Arthur Strimling by Kristen Morgenstern
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In this interview, Arthur Strimling discusses his relationship with Judaism throughout the course of his life, from his upbringing with anti-religious parents to discovering his love for Jewish prayer through theater making. He talks about his life as an actor and storyteller and his journey to becoming the Maggid HaMakom, resident storyteller, of Kolot Chayeinu. Arthur explains his involvement in the feminist midrash movement of the late twentieth century and details how Kolot provided him an audience for his drashes. He shares his true love for the Kolot community and the role the congregation has played in his journey with Judaism.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:00:04]
Hi. This is Kristen Morgenstern here interviewing Arthur Strimling in his beautiful home in Park Slope. Yeah?

Arthur Strimling [00:00:14]
In the South Slope.[1]

Kristen Morgenstern [00:00:15]
In the South Slope...

Arthur Strimling [00:00:18]
Yes, and people in the North Slope will tell you this isn't real Park Slope. And the real estate, you know, sales people tried to rename this So Slope.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:00:32]
So Slope. Mhm.

Arthur Strimling [00:00:34]
Didn't work.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:00:35]
Didn't work.

Arthur Strimling [00:00:37]
Didn't fly.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:00:37]

[1] Kristen mistook two neighboring parts of Brooklyn, thinking Arthur's house was in Park Slope.

And it is November 5th, 2022 and we're ready.

Arthur Strimling [00:00:44]
Okay.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:00:44]
We're starting.

Arthur Strimling [00:00:46]
Okay.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:00:47]
So I guess my first question is, what led you to Kolot? I'd love to hear that journey.

Arthur Strimling [00:00:57]
That depends on how far you want to go back.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:01:02]
Let's go all the way back. All the way!

Arthur Strimling [00:01:09]
I mean the simple, boring answer is, you know, meeting Ellen Lippmann[2] and liking Ellen Lippmann and she was starting a congregation. We went in somebody's dining room or kitchen or something and that started. But I think that everybody at Kolot has a kind of interesting story about how they ended up in this, rather, this unique community. I come from a very secular, militantly anti-religious family. My parents were and my grandfather. Particularly on my father's side. And that's kind of where I got my growing up attitudes toward religion. Is that doing alright down there? Alright.[3] You know, and they were lefties, my grandfather, when he came here, he was a union guy. He was a progressive and my father, on that side, my father went to city college in the thirties and was partying and was a real lefty person, and he was a scientist. And my mother was an artist, an actress, and they were progressives of their time. They were modernists and progressives. And religion was something of the past as far as they were concerned. It was something left over from another time. Something they saw as in decline, slipping away. And as it persisted, you know, all those opiate of the masses, prop for the powerful, a crutch for the weak, the cause of all misery, poverty and war. You know, that was what religion was. So. And there was a lot of that kind of. Mm. Sort of amiable contempt for people who went to church or synagogue or whatever as

[2] The Founding Rabbi of Kolot Chayeinu. You can learn more about her and listen to her two interviews for this project here: https://sites.middlebury.edu/kolotprofiles/portfolio/ellen-lippmann/
[3] This is in reference to the audio recording device and making sure that it was still recording

something either they did for social reasons or business reasons or superstition. So that's where I came from with it. And I kind of on that level took it for granted. But I also, as a very young kid, was very interested in God. And in, I can't say spirituality. I don't think I knew the term, so it didn't exist as a concept for me. But I hung out with preachers' kids more than once. As a kid, I was really good friends with preachers' kids, and I went to church with friends. I wasn't in places where there were Jews.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:04:37]
Where was this?

Arthur Strimling [00:04:38]
Pardon?

Kristen Morgenstern [00:04:39]
Where was this?

Arthur Strimling [00:04:41]
Well, when I was sort of elementary school age it was partly in Yellow Springs, Ohio, or in, probably in Rochester, Minnesota. I mean, Yellow Springs, is a tiny town. It's mostly a college town. And Rochester is where the male clinic is. My father worked at the male clinic and so most of the adult males I knew were doctors, and a lot of them were probably Jewish, but I wouldn't have known it because they would probably be as secular as my parents, so I didn't think of them that way. I was aware of being Jewish, but it really didn't mean much to me. And as happens with a lot of people like that, like me, I became more aware of being Jewish because of sort of small scale anti-Semitism in Minnesota, which was a very anti-Semitic place in the fifties. And because of the Holocaust and I don't remember when I found out, but I did. And when I did it was a terrible jolt, that sense that someone would hate me just for being something that I had no control over and hate me enough to want to kill me. It was everybody's, every Jewish kid has that experience.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:06:15]
Do you remember when you first realized the anti-Semitism that was happening around you growing up?

Arthur Strimling [00:06:23]
Well, in small, like in Rochester, yes. I remember what happened in Minnesota. Boys played hockey from September to May. And I was really into that and at the school I went to, the janitor hosed down an extra parking lot. When he hosed down, we used to

skate and we played hockey every day, every afternoon until late, until it got dark. One day there was a kid, something happened in the hockey game and, some kid, some kid was upset about something. He was upset about something that happened. And he started the in on this one boy named Roger Burgess, who was Catholic, which was not that common either in small town Minnesota. And he started calling him a fish-eater because Catholics eat fish on Fridays. So he's going “fish-eater, fish-eater, fish-eater.” And then he turned on me because I was in some way or other involved in this play that he was upset about. And his name was Peterson. Donny Peterson. And Donny Petersen starts and he goes, "So what are you?" Meaning what religion was I. You know because he was after the Catholic. Well, at the beginning of the school year, in those days in Minnesota, you fill out a form which included the question: "What religion are you?" And I didn't know what to put. I really did not know what to put. And so I asked my folks and they said, “put none that's what we are.” And I put none. And then my teacher wouldn't take it. “You can't be a nothing. You got to be a something.” So I said, “what should I put?” And my parents said, “well put Jewish because that's genetically what we are.” So, you know, so I put Jewish and the teacher was fine with it. So the truth as I knew it was that we were nothing. But I had sort of lied to cover this. So I'm sitting there with Donny Peterson asking, “What are you?” I'm thinking, should I tell the truth or should I lie? So I lied, I told him “Jewish.” At which point he started yelling, “You killed Christ” at me. Which didn't bother me that much. I mean, I was like eight or nine and, you know, it didn't bother me. I knew I didn't, number one, and it was silly. But I went home, I told my parents and they were pretty upset about it. And they told me and that's when I sort of found out people didn't like Jews. And I experienced it in all sorts of small ways as a kid, it never became big. But I don't remember when was the first time it really registered with me. The Holocaust, the Holocaust was in my lifetime. And it was after the war, by the time I was, I was born in 1941. So by the 50s, I was certainly old enough to know. And at some point between like ten, maybe 13, 14, I got, I don't know from where. It wasn't like from *The Diary of Anne Frank*[4] or something that was not still around yet. And there weren't even yet, later came Holocaust plays and that I would have seen because my mother would have been in them. I think that was later. But I just remember being deeply shocked, traumatized by that information as anybody is. I think I do remember that. I don't remember the circumstance. I mean, do you really remember the circumstance?

Kristen Morgenstern [00:10:33]
You know, just the feeling.

Arthur Strimling [00:10:35]

[4] A famous book of writings from a young Jewish girl who was hiding for two years in the Netherlands during Nazi occupation. Anne Frank did not survive, but the book has lived on as a very popular book, especially in teaching young people about the Holocaust.

