

franny silverman by Lili Platt

November 7, 2022

Length: 1:34:52

Lili Platt 0:00

Alright. It is Monday, November 7, 2022. We are in Kingston, New York and we're doing an interview for the Kolot Chayeinu Oral History Project. Yay. [both say "Yay!"] I'm Lili Platt and I'm interviewing narrator franny silverman. My first question for you, franny, is what brought you to Kolot? How has your time and relationship to Kolot evolved over the years?

franny silverman 0:38

Great question.

I was connected to Kolot through Shanie Israel, who I went to college with – no, who I went to high school with in Cleveland, Ohio. She and her wife and kiddo were living in Brooklyn at the time, and I was also living in Brooklyn. We were connected a little bit because we went to high school together and were both in Brooklyn. I think it was around the time when their family was getting ready to move to New Jersey. They had been teaching there [at Kolot]. They were an elementary school educator and they were teaching at Kolot, in the Hebrew school, at the Children's Learning Program. They were trying to find somebody to take their job. At the time, I was between – I was working as an actor and was supplementing with mostly Jewish education, Jewish arts income, and so I was like, "Yeah, that sounds good." I hadn't heard about Kolot, I was already connected with a Jewish community in Manhattan that I helped to start up in some ways, so I wasn't really looking for Jewish community or whatever. I had also sworn off teaching at Jewish supplementary religious schools at the time.

So Shanie was like, "Hey, are you interested in teaching here?" I was really only doing private tutoring at this time because there are no congregations where our values aligned. I didn't want to teach at a place that's not values-aligned because I don't want to teach things where I have to be present to education that I think is mis-education. Shanie was like, "I think this won't be like that for you," and I was like, "Okay, let's see." Then I was like, "Wow, this is different."

00:03:17

At the first teacher orientation, at the start of the year, I remember us sitting around – Ora Wise¹ was the Ed. Director who had hired me, she and I kind of were adjacent to each other, we'd known each other a little bit before that – and at that teacher orientation we read – maybe the opening exercise was to read the Kolot mission statement aloud and then we responded to it. I

¹ Ora Wise, former head of education programs at Kolot, current work found at: amc.alliedmedia.org/recipes-for-radical-hospitality#meet-the-creators

remember feeling honestly like, honestly a little bit appalled. Like, how dare a congregation have a mission statement that I believe in?

I just couldn't really square – the community that I was a part of in Manhattan was still very outsider-y. It was artists-based and wasn't trying to be a Schul, at that time anyways, even though we would do services and rituals and stuff it was like not trying to do that, but this was clearly a congregation and I was like, "Oh, my gosh. What? What?" That was very exciting to me. I think that that was the very beginning – gosh, what year was that? Maybe, 2009? Something like that, something like 2009 or 10. Something around then. It was like the economy had tanked, Bernie Madoff – it was like that era, pre-Occupy, but not by much.

00:05:19

I started teaching *kitah bet*, second grade. Then the next year – I am trying to think of if it was that year or the next year – at some point I co-created a curriculum with T. Wise.² He had already been teaching at Kolot and Ora, the director, secured funding for the two of us to co-create a curriculum for the eighth graders. Ora really respected me. She was asking about the program, and I said to her, "No, no. We can take a year to create it and then implement it the next year. I don't want to do it all at once." She really listened to me and was able to lobby for the budget around that. That curriculum was called "What's Up: Jewish Art Social Justice."³ It was like hashtag Jewish Arts Social Justice. It was an arts-based social justice curriculum for eighth graders/post *b'nei mitzvah* year. At some point, I was teaching that with T., and then also *kitah bet*, and it was like that for a few years. Then Ora was leaving her position and I was pregnant, and I ended up applying for the Ed. Director position – the Director of Youth Education was that title. My final interview was maybe days before I gave birth. I remember being in the interview ginormous, and other people remember that too, like, WOAH. A fun fact is that my first interview was maybe the worst interview that anybody had ever been in, including me, which is cute. You could talk to like Andrea Greenblatt, Ellen Honigstock, Andrea Arzt⁴, probably Ellen Lippmann⁵, and they will all speak to what a bad interview it was – and Ora! But they brought me back, they were like she's pregnant – and Ora really lobbied for me.

Then I got the job! I gave birth, I had a summer, and then I started working a tiny bit over the summer – I had to do some hiring – and then I started in the fall. I ran the Children's Learning Program for several years. As Kolot grew and shifted, a new position was created for me called

² Tahel Wise, educator at Kolot Chayeinu: <https://www.kolotchayeinu.org/bnai-mitzvah-tutors>

³ "What's Up" curriculum 5783: docs.google.com/document/d/1Kl2LExneCF1NUjbnN2H_0xsSFd-YwriEb85npSk6qK4/edit

⁴ Andrea Greenblatt: Co-Chair of the Kolot Education Committee, Ellen Honigstock: former member of the Kolot Education Committee, Andrea Arzt: former member of the Kolot Executive Committee

⁵ Ellen Lippmann, founding rabbi of Kolot: <https://sites.middlebury.edu/kolotprofiles/portfolio/ellen-lippmann/>

Director of Learning and Action. That position is now called something else, I forget, I think Director of Justice and Equity is what evolved to be me. The Director of Learning and Action position was one that I held for several years and I supervised the principal who then ran the Learning Program. The bulk of my work was focused on justice work in the congregation broadly, both including the school but not exclusively. I don't remember the question [light laughter], but over the – about like my involvement in Kolot! So anyways, that's how it started. That's the general arc. Over the years Kolot offered free membership to its teachers which I thought was really cool. Then I became a member. My family was in membership, my child started going to the programs that I was in part overseeing. I was more deeply integrated into the community. It very quickly became more than a job. It was a lifestyle.

