

Kolot Chayeinu Oral History Project

Middlebury College
Middlebury, VT

PHILLIP SAPERIA

Interviewed by

CAROLINE SEGAL

November 11, 2022
On Zoom

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Zoom Interview

Transcript of interview conducted November 11, 2022 with:

PHILLIP SAPERIA

by: CAROLINE SEGAL

Phillip [00:00:04] I have to say, "Got it." Okay.

Caroline [00:00:07] Got it.

Phillip [00:00:08] Yeah.

Caroline [00:00:10] Okay. Well, hello, Phillip. I am. It is November 11, 2022, and I am located in Middlebury, Vermont. Would you like to introduce yourself?

Phillip [00:00:25] Hello, Caroline. I'm in. In New Jersey. I'm in a town called Kingwood, New Jersey. And which is, the town itself is on the Delaware River. We are in woodlands and beautiful rural woodlands and area. We live on a road that's called Federal Twist Road. And it is a twisted, a narrow, twisted road. And it's quite beautiful. Lots of preserved land. And of course, the, you know, the land around the river is quite beautiful, too. We have a tow. There's a canal that runs along the river, so we have a towpath that we walk our doggies on and walk ourselves on. And it's very nice.

Caroline [00:01:13] Well, that's lovely. I'm glad you're in a beautiful place.

Phillip [00:01:16] Thank you. Me too.

Caroline [00:01:18] And this is a part of the Kolot Chayeinu Oral History Project connected with Middlebury College.

Phillip [00:01:25] Mm hmm.

Caroline [00:01:26] And. Let's just get started. Very excited. So, my first question for you is just to tell me about yourself and how you got involved with Kolot Chayeinu.

Phillip [00:01:39] Hmm. So, myself (chuckle) is, is I didn't get involved with Kolot Chayeinu until 1993 around its founding. So, I grew up in Maine. I went to college and graduate school, lived in L.A. as a teacher for three years. And then came back and worked in Jewish communal studies for a number of years until 1990. And then I went to work for David Dinkins, who was the first black mayor of the city of New York. I ran his Office of Jewish Community Affairs for one year, and then we were defeated. And so, I went on to run a trade association of nonprofit mental health and substance use service agencies, so which we called behavioral health. So, I was in the behavioral health universe for 21 years until I retired in 2017.

Caroline [00:02:47] That is very cool. And can you tell me a little bit about that those first few years around 1993 and who you met and how you all started to form Kolot?

Phillip [00:03:00] You know, it wasn't "we all," I was just brought in among those who were doing it and kind of fell in. Um, so. When I, um, left Jewish politics, I realized that my connections to the Jewish world were largely political. You know I was doing community relations and working with other groups, but representing the Jewish community and Jewish activity and Jewish values. Um and I was but I was doing a lot of advocacy and intergroup relations and that sort of thing. So, I realized around 1990ish, I'm not exactly sure when, that I hadn't paid attention to any of my Jewish spiritual life. So, I discovered that there was near me in Brooklyn, a synagogue called the Brooklyn Heights Synagogue, and that they were having Friday evening services that began at 6:30, which was perfect because I could go at 6:30 and then meet my husband afterwards for dinner. And so, I started going and I met a group of people there um who I became connected to, including um Ellen Lippman, who was a rabbi. And one day she said Phillip, I'm going to start a synagogue of my own. Why don't you come join me? I'm not sure those are exactly the words, but that was the sentiment. And I said, oh, Ellen, I don't have time for community building, I just want to daven¹ once a week. And so those were famous last words because.

Caroline [00:04:53] Haha.

Phillip [00:04:53] I would go over and knew for those first few years we met in people's homes and the children read around the carpet in the living room while we sat and prayed and talked and discussed and argued and did all the things that you do in a synagogue environment. But we were a very small group. I missed the very first. I think the very first meeting was around Ellen's dining room table. I wasn't quite there yet, but I very soon afterward became a part of the very early group and have been there ever since. I found it to be a um sort of a gem in my life.

Caroline [00:05:33] That's beautiful. And you you definitely were really involved. You were the president of the congregation for a period. Is that right?