Yeah. There's a very deep feeling. And then we moved to Massachusetts outside of Boston, that was the first time I was around Jews. And I was literally ignorant enough that I had never seen the word Chanukah[5] in my life up to that point. And then at Christmas time, which is what I thought of it as, at the shopping center there was a Merry Christmas banner and a thing that said Happy C-H-A-N-ukah? And that's how I found out about that. And then I was junior high age, so, the boys that I knew were getting bar mitzvahed[6] and getting all these checks. And I was pissed, I was jealous, but I didn't know what was going on, I did not. I went to the parties, the synagogue things were not a big deal. So I went to parties and stuff, but then we moved to Ohio, outside of Cleveland, and again there were a lot of Jewish people. And a lot of people that went to synagogue and I went to synagogues, reform synagogues[7] with friends, I had a friend whose father was the rabbi. I just remember he was a tremendously nice man which was surprising to me because men, adult men in those days were mostly pretty distant. You know, that was sort of the way they were supposed to be. So it was surprising how warm he was, enough that I still remember how warm he was. But I was really interested and my parents kind of took it very lightly. You know, they didn't give me grief about it, but they were just sort of like, “that's weird.” But they did let me go to Sunday school at the Universalist Unitarian Church, which is a very almost secular religious community. They don't talk a lot about God, but they do talk a lot about ethics and religion and the history of religion. And it's like when I was growing up, I learned about the history of religion and, you know, sort of the first monotheists in Egypt and that basic stuff. And I remember I really loved it. Didn't do that much of it, but I loved it. So there was in me, I'm sorry I took so long to say this, but there was in me a strong and spiritual. Which when I got into theater, that had a lot to do with it. I got into theater at a moment when there was a lot of a kind of coming together of ideas about theater and ritual. And so it had a spirituality to it. And I talked to my mother, and she felt like that when we talked about it. You know, she would never, ever have professed any kind of religious feeling. But absolutely, as an artist, she would talk about it and I really picked up on that and felt that a lot. And thenI think the next thing was an important part. Well, first of all, in New York, you get into the theater in New York and everybody's Jewish, whether they're Jewish or not, because it's just a very Jewish conscious environment. New York is in general, but theater, in the arts, it's really strong. And so I was around a lot of people who were Jewish. Some of them have been raised religious. And this guy, you're not a theater person are you?

Kristen Morgenstern [00:15:16]
I am.

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[5] An eight day Jewish holiday, or “Festival of Lights” celebrating the rededication of the Second Temple.
[6] A coming of age tradition in the Jewish faith that usually takes place as one turns 13.
[7] One of the major denominations of Judaism, known for being more liberal in following Jewish law and a progressive sect of Judaism

Arthur Strimling [00:15:19]
You are? Do you know about Joseph Chaikin?

Kristen Morgenstern [00:15:22]
No, I don't.

Arthur Strimling [00:15:22]
Okay. Joe Chaikin, this guy.[8]

Kristen Morgenstern [00:15:41]
Wow a picture!

Arthur Strimling [00:15:42]
I'm trying to get it on the right, he's standing on an angle I remember this. Anyway, Joe was a very great director.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:15:54]
Yeah.

Arthur Strimling [00:15:57]
And he directed a company called the Open Theater, which started in the sixties through the seventies. And he was a brilliant, brilliant guy. And he drew me into theater because he was doing- first of all, people were working together, ensemble, which was kind of influenced by the Living Theater[9], which had been on for a long time. It was this crowd of people that just traveled around and did theater together and kind of almost vagabonds and anarchists and they had become very prominent around then and Joe worked with them and then he started something very different from them. But it was a small ensemble of people who worked together for years and developed plays out of a whole process of improvisation. And it was the creation of widespread ensemble and, the theater I grew up around was mostly, you know, my mother worked in mostly regional theaters and they did good stuff, but it was very traditional, Shakespeare, all the classics, the Neil Simon to, you know, Agatha Christie to Christmas shows, to, you know, the whole I mean, that was a regional theater. And she did tons of that stuff, but it didn't really draw me that much. I liked it, I had fun around it, you know, but it wasn't like, real. But this seemed incredibly real. It came at a perfect moment in my life when I was really searching and I dove in. And eventually I worked with them and was very

[8] Arthur gets up and shows Kristen a photo of Joseph Chaikin that was in his home office.
[9] The oldest experimental theater group in the US that Chaikin was once part of, but branched out to create the Open Theater. Read more here: https://www.livingtheatre.org/history

transformed by it, by working this way, all this deeply personal improvisation, storytelling.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:17:58]
Were you already in New York at this point?

Arthur Strimling [00:18:00]
Yeah. Yeah. I came to New York to go to college, I went to Columbia and I just stayed.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:18:03]
You stayed?

Arthur Strimling [00:18:06]
Yeah, I mean, from the time I was a little kid, I announced that when it was my turn to decide where I'm going to live, I'm moving to New York because both my parents were from New York and they had family here. So I came to visit, and I just loved it. You know, this is where I want to be. From like age 6.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:18:26]
Wow. A bold proclamation.

Arthur Strimling [00:18:27]
Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:18:30]
So how did you find your way to this theater troupe?

Arthur Strimling [00:18:35]
You know, I knew people who knew people, I don't know. I went to oh, I think I went to a show of a friend, a guy that I knew from Columbia was in one of their shows called- It was either *The Serpent*[10] or *Terminal.*[11] I don't know which of those two, but they were two great plays that the Open Theater did a production of, and I saw it when this guy I knew from Columbia was in it. And I said “hello” and he invited me to something or other. And at a certain point, I decided, this is what I want to do with my life, I'll do pretty much anything to get to do this.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:19:34]

[10] A play written by Jean-Claude van Itallie in collaboration with the Open Theater, as they explored the Book of Genesis in juxtaposition to current events of the late 60’s.
[11] A play written by Susan Yankowitz, also created in collaboration with the Open Theater, exploring death and dying.

Wow.

Arthur Strimling [00:19:39]
Which meant that I just poured my heart and soul into it and I was lucky to land with mostly. Mostly-Are we going?[12]

Kristen Morgenstern [00:20:01]
Yeah. I think this one stopped, but this one is still going.[13]

Arthur Strimling [00:20:07]
I was lucky enough to land with mostly kind people who were very supportive and so I got started then. But what I was leading to is that in like about 19, I don't know. In the late seventies, Joe directed a production of *The Dybbuk*[14] at the public theater that I was in and he wanted it to be a really Jewish experience for the cast. So almost all the cast were, in fact, Jewish. Not all, but almost everybody. And we had a rabbi who worked with us and that was the very first time I ever did light shabbat candles[15] or anything like that. And we went to the 777 Eastern Parkway, the headquarters for Simchat Torah.[16] It was insane. It was insane. But it was a great kind of immersion in a whole part of Judaism that I knew nothing about and doing the play, it ran for a long time. We toured in Europe with it, so I did it a lot. And there was this one part of the beginning of the play where there's action going downstage right and there's a bunch of us more downstage left, and we're davening.[17] You know, we've got books in our hand and we're sort of standing there and we got tallit[18] on. We're just like the four of us doing this. Yeah, while something else is going on. And, you know, when you make a hubbub in the background, you go like "umbrella umbrella umbrella rutabega rutabega rutabega."[19] But that gets really boring, it gets really boring. And so people do wise ass stuff and make each other laugh. But after a while, I really got into it. I know a lot of other stuff I did in the play was more active. But I love this thing. So I started, I didn't know what, I didn't know anything. Obviously, I didn't know prayers or Jewish prayers, but I was doing