Lili Platt 10:18

What do you mean by that “more than a job”? Or “a lifestyle”?

franny silverman 10:21

The work that I was doing while I was on staff at Kolot was all connected to my life's work. That's what I mean when I say more than a job it was like, you know not – I think there's a lot of ways that peoples' careers or jobs are in alignment with their values and hopes and dreams, and even that doesn't quite describe the depth of Kolot. My work there really touched a deep sense of obligation in me that is of my being, that is connected both to my own Jewish identity, Jewishness in general, Jewish people in general, and justice [franny sneezes, Lili Platt says: “bless you” franny silverman: “thank you”], anti-racism – dismantling and unlearning of systems, building something new – all of these really core things. You know, not every aspect of my job including this, but overall why I was doing what I was doing, and why I was able to be successful at it – and when I say successful, I mean successful at building the budget around getting more money to anti-racism work, successful at getting grants for funding, successful at hiring people to create curriculum that was aligned, those kinds of things – is because I just cared deeply.

Lili Platt 13:01

That care makes such a difference in how we work. You've been mentioning the social justice work that happens at Kolot and in our pre-interview conversation you spoke to the Israel/Palestine Working Group and the Queer and Trans Working Group formations when you were Director of Learning and Action. I'm wondering if there's anything you'd like to speak to about how that formation went, what it was like, if it was challenging...

franny silverman 13:40

[Laughs] In general, Kolot when I was there, that's obviously the time that I'm speaking to... I think that all community that endures over time goes through shifts and changes. During the time I was there, there was a strong emphasis on process. Not horizontal leadership, because that

wasn't the setup, but equitable process. Different people had different understandings of what that looked like, however, many people in membership and in staff leadership and lay leadership had that at the fore. This meant that forming a new group actually took a fair amount of effort because it was like: how do we get the word out in an equitable way? How do we also make sure that people individually know who we think will have an interest, but not at the cost of letting other people know? How do we come up with a process for this group to make decisions? Who is this group? Who gets to constitute the group? Who gets to decide how the group is going to run? Are there chair people? Is it consensus-based? Kolot didn't have a prescriptive way of how all committees work, but there was again, across and throughout, this sense of wanting to have an equitable process at the fore. This means that things take a long time, actually, which is just what it is. But also, I kind of loved that [laughs]. I didn't love that things were taking a long time, but I love the challenge, I still appreciate the challenge, of establishing and moving an equitable process forward, while also maintaining the right-sized urgency of whatever the project is, without moving into full-on navel gazing and chasing our own tails, but also knowing that stuff's going to come up to delay things and require shifts.

00:16:36

Max⁶ – I can't remember his name. Max, what's your last name? Oh my god. Rabbi Max, who maybe was still in rabbinical school at the time, helped to establish, with me, the process of forming the Queer and Trans Working Group. They were really helpful in that as a congregant, as a trans person – I'm not, I'm cis – able to hold that. Actually, he wasn't that involved in the group after the formation, but it was great. In the way that sometimes people are present for the part that is most needed of them. He did officiate an adult *b'nai mitzvah* for a member of the group, which was really, really meaningful. Oh my God. I can't believe this is gonna be recorded. Max, are you listening? I'm sorry, I forgot your last name [laughs]. I'm so sorry.

00:18:06

That was the beginning of that group. It was interesting because the Queer and Trans Working Group was trying to figure out what it was and why it was. One of the things that was exceptionally beautiful about it, which I'll say is actually true for a lot of things Kolot, is that it was a cross-generational group, which was really special. For social things, that was really great. There were Hanukkah things and it was great for people to socialize together. Gen Z, millennials, Gen X, Boomers, all together. There were areas of difference that were surfaced, right? Most of the folks who were trans and/or non-binary identifying were – most, but not all – in younger generations and were experiencing more oppression within Kolot, or within Jewish spaces than cis gay, lesbian, and/or queer-identifying. I'm distilling some of that because the language of “queer” was still really challenging for some, but not all, of older generations. Those were really dynamic and beautiful things to surface and name in the space. We came up with a lot of ideas of

⁶ Rabbi Max Reynolds, student rabbi at Kolot Chayeinu and founding member of Queer/Trans working group, current work can be found here: <https://truah.org/people/max-reynolds/>

programs that didn't run [laughs]. I think one or two of them did, I think we maybe did one of the language ones, and also people wanted to run stuff and it's hard. It's hard to keep the energy, but the meetings were really social and lovely. They started at Kolot, but then they moved to people's homes. We consistently met in a couple of different homes that provided the most access for folks to be able to be there who had the hardest challenges around traveling and/or accessing steps.