Phillip [00:05:44] I was the second president. And then because I was nervous that I hadn't that, you know, the who the person who was treasurer, we were having trouble putting our treasury stuff together in any solid, understandable, intelligible way. So, I was afraid that even while I was president, that we had been unable to do that. So, after I was president, I became treasurer for a short period of time so I could try to straighten out that sort of stuff. Whether I did or not, I can't tell you, but I did do that. So yes, I've been involved in that. I was on the board for a considerable amount of time and certainly (pause) involved and active in many Kolot activities for many years. It's it's actually the pandemic has gotten in the way in lots of ways because, um, we're in New Jersey more than we were in Brooklyn, one. And two, um the congregation has grown by leaps and bounds, much of it through Zoom as well. So, it's you have both excuse me, both the electronic as well as in-person membership arrangements. And it's grown enormously. I'm not even exactly sure the size of it now, but I think it's pretty big. [cross talk] Sorry.

Caroline [00:07:15] It has grown a lot.

¹ *Daven* is the Yiddish word for "pray."

Phillip [00:07:16] Yes, a lot. It is. You know, it's more congregation. We meet. We meet in a church, or we used to. I'm not, I think they still do now in person again, meet in a church in Park Slope. It's called the Church of Gethsemane. And um we call it Kolot Chayeinu (chuckle). And uh. And on the High Holy Days this year we were back together in-person again. And we met at City University of New York in Brooklyn. It was quite a remarkable. It was to be back. It was quite a remarkable thing. And of course, now we have a new rabbi. And um what's interesting is that, well, I know her some. I don't know her nearly as intimately as I know Ellen Lippman, who I count as a friend as well as my rabbi. Miriam was my rabbi, too. But Ellen is my original rabbi in some ways. In my, at least my original adult year rabbi.

Caroline [00:08:30] Do you feel that? Being a virtual member has impacted your experience at Kolot and was going back in person kind of refreshing to come back in-person with all those people?

Phillip [00:08:45] Yes and no. We were all wearing masks, so there were people I knew who I didn't even recognize (chuckle) in those masks. So, it was a different experience, and it wasn't this old sort of familiar intimacy that I remember. I mean, even as it was growing, there was a kind of intimacy. And there were, you know, there are groups that form and know each other and love each other or don't love each other, but know each other and work together and do things together. And um so it's still very different, I think, although I don't go in-person as much as I want to.

Caroline [00:09:32] Do you remember how you were a part of those communities early on as a member and how that impacted your life when it was still a little smaller and more intimate?

Phillip [00:09:44] Well, we met in each other's homes, as I said. And so that was very small and intimate and um (pause) then we met for a short time in a, I'm trying to think it's Kensington, I believe. In a small church in Kensington that you had to put there. They had a room there. Their social hall had like a rummage sale place there, so we had to put some brown paper to cover the rummage sale part. And it was it was small, intimate, and you knew everybody. And that's not true anymore. I think some of that is because, again, the pandemic and again because I don't go as I used to. And although I you know, I know I know most of the people on the board and I know um some of the administrators. I know Sherri Levine². We go back a long way. In fact, Sherri Levine was the administrator of Kolot Chayeinu, and I co-chaired a committee that um, that prepared Kolot's first mission and values statement. That was a long time ago. Before we had an administrator (chuckle).

Caroline [00:11:09] Do you remember any part of the the statement?

Phillip [00:11:13] The only thing that the only thing that I remember about Kolot's motto or statements is that doubt is an act of faith. Which I, I, I don't think is. I don't think is um (pause) curious or funny any. I guess when I first heard it, I thought it was kind of funny. But I as I've come to study Jewish thought and Jewish writings, and I realized that um that doubt is a theme in the Talmud and then in the in all the Jewish writings. And that for us at least, it still is very real. We're still wrestling with Torah and we're still wrestling with concepts like God and um spirituality and all of that. And I think it means different things to different

² Sherri Levine now serves as the Executive Director of Kolot Chayeinu.

people. And we're coming, you know, around to living with different people's views and so forth. It's a very progressive place. I treasure that. Sometimes it's even a little too progressive for me (chuckle). I tend to be more centrist, liberal and left wing, but centrist rather than, you know, way lefty lefty. But, you know, I appreciate the different points of views that they all come together in this place.

Caroline [00:12:52] Do you think that's a benefit of Kolot being a little bit more politically minded than maybe other synagogues?