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[12] In reference to the audio recording.
[13] One of the audio recording devices had stopped working during this point in the interview, so Arthur and Kristen checked to make sure the other was working.
[14] A play written by S. Ansky that he first wrote in Russian, and later translated into Yiddish. The play premiered in Warsaw in 1920 and became a very popular play in the Yiddish theater world. Learn more here: https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Dybbuk_The
[15] A Jewish tradition done each Friday before sundown to mark the beginning of Shabbat, the day of rest.
[16] The address of the headquarters in Crown Heights, Brooklyn of the Chabad Lubavitcher Hasidic Movement: a community that strictly follows Orthodox Jewish Law.
[17] Reciting Jewish prayer
[18] A fringed garment used as a prayer shawl in the Jewish tradition
[19] This is in reference to when an actor onstage does not have any real dialogue, so they will often mouth a series of words

a lot of, I was beginning to do a lot of meditation that I had been doing for a while. And I knew some, you know, like the Heart-Sutra[20], the “Gate Gate Paragate.” So I just started to do that with the book and I felt Jewish for the first time in my life. I mean, I felt like I had crossed some line.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:23:14]
Yeah.

Arthur Strimling [00:23:15]
And it was doing that, you know, it was like the repetition.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:23:18]
Mhm.

Arthur Strimling [00:23:20]
Even something as meaningless and sort of absurd as that. And this, which as an actor, you know that you feel that, too. You swim in the exact same river night after night after night after night. And it's different every time. So I had that experience a lot and it was very amazing to me to carry over into something that was sort of intentionally spiritual. And so that kind of got me started. And then the next thing that happened to me was meeting another person who became a huge mentor in my life, Barbara Myerhoff[21], who was an anthropologist and had written a book about old Jews in Venice, California, called *Number Our Days.*[22] Which should be the next book you should read, I'm telling you, I'm not kidding. Actually, it's a great book about Yiddishkeit[23] culture, immigrant culture, aging, and about ten other things. Memory, storytelling. And she did- this is at a senior center in Venice, California. Do you know L.A. at all?

Kristen Morgenstern [00:24:45]
No.

Arthur Strimling [00:24:45]
Okay. Well, Venice is right on the beach. And at that time, it was hip, this is the early seventies. It was like “muscle beach”, you know, where all these guys would stand on the beach and lift weights. And it was a scene, it was a drug scene, a beach surfing scene. And there were these old Jews who long ago had bought apartments there when

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[20] One of the most popular texts, in the form of a Sutra in the tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism.
[21] A Jewish anthropologist and feminist who studied elderly Jewish people in California and created an Oscar and Emmy winning film about these Jewish elders. Learn more: https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/myerhoff-barbara
[22] The book: https://books.google.com/books?id=H1HUJjs8yHkC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false
[23] Jewishness, the way of Jewish life

it was way far from downtown L.A., where they lived. And they retired there, and they lived in these little apartments, in these little apartment buildings, and they went to the senior center, and there was a boardwalk, a famous boardwalk in Venice. And they walk on the boardwalk and they get knocked down by these skaters. And, you know, people run around and. She went to the senior center as an anthropologist, but also as a Jewish lady, she got to know them and studied them both as an anthropologist and as a Jewish lady who hoped to become an old Jewish lady someday. And maybe she'd learn something about how to do that. And so I met her-

Kristen Morgenstern [00:26:12]
How'd you meet her?

Arthur Strimling [00:26:12]
At a crazy theater festival in Minnesota where Carleton College is, near there. They invited a lot of experimental and political theater companies, of which I was a member of one called Talking Band[24] for years, and invited a whole lot of us from all over the country and South America to this little town where this guy had organized the thing and raised all the money for it. And it was like a conference about theater and storytelling and a whole lot of stuff. And so we did performances and then he invited Barbara because she was an anthropologist who knew a lot about storytelling and memory and life review and all that sort of stuff. So she did a workshop where we and 50 others sat around a table and she talked about all this fascinating stuff about storytelling. And I am a disruptive person as a lot of people will tell you. And after a while I got impatient and I stood up and I said, “Look, you're telling us all this wonderful stuff about storytelling and performance and we're all performers. Why don't we do it?” And Barbara thought that was just a great idea. So we did, and we just threw the tables away. We ended up doing this amazing kind of, all dividing up and doing these performances and reusing all these ideas. And it turned into a wonderful kind of event. And afterwards, Barbara asked me to come and teach a workshop with her at NYU Performance Studies. It was sort of a new program then, but they brought her in as an anthropologist. And there's actually the head of the department that was an anthropologist, Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimlet[25] and she's still there. But anyway, we went and we did this two week, everyday all day workshop with a bunch of graduate students in performance studies. And it was great. And we did it every year for several years. And then she died of cancer in 1986 and the last time I saw her was about a week and a half before she died. I went out there and she was tiny. I mean, she was very small to begin with, but she was really wasting away. And she wanted to go down to Venice to the beach, so I carried her down there. She gave me this sheaf of stories that she had been doing, these interviews, in a

[24] https://talkingband.org/
[25]Professor Emerita of performance studies at NYU and a scholar of Jewish history

neighborhood in L.A. It was like the Lower East Side, it's called Fairfax, so it's an Avenue called Fairfax Avenue, and it's still got some delicatessens and some leftovers from, it was the Jewish neighborhood of L.A. for a long time. And at this point, in the eighties, the seventies and eighties, it became sort of like if you put the Lower East Side and Bayside[26] and Westchester and Crown Heights. All the Jewish neighborhoods, you put them in one neighborhood. That was what Fairfax was like. And she was writing a book about "What is a Jewish soul?", that was her question. And she was interviewing all these people from Hasidic rabbis to Holocaust survivors to social workers to delicatessen workers. There was a gay synagogue there, you know, a wild kind of place in that way. And she was interviewing all these people and collecting all this stuff, and she had edited them down to a sheaf of about 50 pages of these interviews, maybe more. And she was going to make a book out of it, but she died too soon. And she handed me the stories and she said, "Tell the stories". And then she died like a week later. And I had them and I couldn't look at them. I kept them in the back of some bookcase because I just couldn't even look at them. It took me about a year, but then I did. And then eventually I made a solo performance out of these stories, which are just, the story I told you last night is one of them. It's from that show.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:31:44]
What's the name of it?

Arthur Strimling
All That Our Eyes Have Witnessed.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:31:48]
Wow.

Arthur Strimling [00:31:52]
And I toured around with it for years. And that's what telling those stories you know, you tell a good story over and over again it changes you it just does.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:32:06]
Yeah.