00:20:44

That group was really good at taking care. There was always food at those meetings. All the meetings were potluck, now that I'm remembering. Both for that, and the Israel/Palestine Working Group and the Race Working Group. I learned that from – the other groups benefited from the work that the Race Task Force, which then became the Race Working Group, had already established. It was very Kolot-y. Kolot, I'm sure if you've heard people talk about it: "Kolot was formed around a table and there was food," right? You know, Ellen will be like: "I wanted to start a cafe." That's very integral to Kolot, and then deeply extended into the Race Task Force, which became the Race Working Group, and then was able to continue through. Sometimes our potlucks would be chips, salsa, cookies, and popcorn [laughs], or chips, salsa, cookies, and popcorn, and a rotisserie chicken, right? The spirit of gathering together with food and community was central to the project of Kolot, and also central to each of these working groups.

00:22:10

The Israel/Palestine Working Group – so I guess I'm assuming the listeners don't know anything? I don't know. Kolot, before I arrived, one of the things that had already been established at Kolot is that it was – though not explicitly in its mission statement, though it was integrated into the longer value statement later – is something like, I don't remember the exact language, but the way people would talk about it is with the language of open tent on Israel and Palestine. Open tent meaning no litmus tests. No shutting people out. Yes, there's space to be a proud anti-Zionist in this congregation, and it's not a congregation of anti-Zionists. Kolot was rather revolutionary in that. I'm trying to think what year it was founded in. I don't remember, you might remember late 90s, early 2000s.

Lili Platt 23:25

Late 90s.

franny silverman 23:25

Late 90s, right. Even the open tent thing evolved and grew. Right now we're living at a time where there are anti-Zionist congregations and anti-Zionist rabbis. That was not the case when Kolot was founded. I'm sure there will be people who will speak directly to the experience of being anti-Zionist and being able to experience Jewish ritual and services without compromising

their anti-Zionist values or being stealth as a secret anti-Zionist. I'm gonna let people speak to that specifically.

When I came on as a teacher, that was among the Kolot values that I thought were amazing, because it was part of the reason why I stopped teaching at other places. When I say I stopped teaching at other supplementary Jewish learning spaces, it was because I was being asked to teach in a way that I didn't feel was responsible to myself or the world I want to be living in or the world that I want to be raising children in. [Kolot was] in practice, holding space for a community that includes center left to all the way left Jews. There are Kolot members who go to AIPAC.⁷ There's not a lot of them, but there's a few of them. And they are by far the furthest left people at AIPAC, but they're the furthest left people at AIPAC! And there's all the JVP⁸ stuff – which are anti-Zionist: Jewish Voices For Peace. I don't know what AIPAC stands for, and I'm not going to worry about it right now [laughs].

00:25:58

So the question was: how do we teach these children? What do we teach these children? How do we teach these children? How do we hold space for community? I focused for several years on educating the youth and what that would look like. The way that it was happening in the congregation was mostly by, maybe someone's gonna get mad at me for saying this, but I would say mostly by avoidance. Not that people weren't like, but it wasn't – I don't know if it was like 2014 Gaza, maybe it was before that – there were some big moments where Ellen or Brad Lander⁹ or whoever will tell you the story – Kolot was protesting but mostly, people were not talking to each other about things within Kolot membership. People were not talking to each other about Israel or Palestine. There was a sense that, actually, everybody lost. There was a sense among some of us, that avoidance was actually not helpful. That there was loss. That everybody was losing something in that.

So, I had been through a facilitator training with Resetting the Table¹⁰ which is an organization that does facilitation of conversations across political differences. Now, a lot of it focuses in the US across political differences: red/blue stuff. At its inception, the organization was focusing on Israel and Palestine with conversations within the Jewish community. Their methodology comes out of transformative mediation work. So, I was trained in this methodology of facilitation and I

⁷ AIPAC, American Israel Public Affairs Committee, is a Zionist lobbying group. More information can be found on their website, here: <https://www.aipac.org/>

⁸ JVP, Jewish Voices for Peace, is a left-wing Jewish activist organization in the U.S. that supports the Boycott, Divestment and Sanction campaign against Israel. More on their website, here: <https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org>

⁹ Brad Lander is a longtime member of Kolot.

¹⁰ For more information on Resetting the Table, see their website: <https://www.resettingthetable.org/>

was having these conversations with Rabbi Ellen Lippmann, and telling her I was doing it, and she really encouraged me to do it.

One of the things that she was concerned about, I don't know if this is how she remembers it, but how I remember it is, one of the things she was concerned about in knowing that she was leaving, and actually a big concern that was held by congregants, was that she was single-handedly holding this open tent up. There was a big fear that when she retired that it would all collapse, because she was holding it up in a lot of ways by herself and hadn't built capacity within the congregation to actually like, hold it, right? Because the avoidance was happening.

So, one of the ways to effort at building capacity in the congregation was, once I went through the process of facilitation, we brought Resetting the Table on and held a series of what their processes called town halls. We held a series of these small group facilitations, conversations that were less about: what do you think about Israel? What do you think about Palestine? What are the borders? What do you think about zionism? Not those conversations, more of asking: what's people's experience at Kolot in relation to political engagement around Palestinian and Israel? The methodology is really about giving opportunities for people to share what matters most to them about something and why. Asking: what is the kernel behind the passion that is showing up with a laundry list of facts or screaming match or whatever, what is beneath that? Surfacing what is beneath that for the purpose of people being able to understand it, and really hear it – for people to really be heard in their truth around that, even as they're holding different truths, right? And then to be able to see people for who they are with their different truths. To see each other in this way, and be like: okay, and what are you gonna do about it? Like, how do we want to be? How do we want to still be together, have productive conflict, have productive conversations, be in community together? Hold this tent up, if that's what we want, or change it to something else, but know that it's actually going to be sustained even when this rabbi is leaving.

