

Rabbi Emerita Ellen Lippmann, Interviewed by Lana Povitz, September 6, 2022, Brooklyn, NY. Full Interview.

Lana Povitz: Alright so it's 1:30 on September 6th and I'm here with Ellen Lippmann, Rabbi Ellen Lippmann, and I am Lana Povitz. Very—

Ellen Lippmann: *Dr.* Lana Povitz

LP: Dr. Lana Povitz.

EL: (laughing)

LP: Very excited—

EL: Ah yes—

LP: —to be doing maybe the first interview for the Kolot Oral History Project.

EL: —woohoo! Very exciting.

LP: Thank you so much for agreeing to do this.

EL: So glad to.

LP: We could be talking for days—

EL: —days.

LP: And hopefully we will, but I think this, you know, we may have an hour or two hours for this conversation. So, we could start anywhere. I think the question I'd love to open with is just to ask you where you would say your Jewish journey starts?

EL: (laughing) Um... hmm... I think it starts many years before I was born in some ways, on two sides of very different Jewish families. I don't know how much we need to do that, but one, my mother's side of our family is sort of, much more standard Russian-Polish Ashkenazi¹ Jews, came to this country in the late nineteenth century. My father's family, in part, has a much more interesting story of German Jewish, um, immigrants at a much earlier time in the nineteenth century. They came in 1850, um, and ended up, some of them, settling in Santa Fe, New Mexico. So that's the most interesting part of, sort of, my ancestral journey. Um... and... then... One of the factors that's not exactly Jewish, but is familial is that my uncle, my mother's brother, was killed in a car crash about three months before I was born. I was therefore a kind of miracle baby. You know? Extra loved because of counteracting grief. Um... and there is something Jewish about that in some way, I'd have to think more about it, but um... that was real. I was the first grandchild on both sides. And uh... so you know, much beloved, and much, kind of, appreciated and etcetera. So, okay, then, from birth (laughing) umm... so my father came from a German Jewish family. They were definitely sort of... Jewish was important to them... they weren't very observant in any kind of way. My father, at about age 9 or 10, decides that he wants to go to synagogue and start to learn. So he drags his mother to Rodeph Sholom² on the Upper West Side (laughing) and they, not his brother, and not my grandfather, but my grandmother and my father sort of become members of Rodeph Sholom and he goes to Hebrew school. My mother grew up

¹ Term referring to ancestral group of Diasporic Jews who once lived in Eastern and Central Europe

² A reform synagogue in New York City: <https://rodephsholom.org/>

in the family of Doctor Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, founder of the SAJ³ and of Reconstructionist⁴ Judaism and her whole childhood was shaped by connection to that shul. And so when they came together, they moved from New York to Washington D.C. for my father's work and then they're like, "What are we gonna do about shul?" "We need to have a shul," my mother, I'm sure said, "we need to have a shul." "What are we gonna do?" Um... They found a reform⁵ synagogue in Alexandria, Virginia into which I was born, basically. They married in 1949, um... they moved to Washington [and] they found this place fairly soon. It was then a kind of a, slightly being revived, synagogue that was meeting in church basements in Alexandria. And.. um... I come along in 1951. A couple of years thereafter the synagogue buys a building- builds a building in Alexandria. and perhaps in my first Jewish act, I am told, I sat and ate the paper program for the event.

LP: (laughing)

EL: Um... as a little baby, just there by ingesting Jewish knowledge completely- (laughing)

LP: (laughing) There's so many things about that, that are-

EL: I know... Food and-

LP: Unpackable-

EL: That's right. And so (laughing) So begins my interest in food... and in Jewish learning. Um, my second Jewish memory, this is also, this is I guess, a little more, I don't know... serious... is Bethel had a school by the time I was ready for school, for like pre school.

LP: Bethel was the name-

EP: -was the name. Beth El Hebrew Congregation. It remains to this day with that old fashioned name. My mother took me to the preschool or kindergarten or whatever classroom it was. And I was a very shy child. And I was um... kind of clinging to her. I didn't really want to come into the room. And then the teacher showed me that there was a long, low table, you know, like coffee table height, just covered with books, with children's books. And I was like, "I'm here! Bye mom." (laughing) So that was, that's what I sometimes think of as the beginning of my Jewish education.

LP: Were they Jewish books?

EP: Jewish books. You know, Jewish children's books. It was Jewish school... and you know, I don't know what they were, but one of my favorite Jewish books later was *All of a Kind Family*.

LP: I don't know that book.

EP: You don't know that book?

LP: What is that?

EL: Oh my god it's just the worst! (laughing) It's about a Lower East Side family in about 1910. It has 5 girls and they keep having babies because they want a boy. And for whatever reason

³Society for the Advancement of Judaism

⁴ A twentieth century movement and one of the denominations of Judaism. Founded by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, reconstructionists are religiously progressive and believe in Judaism as evolving with the Jewish people rather than set in fixed laws.

⁵ A major denomination of Judaism that has a liberal attitude toward Jewish law and is widely practiced in America.

though it was so delightful in the way the girls were all together with Jewish ritual, and cooking and preparation, and stuff, that I loved it! (laughing)

LP: Amazing-

EP: So... um... anyway.... I grew up in Beth El, almost, in a second home kind of way. Very familiar. Both of my parents became presidents of the congregation. I grew up in the school there. And in shul we were a family that went every week to services. And my mother, especially (laughing) because she had more knowledge, created family holiday celebrations and stuff that were very joyful. And, um... so that combo... Later my father ended up being very much part of a Torah Study Group etcetera. So he found... he was a historian in some ways, and he found, you know, his intellectual way into Jewish learning and life. And so yeah. That's the beginning.

Wasn't that the question? (laughing) Sort of a long answer.

LP: Yes it was. I don't know if I can loop back to this for just a second. But you said something about, um... being born out after this period of loss for your family. And there was something Jewish about that, but you would have to think about what. Can you say more about that?

EL: Yeah... I'm not even positive why it occurred to me... um... they were, especially in my mother's family, were so like Jewish in everything they did, that I know now that there must have been a deeply Jewish funeral, and mourning, and all of that. And there was certainly a Jewish baby naming, and-

LP: Really?

EL: -gifts. And you know, what it was, I don't know. But some acknowledgement. I had a something... I think I had a certificate of some kind. And we got... I got a little baby kiddush cup or something. And so, I think of the ways in which Judaism is so good about lifecycle events. Right? And this amazing kind of journey from deeply sorrowful death to joyful birth. It does seem to me like one of the ways we think about Jewish [is] through the events of our lives, both joyful and sad, and um... and because they, especially my mom's family, were so into all that you know, I think of it as part of their Jewish life of that time. You know? Yeah...

LP: That's so nice. You know, especially because I feel like... I always think about the 70's, the 80's, the 90's, the 21st century as being a time where all kinds of rituals get evolved for girls.

EL: True. Very true.

LP: I don't think of 1951 as being-

EL: As being a time-

LP: A time where people would have known-

EL: Well, you know what they sometimes did... I mean, in ritual terms, they have like an aliyah for the father or something.

LP: Oh really?

EL: Yeah. I mean you know. Sadly, neither of my parents are around to ask. But you know I think what I mean was, there was something.

LP: Yeah.

EL: That acknowledged this birth in a Jewish way.

LP: Right.

EL: Right.

LP: Right and it's just an important—

EL: You're correct, there certainly wasn't a girl baby naming, all that. Although this was the shul... My grandparents' shul was the shul that had the first bat mitzvah. So they were groundbreakers.

LP: So it was at that same shul?

EL: Yeah the same shul—

LP: Ok can you talk a little bit about—

EL: I mean we... yeah it's a good question. I was born in Washington... I was thinking of my grandparents' shul on the Upper West Side. I imagine something happened perhaps in both places.

LP: Ahh.

EL: Yeah... It's a good question because I don't know the answer to that but I was thinking of the SAJ.

LP: Ok. Can you talk more about your connection with that and what that—

EL: With the SAJ?

LP: Yeah...

EL: Um... Well you know so it was my grandparent's shul. They lived right across the street. All the years of my childhood they lived right across the street. And...

LP: And where was that?

EL: Uh.... It's West 86th street near Central Park. Um... they were back and forth also in a kind of two-home way all the time. And in fact they are all buried together now in Queens in one of the cemeteries in Queens. But um... it was part of their lives. And so when we came to visit from Virginia, first Washington and then Virginia, it was um... you know, we went to shul. It was part of what we did. And you know? All of the family celebrations were kind of entwined with it. And they did now, some years back, did a renovation of the SAJ, but they kept this, they made a very beautiful, kind of memorial wall for all the people who had died from the families who had bought plaques or something. They made this beautiful wall with a kind of ever-flowing, small fountain thing. And my grandparents are there.

LP: Their names were—

EL: Harold and Essie Bernstein. Yeah. She was, I forget how they were actually related, she was the niece of Kaplan's first wife. That's how they were related.

LP: Okay.

EL: So Kaplan's first wife, Lena, had a sister, Celia, who was my grandmother's mother. They were Lena and Celia Baron

LP: Okay.

EL: Yeah. (laughing) And uh yeah, so I mean, I have, I had, I don't know what I kept. I had childhood pictures, you know, of like me and my brother and my parents in front of the SAJ. And you know, and I actually, just this year, they had their 100th anniversary and so I was able

to, I think I only went by Zoom, but I was able to attend some of the celebration services. And things like that, which is lovely.

LP: So this isn't really the interview to talk about it, but I can't resist asking what the... I mean, this is Reconstructionism which you're talking about—

EL: Yeah it is. It's the mothership. (laughing)

LP: The mothership. And I presume your parents' Hebrew congregation is Reform.