Arthur Strimling [00:32:08]
And it did. And I found myself identifying somewhere in myself as a Jew, as whatever, and I didn't have a clue what that meant. And then in the nineties,I met Lisa[27] in 1990

[26] The town where Kristen Morgenstern is from
[27]Cantor of Kolot Chayeinu and Arthur's wife. Here interview is here: https://sites.middlebury.edu/kolotprofiles/portfolio/lisa-segal/

and Ellen[28] within a year or so after. I, was it you I told? Ellen was the head of something called MAZON. She was the regional director, I'm sure, she was the regional director. And I had not met her, but they did these benefits called "Dinner Without Dinner", this was in The Puck Building. It's in Soho, it's this great big building called the Puck Building. Now there's on the basement floor an REI Store, but that was a party space then, and it was in there like 800 people there and all these tables with beautiful china and silver and no food, just water. So I guess they figured they had to have some entertainment if they were gonna not serve dinner. So I was part of that and Lisa was on the organizing committee and that's how we met Ellen. And afterwards, we were hanging out, and it went very well. We were hanging out and debriefing and, you know, whatever. And Ellen said, I'm starting this little group- I don't think she said starting, meeting this group or whatever and all I knew and I just liked her. I mean, I wasn't looking for a rabbi. I think, Lisa, much more intentionally was because she comes from a very rich reform and conservative, mostly reform, Midwest, Jewish upbringing. And so it was always central to her life. So I think she was much more intentional in looking for a Jewish home than I was because I had no concept of what that could be. But I just liked Ellen as you do, as one does. And so we went and met in Judy Kane's[29] for the first time. That was not, she had met a couple of times. She had been the student rabbi at some synagogue that doesn't exist anymore, reformed Synagogue in Flatbush or something and it was disbanding. And a couple of other people, some people from there came to Ellen and they asked her. And so I think the original people were from there. And then she started inviting people and that was Lisa and me. And so we just met in the kitchen and it was sort of the first regular experience I had of Shabbat or anything remotely like that. And it was just a nice community of people at that point.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:35:39]
Do you remember what that initial conversation that you were there for was like?

Arthur Strimling [00:35:49]
That. You mean that the first time we went to a meeting?

Kristen Morgenstern [00:35:51]
Yeah.

Arthur Strimling [00:35:52]
It's a great question. I never thought about it. Since, you know, recently, at least I remember Judith Kane's table. And I remember Ellen and Lisa and Judith and her

[28] Founding rabbi of Kolot Chayeinu. Her interview is here: https://sites.middlebury.edu/kolotprofiles/portfolio/ellen-lippmann/
[29] Early member of Kolot. Her interview is here: https://sites.middlebury.edu/kolotprofiles/portfolio/judith-kane/

husband a few other people. Do I remember what was going on? No. And I don't think what was going on probably made much of an impression on me even then. It was more about the feeling, being in that room. People who were not particularly like me they were certainly, mostly not. They were kind of middle class Brooklyn people, teachers, shop owners, Plumbers, you know. I think I went along for the ride for a while. And then at some point, I mean, Torah study was what got me. I wasn't that into the original part of it. I didn't connect to the prayers or anything particularly at that point. But the Torah Study got me right away, you know, storytelling texts to wrestle with. I mean, that was perfect. And I started writing in the voices of some of the characters in the stories. You know, I just kind of did it. And then, you know the Molier play Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme? It's about a very bourgeois gentleman who is kind of uneducated, you know, kind of a bore. And he's pretentious, very pretentious. So he dresses too fancy. Then someone tells him all his life he's been speaking prose, he's so thrilled. “Oh I don't speak just English, I speak prose.” And I felt like that when I discovered midrash[30]. Oh, somebody has been doing this forever. And I, you know, and I invented it for myself, but somebody plagiarized me before I thought of it. So I get very excited about that stuff. And there was going on then this whole modern midrash movement. Which was mostly, I think I told you about this before, but it had deeply feminist roots because if anybody is left out of the Midrash tradition and Torah period, it's women. So there was a huge creative space there. You know, all these rabbis, all those centuries writing, all those midrash were paying very little attention to women. You know they arrive at some consensus about Miriam and never ask again. And it got very exciting and there was a, and for a few years, it's a thing called the Institute for Contemporary Midrash, which ran a week long retreat at a retreat center called Elat Chayyim[31], which is in the Catskills. And it was a Jewish retreat in an old Catskills resort that got turned into a Jewish retreat center when nobody else would buy it, I guess. And this wonderful, well, I didn't know her. But this poet who had written this terrific book of midrash, Alicia Ostriker[32], was teaching a workshop on writing Midrash and I thought, oh that would be interesting. So I went and I took the workshop and just had an incredible time and I got really involved in this stuff. The next year I taught there about storytelling and stuff, so I got very involved in all that stuff and wrote and published a lot of stuff and that got me back to Kolot where Ellen appointed me Maggid haMakom, storyteller in residence. Which is you know, one of the things that has attached me so deeply to Kolot and to Ellen Lippmann is her gift for seeing opportunities for you that you don't see yourself.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:41:03]
Yeah

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[30] Reinterpretation of talmudic texts and other religious texts through creative and exploratory means
[31] http://www.elatchayyim.org/
[32] A Jewish feminist poet and writer of midrash

Arthur Strimling [00:41:05]
She really is astonishing. And with me it was, oh, this is a storyteller. This is a guy- and, you know, it'll help Kolot. And it opened up all these possibilities for me to write and tell stories and then have a community to do it for. When you really know, when you have a few hundred people you really know and you can try material on them. You can just come and say something, do something. It's such a gift and she gave me that. You know, she invented it. Nobody else. Nobody knew what the hell she was talking about. Then I discovered there was this whole tradition goes back to the middle ages of Maggid. Doing not exactly what I was doing, but often translating Torah into language that illiterate people could understand. So the Torah would be read and the Maggid would tell the story and explain. And sometimes at Kolot when Lisa and a few other people, Layne, they will translate in trope as they're going if it's something that people want to hear. So there's this whole tradition of it, but Ellen sort of reinvented it. And gave me this gift of doing that. And I did so for years. So that was a big part of my life at Kolot. It was writing stories for this community. And then other communities, you know, other Jewish communities as well. But this was my home base and it came in all kinds of forms from midrash to drashes[33]. I did every year for maybe 15 years the drash on the Akedah[34] at Rosh Hashanah. And that was sort of an institution at Kolot for a long time. And. And then for other thing, I invented the Congregation, called Congregation Yah[35].That's I had to look it up to tell you. It's. It was a sort of spoof on Kolot and it was fun for a while. And I, you know, I could do all kinds of things.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:44:02]
Wait what was that?

Arthur Strimling [00:44:03]
Pardon?

Kristen Morgenstern [00:44:04]
That congregation.

Arthur Strimling [00:44:06]
Congregation Yah. Like, Arthur Waskow[36]. Who the rabbi was quoting today. He he's a wonderful. He's an amazing, amazing. He has a new book out, he must be 90. I mean, he's an amazing guy. He's a real big important figure in theRenewal Movement. And he

[33] An interpretation of religious text that is spoken in a seron/lecture format during services
[34] Genesis 22, also called The Binding of Isaac
[35] Personal name for God
[36] Important rabbi of the Jewish renewal movement

calls God Yah, like breath.They were talking about Yahweh. What's her name?[37] They were talking about Yahweh. He was talking about Yah, but its the breath thing. Congregation Yah. So, so, anyway. So that's a big part of what got me into Kolot. What made me really part of it eventually was the growing network of people that I was connected to because of Kolot. As friends, at Torah Study, as activists, as neighbors, as, you know, kind of at many levels, as well as just going to services or Torah study or purim or something together. So it began to become a network as well as a community. I think one of the things that really attracted me to the kind of theater that I started into originally was this sense of being a community instead of being an actor, going around knocking on doors and doing auditions which is a lonely, hard fucking life. It takes way too much inner resources just to do that. And this was a world that was rebelling against that and saying, no, we can gather, we can collaborate. Instead of compete, we can. Not just do a show and everybody loves each other. And then we say, “we've got to get together, let's have lunch.” And then it never happens, you know, because everybody goes their way. You know, you had that experience. And one part of it is a good thing. You know, you learn about death a lot. Every show dies.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:46:54]
Yeah.