00:31:45

There were several, either two or three, rounds and people were invited; it was by invitation. With intentional – I mean, it's documented in writing, so maybe I'm remembering it wrong, but I think they were by invitation, Rabbi Ellen Lippmann and I came up with a list together. We made an effort to reach out to people across a diversity of political viewpoints, strong diversity, strong differences, and political angles, including people that are in the middle or don't really know – just across that continuum, and also across other points of diversity, age, race, parents, people without children, people with adult children, old members and new members alike, multiple points of diversity.

00:33:15

Out of that conversation series, which included some exercises led by Resetting the Table folks – I think everybody who participated was invited to be, join, start the Israel/Palestine Working Group.

We knew that that was the trajectory, we knew, Ellen and I knew, that's where we're going. I think we shared with everybody we're starting here, let's help hold a tighter container, since we've never, like – since there's a lot of trepidation about what it means to enter these waters together, so we're gonna bring in some people that have expert skills around holding this container, and then after that experience, we'll see who wants to join and start the working group.

And we did that. Then we opened the working group up. We had one meeting just from those people, then we had a call out to the broader congregation for anyone who wanted to join it. Knowing that there were people who had already experienced some of what might be possible, across these conversations... There was a lot of stuff, I mean, I don't know if this is worth getting into, but it was not easy for me to get people to those conversations. There were a lot of people that didn't want to be there that were like, “Why would I want to? This is not where I want to put my energy. This is not Palestinian solidarity, talking to Jews that are Zionist, that's not going to be – I want to be in the streets. What's the point of this?” Not exactly. But I was definitely told that by more than one person, some of whom participated, and some of whom did not.

The Working Group was then established and there were co-chairs. The group really made an effort to first spend a lot of time being with each other, learning each other as a microcosm, having conversations around really hard things. Then a big effort of the group was putting out a survey to see where the bigger congregation landed, because Kolot as a congregation had not taken any public stance around BDS, in part because it was not clear how everybody feels. There was a big survey that we did and reported out. There were many really deep and important things. There was an effort to bring Omar Barghouti multiple times – he's considered one of the founders or the founder of the BDS¹¹ movement. Ultimately, in all of the cases when I was there, the board did not approve that. For more than one reason, but one of the reasons was it was always kind of last minute, which was hard, but also that's a function of Israel policy around Palestinians traveling.

There were other things... The survey, there were a couple of congregation-wide events besides the survey report-out that the Israel Palestine group led. There was some stuff with students which was really powerful. A policy around what the rabbi can speak about: basically wanting to make space for a rabbi, the future rabbi – we were looking ahead to who's going to be the rabbi – to make space for whoever was the rabbi to be able to hold their political reality, and in their rabbinit, be able to speak on their own behalf, and say things that may not represent all of Kolot

¹¹ Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) is a Palestinian-led movement that works to end international support for Israel's oppression of Palestinians and pressure Israel to comply with international law. More [here](#).

or even Kolot, but to be able to make space for them to do that, and not silence them around that. So that policy was put into place. All the working groups, I'll say like, Queer and Trans, Israel Palestine Working Group, Race Working Group, were really central to the rabbinic search process. We ultimately, hired Rabbi Miriam Grossman¹², but that was a part of that process that was held by those working groups, which I think was really meaningful to the congregation, overall. Oh god, I'm talking so much.

Lili Platt 39:15

So good, that's why we're here!

franny silverman 39:17

Okay.

Lili Platt 39:20

Thank you. You've been speaking to the rabbinic transition a little bit, and I would love to hear what your experience was like. I know it was a big shift in so many ways. Anything you'd like to share would be great.

franny silverman 39:49

Mhm. Well, [pause], this is the sound of me thinking [laughs].

Lili Platt 39:53

No rush.

franny silverman 40:02

[pause] Any change is loss, that is known. I have learned that through my own experience. I can read many books that say that. All change is loss, even good change. When I think about the rabbinic transition, when I hear you ask about the rabbinic transition, I don't think about the amazing Rabbi Miriam Grossman, that's not the first thing that comes to me. Miriam Grossman is amazing. I love her, I work with her, she's fabulous. But I think about what it meant to be inside and hold and support and accompany and guide and carry and navigate and be led by and lead a congregation that was going through a great change, which was necessary and beautiful, ultimately, and also challenging, because all change is loss.

For me, that's the big takeaway. That's the whole thing [laughs], for me. When I hear about the rabbinic transition, I'm like, yeah, transition. That's what it was, it was a transition, peoples' mindsets... There were other changes that happened in tandem, I don't remember exactly the years, that happened around those times, too. When I left, when I was no longer Director of Youth Education and became the Director of Learning and Action and a principal was hired,

¹² Current Rabbi, Miriam Grossman: <https://www.kolotchayeinu.org/clergy>

there was a principal, oh my god I am forgetting everybody's last names today, his last name was Boyarin¹³. Jonah Boyarin came on and he only stayed for one year. He was wonderful in many, many ways, and he left after a year, which I'm naming because people were transitioning out of an experience that they had had with me in that leadership role and moving into a different leadership role. That was happening at the same time as gearing up for this rabbinic transition. There were multiple transitions happening. Kolot also went through a big growth period, which was amazing in so many ways, at some point, we had 200 kids in the learning program! But that was really hard because it meant that the quality of our programming wasn't as strong because we didn't have our own building, we had kids scrunched up in classes, and so there was also loss there.