Phillip [00:13:01] It's a good question. I think that um sometimes I feel like um there's a lot, we cross a line between political and theological. Even though I know that the theology promotes certain kinds of political ideas and ideals. But there are times when I think that kind of politics gets in the way or it gets, you know, becomes part of the the the liturgy or the language that we speak. And I find that, you know, somewhat um not to my liking, wishing that instead we would be able to make a more finite distinction. But maybe it's not possible to make a finite distinction, especially when, you know, because *pikuach nefesh*³ and and, you know, social justice issues are so important to our communal belief system.

Caroline [00:14:10] I really appreciate that honesty and reflection. It is a very unique part of Kolot that I've observed. How would you describe your spirituality? And I can tell that you care a lot about your connection with Judaism. And do you have anything you want to share about that?

Phillip [00:14:34] It's an interesting question. I think I still struggle with my spirituality. I clearly am a spiritual person. I clearly look for spiritual aspects of things in my life. And as, not only is Kolot important to me, but, you know, I belong to many different Jewish organizations, and I connect to Jewish themes. And I actually, through Kolot, attend every morning, the Morning Blessings Group. For an hour every morning where we, where I um, my job every day, my job, my role at least one of my roles every day is to say the *Modeh Ani*⁴ to talk about gratitude and we all talk about what we're grateful for. And then I read a poem that connects in some way to either gratitude or to a theme of the day or whatever. So, yeah, it is incredibly important to me. I look for Jewish aspects of all kinds of things in my life of values um, but I don't know what I. So, but, with respect to God, for example, I'm not sure I believe in God. I'm not sure what I believe. I instead of saying *Baruch atah Adonai Eloheniu melech ha-olam*⁵ I say *Ruach ha-olam*, the spirit of the universe. I think of God as a mystery, as a spirit, as a maybe a mystery, maybe a spirit, but certainly not a gendered being. And in fact, sometimes when I see God described in a gender, I'll use the female gender just to remind myself that God has multiple genders or no genders at all um. But I do think about it a lot, and I read about it quite a bit. And I am you know, I put aside for a short time some of the books that I wanted to read about God, different views of God. I connect to Reconstructing Judaism's emails and websites and also to the Hebrew Union College⁶ emails and websites and different, different, you know, Jewish organizations and so forth. So, I'm constantly looking for ways to infuse my spirit with aspects of belief or unbelief, depending on where we're headed. I guess that's it.

³ *Pikuach nefesh* is the principle in Jewish law that the protection of human life overrides any other religious rule of Judaism. For more information, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pikuach_nefesh.

⁴ *Modeh Ani* is a daily morning prayer traditionally used to express gratitude.

⁵ "Baruch atah Adonai Eloheniu melech ha-olam" is a portion of Jewish prayers.

⁶ Hebrew Union College is a Jewish seminary offering a variety of academic and professional programs with locations in the United States and in Israel. For more information, see <http://huc.edu/>.

Caroline [00:17:27] Did you start to become spiritual when you joined Kolot back in the nineties?

Phillip [00:17:35] Well, certainly as an adult, yes. But as a kid, I went to Hebrew school. The interesting place, we had a rabbi who was the rabbi, cantor, Hebrew school teacher, everything. And it was um Orthodox in its name and in its way. Although most of us who went there were not Orthodox. There were a group of older men who were. And I think our rabbi was. And so, in Hebrew school, you know, you would ask, So, Rabbi, why do we do such and such? And he'd say, because it's in the Torah. That was the answer. On the other hand, I liked being there. I liked being in the shul. I liked going to Saturday services. I went to Tuesday, Thursday, Sunday Hebrew school classes, and I was one of the few Jewish kids that I think liked it among my peers. I'm not sure what it is that I liked, but I it it spoke to me. I like the rhythm of the Hebrew and the and I know so I know the liturgy more than I ever realized. I say that only because you say some of the liturgy at our Morning Blessings Group, and I discovered that I actually know it. Surprise. I can read Hebrew. I can't translate Hebrew or understand it very well. But I can read it. And I. And I. And then there is Israel. And I have a very difficult time with Israel. I call myself a um a J Street Zionist⁷. I don't know if you know about J Street. But it's an organization that um that promotes a two-state solution and promotes rights and dignity and possession for Palestinians as well as the Jews. And so, it is it's not one that denies Zionism. It's not one that an organization that denies Zionism. And it's not one that, you know, that pushes for a one state solution. Peter Beinart⁸ sort of solution. We still are looking at two states. But now that, you know, elections have happened, I have to rethink a lot of my belief system with respect to Israel and Zionism. And I don't know what I'm going to do (chuckle). But I'm not skipping out that easily.

