Transcript: Rebecca Vilkomerson by Connor Wertz

Tue, Nov 29, 2022 6:13PM • 1:20:23

SUMMARY KEYWORDS
felt, people, jewish, congregation, israel, synagogue, Israel-Palestine, services, happening, Kolot, organizing, grew, jewish community, years, rabbi, board, palestine, point, friends, judaism

00:00
Connor Wertz (C): We have all of our recording devices up. Thank you.

Rebecca Vilkomerson (R): How long is this going to take?

C: It can take however long you want, but roughly between an hour and two hours, if that makes sense. Do you have any time limits?

00:18
R: Like, not actually. I want to do a yoga practice before the end of the day. Okay. It's like two o'clock right now, right? Yes.

00:29
C: Yeah. So you should be done by 3:30 or four, or something like that. Great. So my name is Connor Wertz. This is the Kolot Chayeinu oral history project. Today is November 5. And I'm super happy to be here with you. Do you want to introduce yourself? And, yeah, I guess just start with that.

00:54
R: My name is Rebecca Wilkerson. I'm a member of Kolot Chayeinu and have been since 2009. We're sitting in my backyard on an unseasonably beautiful day in November. Lots of birds chirping, and I'm knitting.

01:13
C: So,this will be an expansive, ranging conversation, so we can really start it wherever. But I thought it would be nice if you wanted to talk a little bit about your upbringing and the importance of Jewish community to you and how that kind of led you to Kolot.

01:35
R: I grew up in Princeton, well, technically, right outside Princeton, New Jersey. Princeton is the town that my mom grew up in as well. And so, the synagogue that I grew up in is the synagogue that my grandparents founded. For my parents, their social life, and sort of communal life was based around the

synagogue. I would say almost all of their close friends were [there], and every year we'd have Rosh Hashanah and Passover with the same group of families. Their close friends were from that.

R *(To husband, who delivers coffee)*:Thank you, baby.

02:21
R: Bringing me coffee. Yes. So like, so that was a very, very big part of our life. I'm not sure if it was affiliated conservative, but it was definitely conservative style. I mean egalitarian, men and women sat together. I went to the school three days a week, there was a three day a week and a two day week option for Hebrew school. So the three day kids were like, seen as the more religious kids. And the two day a week kids were sort of seen as a bit like, suspect, or lacking commitment., I'm just talking Jewishly obviously.

Even though my grandparents started the synagogue, my mom grew up fairly secular. I think my grandfather grew up Orthodox and my grandmother grew up, not religious at all. And they sort of met in the middle in their marriage. And so I think they might have even had Christmas stockings. But were very obviously Jewish identified. My grandmother was what's known as a *Yekke*, which is someone who comes from German Jewish descent. And my grandfather was like, sort of classic Eastern European. My dad had grown up, again, quite observant, like keeping kosher at home. That was Jewish on both sides, but mixed marriage in the sense that my grandfather grew up quite observant and wanted to maintain that. [It was] the condition of the marriage.

So my grandmother on my father's side had come from some anti Tsarist communist family. So she adjusted to her husband, and much, much, much, much later, they moved to Israel, after my aunt moved to Israel. And so they would come and visit. And my first thing that would happen is that my mom would take my grandmother out for a milkshake, cheeseburger, which is not kosher in several different ways. You know, so the kosher was in no way an aspect of her faith. You know what I mean? It was like a form that she followed, but she had no actual feelings about it. But my grandfather did.

So in our house, we did not keep kosher, so we didn't separate milk and meat or anything like that.But we didn't ever have pork in the house or seafood in the house. Although I was allowed to order shrimp when we went to Chinese restaurants. So you know, it was sort of like classic weird, everyone makes their own rules. In later years my father gained a fondness for prosciutto and mEllen, which he did count as ham. It's a very classic way to do things.

So, yes, we didn't go to services regularly, but we did do Friday night at home every week. We did Friday night prayers. We had a nice meal on Friday nights. And like I said, I went to school three days a week. My actual friends were, at least in my childhood, generally not Jewish. The school I went to–I went to South Brunswick schools until high school, when I switched to Princeton High School–there, I would say the majority of my friends were not Jewish, just because that's who was around. My big like, core group of friends were my neighbors–it was my street. No one else was Jewish exceptt my sister.

Yeah. And then for my ba mitzvah–I was ba mitzvah'd–the year before my Bar Mitzvah, I went to Shabbat services, it was required to go every week. I don't know how many other people took it

seriously, but I did. So I did go every week during that time. And I actually look back on that as a very important time in my life, in the sense that that's what actually made me feel comfortable, like I bElleng at services. It was a very light crowd on most Shabbats, and there were lots of old people who I got to know. This is probably like the early 80s. So they're still like Holocaust survivors and stuff. So there are all of these older people who I got to know during that time.

So yes, it was a pretty serious preparation for my Ba Mitzvah. I always liked Judaism, I guess. I liked the services. I liked going to services with my dad, I liked fasting. Yom Kippur. I liked all the rituals, I liked Passover–I still think of Passover, actually, the Passover story is sort of like my original organizing story and an inspiration for my political work. So I never felt alienated from it at all. It's not like I loved going to Hebrew school three days a week, but I never went through a stage of feeling alienated from it, like my sister who never felt anything for it. Which I think was personality, not circumstance or anything like that.

07:00
C: Okay. So it sounds like you grew up, in some ways in a Jewish community, like there was a sense of that?

R:definitely.

C: And how does that background fit into your story of your relationship to Kolot?

07:23
R: Well, I think a couple of things. I mean, while I was very attached to Jewish practice, and to Jewish community, even in my childhood and young adulthood, I will say it never was politically spiritually rich. I don't remember Hebrew school being particularly meaningful, there was a lot of what I used to call “Holocaust, Israel, Holocaust, Israel;” there wasn't a lot of delving into Jewish texts or into Jewish prayer. There was a lot of Jewish history stuff, there was a lot of cous on the Holocaust and the lessons of the Holocaust. They would ask you philosophical questions like, “are you an American Jew or Jewish American?” and you were supposed to debate things like that.

So it didn't really do it for me, in any spiritual sense, even though I tried to find it where I could. And so in the intervening years, I maintained my connection to Jewish community. It wasn't like I was involved in active Jewish community in college. But I still kept kosher for Passover on my own in the dorm and found services to go to during College, and then bounced around a bit in my 20s. But by the time I got to San Francisco, I still didn't join a synagogue. Which is very classic for people in their 20s. But I did look around, and I had services that I always went to on the High Holidays, and that was most of what I had at that point.

Of course–and maybe we'll go into it in a different question–but in my later 20's I became involved in Israel-Palestine work, and Jewish community through that. So really my first organized Jewish community after my synagogue, in that sense, was JVP, in the early years of Jewish Voice for Peace.[1]

Then I met and married my husband, who is Israeli, but completely secular. We had our children, and all that happened in fairly quick succession. And then we moved to Israel for three years. And in Israel, of course, you don't–we can talk about this more also–you don't need to be very actively Jewish to be Jewish The kids madeChallah on Friday mornings in their schools. And the rhythm of every day was very, very Jewish. Every week was very Jewish in terms of things slowing down for Shabbat and all that sort of stuff. So you felt very Jewish and you didn't have to do very much. And you did all the holidays through the school and it didn't, you didn't have to be active about it.