So, that's what I'm saying. Oh gosh, there were many changes that happened that impacted people and this is all before COVID, which is the biggest one in some ways. Both the rabbinic leadership, I mean the founding rabbinic leadership of Rabbi Ellen Lippmann, and the lay leadership of the board at that time, and other folks around who were involved, really set Kolot up very well and scaffolded for the rabbinic transition. There was a lot of lead time, like all the lead time that's necessary for the kind of equitable process that one might want. That didn't mean that it went smoothly. There was, if you haven't heard yet, there was a search for an interim rabbi. That search was a fail in that there was no interim Rabbi hired at the end of it.

44:32

So we had a year where there was no rabbi. That was the year of the rabbinic search, the *mantle* rabbinic leadership was taken up by the cantor, Cantor Lisa B. Segal¹⁴, and the ED Sherri Levine¹⁵, the exec. director at the time, both who are still on staff, and me with the support of many. Kolot is rich in rabbis and *Shaliach Tzibbur*, like people who can lead services and rituals. I feel like everybody who knew how to lead any service or officiate anything... I officiated several weddings that year. It was really, really amazing. It still provided Kolot a buffer year, right, so we went from the founding rabbi to the next settled rabbi, which was kind of the whole thing that we were trying to prevent, some kind of punching bag situation that people had historically experienced in other congregations.

We did have that year, we just didn't have a single, external person holding that space. We were holding it internally, with other leadership. It was not easy. I think the first rabbinic search committee that was looking for the interim rabbi – it was very challenging. I won't speak to their experience of it, but, you know, the experience of going through a year-long process that takes a lot of time, with the end result being you don't have the thing that you're looking for, that's hard.

¹³ Jonah (Yoynesh Hersh) Boyarin former Principal of the Kolot Children's Learning Program

¹⁴ Current Cantor, Lisa B. Segal: <https://www.kolotchayeinu.org/clergy>

¹⁵ Current Executive Director, Sherri Levine: <https://www.kolotchayeinu.org/our-staff>

It's really hard. A new rabbinic search committee was established and 100% gained from all the learnings of the prior committee in so many ways, like everything from the spreadsheets to other processes, you know, challenges that the first committee had bumped up against. The second committee functioned on a full consensus model which took a lot of time, a lot of time, and also made it so they were able to work through things and hire the next rabbi. We provided Kolot with good choices. The finalist candidates were great. They were really, really great. Definitely, the rabbi that we hired, Rabbi Miriam Grossman, is amazing. And it wasn't like she was the only one by far, you know what I mean? Sometimes you go through a process and it's like, oh, my gosh, that person better take the job, because all these other candidates – no way. It wasn't like that. Which is good. It was good. It was a really, really rich process. Gosh, I think COVID happened in the middle of Miriam's first year. If she started – I don't remember exactly when our contract started, but like summer or high holidays of 2019 I think.

Lili Platt 48:40

And COVID really took hold of the US in March 2020.

franny silverman 48:44

Yeah, yeah. So that was you know, that was really hard. That was the year that also was known that I was leaving that year. I don't remember exactly when the announcement was made to the congregation about when I was leaving, but because it wasn't easy to come to agreement, around what the right time would be, so I don't remember, but it was sometime in the fall it was public. That was my last year also on staff because it was known that I was moving up here [to Kingston, New York] which was just like another part of it was like another transition. Right? I think in many ways, my transition, you know, of course, COVID was like the biggest thing really, because it just changed things for everyone and it's still making things, you know, it's still unclear. And people are still trying to figure it out, not just at Kolot, right, but in the world, like: what is COVID? What is happening with COVID? How are we doing? How are we going to be in community? What is our obligation to each other and to ourselves? How are we going to prioritize? All the things we're still, two and a half years later or something, asking those questions. Some of us.

Lili Platt 50:25

Absolutely. You just used that word again, obligation, and you mentioned it in the beginning when we started speaking about how Kolot's mission statement, I'm paraphrasing your words, connected to your sense of Judaism, obligation, and work towards co-creating a world that is more just. I'm so curious about what that means to you. What does Jewish obligation mean to you in terms of justice work? Maybe in terms of the powerful things and collaborations you've done with Kolot and throughout life...

franny silverman 51:22

I mean, I don't love the word, but it is the word that I have returned to time and again. The truth is that I hope to continue to grow and evolve to understand the word in a different way because I think there's a negativity that's associated with the word obligation that I don't love. It still feels like – I just haven't landed on a better word. You know? One of the things that I loved the most about my position at Kolot was that I had the institutional backing of Kolot as a congregation to go into legacy Jewish American institutions and organizations, and speak on behalf of a congregation that included many Jewish community members who have been historically marginalized in and beyond Jewish community.

So I could say things like – I could look around a room of white people at UJA¹⁶ who were talking about how diverse we were, in many ways, but it was a room of people at least presenting all white and named that. I would talk about Kolot sometimes, and sometimes I wouldn't, depending on the relevance. But it wasn't just like franny. I wasn't just some random Jew who wanted to start talking about whiteness at UJA. But I was like, I'm on staff at a congregation, I'm at a director level at a congregation, and I think that we're talking about diversity in a room full of white people, which is actually a really important thing to do. But also, if we're going to do that we should also talk about the lack of racial diversity in this room, even though there is racial diversity in the broader Jewish community, and ask questions about why that diversity isn't represented in this room, for example, right?