Caroline [00:20:09] I admire that a lot.

Phillip [00:20:12] Well, thank you.

Caroline [00:20:13] It's complicated.

Phillip [00:20:15] Very.

Caroline [00:20:16] Working through it is all we can do.

Phillip [00:20:19] Well, there are people in our congregation who have for themselves worked through it, I think, you know, and have become either anti-Zionist or non-Zionist or. You know, much more actively on the left than I am, even though I think of myself as on the left. But yeah. So. I'm still carving out a space for myself. And since the election, I have to carve out a new space.

⁷ J Street is a nonprofit liberal advocacy group whose aim is to promote American leadership to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts peacefully and diplomatically. For more information, see <https://jstreet.org/>.

⁸ Peter Beinart is an American liberal columnist, journalist, and professor who has been publicly known as a stalwart of liberal Zionism. For more information, see <https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-populism/a-liberal-zionists-move-to-the-left-on-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict>.

Caroline [00:21:01] Do you feel like Kolot has given you the space or opportunity to think about these things?

Phillip [00:21:09] Oh, no question. Not only given me the opportunity, but provoked it, you know. So, yeah, I would say absolutely. I mean, you know, I as I told you before it, I think of myself as sort of a lefty centrist. I know that doesn't really make sense. But I mean, a moderate lefty is distinct from a far left progressive. I think of myself as progressive, too, but I realize there are people to my left and I'm not that far left. I'm certainly not right. And, you know, not that centrist either. I'm, you know, center left. I guess. So, and Kolot allows that (pause) to exist, to coexist with other points of view. And there are times when I'm, you know, annoyed at some people's points of view and times when I embrace them. It's it's it's evolving. It's ever evolving, as you know. I mean, the politics certainly are evolving. And my own belief system is evolving. It's strange to say somebody at my age that is still evolving. But it is. It's in motion. Again, as much as I love the Jewish tradition and as much as I love what Judaism, I think Judaism stands for. You know, which is more about wrestling and and um debating and interpreting and reinterpreting than it is about a single sort of belief system and. I'm taking a Kolot class right now in the Jewish Ways of Death and Dying and. But I've been reading, you know, some of the literature that they provided for the class and I see that, you know, there isn't a single point of view in that, that moreover, the even the Talmudic point of views, plural, are also evolving in modern times, you know, through reconstruction or reconstructioning not Reconstructionist Judaism and the modern denominations and certainly at Kolot or Torah study and things like that. So as much as I am a member of the Torah Study Group, I don't go as often as I did once upon a time. In the pandemic time, I just it's hard for me to do it from New Jersey. I'm not sure what that's all about.

Caroline [00:24:12] What are other aspects of Kolot that you feel have allowed you to grow and discover new, new things about yourself?

Phillip [00:24:28] Other than the ones we've discussed. We've discussed spirituality. We've discussed social justice. We've discussed community. No, I think about Kolot the thing that's most important, or at least side by side with spirituality is community. You know the people there and knowing people so well and loving so many of them and even the ones I don't love, I respect, and you know. You know. And feel related to. Somewhat less now, again because of the absence of in-person this or in-personhood or whatever. But still, I have some very, very important and deep friendships that I made through Kolot.

Caroline [00:25:32] Is there a tradition at Kolot that reminds you of this community and how important it is to you?