EL: It's Reform, you know, if there had been, there was barely Reconstructionism then.

LP: Right.

EL: If there had been something they might have found it. You know, but they, Reform was the best combo they could find.

LP: Briefly, could you talk about—

EL: Jewish— (laughing)

LP: Very briefly. What you see as the kind of essence, of like where Reconstructionism and Reform meet. Let's say.

EL: Where they meet?

LP: Yeah.

EL: Um...

LP: Cuz they're on a spectrum, right.

EL: Yeah... yeah... I mean I more often think about how they diverge.

LP: That makes sense (laughing)

EL: How they meet. I mean they're both, you know, one reforming and one reconstructing.

They're both movements that were both founded on changing Judaism, right? On making changes that would keep this valuable tradition alive for another generation. You know, for people that were fleeing it at different times in history for different reasons. Um... and that would make it, you know, in a sense, appeal to people, be meaningful to people in a new time.

Whatever the new time was. Reconstructionism is much newer. Um... so reform starts in Germany in the late, late eighteenth century. And then comes to America and flourishes.

Reconstructionism is a twentieth-century creation, but both of them kind of looking around and seeing people leaving and new waves of thinking that might have an impact on how we look at Judaism.

LP: This all sounds so familiar...

EL: (laughing)

LP: Sounds almost like...

EL: Kolot Chayeinu. (laughing)

LP: (laughing).

EL: Exactly. Yes.

LP: Hmm... You just said a second ago how you often think about how they diverge, can you say more about that?

EL: Um... yeah I mean, this is so crass. But I think in general, I think of Reform as being a little bit more focused on individuals, like *my* prayer, you know, *my* connection to learning. And

Reconstructionism because it did have some foundation in kind of a sociological way of thinking, as being more communal. Um, which in a way is an older way of Judaism, but in a new form. Kaplan really had thoughts about things that came to be the Jewish community centers and, you know, the 'shul with a pool' kind of idea. And uh... much more community-based and community thinking. And Reform is, as you know, they say crassly, more about 'I'm sitting in my pew and I want to have this modern understanding of the God I'm praying to,' that kind of thing.

LP: That's a great, I think, short definition, or like explanation of that and I think you can really see the basis of both of those things in a lot of contemporary iterations of Judaism. Like there is something that is very customized in our like, iphone, imessage moment, that's in a lot of our Jewish communities, and also of course with an eye to the communal. Sociological-

EL: Right. Right.

LP: So that's interesting to think about. Okay. So I mean we could talk more about that. But... back to you. If you sort of think about your coming of age, as a Jewish person, I mean it sounds like it, from birth, was a part of your life, but if you were to pull out any key moments, where like you sort of saw yourself Jewishly, or it mattered to you...

EL: Yeah. Um... One of the things that comes to mind actually is that I grew up in Arlington, Virginia, which was then a very not Jewish area. My parents had grown up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where everyone was Jewish, as far as they knew. And I don't think they had a thought that they might move to a place where that wasn't true. And so they bought a house that they could afford. Right? Which, they didn't have a lot of money at the time and first we were in apartments and then they bought a house. And it was in both a very not Jewish neighborhood and street and I grew up with a certain amount of antisemitism. I mean the American Nazi Party was nearby at the time and um, headquartered nearby. And I grew up with a certain amount of antisemitism which, you know, in some ways can be defining. You know, you are a thing when people hate you for it. So I remember a moment in youth group, you know, in teenage youth group where, I think because of requests from us, from the teens, our couple of leaders had a whole session with us about kind responding to antisemitic um, comments, attacks, questions, etcetera. And what I remember about it, first of all I remember it. It's many years ago and I think I remember it because of that sense of them taking us seriously. You know, that these were Jewish adults who recognized that Jewish teens had a real concern here that they could respond to. And something there that's like Jewish response to Jewish oppression, right. And so I definitely, I remembered that for a long time. Thereafter I have a long period of time, I went to college, I always went to High Holiday⁶ services at college. And I always came home to my parents for Pesach⁷ and that was the extent of my Jewish involvement. I walked one day into the Hillel⁸ at Boston University and walked right back out again. Cuz it just did not feel like it was

⁶ The most important time in the Jewish calendar; a period of days leading up to Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) that goes through Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) and the days following that holiday.

⁷ The Jewish Holiday of Passover takes place in April and celebrates the story of the Israelites breaking out of slavery in Egypt, as written in the books of Exodus in the bible.

⁸ An international Jewish organization that has chapters at hundreds of college campuses.

right for me. And so I really wasn't involved in Jewish life. And so the next thing about it, probably to answer your question, the year I was graduating from college in almost the same week, Sally Priesand was ordained as the first woman to be ordained at a seminary as Rabbi.

LP: And that's what year?

EL: '71-'72, 1972. And so there was no internet then, but every newspaper, every radio station, every television news, everything had this news. It was quite enormous. And um, I had my first thought of, 'That's what I want to do.' Even though I hadn't been involved at all. It was nowhere in my then-current practice, that's what I want to do. And it took me a lot of years to get to do it, um, but that was another moment. And then the third one that I think of is, um... when was this... like 1984 maybe? I was living in Ossining, New York and um I joined the synagogue in Croton that had this very social justice activist Rabbi, Mike Robinson, the late and beloved Mike Robinson.

LP: What was the synagogue?

EL: Um, I think it's called Temple Israel of Northern Westchester. Um, but I used to, I was a competitive swimmer, in those days. And I used to go to swim practice on Saturday mornings very early and then I would go to Torah Study at his Shul. They were so nice to me, I mean, you know, more then than now, you sort of dressed up for Shul and here I come with wet hair and a t-shirt and young. And he just took me in and he enjoyed my comments in Torah Study and he asked me to speak on Yom Kippur about the story of Jonah. Which was just, I spent a lot of time preparing and I gave this talk that people liked and responded to and I thought, 'Wow,' you know 'I like this.' (laughing) And so it was another moment propelling [me] towards the rabbinate, much closer to the time when I finally applied, which was 1985, I think, and so those were sort of Jewish and Rabbi moments you know, together that I remember.

LP: Do you have that talk?

EL: You know, I don't think so. One of the sadnesses of no internet, I don't know where I kept that back in the day and I have no idea.

LP: Okay.

EL: Yeah. I know, I wish I had it. I do wish I had it. Um, I think I have or HUC⁹ has my senior sermon at HUC. Thank God for other institutions and things, I can't imagine where I would have this. Yeah.

LP: You applied to HUC?

EL: I applied to both HUC and RRC¹⁰. I had this dual heritage.

LP: Right.

EL: And I was actually accepted at both. But I was living in New York, I had a fairly settled life in New York. So two things: one was if I went to HUC I could live in New York. And one was if I went to HUC In New York I would have more job possibilities. It was kind of a practical

⁹ Hebrew Union College is a Jewish seminary that trains clergy of reform Judaism.

¹⁰ Reconstructionist Rabbinical College is a Jewish seminary that ordains rabbi of reconstructionist Judaism

decision. And um I'm not sorry, although sometimes I wish I had the RRC education. But um both places are different now then they were then.

LP: Sure. How were you in Ossining?

EL: How was I in Ossining? (laughing) So I was back in those days in an earlier relationship and the person I was with was going to be going to school in Westchester and so we just needed a place to move to and so we found Ossining. We found an affordable apartment in Ossining. Very near Sing Sing Prison actually. So I lived there for five years, maybe, back in the early '80s. Like '80 to '85.

LP: And so where had you been before that?

EL: Brooklyn.

LP: Oh.

EL: Yeah. Not for long. I went to college in Boston and stayed in Boston for many years, like eleven or twelve years total. Then moved to Brooklyn also for love, for that same love, but long gone. And then moved to Westchester like a year or a year and a half later.

LP: Okay and what did you do in Boston?

EL: Besides college? And also graduate school.

LP: And you studied—

EL: Library science. Yeah, I had various summer jobs and things in Boston, but after graduating from college I actually briefly moved to Connecticut. In with these friends who lived there and I worked sort of as a volunteer in the local, little public library in a little town and I kind of liked it. I came back to Boston. I worked in a public library and liked it enough that I thought I'd go on and try to, you know, expand this possibility. I majored in English Language and Literature in college so it made some sense. And so I went to Simmons College and got a Master's Degree. It's actually called a MS Degree¹¹ there, Master in Library Science. It's so funny that it's science, but that's what they call it.

LP: It is a science.

EL: Yeah it's a science of sorts.

LP: Of sorts?

EL: (laughing) Yeah so then I worked in another public library, then I moved to Brooklyn and worked for the Brooklyn Public Library very briefly.

LP: Oh really.

EL: Yeah. In the Mapleton Branch. Which is just kind of on the edge of Borough Park and what's it called out there, much more Italian, sort of the Jewish and Italian sections, right on the edge. And that's mostly who the people were that came in for the library.

LP: Not Marine Park?

EL: No, it's not as far out as that. It's more this way. Bensonhurst! Bensonhurst! and Borough Park. It is actually where I encountered Orthodox Jews¹² for the first time. And learned things like I couldn't hand an Orthodox man a library card, I had to put it on the desk for him to pick up.

¹¹ Masters of Science

¹² A term referring to branches of Judaism that strictly follow Jewish law.

We couldn't touch. And learn that male Orthodox young children look like girls cuz of long hair, until they're three. And deliberately so. To avoid the angel of death and other such superstitions. And that's what I learned at the library. (laughing).

LP: There's a Jewish education there too.