Same with anti-Zionist Jews. I could go into a space and say we're taught all of these things, we're talking about Israel this, Israel that, this way of being Zionist, this way of being Zionist, this way of being Zionist, this way of being Zionist. I was in a room where we were learning all the different ways of being Zionist, which are legit and historic, which are historically accurate, is what I'll say. When I say legit, that's I mean, like they're historically accurate, which is new to a lot of people, actually. New news, even though it's history, it's still new news to a lot of people. And I appreciate that nuance that was offered. There was no, for example, no corner to walk into if you didn't identify as a Zionist at all – non Zionist, ex-Zionist, anti-zionist, there was no –

Lili Platt 55:08

At previous schuls?

55:10:

No, I was in a legacy institution. And I felt nervous to say that this is, what year are we in... dodo-doo doo [doo-s said in a sing-songy fashion as she tries to think of the year], probably like 2016 or 15, pre Trump¹⁷, so whatever [laughs] we were pre Trump. And I was able to say, like,

¹⁶ Also known as UJA-Federation is United Jewish Appeal (UJA), Council of Jewish Federations and United Israel Appeal was founded in 1917 and is now the largest local philanthropy in the world. It has an endowment of \$1.2 billion USD as of 2021. More here: <https://www.ujafedny.org/>

¹⁷ The 45th President of the US was inaugurated in January 2016.

“Hey, this conversation is really presumptive because it's assuming that all American Jews, and All American Jews that are engaged in Jewish life, even, have a Zionist relationship to Israel, which just isn't true.” And that was a risky thing, that is a risky thing to say in a legacy Jewish institutional space. When I say that, I'm talking about spaces that are like 100 years old plus, lots of money... but I was able to do that because I was, I felt, I knew – I could have done it anyways – I was in that room because I worked at Kolot and because I hustled my way into the room and Rabbi Ellen Lippman worked with me. We built relationships so I could be in that room even if I knew I was going to be in a room with people that I wouldn't necessarily be values-aligned with in many ways, I still am Jewish and active in Jewish life. I went to Jewish Day School. I can speak Hebrew or I can tap in an orthodox minyan if I had to and know when to stand and when to sit and where to stand and what I get to go up to the bimah for, just kidding, I don't.

So like, I know all of the stuff, I can hang. My extended family includes people who are not Jewish, and includes Haradi people and includes people that live here on Turtle Island and includes people that live in Palestine/Israel. Many people, close family. So, I can be in those legacy spaces, I get to be there representing a congregation of 400 plus family units and say things that nobody, or very few people at the time, were saying in these spaces. Now more and more people are saying these things, which is so great, but there was a high social risk for me to say those things individually when I had no institutional backing. There was some Kolot risk, some institutional risk, for me to say these things, except that I could back it up and say, “Well, you fund Jewish community and we are Jewish community. This is our membership.” Which they knew, these places already knew some of those things.

I know this was a question about obligation, but I think that part of this for me is... the part of me that experiences Jewishness is at a cellular level or like a stardust level, you know? Plus there's a way in which justice, equity, values, none of these are adequate, it's not adequate language... All language is inadequate. Anyways, these things are at a fundamental level. Maybe it's not at a stardust level, because a lot of it has been learned, in the way that some of my Jewishness has been learned, and also feels of my being, like it might be primordial for me.

I have also felt strongly that once the experience of learning around justice, equity, whatever other inadequate words, values, right, being good, fair, that not unlearning that, being able to hold on to that learning has been... I think many of us, and I know I've done it too, forget. We just forget. We learn a thing and if it doesn't impact us directly, we forget. We mis-pronoun people, mis-gender people, that's a really easy example. Right?

We numb ourselves. I don't un-know the things that I've come to know. And the things that I've come to know, plus this like cellular Jewishness together, smushed, is obligation. It's literally, I'm actually living a life that would be against my own being, if I wasn't doing some of the things that I'm doing or standing up in some of the ways that I'm standing up, metaphorically.

The obligation is if living means not just breathing, but also breathing with integrity [laughs] or something. I need breath, I am obligated to have some kind of oxygen in order to live, but also – and I have access. That's what I was saying before. I'm positioned – when I was working at Kolot I was of that community, but not everybody in the Kolot community is comfortable at Federation¹⁸ for a bunch of different reasons. I grew up with access. I went to Jewish Day Schools. I'm white. Ashkenazi. Cis. Cis-het. Married to a cis white guy. And I don't feel of that world, I felt of the Kolot community. So I just need to go get my people right at that level. But yeah, that was a long answer. I don't know. I don't know if that belongs in the Kolot Oral History Project. [laughs]

Lili 1:03:02

I think it's all important. Thank you.

franny silverman 1:03:18

I'm going to eat a strawberry.

Lili Platt 1:03:20

Please do. You know, I'm gonna pause the recording real quick.

Lili Platt 1:03:33

All right, we are back from strawberry break. [shared laughter]

Lili Platt 1:03:40-1:05:40

You've been speaking to some of the powerful collaborators you've had at Kolot and something you mentioned in our pre-interview conversation was that you'd like to speak to the teachers and educators that you worked with; what should be known about them? Is there anything or anyone you want to uplift? Celebrate?

franny silverman 1:04:06

Oh my gosh. They're the best. What should be known is that they're the best. Gosh, I'm nervous about saying names because, I just, I'm nervous I'll forget someone and I don't want to, but I am going to try to say some names. Hadar Ahuvia¹⁹, Andrew Davies for a hot minute, Zacharay

¹⁸ Ibid 16.