Phillip [00:25:41] Tradition (long pause). Um there are so many traditions, most of which we've touched on. I love the efforts toward um social justice. And, you know, and as I said earlier, pikuach nefesh and the things that Kolot folks do. I love the Race Working Group. I love that we're working on racial issues and how they relate to Kolot and how they relate to the Jewish world and community in general. Because we don't, we don't have a, you know, kind of a, that many members of color, although there are many more than I ever knew there were. I never I never when I where I grew up, there were no people of color, period, Jewish or otherwise. But yeah. But now Kolot has them. I like their LGBT+ or work group and activity. I think it's very important. I myself am trying to um go beyond the acceptance of non-binary and get to a place of understanding. But because of my age and my experience, which has largely been through issues of sexuality and not gender, I have found it difficult to

wrap my head around what it all means and how it means and is much more present at Kolot now than it ever was before. And I want to know and to understand more. And I want to do it. I want to do it some in conversation with some of the people who see themselves as non-gender. But I also don't want to commit any microaggressions. So, I'm still thinking hard about how to approach that and again, when to, you know, because we're not together as much anymore. And I don't want to do it on the telephone, even on Zoom, for that matter. (pause) So it's important to me that we have those aspects of our community and that we embrace them and discuss them and try to bring people aboard into it. You know, I think that, for the most part, people at Kolot think of themselves as progressive in both a political and social justice sense, but probably also in a religious sense. We're not denominational. We made that decision not to go into a denomination, but we are closer to the liberal denominations than we are to the more traditional ones. And some people actually. Rabbi Grossman was ordained by Reconstructing Judaism⁹. I actually attended her ordination. It was nice.

Caroline [00:29:19] That's lovely. Has Kolot had this culture of progressive and community-based interaction for a long time? And I know that you have been very influential in New York with the nonprofit community and really connecting with the community around you and supporting them. Do you feel like these parts of your life have intertwined at Kolot?

Phillip [00:29:55] Yes. Yes. I mean, maybe not specifically because Kolot had no activities on behalf of behavioral health and the agencies that I represented, there were about 150 of them, nonprofit agencies who, in my view, did the work of God. However we understand God. And so, it was exciting, even though I wasn't providing those services. It was exciting to be enabling in ways through advocacy and education and organization to be enabling those things. So, it didn't really come up specifically at Kolot. But I have no doubt that there are lots of people there, I know that there were lots of people there who were involved in their work world, in this universe, and maybe in their private worlds as well. But, yeah, I always felt upheld that way by Kolot.

Caroline [00:31:02] It's really nice.

Phillip [00:31:03] Yeah.

Caroline [00:31:03] And it's a very impressive career you had.

Phillip [00:31:08] Oh, thank you. I don't think of it as impressive, but it was meaningful. Certainly, incredibly meaningful. And it it fed me, I guess it fed me spiritually in ways that I didn't think of it as doing, but I guess it did.

Caroline [00:31:28] How did that connect you to Brooklyn and New York? Do you feel a strong connection and one that's Jewish and spiritual still?

Phillip [00:31:39] So, Brooklyn and New York. Yes. I moved to Brooklyn with my husband in 1976. We moved to Fort Greene. And we have lived, and we still have a condo now in Fort Greene, but we've lived there ever since. We bought our first home in 1979. And so, we were very active in the community. We did a lot of work around community betterment because it was, you know, there were all kinds of problems, crime and and other, you know, issues that

⁹ Reconstructing Judaism is the central organization of the Jewish Reconstructionist movement.

seemed to revolve around crime and so forth. So, we worked really hard. I was active in my block association. I was president of my block association for a time. I was active in the local Neighborhood Betterment Organization. I was on the community board again working for um the selection of communities that it represented in terms of making the politics align with our values and so forth. So yeah, so I brought my whole self into Brooklyn and New York. I'd say Brooklyn is my New York, although, you know, I go to the theater, and I go to museums, and I go to other things in Manhattan. But Brooklyn, Fort Greene is my home. More so than my husband who loves it here because he's the chief gardener (pause). We've always had gardens in Brooklyn, too, but small and very tiny ones. These, this one [the garden¹⁰] is, as you know, spectacular.

Caroline [00:33:36] I do know. And it is spectacular. And I recommend anyone who reads or hears about this interview later should look into it because it's magnificent.

Phillip [00:33:49] It shows up on Facebook some, but mostly he's on Instagram. He posts a lot on Instagram, and he has a website and a blog, but he doesn't, I'm not sure he keeps that up to date, those up to date.

Caroline [00:34:08] Has your husband been involved with Kolot, as well, throughout your time together?