EL: Exactly. In Brooklyn, there's a Jewish education all over. Yeah cuz we all know everybody's holidays and things by opposite side parking. And yeah, then I moved from the libraries into educational sort of, like educational non-profits. I took library skills to a couple of different places. And then finally said, it's time to start thinking about Rabbinic school. The idea kept coming up, it's time to start thinking about it, it's time to go, it's time to apply. And cuz I had explored it and sort of, every five years (having just been in school for 4 years, another 5 years felt daunting, and I was sure I was not scholarly enough) And so I think in 1985, it might have been late in 1985, I finally applied and was accepted. As I say in both [RRC and HUC].

LP: Do you remember what was like your final push to actually apply?

EL: Age. I think it was age. In 1986, I turned 35. So I thought, I knew rabbinic school was for young people coming out of college— that's mostly, especially in those days, what it was. And I thought, you know, you're really gonna get too old. It's gonna be past your time. And so seeing 35 in the distance, I had always had this magical thinking about the age of 35 from when I was a child. I thought 35 was the ideal age. And so seeing it coming, I thought, you know, you better go at least and try and do this.

LP: What were you like as a person at that time?

EL: (laughing) There are ways I think I've been very similar all my life. I [have] some pictures. Besides having a lot of dark hair (laughing) and no glasses, I... what was I like? I don't know. I was still, I mean I have always had a sort of shy, introverted side and a more outgoing engaging side. I think I had both of those. I was very nervous. HUC sends all the students out to Jerusalem for the first year of study and I had never been. And, having not had all of that, sort of, Jewish engagement as a young adult. And so, I arrived in Jerusalem, I know nobody. I go wherever I'm supposed to go. I stayed at the Y, before I found an apartment. And I'm walking down the street thinking, 'Now what have you done?' You know? Like 'Here you are...' And fortunately some classmates who had arrived earlier were in a restaurant and they called to me and pulled me in and I settled into my group. Yeah... I think I was some combination of nervous and eager. And fairly quickly, I think I may have said to you at another time, I went to my first midrash class and I was like 'This is it, this is the whole story.' This is it for me and always has been true. And I liked learning languages and I was sort of eager and curious in some of those ways. And I'm sort of embarrassed to say, I'm embarrassed for myself and HUC that there was no sense that the Palestinian people were there, anywhere. And we were living in this kind of um... false division. And so that's all true. And there were ways that I did, then, love living there, and ways that I didn't love Jewish everything. Right? I didn't love that everything was Jewish all the time. Members of my class were like 'This is so wonderful, Shabbat, everyone's celebrating Shabbat.' And I'm thinking, 'I wish I was in Brooklyn where everyone celebrates different things.' And a seder, you know, I would say, 'Next year in Brooklyn.' But in personality I think I have been

quite the same all my life. I don't think there are major shifts. I mean, I made some major shifts, but I don't think my personality was that different.

LP: What are the major shifts?

EL: (laughing) Besides starting rabbinic school? I mean, you know, I had been kind of flirting with the idea of being with women since... soon after college I guess.

LP: *After* college?

EL: After college. I know... well, those days were druggie heterosexual days in colleges, right?

LP: Uh-huh.

EL: And, you know, Vietnam War protests, all based on kind of heterosexual memes, what we would call memes.

LP: What do you mean by that?

EL: Oh there were these posters, you know— 'Support—' I can't even remember what they were. Sort of 'Sleep with boys that refuse to go to the war.'

LP: Oh yeah, right. (laughing)

EL: (laughing) And so it was really after college I got involved with the Cambridge Women's Center. Which was really a hub for lots of people and I ended up teaching a class in women and literature.

LP: Really?

EL: With a friend of mine who I'd met in that class and we became longtime friends and roommates.

LP: Who is that?

EL: Wendy Fitting, who actually later became a minister. We both had these interests in the clergy and she went a little before me. We spoke at each other's retirements and anyway. You know, I ended up living with all these lesbians in group houses. And, you know, it looked much more desirable. And so I was sort of flirting around the edges and finally came out just a couple of years before going to rabbinic school. And it all sort of came out in this dual way.

LP: So that's like '83?

EL: Yeah '83... '83/'84. And so, you know, a good ten years. It took me fifteen years to get to rabbinic school and it took me ten years to get to a place to come out. Who knows? Slow learner. There was, I think I've said to you, there was a kind of sense of coming out, that if I'm gonna come out as my true self, I'm gonna come out as all my true self. And so the combo of becoming a never-to-return lesbian and a rabbi, was—they were very tied for me. And so it was a time of new and thrilling. And terrifying. All together at once.

LP: What had been some of your concerns about coming out? I guess [about coming out] as any of those things.

EL: Yeah... I don't know, 'nice girl Jewish girl.' Some of it was like that. I had only one sibling and he was disabled and I think besides having all that joyful stuff around my birth there was a lot put on me. Lots of expectations put on me from family. This was not their best choice.

LP: What do you mean this—

EL: My parents were not thrilled at me being with a woman.

LP: Oh I see.

EL: You know, I mean, they had a vision of marriage to a man and grandchildren. And all that business, Jewish parents, of the time especially. So I think that was part of it and I think it was kind of my own nervousness. To break out of that picture, I probably had that picture too. In my head. And I think it was ‘Woah!’ to live as a bit of a pariah, right, which was true then. And to kind of cast my lot with people who were living out of the mainstream. It was a leap for me. But also an extremely joyful one, you know, as I said, I’m a total convert. Like, you know, (laughing) not a ‘hasbian’ as they say.

LP: A what?

EL: You know. There’s all these stories of young women who kind of sleep with women during college and marry a man.

LP: Oh sure.

EL: So the term I’ve heard for them is hasbians. Yeah yeah. (laughing)

LP: (laughing) So tell me some of the great joys of it, I mean, I feel like I could probably imagine, but how would you describe that.

EL: I think I always loved women, I mean that’s what I think. I always had wonderful, wonderful, deep, intense intimate friendships with girls and then women. I always most loved being with women. I never felt drawn to... to men. You know, in that way. I had boyfriends and whatever, but it was never wonderful. And this was a whole other... like I’ve come home. I think it was like I’ve come home. As with my midrash class, in a kind of way, ‘This is where I’m meant to be. This is it, this is really it, now I can settle in. And be who I am and be with my right people.’ And I... yeah.

LP: Can you... about where... [long pause] My pause is to think about, you know, there’s so many different things I want to still ask you about. I guess one question which maybe we can come back to in a minute cuz it’s a bit more... well actually this is all tied to Kolot...

EL: It is very much tied to Kolot—

LP: All of this, for so many reasons. But first of all you just talked about, again, this midrash class. Can you just say something about it, I love the idea of a midrash class. I think it’s sad you have to often have to be in rabbinical school to have that.

EL: Yes, that’s true. That’s very true. You don’t always, but there aren’t that many opportunities. And that’s... to step out of my story too, kind of [in] Jewish life, that’s a real thing. That thing of, like, rabbinic school is the only path to serious adult Jewish learning is a problem. And there are places like Hadar and whatever that are trying to remedy that.

LP: Right.

EL: Offer other chances. [EL’s partner Kathryn Conroy enters with groceries.] Maybe we want to pause this so she can buzz in.

LP: Sure, let’s pause... [Pause for 10-15 minutes.] Alright we are continuing, we are back. I was gonna ask you about the midrash class.

EL: Oh the midrash class, what was the question about it?

LP: Well just, I don't know—What was the significance of it? We were talking about it and it came up in the same breath, as you discovered lesbian life. So there's something there.

EL: Um... yeah what was it... So I don't remember exactly but the classes we had to take in that first year were, say, Bible history, prayer, you know, I don't remember what else. Midrash was one class. And there was always something for me about the playing with the text that connected to my earlier literature learning. I know how to read a text in its context. And so even though I had some deficit in terms of language (was late to learning Hebrew), I was always helped by getting the context of a thing which enabled me to translate even without knowing all the words. But also how marvelous, like this whole story grows from this word. But it's not just from *that* word, it's from all the places that word is. It's from the other stories that word is. It's from all the valences of that word. How amazing, right? Creative and playful and often deep, that art can get to be. For me that was always more satisfying than, say, reading a biblical text. Which I like to do and some people like to do.

LP: They're so minimalist.

EL: Yeah. Very.

LP: So much unsaid.

EL: You can't read it by itself, I mean... so midrash, from the very beginning, I don't remember what we studied, and I don't exactly remember the teacher although vaguely. And it wasn't that she was my favorite teacher either. It was that subject matter and that way of approaching text that was just the right thing for the right time and the right person, yeah.

LP: If you were to very briefly say what midrash is—

EL: (laughing) yeah. um... Well it's a style of interpretation, usually a biblical text, but the style that sort of includes the possibility of creation of other stories from the original. And sometimes the creation of a path of behavior. From that there is midrash *halakha*¹³. You know, a way to go that starts from that sort of interpretation of a biblical text. In other words here is a story about our ancestor Jacob and this is what it means for us. And how we should approach a situation. But the word 'midrash' comes from a Hebrew word that means 'seeking' and so there's something wonderful about a deeper seeking of truth or meaning in this way of playing with a text and a story.

LP: It seems important to think about, not only for the Torah Study that we do at Kolot, but just like if you're thinking about doing something like, hmm... founding a congregation. It's useful to have a playful and creative framework and for that to have been part of your preparation.

EL: Indeed.

LP: Part of how you knew you were aligned with it.

EL: Yes indeed, I agree with that. I mean I think ideally that's true of a lot of Jewish textual interpretation, but not always. It becomes hardened sometimes, instead of opened.

¹³ Jewish law

LP: Right. There was a beautiful thing if you remember on Saturday at services, uh, I guess it was Rabbi Miriam who talked about Heschel¹⁴ saying that it's really the questions that are important.

EL: Not the answers. That's why we love him.