Arthur Strimling [00:46:56]
A lot of us at that time certainly felt like there had to be another way.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:47:07]
This radical community.

Arthur Strimling [00:47:09]
And it was and it was political and spiritual. And it was artistic. And it was a moment in time, it happens every once in a while in history where the art, you know, radical art and radical politics and even radical religion kind of all come together. And it happened, you know, late sixties, early seventies in New York. And I was lucky enough to be in the middle of it and this theater company and all that stuff.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:47:37]
What was the name of the company?

Arthur Strimling [00:47:38]

[37] In reference to Kolot’s shabbat services Kristen and Arthur had both attended earlier that morning. The drash had referenced Yaweh.

The Talking Band, it still exists and the Open Theater. Oh, well, I wasn't in the Open Theater, but I was in the later incarnations and stuff that Joe did.[38] But. I was tremendously drawn to the sense of community and was sort of intentional about that since I'd gone out and moved so much when I grew up. We didn't have any religious affiliation.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:48:14]
Yeah.

Arthur Strimling [00:48:15]
So I didn't have a sense of rootedness at all. And I felt the lack of it and the word community was in the air. And I grabbed onto it and I looked for it. And in some ways that kind of ensemble work really did serve that. But It always kind of in the end, didn't work. And a lot because, well, community is part of the process. The agenda is to make good theater or it isn't worth bothering with. And that means often sacrificing a lot, including goodwill and, you know, and then people are people. So yeah, so, you know, betrayal and all that stuff goes on. So things fall apart. But one of the things that I began to be very aware of after a while was the sense that this was a community that existed for no other reason, than to be one. You know.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:49:19]
Kolot was?

Arthur Strimling [00:49:20]
Kolot, yeah. And to me, my sense of it and this is not by a long shot, everybodies. This is very personal to me because of that hunger for community. That's more central than even the religious part of it. And I think Judaism is about that. I really deeply do. We were talking in Torah Study this morning about the sense that Torah presents conflicting stories of the same versions, of the same story of Adam and Eve. You know, the stuff is told two different ways and they contradict each other. And also, you know, there's all this scholarship about who wrote which parts of Torah. You know, the J[39] you know all this stuff. Well, and Janet Price[40] who was leading Torah Study this morning is really into that stuff and so she was talking about part of this text that we were reading from the J text. And the priests put their two cents in there and so on and so on. And she asked the question, we were talking in breakout groups about “are you interested in that?” You know, looking at Torah that way or do you prefer to look at it as a kind of unified text? And my answer is both. I know it isn't a unified text, but I like to look at it as if it is because there's a lot to be got from doing it. To me, what's amazing about that is that

[38] Joe Chaikin
[39] one of the authors of Torah, of the oldest parts
[40] A member of Kolot who spearheads Torah Study

they left those traces. They didn't fix it. So it all sounds like one text, you know? If you and I and five other people write a document, I'll say, “okay, I'll make it.” You know, I'll do the final copy and I will go through it very carefully to give it a kind of unified sound and style and stuff like that. I will, you know, I may quote you, but I would quote. They didn't do that draft. They just left it like, okay, we need to say that, whatever fits with the priestly practice happened so it's okay. So they wrote it in, but they didn't write it into make it sound like they didn't write it in. They just wrote it in. And I think that's dialogic. That's like saying “this is a dialogue, it's a welcome, you know, come on in.”

Kristen Morgenstern [00:52:38]
Yeah.

Arthur Strimling [00:52:39]
Talmud is the same thing. You know, they would just present five different opinions about something and there you are. Or sometimes they'll make a decision, but they give you all the other opinions as well, because it might be useful, you know. And it is dialogic. It's meant to be. This is the answer. And I love that about Judaism. I love that sense of it, that. Yeah, we're trying to figure out who God is. Yeah, we want to figure out what a perfect world is, but we know that's a long journey and we need both what people have said before and we need our own input. We need to create people who understand that dialogue, understand that that's the way we work, the way we do things.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:53:45]
How has Torah Study helped you on that journey?

Arthur Strimling [00:53:48]
Well, in a whole lot of ways. I mean, first, as I say, by just reading the text and seeing how contradictory and opaque it is. And being invited to try to figure out what is going on. And being invited to criticize it, to question it. And never to feel like my question was not welcome or it was the wrong question. To be in real dialogue with very smart people who come from a whole range of other kinds of learning and thinking, lawyers and social workers and teachers and doctors and historians. People who have very different disciplines and therefore ways of thinking and responding. As well as artists. Now I listen mostly. You know, Ellen–. There was Torah study originally, I think this was a story Ellen wanted me to tell. You know, there was originally Torah Study, and we met after service. So it would be like noon or something and it was this small group of people and it got really boring. I mean, it’s just the people were not, it wasn't going anywhere. And I left, I quit, and so did several other people. And I get a phone call from Ellen one day and she said, Why don't you and I just start meeting at nine in the morning, let the other group go on and you and I will start meeting. And if it's just the two of us, fine. And if

other people want to come, great. So we did. And I mean, we started out with four or five people and, you know, it grew. So we just switched off leading it. And I was really doing it off my storytelling background much more than anything I knew from Jewish. But it made me read more midrash. It made me really study Avivah Zornberg[41] for two years, go to every lecture she gave and everything else. I read all this stuff and got really entranced by it and interested in it and then we started pulling other people into leading. Ellen again, you know, it's always her thing. She just wants more people to participate.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:56:52]
Yeah. How long did you lead?

Arthur Strimling [00:56:53]
Like last night-- Pardon?

Kristen Morgenstern [00:56:58]
How long did you lead Torah Study?

Arthur Strimling [00:56:58]
Oh. Somewhere between five and ten years. I don't know. I don't remember. And then Ellen retired. And then for a couple of years, I led it, I mean, I got other people leading all the time, but I was in charge of it. And then when Miriam had been rabbi for a little while, I just said it's time to let go and get somebody else and Janet Price and another person took it over and has done an absolutely magnificent job of leading it and turned it into something very different from what it was. And wonderful it was when it was in person. And at its most evolved, it was up in the balcony. Did you go there this morning?[42]

Kristen Morgenstern [00:57:48]
Yeah.

Arthur Strimling [00:57:48]
I saw some people did.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:57:48]
Yeah.

Arthur Strimling [00:57:48]

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[41] Author and Torah scholar, Arthur is part of an Avivah Zornberg reading group currently
[42] Arthur asking if Kristen had attended Torah Study in-person in the balcony of Kolot

I mean, it was, there was a little more space there. I don't know what it's like right now, but it was pretty much of a mess last time I was there. It was messy. But it was enough space for like 25 people sometimes, you know, around the table, another couple of rings around on them, people up the stairs, you know, like that. So it was very much like a sort of big midrash, all of us over texts kind of leaning in and it was much more conversation, you know.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:58:22]
Yeah.

Arthur Strimling [00:58:22]
Because you're not on Zoom.

Arthur Strimling [00:58:23]
You know, where you can be saying, yeah, now, because we're talking together. But on Zoom, you cannot do that. It won't work. You can nod your head like 3 seconds or something later you can do that, but you can't be part of the conversation. But I think what's evolved on Zoom is also excellent, I miss the bodies around the table. But I really appreciate the kind of conversation that we have.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:58:50]
Yeah, well, that's like a pandemic growing pain, but

Arthur Strimling [00:58:54]
Very much.

Kristen Morgenstern [00:58:54]
Thinking of, besides Covid, is sort of how Kolot has grown and changed over the years, and you've grown and changed over the years. What has that relationship of Kolot's growth been like for you?