Phillip [00:34:13] Not in the prayer sense. But we, we light Shabbat candles every Friday night together. We bless wine together. We attend Erev Rosh Hashanah and Kol Nidre together. But daytime I go myself. He's not all that interested in liturgy. And. But I think he, uh, I know he respects and loves certain aspects of the Jewish tradition and our Jewish connection. He doesn't hate that he calls himself an atheist. That I don't know if he is or not, but that's what he thinks he is. And so, he doesn't, he doesn't attend another institution or work. Kolot is his place. And Ellen Lippman, you know, who is our dear, dear friend, is also his advisor, spiritual advisor.

Caroline [00:35:23] Is your relationship with Ellen important to you?

Phillip [00:35:26] Incredibly important. It's basic. She got me into this to begin with, first of all. But over time, she is not only my rabbi, she's become my friend. She and Kathryn are our friends. We love them dearly. And we feel blessed to have them in our lives. Um and more fully than just as rabbi and congregant. Far more fully than that.

Caroline [00:36:05] I love to hear that. We were grateful to hear from her a few weeks ago in our class.

Phillip [00:36:12] Oh, good. She's so wise. And down to earth at the same time. I mean, if she brings her wisdom in, in a very straightforward way and it's always so beautiful and so important. Um, yeah. And then she's a wonderful friend too, on top of that.

Caroline [00:36:39] How would you describe the way that her legacy remains with Kolot?

¹⁰ *Federal Twist* is a landscape garden designed by James Golden, Phillip's husband. For more information, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/20/realestate/how-the-worst-site-can-become-the-best-garden.html>.

Phillip [00:36:51] Well, that's interesting because again, because of the pandemic, it's been hard to see what for me, what the new marks are as distinct from the old marks. So, for me, the new Kolot is very much the old Kolot. I'm not there going to committee meetings and I'm not there at services in person and so forth. And and I do know, Miriam, I, I told you I went to her ordination, but I don't know her well and I certainly don't know her anywhere nearly as well as I knew Ellen. And I would like to get to know her more. So, I think she's smart and and uplifting and thoughtful, you know. And so, I want, and I say that as a a Zoomer, you know, not somebody who is right next to her and experiencing it that way. So, I would like to I'd like to get to know her and. To see the new world of Kolot, however it manifests itself, and I'm not even sure how it does. Again, I'm sort of connected to an older group. Not old, old. Not chronologically, older necessarily, but older in the sense of long term or, or some more pre-pandemic term.

Caroline [00:38:22] Would you say that's one of the challenges you've experienced with Kolot?

Phillip [00:38:31] Meaning what? Which challenge?

Caroline [00:38:34] Just being less active in committees and not being in New York physically.

Phillip [00:38:41] Yes. Yeah. That's very hard. It's very hard. You know, Zoom services are lovely, but not the same as being in person and sitting next to people, you know and like and you know, going out to lunch afterwards. And no, I know that's not quite the same thing, but it is in a way, you know, it's the extension of community into various aspect of our lives. And it's so important, it seems to me (pause). So, I miss it terribly. We have, we have a couple of synagogues out here. One in particular that I like um it's a Reconstructionist synagogue in New Hope, Pennsylvania. It's called the Kehilat HaNahar, which which they translate as "the little shul by the river." And it's a lovely informal space. And the rabbi, actually the rabbi used to teach yoga to Park Slope Jewish Synagogue, congregants and Kolot Chayeinu congregants in Brooklyn. So, I knew her, and she lives around here. And so occasionally I will attend a um online session there. And then we have a conservative synagogue in Flemington. And, you know, I've not been all that interested in conservative theology and modes of worship and so forth. But I have occasionally gone there too. It's not the same.

Caroline [00:40:17] You mentioned some parts of Kolot that are unique, like meals and the kitchen table. Is there any part of that that has stuck with you, the just community-based eating and talking and experiences like that?

Phillip [00:40:38] No. Not too much of that. Not too much of the eating part. You know, occasionally I'll go to a committee meeting or to a class or something like that, but not sitting around a table. I don't find that comfortable, to be honest. Sitting around a table. Eating with other people and. We've done it several times, but it's not fulfilling in the sense that I think of as fulfilling. And so, we don't do it very much. We mostly celebrate Shabbat together or if we have guests, with our guests.

Caroline [00:41:42] Is, is there a way you would describe how you influenced Kolot when you were involved? More logistically back in back in the early nineties. Is there any impact that you knew you wanted to have?