09:55
So when I came back to Brooklyn, to make a long story not very much shorter, when I came back to Brooklyn in 2009, I realized I was at a choice point. In the sense that my kids were then six and three. And either we were going to join a synagogue and maintain their sense of Jewish identity, or we weren't, and they wouldn't have that. It was never a choice, really. I felt very, very strongly that I wanted to raise the kids Jewish. And yes, I was going to raise the kids Jewish. Yoni, my husband, had no interest in the synagogue and no interest in the American side of Judaism.

I never seriously looked at any other synagogue, other than Kolot. I moved to the neighborhood where Kolot is, but more importantly I'd come back as the executive director of Jewish Voice for Peace. I already had very strong Palestine politics. Klot was the only synagogue where I felt like I could really bring my full self politically and still be welcomed. I will say, especially in those early years, I felt–to say that I felt tolerated and not welcome would be too strong a way to put it–but I would say that it's not that I felt like….[silence]... I felt it was fine for me to be there in my politics. Let's put this way: I didn't become very active in the synagogue.

That being said, even when I moved here, I already knew a lot of people who were members. People who I'd been friends with in San Francisco who were organizers.There were a number of people who I had known politically, who were all members of Kolot. It was clearly the organizer synagogue, which very much appealed to me. So for all those reasons, we joined .I think my engagement with the community, and with Kolot, sort of ramped up slowly over time.

But what I will say is that, almost from the beginning, the nature of the services were very meaningful to me. I got a lot out of the services. The nature of the services were sort of Reconstructionist-ish.[2] So there was enough that was similar to what I'd had in my childhood, like a lot of Hebrew. In my childhood, more conservative synagogues didn't have music on Shabbat. So that was a little bit weird to

[1] JVP is a national organization that supports"full equality for Palestinians and Jewish Israelis grounded in international law and universal principles of human rights" and that has "a large grassroots base of members across the country who lead or work on campaigns." https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/

[2] Reconstructionism is a denomination of Judaism, approximate to Reform Judaism and with progressive values (like gender equity and LGBTQ acceptance). https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/reconstructionist-judaism-today/, or https://reconstructingjudaism.org/ for more details.

me in the beginning, but I got used to the integration of the music. There was singing [in conservative synagogues] but not instruments. So the instruments were a little bit to get used to it, but there's not too much.

So in general, it was similar enough to what I'd grown up with to feel very familiar, but also was imbued with much more engagement with Jewish ideas, much more engagement with prayer, much more thinking about what was the nature of why you were there, in a way that I really enjoyed. So I think–you know, interestingly, I haven't ever said it this way before–but I think Kolot was both a continuation of my Jewishness, but also a real reaction to the way I'd been brought up, in the sense that I loved it so much compared to how I remember my childhood services.

13:07
C: I'm thinking I'm a little worried about all the sound, with drilling and stuff. So I'm just gonna pause.

Connor switches microphones

C: That sounds good. Okay. So resuming after a quick sound check quality. I definitely want to pick up on some of the themes you mentioned there, including your work with Jewish Voice for Peace and Israel-Palestine.

13:56
R: You said you didn't want coffee, right? I feel bad.

13:59
C: I'm fine, thank you. No worries. So you talked about the role of your kids and [about] that being an impetus for needing to find a congregation. And so, from your position as a parent, and a mom and somebody who did rigorous Hebrew education three days a week growing up, what's your perspective on how Kolot does youth education, and how that has grown or anything like that?

14:35
R: To be honest, I don't have a lot to say about that. My kids did go to the CLP, to the children's learning program. They didn't start till later because in the first few years, we sent them to a thing which was for Israeli kids to maintain their Hebrew. That was not part of Kolot. So my younger daughter probably did start in like first or second grade, but my older one didn't start until like third or fourth grade. Some of the stuff was great. I remember my daughter came back, she was in the gender and Judaism class, there was some innovative stuff that happened. And they did a lot–especially in the later years–to bring the parents and the kids together. But I can't say I have a lot to say about CLP. Overall, my kids already did feel very Jewish because of Israel. And they had a little bit of–honestly, they had a little bit of an Israeli superiority complex about the other kids who didn't know how to speak Hebrew and didn't know what they knew, because they knew. It's not like they knew a lot or know a lot, honestly. But they did know the holidays and had a very visceral sense of identity with the holidays and the cycle of the Jewish year and stuff. So they never particularly enjoyed the Children's Learning Progra…I mean, they both have–especially my younger one–have friends who come mostly from that, but I can't say that was like a big highlight of their childhood or anything like that.

15:59
C: No, that makes sense. So Jewish continuity is such a strong–

R: Yeah, I know, it's a very classic narrative arc, that I finally started to go to synagogue when I had kids who were old enough to learn, I mean, that's as classic as it gets. So, yes.

16:19
C: And how do you feel about that? Fitting into the narrative arc,and how Kolot has helped in that?

16:29
R: I mean, I laugh about it a lot. It's just funny that I'm on the board of the synagogue. And also, there's things about how Kolot is so non-traditional in some ways. And then–where was I, maybe at High Holidays this year–there's ways that Kolot is just like every synagogue that's ever existed, you know what I mean? The ways that people interact with each other, the shenanigans with the board and the complaints, the way people talk to each other after services, you know, all the things that are very, very familiar again, for me in a very comforting way, about the way I was raised. You can try to be innovative in many ways, but I think Kolot is very much part of a cultural Ashkenazi Jewish tradition. That is very familiar to many of us. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

17:21
C: And there are some, what seem like small tweaks that, at least from my understanding, can have a pretty big impact on feelings of inclusion… I think of the way families are included, or how you can join as an individual.

17:39
R: Exactly. So it didn't make a huge difference. I would have–we would have joined either way, if we had to join with Yoni, but it definitely has made the whole situation, and my experience at Kolot, much more normalized, [given] that I joined as an individual. [Yoni] never joined. He comes usually to Kol Nidre services. And he came to both girls' ba mitzvahs. And that's it. But there's nothing weird about that. You know what I mean? And I think in most congregations, that'd be very weird.That's a very mild example, obviously, because we're two Jewish people married to each other [and] each of us have a Jewish pair–all the Jewish parents, you know what I mean? So there's nothing interfaith about the relationship except for that he's not into it, you know. But obviously, there's interfaith and interracial couples in Kolot, and there's lots of communities where they wouldn't feel welcome and Kolot has done great job [making them feel welcome].

There's a lot queerness and different kinds of queerness…not to make it sound like utopia, because there have been and continues to be issues, especially around race and Kolot, but certainly, I think those tweaks have made a big difference in…*welcoming* I think is the wrong word. Because there's a difference between being welcomed and being an integral part of the community. And I do think it's an integral part of Kolot's identity, that we aren't judging people by how they do their Jewishness, you

know. That also extends to, like, “Do you believe in God or not?” That's never a question that anyone asks. Are you a member that comes once a year? Or do you come on different shabbats? Everyone has their own different Kolot that they, you know, engage with in whatever way they want. And that's totally cool.