Arthur Strimling [00:59:14]
(Sigh) I am very much a small group person. I do not like large, I am what someone called an organized anarchist and a militant pacifist. I like small organizations. I ran a small theater company for a long time and worked in small groups. So I loved it when it was small. I still love it very much. Now people use the word siloed. I am centered in Torah study. That's mine, my shtetl. You know, I know all those people. I'm in contact with a lot of my friends, the people I go for walks with, etc., and I see them week in and week out, and I know their minds in a certain way. Well, some of them I know personally. So it's, you know, that is my part of Kolot. I mean, I go to the services and

have grown to love going to services and value them immensely. I mean a lot. Initially it was more because of Lisa that I went to services in support of her and to listen to her sing.

Kristen Morgenstern [01:00:55]
What's that like?

Arthur Strimling [01:00:57]
Oh, God I love it. Oh, you know, she has to put up with the director in me, which is, you know, sometimes it's a problem, but sometimes it's helpful. And I moderated it a whole lot. But I love listening to her sing. Partly because she is so.released into it. She's just so fully herself. And there are other places where she is but, you know, it's just she can go there and I love it. Yeah so it's a real, you know, great joy and pleasure for me to listen to her sing. I'm very aware of what's going on in the room. Partly because I am a director, I do what I've always done, I just do that. And I spent a lot of years developing those antennas, so I'm really aware of that. It's a complicated thing. And I love the prayers, I love them now. I mean, I, this is important, I'm glad you asked this question. I learned about praise from Kolot. I grew up in a family where love consisted of saying the most critical thing you could think of to say, because most people are not honest with each other. “We're family, we can be honest with each other. So I will tell you, the worst thing I think to prove that I love you,” you know. And I mean it's real. And I got very good at both. At criticizing and at being criticized and that's a very useful thing to know in our culture, you know, especially in theater. It really is.

Kristen Morgenstern [01:03:30]
Yeah.

Arthur Strimling [01:03:31]
So I learned that what I couldn't deal with was praise. I never believed it. I always thought, you know, only insurance salesmen praise. You know, they're going to have something to sell you. And saying those prayers by rote, saying those prayers of praise over and over again. When I got to know roughly what they meant from the Hebrew, just from reading the translations, it kind of after a while, being aware that’s that one. And saying those things there is that, in one of the texts there's a thing about who rises from prayer a better person, their prayers are answered. Well, when I said just by rote, said all those words of praise, I felt better. You know, I mean, a text will change will make you feel different. And I'm an actor, so if I read something, I put myself in it. So I did it and saying that praise which meant nothing to me. I was praising something I didn't believe in, but it still made me feel better. So I realized that praise can be as real. I mean, it's like a dumb thing to say because everyone would agree that praise is as real as

criticism. But you can agree on an intellectual level and you can agree at the level of your DNA. And it took that, and I'm immensely grateful for that.

Kristen Morgenstern [01:05:29]
Wow.

Arthur Strimling [01:05:33]
And I think it's a lesson a lot of people I know don't learn so Kolot gave me that as well. And I think the growth of it, early on, Lisa and I were tremendously involved in the growth. I'm not that aware of it, but there was this kind of myth that half of Kolot was there because of Lisa and me, which I don't think was true. And it was very small. And then some really amazing people showed up, great people from Act Up[43]. Some of whom are still part of it. And brilliant, engaged, funny, cool, just great. And they came in and things really started to jump in a different way. And I think, how? How Ellen pulled that off I'm not sure, but she did. And we began to see how much it meant that. Really engaged, talented people were part of it. Now everything kind of had elevated. And that has continued to be true. And it's partly I think a lot of it is. That there are already talented people, but also there has been this sense in which you're not just a person who is invited. You're, you're engaged and often engaged in ways that are using talents you may or may not know and have honed, but in somewhat different ways than you're used to.

Kristen Morgenstern [01:07:53]
Yeah. So storytelling for you.

Arthur Strimling [01:07:56]
Yeah, yeah. I mean, I was a theater guy. Yeah. Doing theater stuff.

Kristen Morgenstern [01:08:00]
Do you remember when that sort of transferred into storytelling?

Arthur Strimling [01:08:07]
Well partly from the things I got from Barbara, which were Jewish, but more it became really central to me as a just not a theater person, just as me being part of a community through being the Maggid at Kolot. Through, you know, having to think up a story or find a story or something for an occasion which made me look into the occasion to learn a little bit about more about it. And respond to it more deeply or a drash or something like that.

[43] A political group and grassroots movement fighting to end the AIDS Pandemic since 1987

Kristen Morgenstern [01:08:41]
Can I ask your process for writing a midrash? What does that process look like?

Arthur Strimling [01:08:51]
The text, the text, the text, the text, the text. Read some other midrash. Go back to the text. Ask myself, what in the text really burns me? Good or bad, doesn't matter. Just burns. What's hot for me? And usually it's- more and more it's something that I'm not expecting at all. Like going back to the Akhedah[44] year after year after year after year. And letting myself have moments of writing. I don't like to write about what I'm going to write at all and I only write in a narrative voice, I mean. I write the story. And at the time I, that's when we had the dog. And I walked the dog and the dog was a very good listener. And I would just talk because talking helps me. And then I eventually get on the page and get very on the page. I like things to be shaped, I mean, something that's like that. Um, but I'd say only as long as I can stand it, because otherwise I get just obsessed with it. It's not as much fun. It's not as interesting. So I try to, I try to push myself with this stuff for Kolot where there was a deadline. I am a procrastinator. So I started to use it and let myself be obsessed without feeling like I had to write. I'm not that anymore. But I was very much then and so I would obsess about it a lot before I wrote it, and I would try to keep myself from writing because the writing comes pretty easily, well it does for me of that sort of stuff. And doing it a lot gave me a sense of the trajectory of things and the sense of the length of things. So that I could trust more and I had this community that I had known and was talking to and that was so valuable for that kind of stuff. Public stuff that was written or said to be heard.

Kristen Morgenstern [01:11:52]
Where would you say this?

Arthur Strimling [01:11:54]
In the park.

Kristen Morgenstern [01:11:55]
In the park?

Arthur Strimling [01:11:56]
Yeah. Or I couldn't go with the dog. But Green-Wood Cemetery[45] is actually very good because it's empty. Emptier than the park. But I can go up to the top of the hill in the park there or I could ask like in talking on the phone because people do that all the time

[44] Hebrew for Binding, References a biblical story from the book of genesis
[45] A historic cemetery in Brooklyn

anyway. So yeah. You don't look like a schizophrenic anymore when you're walking along, talking loudly.

Kristen Morgenstern [01:12:24]
And once you had those midrashes what did you do with them?

Arthur Strimling [01:12:28]
Some of them got published. Some of them, I just have. The akhedah ones people keep telling me they want to publish it and then it doesn't happen. So I'm still waiting. But you know, there, people know them. At that time I was touring to different synagogues and places like that. Theaters and synagogues. Jewish community centers and stuff like that, doing Jewish stuff. So I would use it there, you know, I would just take it on the road with me.

Kristen Morgenstern [01:13:03]
What were you touring with?

Arthur Strimling [01:13:06]
Stories. I mean, stories just, you know, as a storyteller or a workshop leader. I did a lot of. Workshops on storytelling. Workshops on intergenerational stuff. That's why I'm really interested in what you guys are doing, because it is intergenerational. I mean, part of my wanting to talk to you is I want. You know, you're an investment for me, you and your crowd, because you'll be around, you know, maybe you'll remember one thing out of this. And that way I'll go on a little bit. You know, that's kind of pPart of the game here, you know?