LP: And I think it could be fruitful, you know, to contemplate Kolot and its founding in terms of the questions you had at the time you founded it.

EL: Right.

LP: So if you were to think in those terms, it's 1993?

EL: 1993, early on in the year.

LP: Early on in the year and I know you've talked about this in so many other places, but you got people who are sort of saying, 'We need this.' You're feeling like 'I need this.' You feel like there's this need. What were the questions you had in your head?

EL: Hmm... I don't know if I had questions... Some of them were probably in the realm of 'Why can't we do this? Why does it have to be like that?' The earliest question-ing, I guess I should say that I did of Jewish, then, Jewish practice as I understood it, was 'Why is the eating and socializing *after* the service?' That was the earliest question I asked it in rabbinic school. And I asked in a gathering of students who all laughed. And happily, Dr. Rabbi Larry Hoffman, who was our professor of liturgy, stood up and said, 'Don't laugh, it's a really good question!' So I got lovely affirmation. That was really the first question that led to developing Kolot. Cuz when I gathered some people around now several years later, it was 'What do you think of this kind of idea of eating together with what we do?' Or we talked about a coffee shop with a *bimah*¹⁵. And a cafe with non-formal Jewish learning and culture, so that was sort of the founding question. And then the others had to do more with the open embrace I always wanted to project. You know—You, you, you, and you, who have been rejected from the Jewish communities of your childhood, or down the street, you come here. Right? As an aside to that—I've often said this, but I'll say it again here, I'm on the board of JFREJ now. Jews for Racial Economic Justice, they have a series of pillars, kind of like their mission or foundation. One of the pillars is: all the Jews are Jewish. There's no questioning. And no dividing and no rejecting. That, I adore at JFREJ and hope that it's also always been true at Kolot. All the Jews are Jewish, you want to come here? Come here. Years ago we were trying to find a tag line for Kolot Chayeinu. A Kolot Chayeinu colon what? You know? And it became 'a progressive Jewish community in Brooklyn.' But there were a number of people who wanted it to be 'Come as you are.' Which would be a really great tagline. One of the questions, I guess, if there's a question behind that is, 'Why haven't we been welcomed? Why have we been shut out?' Right? I've always said, the Jewish community is so small and we do everything we can to push people out. (laughing)

LP: You laugh but it's true-

EL: Yeah it's very true. I don't laugh. Actually, it sometimes makes me cry. But... so you know it was definitely an attempt to change that. And to do it in this way of being able to be together,

¹⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel was an important Jewish philosopher and theologian of the twentieth century

¹⁵ A podium where the Torah is read from

and eat and share and talk. In teaching it, sometimes, I've talked about what the coffee hour, what the *oneg shabbat*¹⁶ or the kiddush¹⁷ looks like. Right, you've been in shul, sitting quietly, and seriously, and bored, and wondering when it's over. And then you go over into, whatever, the next room and you have a cup of coffee and a cake, or a glass of wine, or whatever. And you're talking to other people, and there's all this energy in the room. *All* this energy, all this excitement, all this connection. All this— not always sometimes there's people on the margin and we have to make sure about that. But mostly, that's where the energy is. And that's where that question came from. Why isn't that energy in the service? And so if we did that first, would it establish a baseline of energy, connection, community that we could bring *into* the prayer. Right? So, whether those are questions or not, that was the kind of... foundational hope.

LP: That's so... yeah, I think that's so beautiful, to recognize that the question under the question you asked, even in rabbinical school, is like 'Where is that energy?'

EL: Right—

LP: And how do we bring *that* energy to what *this* is.

EL: Right, right. Yeah. Where and how do we have the energy of connection?

LP: So did you end up doing that? Did you eat before shul?

EL: (laughing) So... well we did, actually...

LP: Before services, I guess?

EL: Yeah I mean I guess that's where the idea lived for many years. I mean early, early on in the first months there were so few of us, our first two things were Friday nights with dinner and culture— poetry, music, storytelling, etcetera. And then, Saturday mornings was Torah study with bagels and coffee. Basically, and the service grew around it. The service really grew— I was not there for prayer services, really. But people started to want acknowledgement of life events, mostly. I need to say *kaddish*¹⁸, I want to have a baby celebration, I want to share the joy of my wedding, or... you know, whatever it was. And it was sort of those blessings of life that ended up creating a prayer service around— and we used to have Torah study in the middle— it used to be kind of... and if you want to see *that* in a purer form, you can see it at the Brooklyn Heights Synagogue. They have a thing called Havurah, where they do like a very brief service and then they go and get bagels and all this stuff, and they study torah, and then they do the end of the service with Kaddish. They adopted the idea in a much purer form than we did. They still pretty much do it that way. Cuz I was a member there when I was starting Kolot. That's where I was, I was just a member and it was a place to be. I was working for an organization so-

LP: Which one?

EL: Mazon.¹⁹.. yeah... food! (laughing). So... uh yeah at the beginning that's what we had. And then... one just glorious moment in that kind of expansion was, one of the kids, who's now long an adult, was with us, wherever we were. We met in people's homes. And we were studying the story of Abraham- oh, Sarah's death- in the Torah, and Abraham purchasing the cave at

¹⁶ Joy of Sabbath

¹⁷ Blessing over wine to celebrate and sanctify shabbat

¹⁸ Prayer recited in memory of one who has died

¹⁹ MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger <https://mazon.org/>

Machpelah and leading to no end of discussion and trouble. But... when we got to the saying of Kaddish, this little one who we didn't realize had been listening, she must have been six years old... "Are there people you want to say Kaddish for?" And she said, "Sarah."

LP: Aww!...

EL: (laughing). We thought wow... that's amazing. That's a midrash, that's amazing.

LP: Totally

EL: Yeah. (laughing) So that's how we started. As we evolved, especially as we evolved away from home-based practice to place-place. We were in a couple of different places that worked and didn't work.

LP: Like what?

EL: Oh we were in... the first High Holidays, we were in a church on Greenwood Avenue, Windsor Terrace. It was right down the street from one of our early people. And (laughing) they had a flea market in their basement. And the basement was where we were renting out for services, and some of my people came with brown paper to kind of cover up the flea market, it was like we were *davening*²⁰ in a paper bag. (laughing) So that was one place. And then we were in the Knights of Columbus Hall of all things in Windsor Terrace. Which was a very odd match. It was saved by—there was a guy there who was known as sort of the mayor of the area, you know, one of those people. And he was a veteran, older guy from the neighborhood.

LP: Do you remember his name?

EL: Oh my gosh.... it was Moe²¹... Later he died and the community made a statue or a plaque some place. But he fought for us, his people were like, what are these, like 'They're all gay and they're ya know, (laughing) these Jews what are they doing here.' And he fought for us and saved it for a while and we had holidays there. And... then we came to the Church of Gethsemane. I was walking along 8th Avenue and I saw this church and it said, 'Church of Gethsemane, Justice Works' like on the other door sort of, same kind of sign on the other door. And I thought like... wow how do you read, what's the punctuation of that? 'Justice works?' And I cold called the minister of the church and said I saw your sign and I want my little congregation to be in a place called Justice Works. We met and we totally hit it off.

LP: Who was it?

EL: Connie Baugh. She was amazing, and very sadly, she had to leave not too long later because she was ill, and she had to go and live in the country and be away from city pollution and whatever. She was also a big smoker, whatever. She was a force, she was really a force and it was a wonderful kind of joining that I'm sorry wasn't able to continue. I think more good things might have come—

LP: Of that collaboration?

EL: Of that collaboration.

LP: This was around when?

²⁰ Reciting prayer

²¹ The nickname of John Maloney

EL: '95? Maybe '96. So she and I met and we moved in there... and there are ways it isn't that different now from then except that we've had more space possible. We needed more space. We started in this little balcony upstairs with like 20 people.

LP: Wait, not the Torah Study balcony?

EL: Yeah, the Torah Study balcony was originally the whole deal.

LP: No...No.

EL: Yes it was...

LP: Woah...

EL: I know, it's tiny. It's tiny. I mean, we had originally, by the first Rosh Hashanah, we had 75 members. And we had 20 people that came to, on a Saturday... But all this was leading to, in the evolution of the eating idea. We started to develop breakfast before services. One of the members took over overseeing it, and different people were responsible for it. It used to be people bringing things they made, and it evolved into bagels or whatever that we bought. But it was, ideally and in practice, it was that place where that energy showed. And then for after a while when we were doing Torah Study, it used to be after services, which was a really bad idea.

LP: Why?

EL: Because we were tired. You know, and we hadn't eaten, and we didn't know what to do with that. And so, we, Arthur and I started Torah Study at 9 am now years ago, I don't remember how many, we started. We said, if just he and I were together with coffee and Torah, it would be great and if anyone else wanted to come, they could come. And it began this—

LP: And sure enough many people wanted to—

EL: Many people wanted to come. Many more want to come in pandemic times. Zoom has been a big boon to Torah Study. So then we had Torah Study and the coffee was after that and before the service. So it was a nice ending for Torah Study and a nice beginning for service. I don't know what will happen, actually, as Kolot returns in person. So far *that* has not returned. And that's been a pandemic caution. But I'm not sure that the Rabbi or the congregation now has that same idea of that thing happening. So you know it may not.

LP: It's also not a lot of time.

EL: No, it's not a lot of time it used to be from 10 to 10:30. Yeah it used to be from 10 to 10:30

LP: Yeah.

EL: Not a lot of time, but it was enough.

LP: And if it's organized...

EL: Yeah, it was enough time, you know.

LP: It sounds like a nice tradition. It's never been a part of my experience.