19:26
C: Absolutely. I think it'd be a good time to dig a little bit into your history with Jewish Voice for Peace and what you described as experiencing your first organized Jewish community through [political] organizing. So do you want to just talk a little bit about your history there and your path and what in any ways it connects or relates to your experience with Kolot? I think starting with the work that you've done is great. And then we can wind it right back to Kolot.

20:13
R: Yes, I had never quite put it that way before. But it's true that JVP was my first–as far as I can remember–organized Jewish community as an adult. Which I think, by the way, is not unusual. I have always felt that the values that I have gleaned from Judaism are what have compelled me to be a political person more generally. And, like I said, one of *the* most important story to that is the story of Exodus, which, is an organizing story, where Moses organizes the people, and he develops leaders, and he does escalating actions until there’s liberation; there's a clear target, I mean, if you think about it that way, it really is like an organizing manual. I'm always moved by the story every year, when we tell it over and over again. And so I think that is very integral to the person I have chosen to become in terms of the way I spend my life. And that was already true before I was working on Israel-Palestine.

I did a lot of work on racial and economic justice before I was involved in Palestine politics. So I was living in San Francisco and very much identified as on the left. I was part of a collective called the Center for Political Education, which is a non sectarian, anti-capitalist left organization whose whole point was to bring people together from different left streams.[3] And as was also very typical for many [Jewish] people–still now but maybe even more so at that time–my left-ness did not include Israel-Palestine, because it was too hard to deal with. It felt too fraught, it felt too sensitive, I didn't feel like I knew enough to, you know, argue with my dad about it. I had some instincts, and I did have a couple arguments with my dad, if I remember, but I really didn't know. I definitely didn't feel a very strong connection to Israel.

That's the other thing. As I mentioned, my aunt made Aliyah, as it’s called, right after college, and then my grandparents followed her there. And then she moved to a religious kibbutz, she became much more religious, she, married uncle, and my grandparents moved there. So my father's entire family was in Israel, my entire childhood. So we would go every few years. And then later on I married an Israeli–a very different kind of Israeli, a secular Israeli–but that sense of connection to Israel in a very visceral way, not in a distant way, but in a way of like, family, was very, very present in my life. So that was the thing.

But I also have to say that, like, of course, the whole process of becoming a leftist–and I’ve thought about this a lot, because I came of political age and came of age, period, in the 90s. And I've had this

[3] See their website, https://politicaleducation.org/, for a glance at the center’s current programs.

conversation with a lot of people recently, that it wasn't easy to become a leftist in the 90s. Like, you kind of had to work at it, you know what I mean? Now it's in the air to become–like, 40% of kids, people 18–24, or maybe it's 60%, or some large percentage, say they're anti-capitalist. And I don't know how many of them actually know what that means. But even the idea of that is kind of remarkable. To say that, in the time that I was becoming an adult was completely, way, way, way, way out in left field. And pretty unacceptable. So it was a much smaller….I want to say more intimate, but I think the point is a more embattled thing to be part of the left. But again, you had to really work at it. So being part of the Center for Political Education was amazing, because suddenly I'd found this political home and a way to understand my politics that I hadn't–that I'd started to have, but didn't necessarily have. It wasn't like it was like in the air around me like it is now. You know, I think for people coming of age from what I can see from my kids, who are Gen Z.

Anyway, point being, I had not really engaged with Israel-Palestine. It felt–I mean dangerous is a strong word–but it felt fraught, just put it that way. I can think of two people who were very important. One was a woman named Iman who was Palestinian-American who was also part of this collective. And the other was this person named Tarik who also is Palestinian American… and weirdly enough Tarik was the only person that me and my husband ended up having in common when we met. So I met my husband in the year 2000. In the spring, and Tarik had been part of my circle of friends, and was Palestinian American. And it turned out, they'd known each other at Berkeley. So it was sort of sweet.

The two stories that I remember are the Second Intifada, which started in the fall of 2000.[4] And during that time, there was a boy named Mohamed El Dora, who was 12 years old. And there were pictures on the front page of the New York Times.[5] This father was holding him in his arms while he was being shot at by the Israeli army, and then he died. He was killed. And it was a very, very shocking photo at the time, and you know, when you think about the progress that's been made politically, would that be on the top fold of the New York Times? I don't know. So maybe we haven't gotten that much further than we were. But the point is, it was on the top of the New York Times. And I remember I was home and I wrote to Tarik and email and I said, “This is so terrible. This isn't who we are, I feel so ashamed, blah, blah” type thing. And he wrote me back the nicest thing–I still think about this, like the nicest thing, like the most generous, kind thing–which was basically like, “I'm so glad you're thinking about this, blah, blah, blah, you should probably know that this didn't start yesterday.”

As an organizing philosophy, I think about this a lot because it was the beginning of the Second Intifada. Terrible things are happening, I'm sure he was very angry and very upset. And he could have been like, “What the fuck is wrong with you,” or like, “leave me alone.” But instead, he encouraged me, you know, and that enabled me to push it a little further. And so I think as an organizing principle of JVP, and I think that's actually for most good organizing, that's very important, where you are able to take people in those moments and help them continue to learn as opposed to shutting them down and making them feel like assholes for not having known. And certainly both of those models exist, you know. So that was very instrumental for me at the beginning of the Second Intifada. And also

[4] The Second Intifada was series of Palestinian uprisings aimed at ending Jewish occupation of West Bank and Gaza, Strip that lasted roughly from 2000-2005. Sometimes referred to as Al-Aqṣā intifada.
https://www.britannica.com/topic/intifada

[5] See this link for access to the photo (trigger warning: violence). Note that the link leads to a contrary article

because–and it's a little embarrassing from a feminist point of view–I did have this Israeli boyfriend who I was falling in love with. So I was like “Okay, I'm gonna have to deal with this situation,” like it had suddenly become a thing that wasn't so abstract. It was real. In fact, I think he was in Israel for the beginning of the Second Intifada. And he came back, and it already started. And so anyway, it was just one of those things where the two things intertwined. The personal, the political. So that was Tarik.

And then Iman, in a more organized way….so she was part of the collective. I don't remember what happened, there was some conversation at the collective where I became very defensive about something about Israel. She asked me to meet her for lunch and talk about it. And she *reamed* me. I don't remember the conversation very well, except for that I was extremely defensive, she was very upset. It was hard for me to hear, but also helpful, and I sort of understood that I was gonna have to, like, figure this shit out. This was the left position, and I was gonna have to like, figure it out if I want to be part of it. To say it more clearly, it was, at that point, easier for me to apply my politics to Israel-Palestine. Even to the point of like, do I believe in full citizenships for Jewish people in the United States? Yes, I do. So how could I, you know, think that Israel should be a Jewish supremacist state? I don't think I would have used that language then. But that was the idea. But anyway, that was a very, very hard conversation with Iman.