Phillip [00:42:16] Well, you know, you have no you have I can't name it, but I believe I had impact when I was on the board and an officer. I certainly had impact when I was helping to develop the mission and values statement. I certainly had impact by having relationships among people who are active in the community. I certainly had impact through my friendship with the rabbi, but I can't name it or define it. I don't know what I would take credit for because there are so many people of so many of us who were working hard to, you know, make an impact. And we never thought I never thought of it as making an impact. I did think of it as, you know, what was this place going to be like and how could I help shape that image? I suppose that's making an impact, not just shaping the image, but shaping the space and shaping the experience. But um, it wasn't, it wasn't, it wasn't in my mind that that's what I was doing. I just was very actively involved and and um deeply committed.

Caroline [00:43:40] Do you remember any of those responsibilities that you had?

Phillip [00:43:46] No, not really. No, it's been a while. It's been quite some time. And I'm more of a parishioner. I also love to sing. So, until the last couple of years, I used to sing at the High Holy Days with a group of people that work with Cantor Lisa Segal, who is a very good friend and was a friend long before she was Cantor and as is her husband, Arthur. So, yeah, so I loved that, and I miss that actually. I missed. And they're having a singing group, which I can't be part of from a distance, it's really hard to sing on Zoom in in unison, if you know what I mean. So yeah, I miss that. I loved participating in services I used to love um, I even loved, well, this is interesting. So maybe here is a way in which I had impact without realizing I had impact. So, one of the struggles that we had early on was a struggle around how and when and if we should ask people for money. Cause that seemed like a contradiction in the spiritual side of things. And since I grew up in Jewish organizations and in Jewish synagogues who were asking for money, asking for money was a common experience, I was not afraid of that. And moreover, I felt that without money we couldn't, we couldn't continue. We couldn't pay the decent rabbi salary. We couldn't, and at that time we just had rabbi. And, you know, now, of course, we have many more salaries to pay. So, I fought very hard to bring the concept of money for Kolot as a holy endeavor. You know, and I know I will not forget one Yom Kippur or High Holy Day fundraising effort where I, where I brought a you know what like they have in churches, those little collection plates and I talked about, how it's holy in other places and it should be holy here. And we need and money is very important, especially as it's feeding our spiritual institution in our relationships and all of that. So, I think that was one of the areas that I kind of pushed. I'm not saying I'm proud of that, but I think it was fundamentally important. And so that was one of the things that I was quite pushy about.

Caroline [00:46:34] It's tzedakah¹¹.

Phillip [00:46:36] It is. It is. It's totally that. It's tzedakah. And it and it holds up the community in ways that are absolutely necessary if you want to have a community. And so, you have to think of it as part of what you do then, you know, at Kolot we still don't say, you must pay this, or you must pay that or. But you know, we want you to pay what you can, but we like you to strive to do as much as you possibly can. And I like that. I like that whole notion. But I also like the fact that we feel freer. At least they think, because I'm not doing it. Feel freer to talk about it more openly now.

¹¹ Tzedakah is the Jewish moral obligation to give charitably.

Caroline [00:47:28] Were finances a challenge?

Phillip [00:47:35] I would say yes, um, as again, we didn't have as many expenses. But we also didn't have as much income. And we had a rabbi who founded the synagogue. And my feeling is, is that she, you know, accepted remuneration that was far too little and far less than she was worth. And, you know, and I don't remember what even a well, at the beginning we weren't paying rent. Excuse me. Except for the High Holy Days. But eventually we had to pay rent too, so, yeah. So, I don't know, but, as we grew, it became more important, I think, to everybody.

Caroline [00:48:32] I think it was always important.

Phillip [00:48:36] Yes. I'm just I said it became more important in the sense that people um (pause) witnessed its importance and then became and believed in it's important, you know, more than I think in the beginning. With our our rabbi wasn't all that certain, you know, about how money should play a part in what we did. So those were some of the early struggles. But yeah, we've moved. We've moved and grown. I mean, mostly it's because we've grown so much. It's such a remarkable place. It's nothing like, you know, the small, intimate living room-based place where we began. On the other hand, it still has a lot of those features in within groups within the larger group. So, it's very special.