¹⁹ Educator at Kolot, Hadar Ahuvia: <https://www.kolotchayeinu.org/bnai-mitzvah-tutors>

Wager-Scholl²⁰, Amanda Miller²¹, Irene – Irene, what's your last name? [laughter]²² This is so weird. Kendell Pinkney who is now a rabbi, Simi Toledano, Rachel Evans, Melissa Shaw, Alana Krivo-Kaufman who's on our way to become a rabbi, Shawn Shafner for a hot minute... Oh my god, Niko. Autumn for a minute, Autumn Leonard – and in other ways and other things. Oh my gosh. Ilana Levinson²³, what?!²⁴

Okay, so here's the thing. I've worked at a congregation in Cincinnati, Ohio, two congregations in Manhattan, and a different congregation in Brooklyn on their Hebrew school staff for many years, starting in the 90s. The quality of human that teaches at Kolot Chayeinu – that's the thing I was speaking to my whole own alignment and who I am and working at Kolot, and the truth is that that's actually not unique to me, what's unique is Kolot. The educators that I taught with and I helped – the team of educators that I cultivated and nurtured, or tried to, when I was the Director of Youth Education were the best.

Oh my god, I'm still thinking of people. I'm like, oh yeah, Avi Amon. Dave, what's your last name, Dave?! Anna. All these people, not everybody was fully aligned in all the ways with Kolot, most of the people I've named are... Some of the people I named were in for a year, in and out quickly. And I'm like, Eve, but everyone really cared. For so many of them the experience, if not everybody, but for many, many, many of them, the experience of participating as an educator in the children's learning program was part of their Jewish expression. I loved to make space for that and everybody stepped up to it. Everybody stepped up to the challenge.²⁵

01:08:29

One of the things that happened while I was Director of Youth Education is that we made the *b'nai mitzvah* program into an elective based program.²⁶ My predecessor Ora Wise had done a bomb job of creating this amazing curriculum of semester-based courses – for the *b'nai mitzvah* years, the sixth and seventh grade years – there was an Israel/Palestine course and a *God Talk*

²⁰ Educator at Kolot, Zachary Wager-Scholl: <https://www.kolotchayeinu.org/clpstaff>

²¹ Current educator at Kolot, Amanda Miller: <https://www.kolotchayeinu.org/bnai-mitzvah-tutors>

²² Current Children's Learning Program educator, Irene Siegel: <https://www.kolotchayeinu.org/clpstaff>

²³ Current educator at Kolot, Ilana Levinson <https://www.kolotchayeinu.org/bnai-mitzvah-tutors>

²⁴ Former staff members and educators at Kolot's Children's Learning Program, in the order they were mentioned: Andrew Davies, Kendell Pinkney, Simi Toledano, Rachel Evans, Melissa Shaw, Alana Krivo-Kaufman, Shawn Shafner, Niko Bialek, Autumn Leonard

²⁵ Former staff members and educators at Kolot's Children's Learning Program, in the order they were mentioned: Avi Amon, Dave Klasko, Anna Schön, Eve

²⁶ Kolot Curriculum: <https://www.kolotchayeinu.org/teens>

course and a *Gender and Judaism* course, a tallit²⁷-making course, so amazing. There was this kind of elaborate rotation schedule, so it would work over two years. And not all the courses worked for all the kids. We would get enough consistent feedback from enough people that for some students, some of the learning was like not aligned with where they were in their growing, in their cognitive growth and just in their development as youth. Plus there were other areas of interest that people had and so that combination – oh my gosh, Lior Shtivi!²⁸ Just getting your name in there. Oh my gosh. So good.

So by making an elective based program, we had a couple of classes that were required and then they could choose after that. This meant that we could expand the program to offer more classes. So Kendell created a class called Kol HaEidot²⁹ that then morphed – oh my gosh, Diya Moushahwar³⁰, I just am remembering your name now as I'm talking about the Kol HaEidot curriculum. Oh my gosh Dia is amazing. This is why I didn't want to name anyone because I was like, I'm gonna forget people. Dia is amazing. Hadar Ahuvia, who was also the assistant director for the program. She and I started teaching at Kolot – she's now in rabbinical school – hahaha all these rabbis. She and I started whatever that year was, I don't remember, but our first year we both – maybe she started the year after me or like it mid-year or something – she started and then became the assistant director the second year of me being the director. She also created this History of Israel/Palestine Through Dance course that looked at Israeli folk dance and the Palestian Dabke and teased that story out through the physical dance and dance creation, which was just so amazing. That moved into some of her work as a choreographer that she's been doing. Now she's just starting rabbinical school. Ilana Levinson, who is an amazing podcaster, would bring in all her amazing podcast-skills which was really cool and just so, so special. Oh my gosh, I'm thinking of another person. I need to think of your name. This is what was gonna happen, it's going to be a list of names. Alpert. What's your first name? Alpert who's not related to the other Alperets. You know who you are, if you're listening. Dov!³¹ There you are. Amazing, amazing teachers who brought a lot of different skills. Simi brought some gorgeous lessons around Judeo Arabic that were really stunning. There was really deep, amazing learning that people would bring. Zachary brought Yiddish in multiple ways, which was really amazing. Rachel, Melissa, Amanda all brought a lot of theater learning that was –I just loved that crew. I love working with them.