EL: It was really nice for Torah Study people, because they could continue their conversation. And so many people come late to services, if people came *on time* for services they could kind of slide in there too. You know, we'll see. The thing evolves, hopefully it evolves. It should evolve. I don't know if that's the way it should evolve, but it evolves.

LP: So one of the things... this is an unusual interview, in a way, because so much of the building of Kolot Chayeinu, because you are a founder of it, starts so much earlier. All of your prior

history matters so much to the kinds of things Kolot ended up becoming and doing. If you think of the early years and starting it, and this for sure for other interviews also, to fill in, in different ways, when you think of the kinds of early efforts that you did in collaboration with people, can you talk about some of those- I mean you just mentioned Torah study with Arthur for example.

EL: Yeah... those kinds of things?

LP: What were the collaborations like?

EL: Well... (coughing) Starting a school was a huuuuuge decision, that I don't think I or anyone realized how huge it was. Cuz there were two things that pulled us more into becoming a synagogue, I never in the early days used the word 'synagogue.' But there were two things that pulled us in that direction. One was the thing I mentioned of people wanting life cycle stuff that turned into prayer. We didn't have a prayer service. Right. That was one of the things and the other thing was school. So we started in like January, February and that September we had a school. Um and we had it in—so Peter Kleinbard, who you know from Torah Study, he was one of the founding members at the original table²². He lived already here, I think he lives near by me. And he had a basement. And the first school was like five kids in his basement. He was an educator and he wasn't our *teacher*, but he understood the value of having the kids come together and learn, and one of his kids²³ especially was part of it, who we are interviewing. We had a couple of early teachers, to start, probably once a week. But that was a huge step into synagogue land. Probably helped support the community for all these years. And provided something that people wanted. And skews in that direction. Right? From an early vision of a cafe, with adult non-formal learning. A place that has a school for kids is a very different vision and I don't think we examined it enough to realize how consequential it would be to start a school. And so, I'm not sorry, because it's been so wonderful to have the kids, and the b'nai mitzvah, and, you know, all of it... But it is a very different vision, and a very different kind of place now. And so... I don't even remember what question you asked (laughing), but that was one of the collaborations. Really... there were...we...it's so interesting, we went at some point in those early school years, we went and met with Hara Person, now a rabbi, who was the Education Director at the Brooklyn Heights Synagogue, and a very smart one. And we met with her with lots of questions, how should we do this, and whatever. She is now the first woman rabbi head of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. I mean, she has had an amazing journey, herself. But she was a wonderful help, that kind of outside collaboration, right, in helping create our school. And... we had this collaboration with the building with Justice Works, right, and so we didn't do enough with that. Another thing I'm sorry about. They had a whole program of both visiting and teaching those who were in prison, so that they would have a place to come for church when they were finished with their prison sentence. And it was a marvelous, yeah—they sort of became members of the church while they were in prison. And then there was a lot of advocacy for people in prison. We did join with an annual thing they did called the Mother's Day Campaign, that had to do with both mothers of people in prison and mothers in prison. And that was a way to highlight,

²² The table around which Ellen convened people in order to start Kolot Chayeinu.

²³ Kai Kleinbard

especially women in prison, and women visiting others in prison. And so we did join with them for some of those efforts. A rally and a letter writing campaign, things like that.

LP: So Kolot would support by like attending the rally and writing letters?

EL: Yeah exactly. And we did as we grew a little more... I mean we were pretty early on connected to JFREJ, we were the first community that joined in the early domestic workers fight for rights and so very early on got involved in that and lots of Kolot people became part of Employers for Justice and what later was called Hand in Hand, and all this kind of stuff and so that was kind of an early collaborative effort. JFREJ was about (laughing) three years older than Kolot I think. Three or four.

LP: Can you talk a little a bit more about how- how there was a connection, how there was a connection with JFREJ. I mean it seems self-evident.

EL: Yeah I would think so, I mean in a way-

LP: But are there particular people or were there particular-

EL.: Oh gosh, it's so long ago... I mean I joined JFREJ in its first year... and I don't exactly remember how... The late amazing Melanie Kaye-Kantrowitz was the first executive director and I don't remember who exactly I connected to, I knew Rachel McCullough very early um... but... we had um... Temim Fruchter was our first sort of organizer who worked with us on some of those efforts. And after that, the person who changed their name to D. Morgan Ferris and um... Rachel for a long time. So you know there was this amazing collaboration of a person who would come and do the organizing work right ,which was amazing. I think that was generally the way we were able to do some of that. We weren't that big and we had people who were interested but also had other jobs. And so some of those things happened, particularly with that and then some early interfaith efforts especially with the Arab-American association in Bay Ridge. That's how I met Linda Sarsour way back then. She was a staff person who became the ED of the Arab-American Association. And we did a few things together. Also in 2002 Debbie Almontaser and I and others started the Children of Abraham Peace Walk that walked, you know, Jews, Christian, Muslims, walking through Brooklyn in peace, soon after 9/11 and then for many years, fifteen years I think, annual walk. And um... so there were outside collaborations. There were *always* inside collaborations, I mean... I didn't do anything that wasn't sort of with other members of the congregation. So whatever it was... it was either, that's a cool idea let's see about it, or I have a cool idea, what do you think about it? And let's do x, whatever it may be. I mean we were so small at the beginning, like the board *was* the congregation. There was almost no difference. The ease of a small place is a very different animal and so it was all collaboration, all the time. And I was only part-time. I worked only part time for Kolot, for seven years.

LP: Yeah let's talk about this...

EL: Let's talk about this. (laughing)

LP: So from what I know about projects... it's actually probably not part time hours. Probably working on it all the time.

EL: Yeah. Lots of time. Lot's of time.

LP: But I think by that you mean, it's like, you're paid part time.

EL: I was paid part-time. Yeah and I did have another job. Another part-time job that I had to show up to. Some hours taken away (laughing)

LP: What was that other job?

EL: Well first I started Kolot while I was working at Mazon, somewhat surreptitiously, sorry Mazon. (laughing) And then I went and got a part time job at the 14th Street Y in Manhattan. And in that job, it was a little bit of a loose job, but I ran some women's programming and some other kinds of Jewish stuff. In this process, I developed this strange, small but important connection to Allen Ginsberg²⁴ and his memory. I didn't know him, but two things happened, one was, at the Y I came to know his longtime assistant who followed a longtime assistant who became a Kolot member earlier Richard Elovich.

LP: Oh.

EL: Do you know Richard?

LP: Yeah sure –ACT UP.

EL: Right of course. Richard's successor, Rosenthal, I think Bob Rosenthal, came to know me at the Y, and decided he wanted to put Allen's papers at the Y. So we... I don't know what's happened to it, but we were able to secure this room, not a very big room, but his papers, arranged on the shelves, and books, and whatever, we dedicated the Allen Ginsberg room at the 14th street Y.

LP: Are you serious? This is the quirkiest thing I've ever heard.

EL: Yeah. Right. And, as I say it, I'm sure lot's of his things are at some big university or library but anyway that things is there. I hope it's still there. I don't know what happened. And the other thing is that, so, Ginsberg had a mostly Buddhist funeral. Um... that was mostly how he had a spiritual connection in his life, or later life. But his family, some of his living family, wanted a Jewish funeral. And so, um, they wanted... Zalman Schachter-Shalomi²⁵... as I always say, they wanted Zalman and they got me. (laughing) They wanted Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, who was, you know, fairly old, already, by then, and was unable to come to whatever the day was. But he... created the phrase that's on Ginsberg's gravestone. Which is, I think, "Mishorer hador," like 'the poet of his generation.' And because Bob knew me at the Y, I became the rabbi who did this Jewish funeral for Allen Ginsberg in this little back-of-beyond the cemetery in New Jersey where his family had plots. His brother came, and some other family members. Some people like Richard and Gregg Bordowitz and other folks. And Elliot Pilshaw was the sort of Leader of Song at Kolot um... hopefully you'll talk to Lisa²⁶ about all the evolution of music at Kolot. But Elliot Pilshaw was a gay man who later moved to Florida. But he came with me to do this funeral and it poured rain. I've almost never been in as drenching a downpour as the rain on the day we did Ginsberg's funeral. It was like God was weeping, and uh... and so we did you know a Jewish burial. Some folks, I don't remember if Richard spoke, but Bob spoke, I think. And other people spoke or read a poem. And somebody wrote a funny article about it, somewhere... in like a Jersey paper. You know, some little local Jersey paper, there was a couple of things written about

²⁴ American poet and writer

²⁵ One of the founders of Jewish Renewal and a well known rabbi of the late twentieth century

²⁶ Lisa B. Segal is the cantor of Kolot Chayeinu

it. But that's how I met Gregg, I think. And um... anyway that's all an aside to my part time job at the 14th street Y.

LP: That's an amazing story- That's so funny how questions lead to- it doesn't really matter what you ask in a way, but... can you just clarify what is the relationship between Richard and Bob?

EL: They were just successors in the role of assistant.

LP: And who was first?

EL: Richard was first. There may have been somebody before Richard, I don't know.

LP: He was Allen's assistant first?

EL: He was Allen's assistant for a number of years, and then it was Bob.

LP: Got it.

EL: And um yeah and I don't know if there were others before. And then Bob was... you know, there were no more others after...

LP: And Bob was a Kolot member.

EL: No, Bob was just someone who just lived in the East Village. So there I was on 14th Street.

LP: Got it. Wow.