Actually, very cutely, like two months ago. She wrote to me for a professional reason–we had not stayed in touch–and she was like, “I don't know if you remember me.” And I was like, “Do I remember you?You're like a core story, a core character in my political development!” I told her the whole thing. And she's like, “I don't even remember that, but I'm so glad you told me.” It is so nice to be a person who plants a seed. You may leave a conversation and it's like another organizing lesson. You have these hard conversations with people that ultimately aren't that satisfying at the moment. And then to know that 20 years later, to know that that moment was essential? So we had this very nice, you know, it happened like a month ago, it was great. We’ve been doing some work together recently, so it's cute.

But anyway, all that being said, what ended up happening as the Second Intifada was starting was that me and a friend from home–from Princeton, who also was part of the same synagogue that I grew up in and also had gone to high school with and also had become a leftist in San Francisco–we decided that we should do a a series of political education sessions for lefty Jews who didn't know what to think about what was happening. And so we did that. And it was an enormous, enormous, enormous success. And Palestinian allies were very excited about it.

There really was no Jewish-Palestine solidarity organizing happening in that time–so to go back in time. There's a couple of organizations: New Jewish Agenda and Breira were the two most well known national organizations, and they both fallen apart by that time.[6] So there really was like a dearth of Jewish organizing around Palestine. But JVP had formed in the last couple of years. And so at the end of that political education session, she and I both joined JVP as members. JVP at that point was a Bay Area organization. And I will say I became very–as people do, as they convert–I became very stringent about things. That was the beginning of my Palestinian activism.

[6] Information on Breira and New Jewish Agenda

It definitely was a real shift from what I had been doing–I'd been doing racial and economic justice work. I'm a middle class white person. That [work] always felt like I was doing it from the outside. The opportunity, the feeling of doing work from within my own community based on my own identity and my own experiences was very compelling. In addition to the subject, feeling extremely, extremely passionate about it. Just like, so angry and upset about it all the time that I couldn't even believe it, you know what I mean? There was the political thing, but there was also just like, this is a space for me to do a specific kind of work.

So I was very involved with JVP. So that was probably 2001. When I joined JVP. I had my kids in 2003, and 2006. All that time, I was involved in JVP. But, again, as my nighttime organizing–my day job was doing other organizing work. Then we moved to Israel, which had been sort of an agreement when Yoni and I got together, that at some point, we'd go back. He'd never intended to stay forever in the US. And, when the kids were small, [it] seemed like the right time. I could take a break. I, you know, hadn't really wanted to go. But I agreed to go. And I did go through a whole process of having to actively *not* become a citizen of Israel just by going, which is a story we don't have to go into.

I spent three years there, very involved in the left–meaning now the anti Zionist movement–in Israel, and then came back. Now is when we get back to Kolot, finally. We moved back to Brooklyn after the 2009 War. Again, going back to my Second Intifada story–I think we talked about this, the last time you and I talked–there's often these sort of like "classes" of people who come into this work, at least in the Jewish community. And it's probably true of almost any movement, just the way you see huge outpourings after the murder of George Floyd, like the Second Intifada happens, and all of a sudden, a huge number of Jews are very upset about what's going on, because it's at the top of everyone's mind. So there's different waves of people who come into the organizing.

So 2009, which was the first Gaza war was one of those big big waves.[7] I was still in Israel, then it was…not to go deep into that, but it was a very hard experience to be in Israel during that time. We had always agreed that we're going to come back, it was never going to be a permanent situation. I think I could have been convinced to stay. You know, the girls both there. They spoke Hebrew as a first language, my husband's parents were there, we were nicely set up there by then. I'd spent a lot of time creating a community there. So I probably could have been convinced to stay another year, and then another year, and then who knows how many more years. Then that war happened. And I was like, get me the fuck out of here. This place is a fucking disaster. Which I knew already, but there were things so visceral about it, it was just an escalation that I couldn't deal with. And so I basically dragged the whole family back, you know, I really did.

JVP had gone through a going national process and had been looking for an ED [executive director] on and off for a while. And I remember when they were first looking, I was like, "This would be the perfect job for me to do that. But I live in Israel and can't do it." But they still had not hired someone by the time it was time to move back. And so I wrote to them–they were very based and they were expecting to hire someone there–I kind of wrote to them and was like "You should hire me even though I'm gonna live in New York," which was like a pretty easy sell, honestly, because there's a lot of Jews in New York. If

[7] The First Gaza war marks an invasion by the IDF (Israeli Defense Force) of the Gaza Strip, in response to increased rocket fire by Hamas (a Palestinian militant-political organization). It began around 2008.

we're going to be a serious national organization, we should probably have an outpost on the East Coast…they didn't have to think about that that long.

34:22
So I came back to Brooklyn and moved to Brooklyn as the ED of JVP, which at that point, in 2009, had gone through a large growth spurt. Our deputy director Serrasky had been very smart about digital tools. So they were ready during the 2009 War. So the mailing list jumped to like 80 or 90,000 people. It already was one of the biggest Jewish organizing places around Palestine just from that. But also it was not really an *organizing* organization and had a lot of difficulties going national that we don't need to go into. Anyway, all that to say I came to Kolot as the ED of JVP, which already was an outlier–hadn't endorsed BDS yet or anything like that–but definitely was an outlier in the Jewish community. And had a much more left and much more radical position in terms of Palestine Solidarity than any other Jewish organizing did.

There weren't honestly tons of other Jewish organizing happening. If Not Now didn't exist. T'ruah was rabbis for human rights still,which was like an appendage of the Israeli version, JStreet started around the same time, but was just getting going–it started in 2009.[8] So the organizations that you think of now, none of them really existed. There were a bunch of smaller organizations, local organizations…JVP was pretty much the only national organization that was out there. So I guess the thing to say is, it was a slow process over time where my organizing life started to become fully like both Jewish and Palestine focus as opposed to being separate. Although I wanted to feel comfortable at Kolot and I wasn't gonna hear stuff on the bema that was gonna make me insanely angry, like I would at many synagogues, it wasn't like I was coming to Kolot to enact my Palestine politics there. It was for me a very separate space to have my Jewish practice, not my political world. Very long answer to very short question.

36:45
Connor: No, not at all. That's great. So when you joined Kolot, was that the first time you had returned to Jewish practice, or were you attending others?

37:01
R: So it was the first time I joined another Jewish *community*, I think I never fully lost…like, I was really good about Jewish practice until I met Yoni and then like, somehow that made me fall off because he was just so uninterested. So it was hard for me to maintain by myself. And then I had very young kids, and it was very vague. I'd find places to go on the High Holidays, but there wasn't anything else. And then, like I said, in Israel, everything was Jewish community, but not in an organized community way. You know what I mean? It was just like what was there all the time? You know what I mean? So it was like, sort of yes, but also no,

37:38
Ct How did that feel, returning back to Jewish practice in this kind of American context?