Kristen Morgenstern [01:13:59]
How does storytelling feel Jewish to you?

Arthur Strimling [01:14:15]
It's a funny question. I think it's confusing because I think that storytelling is more fundamentally human than Judaism and Judaism is a human creation. Barbara Myerhoff used to call humans Homo narans. We're not Homo sapiens, we are Homo narans. Narans is storytellers, stories, in latin. Homo narans. And that's what, you know, that's what distinguished humans is that we tell stories. So your question confuses me a little bit because in a way, the stories come first, the Jewish part of it. I. I think that's and unanswered for me at this point. I don't have an answer, you know, or I have too many answers. You know, I got like, yeah, there's I tell stories and I'm Jewish, there's that. You know.

Kristen Morgenstern [01:15:25]
Or how do they feel connected to you? Do they?

Arthur Strimling [01:15:25]
I think that they really do. And, um, partly, I think this is a, not going to help but I feel it partly because I'm writing a story that doesn't have much Jewish content and I feel the lack of it. And I'm try to find how the story can have that and not violate the story I want to tell so I feel like the lack of it in a way at the moment more than I feel it. I mean, for me the Midrash and all that stuff is part of it. It's Jewish in the sense that it's part of a dialogue with our tradition. You know, if I'm writing a midrash, I'm looking at things that were written in Babylon in 400 BC and I'm talking to those guys like they're at the table. And I really like to think of it that way, you know? And I'm really sorry it's all these guys, stinks. But I think that many of the smarter ones go home and talk to their wives and their daughters and their sisters and repeat what they hear as if it were theirs. It's a male habit that I think goes back a long way. Stealing things from women and claiming it as their own. So I think all those rabbis went back and talked to their very smart, pissed off wives, got some more wisdom and went back and claimed it as their own. I mean, I really do believe that, that's not a joke. I mean that. So I think that women are very much in there, just not given credit. And I think it's part of why I think women's culture has been so able to transform Judaism in this span of time, so quickly. You know, since the early seventies.

Kristen Morgenstern [01:18:02]
Yeah.

Arthur Strimling [01:18:02]
That's it. You know, 50 years. And I have spent my entire Jewish life. You know, women run. Women centered community.

Kristen Morgenstern [01:18:15]
What does that mean to you?

Arthur Strimling [01:18:21]
It's a very comfortable place for me to be. I grew up, I guess, around strong women. I grew up with parents who were openly feminist for their time. My mother always worked and had a vocation, not a job. She was an actress and she was, you know, worked as a professional. She was very good at it. She worked incredibly hard at it. And it was her vocation. You know that in the ancient sense of that word, which was unique. In the world that I live in as a kid. And I was around theaters where women were powerful, where queer people were powerful. So Kolot is like water I've swam in all my life and in

the theater world that I traveled in. It may or may not have been led by men or women. I worked with a lot of women directors and writers, actors. But it's feminism was a big force in that world. And Jewishly, the first seder I ever went to was one of the very first feminist seders, first one I ever went to. And it was written by a bunch of women that I knew Joe, Joe's sister. They were raised orthodox and his sister was was the hazan[46] at the gay and lesbian synagogue when it started. Again, I was just around, I took it for granted. How did this, how does it affect me? I've been trying to write about that now and thinking about it a great deal. I think that my simplest answer at this moment is that it was not difficult, luckily for me. To give up a lot of the trappings of male privilege I didn't get. I'm not a highly competitive person and not a person who needs to dominate particularly. But in the end, losing that stuff opened up a huge amount of possibilities for me as an artist, as a human, as a father. So anyway, I'd rather I'm losing shit here that I don't want mostly. And the reason why is midrash you know, I said it was, it happened, I think, because of feminism. That whole contemporary midrash movement. Yeah and you know it's huge. And I think everywhere I look, those kinds of opportunities and openings exist. You don't have you're not, you know, dwelling on what you might or might not have lost is not a good idea. You could mourn it or something, but sitting around complaining about it is not going to help. And I don't know. I just am somebody who looks that way at things. And so it opened up artistic possibilities for me that I had not would not have considered. And so it opened up. It changed me as a father enormously. And I had been much criticized and felt guilty about how much I liked being a father for the first ten years of being a father because I really did like it and men weren't supposed to, not that much. So I took a lot of shit for it. So a lot changed. I was very grateful.

Kristen Morgenstern [01:23:12]
How do you think it changed you being a father?

Arthur Strimling [01:23:17]
Partly you would have to ask my sons but it just made it. It gave me permission to be open, try to be open with them. You know, like you weren't supposed to be. You were supposed to keep your distance, you were supposed to keep that. Father-son thing that I'm older, I'm wiser, I'm paying your bills. You do what I tell you and it will be good for you. And I mean, that can be done well or done badly. But that was the mode. And I don't know whether, you know, this new parenting makes better people I'm not sure, but it's different. And I felt acquainted to it. You know, I liked it. I tried to try to think of it in the, in ways that were as I was doing it, quite undefined as yet. I think it's much more defined now. You know, I see the fathers in Park Slope and Kolot and they are so much more at home in a kind of intimacy with their children, real or imagined. I don't know, but

[46] An official at a Jewish synagogue

that's they seek it open and would have one believe that they are that and many of them are really are. That's a big transformation. It just didn't exist. And I was part of the sort of first category of people who started creating that. And, you know, so I don't think I did that. Fabulous of a job with it. But you know my sons have turned out well and. We get along well, most of the time. You know, I'm very proud of them. And they know that. And with one of them we have achieved real friendship. I mean, we're still father and son, but it's not the biggest deal in our relationship. It's a real friendship that is that includes father and son. But a lot of other things as well. And the other with my other son, it's more. As often happens, it's a little more strained. But we really love each other and aged with each other. And I think we'll get there, we'll find our way to it. And I think that this. (Pause, taking a sip of water and getting a clementine). I wanted to say to you that, here would you like? (A Clementine).

Kristen Morgenstern [01:26:38]
Thank you.

Arthur Strimling [01:26:38]
Last night, you saw Ellen Lippmann in action last night when she said, “and when we finish our Bentsching[47], everybody's going to help clean up.”

Kristen Morgenstern [01:26:54]
Yeah.

Kristen Morgenstern [01:26:55]
And I looked around the table and everybody smiled. It's like everybody's like, “Of course that's what I want to do.” But if she hadn't said it, you know, a few people would have volunteered. And everybody else sort of kind of stood around just out of sort of oblivion, you know, or shyness or whatever. But when she says, “okay, now everybody is going to clean up”, everybody did. You know, and she's just she can do that and does it. And when she does it, it's so obvious you either don't almost notice it or you wonder, why doesn't everybody just automatically do that?