EL: Oh and, I should say, one of the things I started at the Y was a poetry thing. I started thing called Y Women. Like W-H-Y and Y, at the Y and one of the people who came to collaborate was a poet called Veronica Golos who lives now in Taos. She's been living in Taos, New Mexico for many years but she used to live in the downtown somewhere in the village or I don't know. She lived in Manhattan some place. And we started a poetry series at the Y. Some amazing poets who became better known later. Like Staceyann Chin²⁷ came and read and Yusef Komunyakaa²⁸ I think came to read I mean it was kind of amazing. And we just had fun, we stay in touch, Veronica. She's a wonderful poet and has several books out now. Um... so there was also that. You know, I think Bob, there was sort of a little more reason why, I have always been a poetry lover. And you know (laughing). Well so there was all that and that was my part time job. The other part time job. And then this part, was all the time creating Kolot.

LP: So how did, first of all, who paid your salary? How did you get a salary?

EL: We had, we did have a synagogue model. We didn't play, I mean we might have been more creative with the money, but we understood synagogues as membership organizations and we had an early... (laughing) The first year my salary was \$1,000. I used to say, 'No one's ever had as much growth in salary as I had.' (laughing). But, you know, the second year was \$5,000 um... and so, much gratitude to my partner who you know paid the bills for a bunch of years in there. So we started with a system of dues. I think we had just even dues the first year, like the same number for everybody, was like \$350 or something. Later, you know, some years later, we developed a sliding scale.

LP: Do you have any sense of when you might have developed that?

EL: The sliding scale?

LP: Yeah, it's a really important thing.

²⁷ A poet and performing artist

²⁸ An American poet

EL: That probably comes... um... like after 2000, I don't know. I don't know. I feel like it was a thing that developed when I was there full time. I came on full-time in 2000. You know we had lots of discussions about 'the money,' at different times. Because of some awareness that among the broad embrace that we wanted to have were people that didn't have much money. Right? Later, it took a long time to recognize that it also included people *with* money. And that we could *ask them* for money. I had a great antipathy toward asking people for money. Or basing lots of conversations, or, you know, *asks* around money. And it took me a long time—Margie Fine—you know, it took me a long time to feel comfortable with asking people for money, and to recognize that, indeed, Kolot also has people with a lot of money.

LP: What, what's the Margie Fine—

EL: Margie Fine is a major fundraiser. You know she teaches people how to do it and she for a living works with small nonprofits and maybe not-so-small and funders to sort of come to terms and understand each other and things like that. And so she's always my go-to fundraising person. You know she did tons for JFREJ as a board member. And in earlier days, she helped at Kolot with it. She used to yell at me, "You have to ask, you have to stop being such a jerk." There were lots of Kolot members in the early days who had very bad experiences, sadly in Reform synagogues, where their families were kicked out because they didn't have money. You know things like that. There were terrible stories about money and shul, and we wanted to avoid that. But in avoiding it, we missed some chances in asking people to support the thing. So all that's to say we started with, I think flat \$350. I think we stayed with the flat dues for a while, I think we probably increased it some until we got to a sliding scale. Which was probably a little *au courant* at the time. Now there's been a movement towards "no dues." "Sort of just voluntary, not at Kolot, well sort of at Kolot, but other places too around the country. There is a push away from dues and toward voluntary giving. You know, with the recognition that a shul has to be supported. And that the biggest base of support is gonna be its members. And so... I forget about... oh, so, who hired me? There's a board, there's a president. They hire you. It's a little retrospective for me right, I was the founder.

LP: Right exactly.

EL: I hired them in a way, I picked them. Yeah so it's a little weird, at the beginning. But then after that... in truth, I never had a contract. I mean I only had a contract in the last couple of years, because I think Cindy Greenberg was then the president of Kolot, and I was heading toward retirement, I was beginning to talk about it. And she was like, we are going to have a contract with the next rabbi, probably. And so let's have one for you so we can practice and start to think about what are the things that should go on it. And we developed, I hope they still have it, we developed a two-part contract, which I had learned about from others. Which is sort of, one, I think we call the Covenantal Agreement, and one the sort of Money Contract. Meaning here's all of the non-money agreements between rabbi and community, and here's the... you know, what the money stuff's about. And the details. The time, the money, and time-off. You know, all that stuff. So for two years or something like that I had a contract. Before that I did not. And that's somewhat common.

LP: Wow. That's amazing.

EL: It's somewhat common with founders.

LP: Is it?

EL: Yeah I've heard it from others. Um but it is sort of amazing. It meant that we had to come to agreement more often, on more things. But there was very little conflict. I mean, when I retired, I said, I had the right president at the right time, every single time. We had very little conflict, happily.

LP: Why do you think that was?

EL: Well, I think we did sort of develop, sort of, collaboration. We developed a system of collaboration early. And so... there weren't... secrets, from each other. And... there was advice and respect and whatever, among us and between us. In the early days, for many years actually, I used to insist that at the end of every time we got together, not services, but classes, meetings, board meetings, etcetera. We would sing "Shalom Chaverim"²⁹. And (laughing) Ora Wise said "Do we have to sing that stupid song again?" like, years later (laughing).

LP: Can you sing it?

EL: I mean, I guess. I'm a terrible singer. But... (singing)

Shalom Chaverim, shalom chaverim,

Shalom! Shalom!

*L'hit-ra-ot*³⁰, *L'hit-ra-ot,*

Shalom, shalom.

So this is why we sang it. Not because of my singing, in any way shape or form, but because I wanted to emphasize each time, three things, I think. One is, Shalom. One is, there needs to be a sense of peace and kind of wholeness between us. One is, we're Chaverim. We may not be friends, but we are all members of the same together. And we are tied together because we are part of this community. And thirdly, we are going to see each other again. If you act like this to each other at this meeting, you're gonna have to look at each other again another time. And you want to be able to look at each other with... Shalom. So Shalom Chaverim, L'hit-ra-ot. It was a really important message. I urge rabbis that I mentor... I urge them to have a thing like that. That you do over and over and over again until it gets into people's heads. I also urge them to do the mission statement, to use the mission statement, not just as a dead thing that sits on the website, but as a living document that influences and undergirds the work of the community. But anyways so... another story the creation of the mission statement. But um so we used to sing that over and over again and I think you know I tried to live by it. Mostly people tried to lived by it and you know I think it created that kind of an atmosphere. We're supposed to respect each other. And it's not that people didn't have fights and whatever, things happened. And we didn't do as well with creating a, sort of, you know, a restorative justice process for instance. We didn't do as well with you know, 'How are we going to deal with conflict?' But in terms of, especially in terms of me as a rabbi with the board there was so little of that.

²⁹ "Farewell, Good friends"

³⁰ "Goodbye for now, see you again"

LP: I think that's common with-

EL: The founder

LP: With founders and early generations of the board. I know, I mean not to get too much into this, but certainly with Kathy³¹'s organization³²

EL: Yeah they loved her.

LP: And she chose them.

EL: Yeah she chose them.

LP: She chose her people and it worked really well, yeah, for the goals.

EL: Yeah exactly. Exactly, no, it's true and we had board terms and things, so it wasn't always the people I had chosen. You know, as I said, at the beginning the membership sort of was the board. But you know, after a while it grew, and there were board members, and we had terms. So they... they chose each other. But that message kept getting reinforced.

LP: So let me ask this then-

EL: I also have to get something.

LP: Let me pause it. [Pause] [Resumes] Ok so one of the things I remember reading about in your book of essays, which I read now in the summer and I don't remember all of, I do remember you describing, well you'll probably remember this—you were describing one of the major conflicts, or difficult times you had with the board, was sort of figuring out the question of who should be on it. Like in terms of, should there should be non-Jews?

EL: Oh yeah. You know, huge discussion for many synagogues, at the time especially.

LP: For sure, and not unrelated to discussions everybody's always having and needs to have about representation.

EL: Yeah, that's right.

LP: And inclusion. And you know you said something before, I don't remember exactly how you said it. But something about... the benefits of the people on there being people you know already. You know, have your people on the board. Or that question, which, in some ways clearly makes sense, but in other ways could preclude having the representation that you need in a community that wants to grow, and wants to be welcoming to everyone.

EL: Yeah, yeah.

LP: So can you talk a little bit about that whole question.

EL: It was really the interfaith question. There were two parts of the interfaith question. And this is often true, too. Which is: can someone who is non-Jewish be on the board? And a sub-question to that is sometimes: how many? (laughing). Um... and the other question is, Can someone who's non-Jewish be president of the board or the chair. And... at Kolot, we came to the same decision as JFREJ, which is yes, someone who is not Jewish can be on the board, but they can't be president or chair. That it is a Jewish community, and that the head, in that way, needed to be someone who was a Jew. And I think that has been a reasonably comfortable reality for all those years. Most of the people on the board are Jews, but not all. There's often or always since then

³¹ Kathy Goldman

³² Community Food Resource Center

been one or two people who aren't Jewish. It was painful... It was painful, at the beginning, because it was a place where we were not in sync all together. And there were people who were very much against it, in ways that felt hurtful to others, and then there were people who wanted just the whole shabang and you want everyone. And um... I think it was Kathryn [Conroy, Ellen's partner] who said "If you can't find enough Jews at Kolot Chayeinu to be on the board, there's a problem." (Laughing) Which was interesting, too. Right? That's a different question than representation. It was, is there enough strength in the community? And so... yeah. So we used to have these board retreats, I think maybe every year. We would go someplace, which was kind of fun. To whatever different... Mohonk.

LP: Mohonk is nice!

EL: It's nice. You know somewhere, I don't know if we went to Mohonk or where went- out to the end of Long Island somewhere and whatever. And so we would do a retreat for a couple of days with the big questions and I'm not sure they do it anymore. I'm sure it's like, way more efficient not to do it, but, you know, it was kind of fun and it was digging into these big questions and that's where it came up, I think, originally, it was in one of those retreats. And as I recall I think our very earliest kind of administrative person at Kolot was not Jewish, was the not Jewish spouse of a Jewish member. You know they were both members but because that, we settled pretty early. Non-Jews could be members, that wasn't as hard actually as questions about the board. But we dug into this question of 'on the board' and there she was, like, taking notes or whatever. You know it was it was not an easy one, but we got to that place.