[8] These all refer to various left-progreseeive Jewish organizations that took stances either critical of Israeli occupation or in support of various degrees of Palestinian solidarity. See more information on If Not Now here, T'ruah here, and JStreet here.

37:45
R: Very natural. Like I said, I was very determined, like, in terms of feeling very strongly on behalf of my kids. But also, yeah, I think I was very immersed by then in a Jewish communal life, because I both was organizing at JVP and had been in Israel, and so wanted to be anchored by that. I think as a reflection of my growing up, it felt right to be in some sort of Jewish community. I think I knew that it was a very normal thing for people to rejoin a synagogue in their early 30s when they were young parents. To me, that's like a classic thing to do. So yeah. It felt very natural. But like I said, I also wasn't very active, like I was not very present in the synagogue.

C: What year did you join?

R: 2009 was back here. Yeah.

38:33
C: Okay. And when did your participation start to feel more active?

38:43
R: It's a good question. Both kids had their bought mitzvahs. And so I would go to services. They had a requirement to go to services a certain number of times a year before, I think it was 12. Before they were Ba Mitzvah'd. So I'd go with them to services during those years. That was 2016 and 2018. So 2016, certainly I was starting to go to services more often….[pause]... Miriam began being the student Rabbi, I think around that time, maybe not by 2016, but by 2017 or 2018. Maybe I'm getting those years wrong, I'm not sure. But I'd met Miriam [because she] was on the JVP rabbinical council. We had national membership meetings every two years. And she had lead the havdallah at the JVP national membership meetings.

Those national membership meetings are always very important to me from a JVP perspective, but also from a self perspective in the sense of, like, it's the one weekend where it really felt like it's all coming together. You know what I mean? Sure, Kolot was great. I was happy to be there. But this was like, "Oh, I'm with my people, and I'm doing my Jewishness, and it's beautiful". And everything feels fully integrated. And Mariam would do these beautiful, Havdallahs, that were just phenomenal. And so I knew her from that. I think I met her even before she was a student Rabbi. Jeremy, who's her husband now, was doing fieldwork in the West Bank. And so I remember there was one year before they were married, they were friends with friends of mine, with Alana Kriebel Kaufman, who's an old Kolot member (younger than me, but had been there longer than me). Anyway, they ended up here for some high holidays, I remember for some Rosh Hashanah afternoon.

What also started to happen [that increased my feeling of participation] was that the JVP in New York started to grow. And so there are more and more JVP peers in Kolot also. And that made it feel more homey to me and more lovely, you know, and because there were lots of years that Kolot that O would go there, I wouldn't know anyone. And I would go to services by myself. One of my best friends had cancer and then died. He died in 2017. And Miriam was already the student Rabbi then, and both she and Ellen were very, very supportive pastorally for me, during that time, which meant a lot. I went to the

synagogue more during that time. Especially the year after he died, it wasn't like I went every week, but I went fairly often to say Kaddish during that year.

Sorry, it's probably too much detail. But 2017 was also the year that–I had never been on a committee. I'd never been involved in any organized way. Very young children, very intense job, like I just didn't have any time for anything, really. But Ellen did ask me to be on the newly formed Israel-Palestine working group. And as I'm sure you've heard from other people, Ellen would ask people things, they do them. It was very much like a tap on the shoulder system. It happened because she told you to, not because you volunteered. But anyway, I remember the first meeting was like a week or two after my friend David died, and I was a little bit of a mess. But I was like, "I want to do this," you know. And it was also weird, because I didn't really want to do Israel-Palestine stuff. I'm very protective of this place as my Jewish practice community, not as my Israel-Palestine or Palestine politics community. But I agreed to do it. So 2017 was my sort of initiation into organized Kolot spaces beyond showing up at services every once in a while and through JVP. And then from that point on, I guess, then I left JVP staff in the fall of 2019. And then I had a lot more free time. So then I started being asked to–I think I was on the search committee for a job, I was on a safety and security committee for a while. Then they asked me pretty soon after I left JVP to be on the board the following year. So I joined the board in 2020. So since 2017, it's been like more in the infrastructure of Kolot.

43:19
C: Yeah, that's great. I think that this is a great time to talk a little bit about that, you know, from your perspective as a board member and from your perspective as a former executive director of a large organization. You're coming at this from a unique perspective here. And just to frame the question of one of the purposes of the oral history project, which is to really talk about the challenges that Kolot has experienced and how they've muddled through them. And [to ask] for advice and wisdom that we can tap into later. So through your role as a board member and as your position on the Israel-Palestine [working group], what do you see as the largest challenges that Kolot is facing now, and has faced in your tenure with the community, as well as a little bit on how you think they've done,

44:24
R: Yeah. One thing I should say about those years from 2017 to 2020s, I can't recall what year it was, but I became very invested in Miriam becoming the rabbi. I was invested in like, having some influence and having that happen.

C: And why is that?

R: Just because I think she's a wonderful rabbi. And also politically, I felt very in line with her, and I felt very safe in her hands, in all kinds of ways. And I just thought she would be phenomenal. And I was right. So that but that felt very, very important. And that sort of motivated me to dig in a little bit. So that was during the transition process.

I mean, I think an ongoing issue with Kolot is racial justice or white supremacy culture. Wherever you want to put it. You know, I think it's not a unique problem at all, obviously. JVP went through an internal racial justice transformation process that started from an internal challenge of Sephardi Mizrahi Jews

inside the organization as well as Jews of color, about the ways that JVP was very different from Jewish organizations in most ways, but [also] not at all in it's white, Ashkenazi leadership. So we went through a process that was somewhat successful, but not entirely successful, or was two steps towards one step back. I feel like I bring a lot of that now to some of the conversations that are happening.

It's an interesting thing, because I think Kolot is always going to be a majority white organization, congregation…maybe not in 30 years or something, but if you look right now at the population of Brooklyn, the Jewish population of Brooklyn, it's mostly white. And so it will probably continue to be mostly white. But that doesn't mean we can't do a lot more work in terms of making it a place–and again, I don't want to use equity or inclusion language. I find that really problematic. But a place where just in the way that I now feel completely comfortable as an anti-Zionist Jewish person, that a black Jew or Latino Jew, or any kind of any kind of Jew of any anything should feel like Kolot is their home.

I think the biggest thing Kolot is going through now is that we're still sort of in the period of transition from founding rabbi. I don't know as much about it. I wasn't as active then, but I think, you know, Ellen was sort of…everyone was there because of Ellen. There was a founding generation that came in through Ellen, she sort of had her fingers in everything. In a good way. That's a classic, not just congregation, but organizational, founder's syndrome. Where then you move on from the founder. And things professionalize a little bit. The next round of people aren't there. As founders, they're there. I don't want to make it sound like Miriam is less committed to Kolot. And Ellen was, too, but like, obviously, [Miriam] want to be paid, for example, a decent amount. And I think Ellen, in retrospect, would have loved to have made a decent amount too, you know what I mean? Because of the way things grew through that very informal way and slowly became formalized, there was a lot that wasn't attended to in terms of running–and again, I don't love the word professional–but like running in a way that took care of workers, for example. Like your Rabbi is a worker and all the other staff are workers.

