sort of have to be doing that work for it to be happening.

And it would be great to just be a community that can be diverse without feeling like people have to do that work in order to be there. I would say that there's that too. There's also been there's sort of a tension of like how much kids are or are not welcome in like, adult spaces there or in what feels like adult spaces, in the sort of the general space versus— there's a very strong children's program and— but there was definitely the feeling at least a few years ago, if your kid isn't quiet and well behaved it's not necessarily the space for them. There at least are times when it is or isn't but it felt hard as a parent and stressful to like have young children with us and in the space. And I think part of that comes from in a lot of Jewish communities your value is determined by your membership in a family and having children and all of that is like required and so Kolot has individual membership for that reason. It's not like a family membership, it's each individual choosing to be part of that community and it's— I think probably single folks would say that that's an area of growth, too, that they would want to feel more accepted and welcomed. But there's definitely like a tension of— with the kids and the presence of children. And I think that that's less. I think that Rabbi Miriam is this sort of more kid-oriented than Rabbi Ellen was in her work.

Claire Contreras 1:04:49

I guess since this project is about collective memory and archiving the experience— your experience in Kolot, is there anything that we haven't talked about that you really want to be remembered about Kolot in the time that you were part of it? Or about your experience in general?

Hannah Mermelstein 1:05:14

Oh, that's a great question. Well, I mean, other things I was just thinking about in terms of involvement, like up through when COVID hit was that we actually ended up starting to go to services more because we had kind of stopped when we had our young— our older one was younger it was too complicated to try to go all the time, we went sometimes, to kid stuff. But we went and we were regular Shabbat visitors, or whatever attendants, on Zoom once that started and it was amazing, but just feeling that community in particular, like in the Zoom world, I think that Kolot did it really well. And I'm not sure what went into the back end of things but I think just like, making that space. People really responded to it. One of the memories— I'm just thinking of, what are different memories I have? I mean, one is one High Holiday services— when was— was it last— well, we can look up when, or when Ruth Bader Ginsburg died, but whatever year— whether that was 2020 or 2021, but anyway—

Claire Contreras 1:06:55

[Interrupts] I think 2020.

Hannah Mermelstein 1:06:57

Okay, yeah, so it was like we logged in onto services and it happened right then, that's when the news came out. So the first comment we see on Zoom before the services started someone just typed into the chat 'RBG' and everyone was like— and we all found out— like 1,000 people found out together. And Rabbi Miriam was just amazing, sort of holding that space. But yeah, that's one experience and memory that I think of. But yeah, I mean things about Kolot that— I mean, Lisa like, I haven't mentioned Lisa at all who's— Lisa B Siegel, the cantor, who is just incredible and had like such an amazing rapport with Ellen and has such an amazing rapport with Miriam that just— the clergy of Kolot is really fabulous and deserves to be remembered. Lisa also helped like when we had our miscarriage she helped us to design a ritual around it like at the water in Bay Ridge in our neighborhood. We went down to the water and we did this whole ritual and she helped us with that. But yeah so many different big and small moments. I think of both Ellen and Miriam, like being community leaders, you know, speaking at protests and both on behalf of Kolot, at times, or just as religious leaders, but speaking for themselves and just feeling connected in that way to them.

Claire Contreras 1:08:57

I'm also wondering what it was like to experience Kolot through the transition, the only transition of rabbis Kolot has gone through.

Hannah Mermelstein 1:09:09

Yeah. Yeah. I mean so Miriam had been there as the student rabbi. And so people already knew her, I think Kolot handled it super well. From, again, at least what was public about it, like, I was not involved in any of the back end on that. But just in terms of saying— like, there were three different finalist candidates and when it was Miriam's turn people were like, okay, you know her already but this is a new way that we're getting to know her. I think, I don't know, I think they did really well at actually not pretending that like we didn't know her already but also just really bringing new, I don't know, like having all the candidates kind of on equal ground and giving people new respect for her— because we could also have been like she's chosen and it felt like not a complete process or something. But it really felt like the right process, the right person. I think it felt really great. A lot of people— you know, Ellen was huge for so many people and like bringing them into Kolot and I think a lot of people were really nervous about the transition and I think people, for the most part, feel really positive about the way that it went down, both the process and the result. And being part of that, I don't know, when it was happening we were like okay— we had already, we'd been thinking about possibly moving someday, I mean, it was COVID that kind of put that into high gear but before that, we were sort of thinking it like alright, if Rabbi Miriam becomes the rabbi we can never leave Brooklyn, if she doesn't, we can leave Brooklyn. And she did and we left anyway. But, yeah, we were very happy that it was Miriam. And I think Ellen handled it really well, too, in terms of like, she kind of stayed away for a little while and like wasn't— you know, she comes to services and to at least to High Holiday services and would come on Zoom to some of Shabbat services. I think it's as smooth a transition

as it could be, really. They intended to have an interim rabbi, and– I'm remembering this now– so they intended to have an interim rabbi for a year and then to have– because they didn't want to transition directly and then have the next person fail. An interim rabbi is actually a thing that happens where everyone can put their frustrations and grieving and everything on this person for a year and then they're out, and then you like, start over. And they didn't end up– like that process of finding someone ended up falling apart and so they just didn't have one. And instead, what was– I mean, I think it was that it just was Miriam– was it Miriam and Lisa? Was it like, student rabbi, and– I don't even remember. I'm sure other people will talk about that. But there was an interim period so it didn't go directly– there was an interim period, but without the interim rabbi that was intended at the time. So I think Lisa's hours were upped, at least for that year.

Claire Contreras 1:12:54

Did it– did Kolot feel different? Not better or worse, but like, different with a different rabbi? I assume it would.

Hannah Mermelstein 1:13:04

Yeah, I think that Miriam is bringing a younger crowd. So in terms of the community, some of the things like who are joining, who maybe wouldn't otherwise have joined anything? I don't know. Like, I'm not sure how it would look different if Ellen was still the rabbi. Would it still be having the same kind of transition? But I do think Miriam's brought sort of new, different people to the table. Her style is both similar and different. I think Lisa being a constant– and she's someone who– she does have a very strong role and does a lot of things like the leading of, you know, the singing, the prayers, the songs, all of that. So, it wasn't– it didn't feel jarring to me. Like it is– they're different, they're very different, but they're similar in ways that matter and different in other ways and it was not like– it didn't feel like a jarring transition. Also, because Miriam was already there as a student even while Rabbi Ellen was there and they also got along super well and gelled together, it felt like a natural transition. I don't know, for other people who had been there longer I'm sure it was more of, you know, a harder transition. But yeah.

Claire Contreras 1:14:50

Um [pause] yeah, I feel like it's like we've covered a lot. Is there anything else that you'd like to share about Kolot or– any final words?

Hannah Mermelstein 1:15:04

No, it's a special place. It just has a lot of heart and in like a different way than I've seen elsewhere. People really care for each other. Which, you know, it's not unique, other places that is the case too, but there's, I don't know, there's a lot of people I really, really miss from Kolot that I wouldn't– I mean, some people who are like my friends otherwise and then other people who wouldn't be or aren't, so.

Claire Contreras 1:15:44

[Pause] Great. Well, I think we can– I can end the recording. Yeah, thank you so much for being part of this!

Hannah Mermelstein 1:15:58

Yeah, I hope there was– I feel like I talked a lot about other things that were not Kolot so I hope there was enough about Kolot too.

Claire Contreras 1:16:03

I think so, yeah! No, and it's all– it's all part of– you were part of the Kolot story so it's all part of the Kolot story. [Pause] I can pause it here– [recording ends.]