Caroline [00:49:43] How would you describe Kolot's acceptance of various types of people and spiritualities? Is that something you admire about Kolot?

Phillip [00:49:58] I think so. I it's very open. I mean, I think that it it promotes certain points of view, but for the most part, it's very open to the diversity that we represent among us. And, um, you can see it in the variety of committees and the variety of people on the committees and the intergenerational aspects of much of Kolot, which is so incredibly important and lovely to see. So again, as I said, I still I feel a little bit distanced because of geography and because of the pandemic. But I still think of it as, you know, an outgrowth of where we began. And it's still open to diversity, to big diversity. I'm not just saying that. And, you know, you know, verbally, it's it's true. It's in practice open to diversity. And you can see it and feel it in all of the various committees and activities and emotional activities that it (pause) it affects.

Caroline [00:51:27] You mentioned intergenerationality. Do you hope that that will continue in the future? And do you have any other goals for Kolot in the future?

Phillip [00:51:38] No, I especially hope that it continues. It's so important as an older fellow now, and it's incredibly important that I get to interact with younger generations. But as a younger person, it was very important for me to interact with older generations. And yes, I want that to continue. I think it's incredibly important. I think it's an incredible piece of the identity of Kolot and and and, you know, I like it's, I like its emphasis on inquisitiveness. When the art of the inquiring aspects of it being open to debate and new ideas, and the challenge of new ideas to old ideas and the ways in which we bring people together. I like, you know, ways in which we interact with the community through our *Gemilut Hasadim*¹²

¹² *Gemilut Hasadim* is an important Jewish social virtue that includes the personal service towards others. For more information, see https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/111262/jewish/Gemilut-Chassadim-Loving-Kindness.htm.

activities and not just the formal ones, but the informal ones, as well. I mean, lots of Kolot folks are very active in a variety of, you know tzedakah-oriented activity. I love the fact that we're involved in resettling a refugee. Well, because I worked for five years, I worked for HIAS¹³, I was the Deputy Executive Director of HIAS in the eighties. And um, so I am deeply committed to immigration and refugee stuff. And I like that Kolot is moving in that direction too.

Caroline [00:53:24] That was incredibly well put.

Phillip [00:53:27] Thank you.

Caroline [00:53:33] I love hearing that reflection on Kolot. And I think it was very holistic and a great way for me to understand what it means to you and to a lot of people who belong there.

Phillip [00:53:51] I'll be interested to see what other people say too, to see where the, again intersection is and and where the differences are. And then some people will relate in different ways, you know, and more intensely in some ways than I did and more and less intensely in others. It, will be interesting to see. How many people are being interviewed?

Caroline [00:54:12] It's going to keep going. But around 15 to 20 right now.

Phillip [00:54:17] Mmhmm.

Caroline [00:54:18] And so the project will continue. And I was going to mention when when you mentioned the Cantor, Lisa B. Segal, and her husband, both of them were interviewed, so, maybe you can listen to them.

Phillip [00:54:30] And they were here in the beginning. You know, they preceded me even. And, you know, not by much, but, yeah.

Caroline [00:54:40] You could see how much your stories overlap.

Phillip [00:54:43] It'll be interesting to see. Yeah. I can't wait.

Caroline [00:54:46] Yeah, I'll be sure to send you all of the information that I have.

Phillip [00:54:51] Thank you, Caroline, that's very nice of you. This has been very enjoyable.

Caroline [00:54:58] Thank you so much for sharing and reflecting. I know it was many years ago, but you're still a part of the community and I admire how you take time every day to still join the sessions. And a lot of people will love hearing your stories, too.

Phillip [00:55:19] Well, we'll see. But I'm really glad to be a part of this community. I'm very, very fortunate in that way. Thank you very much. And you were a good thought-provoker.

¹³ HIAS is a Jewish American nonprofit organization that provides humanitarian aid to refugees. For more information, see <https://hias.org/>.

Caroline [00:55:32] Thank you.

Phillip [00:55:32] And fun to talk to.

Caroline [00:55:37] I appreciate it. You as well. I'll stop the recording and then we can.

Phillip [00:55:41] Okay.

Caroline [00:55:42] Wrap up.

END OF INTERVIEW

transcribed by Caroline Segal, November 2022