And so I think just lifecycle wise, organizations go through life cycles and Kolot in…first of all, because of the pandemic…Miriam became the rabbi, like, nine months before the pandemic started, she didn't have a lot of time. And then we're in the pandemic phase for a long time. And we also had an incredible amount of growth through the pandemic. So we're both, much larger than we were, but also just in a different phase than we were. We're much bigger. And the staff need to have their roles better defined. Miriam can't do everything. So what's the role of all the different staff in this new configuration? So it all reads to me as very similar to what it's like for any organization to both go through the transition from founder to the next leader, and for organization to go from being a small sort of, you know, informal organization to becoming more formalized and institutionalized. Yeah.

49:06
C: All of which happened, to some degree, with Jewish Voice for Peace. Yes?

49:10
R: 1,000%. Yes. 1000. Yeah.

49:13

C: And so from that end, having essentially done this before in some way. What is your advice to the congregation in this organizational health lifecycle moment? You are on the board so I'm sure you are telling [through that role], but kind in this context, what would you give?

49:37
R: Oh, I think we're doing the things that we need to be doing just happening slowly. You know, it's easy to be a leader and be like, “everyone be patient. We're doing it.” You know what I mean? Like, that's probably the most annoying thing you can say as someone who's in the know about everything that's going on, to then to tell the people who aren't in the know “don't worry, we got it like so.” I think it's not a good tactic.

I think we need as people who are in the lay leadership, to be a lot more transparent with the congregation about what's going on. We need to be much more communicative about what's going on. We do need–and we are–figuring out, like trying to figure out a lot of the things around like structures, you know, stuff that's hard to talk about, like restructuring of the board and staff roles so that there's better communication flows and supervision flows, and all those sorts of things.

A very small example of that was this past year. So this past year, we'd been a board of 15. And three people were leaving the board. And we decided not to do a nominations process bringing in new members. That was partially because we're in the middle of this restructuring process that's going to sort of maybe change the board roles. And again, very typical for this [organizational transition moment] the board used to be involved in every single decision that got made, that's not possible anymore. And usually a well developed board is like a governance board. And so we're figuring out how to be that, and there's a lot of cultural shift to that. But anyway, we decided not to do a nominations process. And in part, it was because the nomination processes have been so fraught in the past, often around race. Again, it's been very “tap on the shoulder.” It's been very “people nominate people they know,” it's been very sort of cozy clubby. And certainly in the last couple nominations processes, people had been very, very critical of them. And, race is one thing, but it's also around what generation you're from, and all this sort of stuff.

Anyway, the point is that we knew we didn't have the wherewithal to make the significant changes in the nomination process that would make it any different from previous cycles. And we'd already had two or three cycles of when it hadn't gone well, where it really caused a lot of tension and pain. And so I was really one of the people strongly pushing that “let's not repeat our same mistakes, let's just not bring in new people into the board, we're in the middle of this restructuring process, we don't know what the board is gonna look like. And if we do the same thing, if we like, compound the mistakes that we're making right now, that's only gonna make things worse.”

So, you know, we decided to do that. But then I think the thing that we also did differently was we explained very, very–-and I really pushed on this too–we explained to the congregation why. And so at the annual meeting–we have an annual meeting where 75 people show up, it's not like 600 members or something. So it's not like everybody or by any means, but it's the people who are the most interested in these sorts of things. And like, you know, we just got up and explained it to everybody. And in

general, people were not only very supportive and understanding, but also we're very happy that we were explaining why.

It looks like a very small example. But none of this is like there's some big answer. It's just like over and over and over again, being transparent, being communicative, creating clear roles for people, people to know who's making the decisions and why. There is a cultural shift. There's a generational shift from the founding generation to this new generation, and lots of new members don't have strong connections to the community. There hasn't been tons of in person–though now we're starting to have more–but there hadn't been tons of in person. A lot of people joined from being online and the high holidays this year was the first in person high holidays we've had since fall of 2019. And so some of those bonds are very weak and fragile. But yeah, it's not that I think that there's one easy answer. Just like working hard at building trust through transparency and communication. It's one of those things that sounds easy. It's very hard. Very, very easy to mess up very quickly and very hard to maintain.

54:09
C: I would like to talk a little bit about the Israel-Palestine working group since you were on that, if that's okay. How that went and how it influenced the culture of Kolot or or assessed it and what the hopes and fears are going forward?

54:37
R: Yeah. Honestly it went great. It was pretty…Kolot's Israel-Palestine politics range from like liberal Zionist anti-Zionist, it's not like there's a lot of like *Zionist* Zionists. Yeah, like the most right person on the Israel-Palestine committee is someone who's a J Street supporter. He and I, you know, by the time things were over, we'd struck up a nice friendship. It was a very interesting experience for me, in the sense that my JVP organizing was often about organizing the people who are already with us, or organizing existing members to do action. And there's something very different about being in relationship with people who, on this one issue, disagree, but you're committed to being in community with. So that's very different experience, it very meaningful for me to figure out how to navigate that.

So that was, one way the committee was very successful was the way we spent a lot of time building relationships with each other and building trust with one another. We named that one of our big goals was to enable the community to have constructive conversations about Israel-Palestine, and not to be scared to have them. And I certainly know a lot of other congregations, including ones that are sort of in our cohort, where that [conversation] is just still avoided, because people are worried about it being too fraught. I think the best thing that we did over the course of a couple of years that I was very active in the committee was—I think everyone would agree with this–was bringing the congregation to a point of being able to have those conversations in a way that felt like very, like safe, but also very honest.

I think another thing it taught me was like, the congregation is very close to me politically, you know what I mean? And part of that is very interesting in terms of the growth of JVP. And also, If Not Now came around, and Kolot was growing and is growing from young people. And so like, honestly, I feel like my politics feel not exclusive, but like central to the congregational life now. And I look around and I see millions of JVPers and other people have some similar politics. And so that's for me, that's very comfortable. Nice. Like I really enjoy it, and it's very unusual.

We did a survey of the memberships that have showed that people's politics were quite…[pause]...you know, we're in terms of like, their stance on Zionism, their stance on boycott, divestment, sanctions, BDS, my position or something close to my position was like, often the majority opinion, which I didn't know. It was interesting. Who knows if the people who answered were representative or not, but it certainly seemed to mean something, you know. So that was interesting.

Just being able to name it was so good. Like, you know, I think we had a really great event after we did that survey where we invited people to come hear the results and talk about them. And just yesterday, I was talking to someone whose politics have gotten closer to mine over the years, but who spends a lot of time in Israel. And he was talking about how for him that event was very important because he felt like he was able to come to it with his questions and his concerns without feeling like he was being judged in any way. And I think people across the political spectrum felt that way for those events that we did. So yes, I think it was very successful in that way.