LP: Did that person remain in the community?

EL: Yeah for a long time. I mean a number of early members kind of drifted away, but I think maybe they're still members, you know, in name and money I guess.

LP: Who were they?

EL: Huh?

LP: Who were they?

EL: Well that was Viviane Arzoumanian who I hope we're- I don't know if we ever got to her to interview.

LP: I think so, I think. Yeah oh wow, okay. I mean part of why I was asking about this too, is because you know, part of what we agreed upon, as you know, for this project was to really think about the challenges that Kolot has faced, may still face. And I know, that for you particularly this whole question of being in an interfaith partnership has been really a big deal and that thing you wrote in *The Forward*³³ that garnered this huge response. I guess, I'm wondering like, if you were to sort of try to trace the arc of that particular challenge, like the challenge or not-challenge of interfaith now. How do you sort of see that evolving?

EL: Um... You know, I'm not sure I know. I mean, as I say, I think in terms of the board discussion it's remained, essentially the same. The decisions we made so long ago I think are essentially true. It's also still true, as far as I know. I don't know a lot about the many new members who've joined in the past couple years, but my guess is, there are a bunch of people

³³ A Jewish American newspaper that began as Yiddish daily paper in the late nineteenth century

who are not Jewish, who are part of those people who have joined. I think it probably looks like a place that in its embrace includes people who aren't Jewish, in a way that's not too...questiony. One of the ways that it evolved had to do with prayer. We had some learning together and some discussion together about the issues as they related to prayer. I think, in the wake of those, I hadn't thought about this in a while... in the wake of those, we came up with the group *aliyot*³⁴ to torah. So it wasn't like, is the parent coming up Jewish or not, to do this aliyah, which is a huge question, you know, in lots of places. We said, you know, the whole family's coming, whoever they are. And I used to say, I think Miriam does the same, 'Give me one Jew who will wear a tallis, and knows the Torah blessings, to take the lead on that group aliyah.' I don't know, whoever it is, uncle so and so you know. Often. (laughing)—and you know, we'll have the group aliyah, and that was, I thought, very smart. And um and has lasted and lots of places do it now, right? Group aliyot and it's true for membership too. Same kind of thing, like Kolot members come up for an aliyah, somebody's going to be a Jew wearing a tallis who knows the blessings you know. And it means that everybody is a member whoever it is, or these Kolot members who did this effort or something. You know... it, it, it mitigates those questions in prayer. And then—I'm trying to think if there were other, that was the main question. About... about prayer and restrictions, and stuff. There's always been a pull to, against restriction, but not for everybody. I mean there always was, a kind of, I would say usually a minority of people who are like "No, Jews should do that." You know. But I think that's one of the ways that it evolved, into, you know, the prayer life of the community. And then you know the other question of course was rabbinic officiation at marriages and stuff. And here I do think that Miriam is more broadly embracing than I am. I always place some restrictions, not on the person having to be Jewish, but on it being a Jewish wedding. And on when it takes place. Because many, many people want to have a Saturday afternoon wedding. And traditionally, one doesn't do a wedding on shabbat and so those two issues become kind of related. And I always said I'll do a wedding with one person who's not Jewish but it's a totally Jewish wedding. I don't officiate with a clergy of another kind. And I think, you'll talk to her, too, I think that Miriam does a few more of those things, more broadly. And so, you know, has another layer of welcoming I think, to people in the community.

LP: Why do you think that was your... like, you know everybody draws their lines in different places. Why do you think you drew yours there?

EL: Um... I mean or I developed that early on and never felt enough pull in another direction to change it. Um at the time that I was thinking about these questions, like in rabbinic school, what are you going to do? You know um I had a wedding like the minute I was ordained. About a week later. It was my first wedding and I had to be thinking about all these things because that couple was an interfaith couple. And very often true right. And so I knew that I was gonna have to think about it, and I was in an interfaith marriage. I knew also when we got to our wedding that I could not do anything different, right, for our wedding than I would do for anybody else. It mattered to me to be consistent.

LP: So does that mean you had a Jewish wedding?

³⁴ A member of the congregation being called to read from the Torah during services

EL: We had a Jewish wedding.

LP: And that was okay for Kathryn?

EL: Yeah. Yeah, we have a very close friend who's a rabbi ,who officiated. And we had meetings and conversation, and all this kind of stuff and yeah. Yeah, we had a Jewish wedding and then later we had, you know, New York State and whatever... the country. I, early on, there was a wonderful rabbi named Al Axelrad who was the rabbi at Brandeis for many, many years. And he wrote a book called... I don't remember what the name of the book was... 'Tales of a Maverick Rabbi,'³⁵ something like that. But one of his essays was about kind of departing from the norm at the time and and deciding to officiate at interfaith weddings and I called him when I was thinking about these things. I had a particular situation, it was so wacky, and I called him, uh, and I said, you wrote this thing, I want to hear more about it, and here's my situation, what do you think? And we talked about it a lot, he was so helpful, you know, he didn't know me from Adam. I kind of evolved into this position and it sort of has worked for me. You know for all this time, I have to say, in retirement it's kept me from doing very many weddings. Most of the weddings I get asked to do are on Saturday afternoon, and so more of that even than the interfaith question. But, you know, it just, it felt right, it felt consistent enough with Jewish tradition for me to feel comfortable in that way, and enough, you know, acceding to real life and real people and including my own life that that felt comfortable, and so you know, it's always...it's always been like that.

LP: Makes sense.

EL: I think his essay was about it was called something, like, a the subtitle at least, was like "A Departure from Company Policy," something like that um I may have the book, I don't know if I kept that book. Or you may have it.

LP: I don't think I took that one. (laughing) So I want to... there's a couple of, just a couple of things– I only, I only have two questions. I have no more than that. (laughing)

EL: (laughing) Yeah right, yeah, I don't believe it. .

LP: But there are two things I want to touch on before we wrap. One is just like, if you can reflect a little bit, just on your role. Like, you I mean there's so many things you could say about being a rabbi, but I mean, I actually think this is the one that fell under the couch, that Post-It³⁶. Yeah, but it was about the role of love and how you show up for people. And I just wondered if you, and this is also borrowing this amazing thing you said the other day that um to be a librarian and to be a rabbi were sort of the same thing. Because you're putting people together with what they want. So I just wish you could talk more about how you saw your job.

EL: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's interesting I mean... I um.. I think, you know, it was shaped in experience. It was shaped in lived experience. I went to a rabbinic school, I learned the things, um, I often departed from company policy. I created a congregation that was a departure from... the usual company. And um, and, you know, in a certain sense maybe, creating a community that was in part designed to attend to the fringes, right? I probably had some sense that, that there

³⁵ *Meditations of a Maverick Rabbi*

³⁶ Where keywords for the interview were written

was, you know, a need for a certain kind of level of care. Of people in their lives and their pain. They were often not only rejected by synagogues, but sometimes by family and by work and by... you know other kinds of things. And um so I think I probably felt that early. And I think I probably always had the feeling that not only would eating together provide a certain level of energy, but it would provide a certain level of comfort. You know, that here we just are, with cake and coffee and it's so nice to be together. Isn't it really nice to be together? And so you know, there were some ways in which my role... kind of, um, I never said this, but other people said things like 'Earth mother,' and, you know, stuff like that. Oh... oh gosh what's her name... uh there was a woman who came to Kolot and she wrote about it in *The Forward* and through *The Forward* article³⁷, she met her to-be husband, and then I did their wedding, it's like a whole thing. Abigail... oh God, Abigail something³⁸, I'll try and find it but she wrote about me as sort of being 'Earth mother' on the head of High Holidays or something. And, you know, there was, some people responded to how I projected in that way. Um and it probably was... you know deliberately somewhat maternal, right? And ideally, you know as I've kind of said, somewhat embracing, right often literally, as I said. You know, this is a very different time, pandemic time and a very different awareness for people of their bodies and their boundaries and things. And I was a big hugger, you know a big um kind of you know-

LP: Patter-

EL: -Patter of the back, right, and it was not, I think, mostly not in those days problematic. At least I hope not. And I also don't think it was perceived as sexual come on, which might be the other concern, right? I was usually pretty aware of who and where and when that hugging happened. But I think, you know I think I said this to you, I was concerned as I was retiring, before I knew, before there was even yet a search, you know for a new rabbi. You know one of my questions, in some of my emotions about retiring, was 'Who's gonna love them?' Um it was sort of like, I'm taking my children to foster care or something. So, you know, I think -certainly it's not like I loved each person individually, but I loved them as part of this, I hoped, loving community. I totally get the ways in which certain things have become, importantly, more noted, you know, for boundary reasons and for size of community. Loving 150 people is very different than loving 600 people, right? There have to be other ways of expressing concern and care and I totally get that. Some of it I hope carried through. And you know the other way, I guess, is in attention to people's real lives. I think about High Holidays, we develop this giant set of people-stand up for celebration thing. Last time we were in person, maybe even on Zoom, I know that they've continued to do [it]- [like] 'Everybody who had a book published this year, stand up.' 'Everybody who um had a baby this year, stand up.' 'Everybody who joined Kolot this year, stand up.' You know, that kind of stuff. Stand up, stand up, stand up... Trying to acknowledge big categories of things that many people could fit into, right, and celebrating... Celebrating the actual people, through their actual things, right, as well as mourning with and caring for and attending to, you know, illness, death, sorrows of various kinds, births, all that kind of stuff.