Kristen Morgenstern [01:27:35]
Yeah. Was it hard when she left?[48]

Arthur Strimling [01:27:43]
Well, I was ready for it to happen. We remained friends. We remained in contact. I was very, I mean, sad that she wanted to retire. But you know, a little mad at her for it. I went

[47] A set of prayers in Judaism that are done following a meal
[48] In reference to founding Rabbi Ellen Lippman’s retirement from Kolot

through all that abandoned stuff, gave her a lot of shit about that. But now. She's around and she's doing, you know, astonishing things, helping the community in all kinds of ways. And Miriam is doing a great job at stuff that, a lot of stuff that Ellen really was done with. You know Ellen was not a big bema[49] rabbi. She wouldn't want to give sermons. She loved having Lisa sing lots and lots and lots of stuff. And she wanted other people to do drashes. You want you know, she was, her orientation was participation. So things were more participatory. I don't know more, but they were very participatory. And that's gone on and I think is doing fine. And I as many still think of Ellen as my rabbi. I think that's a very common thing. You know, you're you're sort of everybody has a rabbi. And you may love other rabbis and respect the rabbis as I do, Miriam. But Ellen is my rabbi. And it's not a big deal to me, I don't feel, you know, I don't feel like Miriam has any obligation to step into that place in me. You know or to try. It would be an interference to try to. Do you have a rabbi?

Kristen Morgenstern [01:30:08]
Not yet. Someday soon, hopefully. Just thinking about, you sort of had this whole transformation from your upbringing and your parents and their position with religion to now where you are now. How does that feel?

Arthur Strimling [01:30:27]
Hilarious.

Kristen Morgenstern [01:30:29]
What do you think they would say?

Arthur Strimling [01:30:32]
Oh, they said, I don't have to speculate about that. And I've got a sister who will tell me anytime. I mean, they were kind of bemused, you know, like, “That's him. He'll just go off.” And either that or they're partly blamed it on Lisa I think, and they were never hostile. They were not mean really. I mean snarky, but not mean about it. No and I never felt like I, once I overcame the sense that I was in some way or other disappointing them or betraying values. Which I did, you know, once I got over that part of it. Then I would knew that with this I could pretty much predict how they would react to it. It didn't to me. And it didn't matter to them either. And it didn't change anything about our relationship. They had something else to kid to me about and to each other about me, about, you know, what is going on with him now? That always the question.

Kristen Morgenstern [01:32:04]
But for you, that transformation what was that like?

[49] The raised platform at the front of the synagogue the rabbi stands behind during services

Arthur Strimling [01:32:17]
It doesn't feel like a transformation. It feels like an evolution. It feels really like evolution. Like this was always there. It was a part of me that in a certain sense, I've spent most of my life re-finding. You know as I said, theater kind of had that place in my life for a while, love has had that place in my life, sports have had that place in my life. You know, they're all part of some sort of spiritual journey. So this feels like a fulfillment more than a transformation.

Kristen Morgenstern [01:33:05]
Yeah.

Arthur Strimling [01:33:06]
Um. Yeah. Um.

Kristen Morgenstern [01:33:17]
What is your hope for Kolot of the future?

Arthur Strimling [01:33:25]
I don't think about it very much oddly. And this is, you're raising a good question maybe I need to think about more now. I. There is part of me that says it should go wherever it goes. You know, I don't own it. I don't. I can let it go. You know, I think the childhood I had and working in theater made me very good at letting go of things. And, you know, that's useful. And I think I've had that feeling about Kolot. I'm really unsympathetic to the notion that it should go on because it has existed and it's been a good thing. And it. You know, I just don't believe in, if something is ready to go. It's ready to go. God bless and move on. So. I hope it'll I will certainly contribute to its future, you know, financially when I die, you know, etc.. And I will try to do what I'm doing now, which is transmit some of the values that matter to me by telling you these stories of that I value in Kolot. The things that have made a huge difference to me. And that I think are not not doing the same thing, but looking for those values of community and kindness and interconnection and all hands are needed and eating together and being there for each other in times of crisis. And being a lot of fun and deadly serious all at the same time. Talking about that with Zev[50] last night. You know, those are things that matter. I would love to be able to pass all of that on like I don't know, a beautiful package, you know, and have it just go on. As it was for me, it should be for you. I know better. It doesn't work like that. You know, culture is not a sack of potatoes you can just hand it on. You know, culture is like it's like a three legged race, you know, that you're tripping all the time. And I don't know, so what you take from this. I have no real idea. You know, I don't

[50] An interviewer for this project who had attended our dinner the night before.

know you very well. You're smart as hell. You're really nice and interested. And you pay attention. You know, I see that. And I was eager to talk to you because I can see that. And but what you will take away from this I have no idea. There is a wonderful Hebrew word for when you give something, you can either give it with conditions or without conditions. You know, I give you this grant to write this novel or whatever. You're supposed to do that or I give you this. It's yours. You do with it as you will. I'm done with it. I have no responsibility. That's the way I have to feel. I feel like I have to feel about like about like that, about this. Because I know I have been around. I've been doing this kind of stuff, listening to people's stories, trying to transmit their stories, finding all kinds of ways to transmit their stories. And their values and their norms and their rituals and their styles and all that stuff. And I've done it very well. And what I have learned from that is that what people see and hear is only in very limited, in very limited ways. And I think passing the torch of a culture like Kolot is at the far extreme of you can't make it happen. You're a different generation. Miriam is a different generation. You know so I say these words to you. And you, I'm quite sure you and I speak very as if we were around each other for a while. We discover how much different our languages are. You know, I spent a lot of time in this theater company that I ran in, that I created and directed for a long time called Roots and Branches[51]. And it was elder actors working with young actors, people your age, college students or graduate students at NYU. The older people were elders- 70's, 80's 90's. And one of the things we discovered very quickly was that they weren't speaking the same English. They just were not. And so I learned that. And I learned what people hear. I know you learned that from theater over and over and over again. You're putting it out there and you're putting it out there. You know what you're putting out there and your friends come and they tell you, “I got that from that.” “What? You got what from what?” Total digression. But I was doing a Greek play one time and there was this immense scene and a brother and sister, I'm blanking on the names, brother and sister are. Seeing each other for the first time in forever, recognizing each other. And it was very physical and it was like huge. And so we are going out there one night and as I'm going out there, this feather flies into my throat. And I did the whole scene choking, completely choking. All the scene was about for me. You know, I went totally through the motions. I said every word. But the only thing was about trying to get this fucking feather on my throat and I couldn't. And I went back afterwards and I was like traumatized and apologizing and the director says “that's the best I've ever seen it.” You know, and everybody, all my friends who are in the audience were like that was unbelievable, that was incredible. You know, I could never do it again, I would need a feather ever night it wouldn't work. So, anyway, so I feel. But I feel like it's that untranslatable what I'm saying. So When you ask what I think about the future, It should. It should. Zei gezunt.[52] You know, I don't know. And. So I partly, I don't want to

[51] Arthur’s book about his theatre company: https://books.google.com/books/about/Roots_Branches.html?id=ShjuAAAAMAAJ

[52] Be well! Be healthy! In Yiddish

care a whole lot because I see too much. That really disturbs me when people care a whole lot about reaching out from the grave and controlling the future. They are not part of trying to. So my preference is to say, you know, “zei gezunt, it's been good to know you. And I'm very grateful.” And I hope that people find ways to find what I have found and I'll share what I've found and I'll share how I got it and all that stuff. But what you, how you go about doing that or whether you care I don't know. It's not easy to say, but I think that's true.[53]

Kristen Morgenstern [01:42:57]
Yeah. Thank you so much for sharing. Thank you.

Arthur Strimling [01:43:03]
Good job.

Kristen Morgenstern [01:43:03]
Thank you. Okay. (Recording ends)

[53] An afterthought by Arthur Strimling on this topic:
“I have pondered one question; you asked what I hope for the future of Kolot and I told you basically, 'I let it go.' But on second (or twelfth) thought, I do have hopes and this is the best formulation I can give you: I hope Kolot remains a place where creative, progressive minded, searching people continue to say, 'I never knew there could be a place like this.'”