I will say our one big conflict while we were there, not among ourselves, but with the board, was when we wanted to invite Omar Barghouti to come and speak while he was in the US. He's a friend, and the founder of the BDS movement. I'm close with him, both politically and personally. We all wanted to have him, we felt like why not hear directly from the Palestinian who's the founder of the BDS movement. This is the most controversial thing in the Jewish community, so let's hear as a Jewish community from someone who is as expert as it gets, you know. We wanted to invite him and it was during this search transition [for a new Rabbi]. And to make a long story short, the board said we could not bring him which I heard later from people was an extremely, extremely difficult conversation on the board, like extremely. Maybe, you know, more than I do at this point, I don't know.

I never heard very many of the details, but I did hear that it was extremely difficult. And I was extremely disappointed. Like extremely, when that decision came down. I mean, I didn't leave the Israel-Palestine committee and I didn't leave Kolot, but I was very unhappy. And I think like, it felt very much like a betrayal of the values of Kolot that people were not willing to hear, just hear this person speak, you know what I mean? And couldn't engage with his ideas directly. There's so much demonization of BDS not in Kolot, per se, but in the world and in the Jewish press, and in other Jewish communal spaces, and the idea that like Kolot didn't feel confident enough to like, have this person come and talk…I understand why the decision was made to a certain extent. They felt it was gonna take more–they said it was going to take more energy and more resources than they had at the moment given the transition, which you know, that can be legit. But it also felt like a cop out. There would always be reasons why it'd be easier to not do it.

And I also will say it did put a fine point for me on the ways that Kolot is a little hypocritical still in its mission statement, and in the way it lives, its mission statement. We've talked about this in the Israel-Palestine working group, but we never did get around to it in a useful way, where Kolot's, progressive to left values are very clearly stated in the mission statement. Around Israel-Palestine, we talk about the open tent, which means there's a range of opinion. I think, again, in practice, the poles are pretty limited to that tent. But still, you know, we don't say that there's an open tent around race or racism, and I also see Palestinian solidarity as an anti-racist issue. We take very clear positions on

racism. And actually, we added something about being an anti racist congregation, or striving to be one in our mission statement. So if we can't hear directly from a Palestinian as an expert on BDS, you know, what does that show? That our commitment to anti racism is checked at the door, when it comes to Palestine? So I still feel that there's a disconnect in terms of that particular issue. I understand and really, truly sympathize with like– I don't want to create a synagogue where people can't have a variety of views. You know, I'm not trying to say anything like that. But I do feel like if we're an anti racist congregation, then we have to be anti racist on all issues, not just not just some. So that's a place where I feel like we are not there. Yeah, yeah.

1:01:54
C: It strikes me that there's a parallel between the way that you grew in your personal education journey, like in San Francisco when you were part of the collective and your politics grew on the basis of a relationship and a community. And it seems like that's happening in Kolot. It's grounded in relationship and community.

1:02:24
R: Yeah. And I think that's true of any good organizing. You know, what I mean? Like, it's all about relationships, and it's all about community, and the community is what keeps you community is what keeps you coming back, even when things are hard. People invest their time and energy into Kolot, and really work hard to make it a place that they want to be. And that's a really remarkable thing. If there's one thing I've learned from the board, you know, people who just put in a remarkable, remarkable amount of time into making Kolot the place that it is, yeah.

1:03:01
C: I want to leave space as well, for your reflections on the next edges of Kolot: the growth edges and your hopes for what Kolot can be. When I do climate organizing, a lot of times I start with, like, in 10 years, XYZ happened. How did we get there? So if you imagine Kolot, in all of its best forms in 10, 20 years, what does that mean to you? And what will folks have done to get there?

1:03:36
R: I think we have a big question around growth, in that we've grown so much. And like, I think we actually, there's a conversation that needs to be had about whether a value is continuous growth. Do we want to have 1000 members? Do we want to have 2000? I think people are going to continue to be attracted to Miriam's, Rabbinate, and to the culture that has created. I'm sure there's an upper limit somewhere. I don't think we've reached it yet. But then there's also the question of like, how do we sustain that?

There's a conversation at the board that I found very interesting, and that I changed my mind about it, where we're talking about– because it's still the pandemic, we had people to register in advance for the high holiday services, and there was an upper limit of people that could be there because we're trying to keep some distancing and that sort of thing. And, you know, my, my default was like, "Well, of course, members are gonna get priority, because that's the whole point." It was also so exciting. It's the first time we were going to be all together again, this and that. And there were a couple of members of the

board, who made a very, very strong case for why, actually, we shouldn't do that. In High Holidays before the pandemic, you just showed up at services, and whoever got it and got it, you know?

Several years before the pandemic, we were in a space that was too small. And there are many years that I got there, and I was staring at a pole not seeing anything, you know what I mean? Like what you do to be smushed in with people on a balcony in a very, very unsafe way. I will say! You're just smushed in, and it was a fucking insane scene, and also sometimes people couldn't get in. And that could be a member or non member. It was and is, I think, an extremely wonderful part of Kolot.

Anyway, I switched my position, in the end we didn't actually prioritize–we let members know about signups first. But we did not prioritize members. And that was like an interesting moment of changing my mind about something. But overall, I do think it's so essential to Kolot to have that sort of welcoming edge. I think it's one of the grossest things about Jewish culture to American Jewish culture, that you have to buy very expensive tickets to go to high quality services, and that we don't charge that, I think, is extremely important. And many, many people become members of Kolot after coming to high holiday services. And we have sliding scale membership, and people pay what they can, and we don't have a minimum that's required.

There is a tension between that, which I think, like I said, is integral to the kind of Jewish community I want to be a part of, and then also just the business model of like the money that is required to run a much larger congregation, the staff that's required to run a much larger congregation, and that we need to raise money. So I guess what I would say in terms of vision is that I want Kolot to continue to be the vibrant, Jewishly, engaged, politically engaged place that it is now and to grow, to the extent that we can maintain those values. And that we continue to be a place that's like, forging a new path, in terms of what it means to be part of Jewish community where young people don't have to pay $1,000 to come to service, you know what I mean?

Like it just like, it's absurd. Even even now, like, it's a little ridiculous to me. I mean, I pay, you know, I looked at the breakdowns I paid for our membership dues, not the up up up quadrant, but more than what a lot of people pay. And it still annoys me that I pay more money to Kolot than I do to any other of my political commitments. You know what I mean? It's a weird financial model. Anyway, so I guess my point is it feels very, very, very important to preserve that very unique and special ability to be a place where anyone can be a member. But also to be able to, like, be a robust enough congregation with enough infrastructure to also be able to be like, a good congregation that offers pastoral support and different kinds of offerings and the Jewish learning for children and adults and like, all various things that Kolot does. So yeah, I think that's one of the biggest questions facing Kolot going forward

1:08:14
I definitely think we have a lot, lot, lot more work to do around undoing white supremacy culture in the congregation, and in figuring out how to be non-tokenizing towards Jews of color, Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews. Doing that in a non liberal way, in the sense of like, not as a deference politic, but as a way of saying "this is the way we can be a real multiracial community." And I think that means there's a certain politics of struggle that you are able to have, where you have be able to go into some of the

conflicts in the way the Israel-Palestine working group actually did manage to like, build that culture within itself.