³⁷ <https://forward.com/culture/13069/my-chosen-people-01585/>

³⁸ Rasminksy

Trying to attend to actual people in their actual lives. I remember somebody who came from a different synagogue, who was just like, a regular guy... He was not young and cool, he was probably middle-aged at the time, he was a carpenter. We had him come up to lift the torah, you know, something. And he said, 'I was a member of that shul for 25 years and they never gave me an aliyah, and I've been here three months and you had me come up and do this!' Like, 'I'm yours for life.' (laughing) You know, some version of that. But that kind of thing, like attention to the fringes and to people in their real lives. They still invite people who've had great sorrow to read and talk about the Unetaneh Tokef³⁹, you know, during High Holidays. Like the prayer of 'Who will live and who will die?' To make it real, right? So some of it's that. And that stuff was, in early days, very much a departure. And even now not all that many people do that kind of thing, so I think there was something about the *realness*—it was a sense of care and attention paid, you know? People want to feel like they matter. That kind of stuff.

LP: Thank you so much for that beautiful answer. I'm so touched listening to this, honestly...

EL: I'm kind of touched listening to it.

LP: And I mean, attention is one of the most important things. Anywhere at any time.

EL: And it's, I mean, it really is a big question about growth, big question about growth. As the community grows and there's, you know, it's wonderful, like they're drawn now to a new rabbi and her brilliance, and you know: how do you attend to 600 plus people?

LP: That's a great challenge.

EL: Yeah, it's a hard challenge.

LP: I think part of what, I mean, this is maybe—I don't know if this is, it's probably just part of the answer, but I think it obviously can't be as much one person and that's why we need smaller projects within projects. Like the Park Slope Food Co-op that has the shifts.

EL: Yeah, yeah, yeah—

LP: —and the slots so that there are people who are always caring for each other.

EL: Right, right exactly. You know I used to, I mean later in my time there, and you know, I used to think about developing smaller *havurot*. And they've done a great job in the past couple years of having these smaller dinners [like during] Elul⁴⁰ or the shabbat thing, you know, during the year. So different groups of people who never get to meet each other can meet each other. You know, things like that. And the community does a pretty good job of caring for each other, too, in needy times, especially. But also in celebrating times, I think. And I think this listserv has actually served a lot of that purpose.

LP: I love that listserv. I'm one of those people who thinks people should 'reply all' cuz I just find it-

EL: Bring it on, I know, but all this like, 'Who knows a podiatrist?' you know, it's amazing, 'I need a podiatrist.'

LP: But again, it's like what you're saying: people's real lives.

³⁹ A Prayer traditionally read during the High Holy Days

⁴⁰ The last month of the Jewish year leading up to the new year

EL: That's right, and shul ought to be the place that helps you, you know, find your podiatrist, as well as, for instance, taking the Torah up to the highest level of the balcony. Why do you have to be sitting on the ground to be able to touch the Torah and honor it and stuff? You know, things like that.

LP: Okay. Well can you briefly talk—

EL: —I can't talk about anything briefly.

LP: (laughing) I know, me neither, sorry/not sorry... Um, you know retirement. After an accomplishment, after building something like this. (laughs) It's got to be a lot, yeah, I would think it'd be really hard, also probably with some great. You know great aspects.

EL: Yeah, a lot more time—

LP: A lot more time, among other things. Can you talk a little bit about how you made that transition and particularly whether you have any experience— I wouldn't say advice necessarily, your own experience.

EL: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I might have said this, but I— the biggest piece of advice I have is: get a coach. Um you know again it was Cindy Greenberg who knew about founder's syndrome in organizations, who said to me: you have to get a coach. And I, notably, I said to myself that's right, 'I'm gonna get a coach, who's a woman rabbi, who's been the rabbi of a congregation that knows what that's all about. That's who it's gonna be.' And I ended up with Mordecai Liebling who is a rabbi, but had never been a congregational rabbi and was just very wise in a way that suited my needs. It was the single most thing I probably did, to care for myself during the retirement process, which for me went on and on. I mean, I probably started talking about retirement five years before I retired. And I ended up actually cutting it shorter by one year, I retired one year earlier than originally I was going to, partly because— partly because it coincided with Kolot's 25th anniversary which was a nice fundraising opportunity, and other kinds of things. But partly because I did start to feel like people were going to be saying 'Hasn't she left yet?' And uh... and so that was definitely a huge thing to be doing. Another thing I did was go back to the mission statement and then, not to Shalom Chaverim so much, but, but—to the mission statement and you know, over and over again. I made everybody read the mission statement in meetings and classes and at the board meeting every month in the board meetings. And with sort of the idea that 'this is now in your hands,' right, like 'whatever happens next, whatever rabbi comes—' it was a little bit of a fraught process in choosing a rabbi etcetera. Whoever comes, this mission statement is yours, right? Like, you Kolot board, you Kolot members: this is now yours. You have to figure out how to inhabit it, right, so let's look at the pieces of it. And we just... it was like our text. We also hired—it's my long time chevruta partner, study partner, is a professor at HUC and she is the person who places students in jobs and things like that. One of her students who she had been working with had done his thesis on interim rabbis. But in the process, he learned a great deal about retirement of rabbis and etc, and we hired him as a consultant while he was still a student. We hired him as a consultant and he was brilliant.

LP: What was his name?

EL: He was just wonderful, Fixler, I think. Josh Fixler. Shout out to you, Josh. He's a rabbi in Houston, Texas now, I think. He really, really took in the work that he had done. He brought, like, biblical and rabbinic texts for our board and our staff to read and and think about, and he had great advice for me. And yeah, he was just terrific. To have someone come from the world, but outside *this* part of the world, was really helpful, I think. The thing he said to me was, the biggest gift you can give your congregation is to get out of town. And I did get out of town for about 18 months. Like literally out of town, for much of that time, but also just away from Kolot. And then Miriam, my lovely successor, invited me to come back for the High Holidays after the 18 months, which was a wonderful homecoming. And then came Covid, and you know, whatever, it's been a weird time. I feel in a way like— four years later, I feel like I'm in my second year of retirement. Which is a little bit odd. Once there was a new rabbi of Kolot, who was not so new to Kolot, she had been the student rabbi at Kolot for a few years. Then the work became what, you know— I did ask to be sort of named 'Rabbi Emerita' [which] in some bigger, richer places that comes with some money and an office and things, but I was like... this is Kolot. (laughing) Um, but to have that title felt important, because I didn't know what kind of platforms I would have. It's nice to be able to say, you know, 'Rabbi Emerita, Kolot Chayeinu' or whatever on things, like signing petitions, and whatever. And so, more of the work then has been in the, kind of, understandings between the new rabbi and me, between, to some extent, other staff people, the cantor and me. You know, we had worked together for many years, how's that look now? All of that, so that's been more of the work in the more recent years. In terms of Kolot, other work for me, you know... I joined some boards and I've done some teaching, and I've done some leading of groups of rabbis. I do some mentoring, both official and unofficial. I'm not— fairly busy, doing, you know, stuff that feels good. But, you know... I'm often left with some of the same questions. Should I have come back? Should I have just gotten out of town, as he said? Should I have come back at all? How is it to have me back? Is it okay? Every time I have a meeting, you know, with the rabbi or with the E.D., or the president, I'm like, you know: is it okay? Like, how's it going on your end? I'm doing the oral history project. I'm teaching about death and dying. I'm probably being a pain in the neck once in a while. But I don't want to be such a pain! You know, there are many stories about the Emeritus rabbi who never disappears... I just want to make sure that that it's okay. In a kind way I'm almost like a grandparent now, maybe, right? Like 'How's the thing going?' you know, 'How's the thing going, is it okay? Are the people okay? Is the thing okay?' Seems to be thriving, right, there are a lot of new members So you know, that's of interest too. But I yeah I think consultant, a coach, um getting out of town, you know, are probably the three advice pieces I would give. Have given, to retiring rabbis. I was with a rabbi this summer who's retiring after 22 years in the congregation and there's to be no interim time! They're just gonna hire a rabbi. I'm like, okay, really? It works differently when you're not the founder and if the place has been around a long time. I mean, the shul I grew up in has been around, even though they had gotten down to the church basement, they've been around since 1850 or something. And they've had rabbi after rabbi after rabbi and many of them stay 20, 30 years and they hire the next one. You know, it's not so fraught. But um and maybe here, you

know, this rabbi stays 10 or 20 or two years, you know, I don't know. Um, but she'll decide, but will it be easier with the thing on a different footing? It is a different thing than the founder, but I... I have known some pretty fraught founder leaving stories, too. I have some colleagues who left with a less good process, um, so, you know, it's a hard thing, it's a hard thing. But yeah, I think I've come through it fairly well.

LP: And not alone, it sounds like. The punchline for so many of these things that you're describing, it's you *and* it's with others, you know, it's with support. People who know the right thing, at the right time, to say-

EL: Absolutely, yeah absolutely, very important, very important. I think, I mean in general- if you can *not* go through a huge, life-changing experience on your own... People do, but you know it's better to reach out if you can.

LP: If you can, yeah. Well, Ellen, I think like any great text, this has created so many more questions than answers. (laughing) But I really want to thank you for everything that you shared.

EL: Well thank you, I mean, the questions were beautiful, and and led me to remember all kinds of things that I had forgotten, which is so, kind of, great. I'm very glad that some of them will be recorded for posterity. It's just it's just a delight to sit with you and um you're a wonderful asker of questions

LP: Thank you, you're a wonderful answerer of them and fellow poser of questions. Okay I'm gonna shut this off...

(The end of audio)