I think the politics around race are still more fraught and more unspoken and more damaging and painful to Kolot members of color. I would like to see us continue to do a lot more work and investment in–we're not gonna resolve them obviously– improving them. That feels really important

[pause]

I don't have to care about Kolot having its *own* space. But I do care about Kolot having *a* space. Like I'm fine if it's in a church that doesn't bother me. So maybe we rent us from some church, where, you know, we have a 20 year lease with them or whatever. But, I do think right now we're constrained and we don't have places to meet as a congregation, except for on Shabbat mornings. So yes, I would like us to be a little bit more stable in what we can offer in terms of actual physical space.

1:10:27
And basically, I hope that creative freaks keep coming to Kolot, you know what I mean? Like, I just think that there's a real– the people who are attracted to this congregation. I mean I'm as normie as it gets, you know, except for my politics, but the range of people who are at home in Kolot is wonderful. And people do all kinds of stuff that sometimes I really want to be a part of, and there's some stuff that I really don't want to be a part of. And that's awesome. And I want to continue to have that, you know, multitude of things that are available.

1:11:13
C: Beautiful answers. So I don't necessarily have any more questions, but you know, I imagine the next round of interviews might take a little bit. So thinking about this as collective memory and knowing your interview will be contextualized with the voices of many other folks in the congregation, is there anything else you want to add to your experience, your insights, your opinions?

1:11:50
R: Well, I think Kolot is a really special place, I feel incredibly grateful that it exists. I felt incredibly grateful that it existed when I found it, and I feel even more so now. I do think it's funny that I've grown up to be my parents, in like attending a good congregation. I'm also in some ways not that surprised. I think Kolot has done and is doing something very unique. And like, I just really never want to take it for granted. I don’t want anyone to take for granted what has been created.

Incredible props to Ellen for the vision that she had for it when it started and the ways from the beginning that it has not been limited by the status quo of Jewish communal space and has done things in ways that were not obvious. You know, it's a little bit like I said earlier, like it was hard to become a leftist in the 90s. And what Ellen did when she started Kolot, it didn't exist before. And she herself faced incredible amounts of, you know,, as a rabbi in an interfaith relationship, as a queer rabbi…. she really created something new that I think is absolutely precious. And also that is very deep and Kolot’s DNA is, like I said, to welcome what is not necessarily traditional Jewish community and be willing to

question–you know, we have that in the mission statement itself, it says, something like “wrestling with doubt” or whatever, you know what I mean?

So it's really built into the DNA of the community. I think and hope it will continue to serve us. Yeah, so that feels very core to what Kolot is. Also, you have a real true deep engagement with Jewishness and Judaism; I think a lot of Jewish congregations are very performative and are very ”seen be see”n and are very superficial. And it never feels superficial to me to be at Koloy. My daughter always laughs, because I always cried, you know, when she would come with me to Kolot services. Like, it's a rare show of service where I don't cry a little bit here. I mean, maybe it's the parental blessings at the bar mitzvah, or maybe whatever it is, you know what I mean? But like, there's like a real true….

[silence]

I think it like encourages all of us to be vulnerable

1:14:22
And actually, like, last year, I had this very weird experience. I went to the dentist and I had laughing gas, and they overdosed me. So I was like, in the middle of the operation, and I was as close to death as I've ever felt. I kind of lost my tethering to my soul. And then I woke up while throwing up, right. It was a very traumatic experience. And I was really traumatized by it. And I wasn't processing it. And there's a prayer in Judaism called the Birkat Hagomel, which you say when you've been in an experience near death. I was at services anyway and I felt like I should do that because I go, “man, I think, like, I think I need that this is really haunting me, I need it.” And, again, it's a non-traditional use of that prayer, and also you have to go up to the front of the congregation and you can choose how much you say or whatever. But like, there’s still something very vulnerable about it, people come up to you afterwards, they're like, I hope you're okay. It’s a little weird, but I really needed it and wanted it and Miriam guided me through it. And sure enough, it acted exactly as it was supposed to do.

So that sort of like, I almost want to say the practical nature of Judaism, you know what I mean? The way that I think for all of us, it offers spiritual answers to the ways that we exist in the world.

[Another example] is the night that Trump was elected, I remember, we were having something anyway., I went to Shabbat after that. And, we were, everybody–and I think Elena was still the rabbi then– everyone was crying. It was horrible. But it's also beautiful, you know, what I mean? Like, it really created space for what we were all feeling. And I think the other thing that I think is very important about the roots of kolot’s queerness is the emphasis on chosen family and the ways that it encourages that… and I feel as a straight person, a recipient of that generosity.

And, you know, again, this, this friend of mine died. You know, when he died, my…Ellen had known he was dying, and she asked me to get up and say some words about him..

[Pause, with emotion] And that just meant, a lot to me, that that relationship was honored. You know and you can't do that in any synagogue.

1:17:05
So yeah. I see that happening at Kolot a lot, where we're able to honor all the kinds of relationships we have that we care about. Like one of the most amazing things this is before I was on the board. Somebody who's been at Kolot for a long time transitioned, and had grown up very observant. But wanted to be Bar Mitzvah'd as the mark of the transition. And so he had a Bar Mitzvah–an adult Bar Mitzvah. And it was like one of the most–he's a tutor at Kolot. he tutors tons of queer youth who were all there and like, it was like one of the most stunning spiritual experiences of my life honestly.

And like I remember afterwards–the board is a pain in the ass and takes a lot of work and it's, you know, annoying sometimes and you spend hours on congregation business as opposed to the actual, communal work, (like I'm not gonna go to Kolot this morning, because I already spent 10 hours and clear this week, you know what I mean?) But anyway, I remember one person who was very deep in board work at the time, she was like, "all the shit we have to deal with, it's all worth it when something like this happens."

And so I think like, over and over again, Kolot has created those moments when ritual and spirituality are used to help people become their full selves and help the community be its full self and like moments of grief and in celebrations, and so I think that's what's most special about it. Yeah.

1:18:49
C: Thank you so much for sharing.

1:18:52
R: That kind of again, I've cried a lot about it. Yet again.

1:18:58
C: What you were saying about crying and services makes sense. Yeah, there was actually the–what you said, the near death prayer? That happened today. About a friend and it was incredibly rare, at least for me, and emotional. Yeah. And I don't even know anybody at Kolot.

1:19:20
R:. Yeah, totally. Totally. And like you need safety to be able to do those things. Like actually with JVP, one of the stories for JVP that I love was during one of the national membership meetings, which again only happen every two years. And you know, that whole weekend is very political, whatever, and it's very communal, but there's also the rabbi's who would plan a full thing of ritual stuff. Only a proportion of JVP cares about that shit. But for those of us who did it was great. Anyways, I still remember that someone came and did that prayer. And they had, like, recovered from cancer 18 months ago, but they there was nowhere else where they wanted to say it, you know what I mean? They waited for that space to say it. It's this thing where you have to have a certain vulnerability to be able to truly be in that spiritual space, you know?

C: Yeah, yeah well, there's so much there. Thank you.