²⁷ Jewish prayer shawls are called tallit. At Kolot, there is currently a course taught called: *Oteh Or/Wrap Yourself in Light: Making our own Talitot*.

²⁸ Former educator at Kolot's Children's Learning Program: Lior Shtivi

²⁹ Full course title: *Kol HaEidot: Voices of Jewish Racial and Ethnic Diversity*

³⁰ Former educator at Kolot's Children's Learning Program: Diya Moushahwar

³¹ Former educator at Kolot: Dov Alpert

In the way that I really love doing the work with the working groups, I loved being able to work with those incredible educators. We're talking about a part time job like, for some of them once a week for two hours, you know, but that would show up to PDs³² – like I would require him to go to PDs, I mean we paid them, but not like a lot. But the commitment to Jewish learning. The truth is that it was very different – the stance that I experienced with everybody who I named is very different from the stance of how I entered Jewish education, frankly. I needed work. I was a college student and I could make more money teaching Hebrew school than I could have my retail or bartending job in the 90s. That's how I started teaching Hebrew school. It wasn't like a joyful experience for me. Then I moved to the city and it became better in some ways different, you know, over time. Then I found the ways that I loved it.

franny silverman 1:15:12

I think that Kolot is such a special community overall. That it's not one thing. It's not like all millennials and Gen Z-ers. It's not all people without kids. It's not only queer people. It's not only anti-Zionists – it's actually many – it's a funny intersection of many of those things. It's not only class-privileged, Parkslope-ians, though there's many, there's lots of working class folks and lots of people that are not in Park Slope – which is where Kolot is located, which is why I'm naming that. And it's not all white Jews! And the people that wanted to teach have thrived as teachers are in many ways of the community. Some who have become members, because they can, and many of whom have... [indistinguishable] and there's also new teachers that I don't know because I'm not there right now. So you know, Helena was, oh my god, I just said Helena. Sorry Helena.³³ Everybody who's listening should know I'm sleep deprived because I have a puppy, which means that I'm really, really challenged right now. Truly it is compromising my memory and focus. But, yeah, Helena has hired all these other people, who are amazing too, doing a great job holding that down. That's what I got. I hope I didn't forget any of you. I'm sorry.

Lili Platt 1:17:15

Is there anything else that should be known [franny giggles] or remembered about the educators or teachers you worked with? Just want to offer space.

franny silverman 1:17:22

I mean, T., I didn't name you again, but you're always there. You know that.

I guess I can say some more things at the school because I might be the only person right now who's being interviewed around that. I don't know if there's anybody else who's being interviewed around the Children's Learning Program. I don't remember who started it. I don't

³² Professional development meetings

³³ Current Children's Learning Program Principal at Kolot, Helena Gindi: <https://www.kolotchayeinu.org/clpstaff>

remember if it was Leah Zimmerman³⁴, but I think I might have been somebody before Leah Zimmerman. Then Leah Zimmerman was the director and then Ora Wise was the director. Then I was the director. Then the director moved to be a principal and that was Jonah Yoyneh Boyarin, and then Helena Gindi, who's currently running the Children's Learning Program. Ora Wise built much of the curriculum that I was able to run with – not exclusively from scratch a lot of pieces and parts of amazing things that other people created, like books and things, but some of it by scratch, and not only Ora, but also people working with her. There's an amazing Ed Committee – I don't know who that committee folks are right now, because... What I do know is the people who were on the Ed. Committee, who were really holding that down when I was the director and even beyond, their kids are now like, some of those kids are freshmen in college.

So like, Grace, Andrea Greenblatt and Scott, Grace what's your last name? Scott and Grace, what's your last name? It's not Greenblatt. Grace is now a freshman in college. I was her teacher maybe when she was in *kitah bet*, definitely in *kitah gimmel*. Right, so like when I am I guess that means Raol was in my class when he was in *kitah bet*. These people are now in college. The Ed. Committee parents, I named some of them before, were amazing. They really held down the transition from Ora to me in a hugely important way. Then the transition from me to other principals. The other thing that I do want to say is that we added a *kita aleph* during my time. I think I was not running the school anymore, but you know, Niko launched our *kita aleph* program which was great, that was many years in the works. Storah Steps which then became Torah Tots – which was like even younger – was an infant to four year old program separate from the *kolokteni* which was like the four to six year old family program. So yeah, I don't know. That's what I got to say. I think during my time I've seen a lot of – there's been more integration of the stuff that makes Kolot into the school and the stuff that makes the school into Kolot in ways that I think have been meaningful. Should we stop because I'm rambling? [shared laughter]

Lili Platt 1:21:44

Would you like to?

franny silverman 1:21:45

No, we don't have to. I just feel like I'm just like oh gosh, I'm really rambling. Okay.

Lili Platt 1:21:54

It's all good. And all important.

franny silverman 1:21:56

It's what it is.

³⁴ Director of Education at Kolot from 2004 to 2007, Leah Zimmerman:
<https://sites.middlebury.edu/kolotprofiles/portfolio/profile-3/>

Lili Platt 1:21:59

One more question I wanted to offer, and then we can go anywhere else or stop the recording. What about your experience at Kolot needs to be remembered? Or, what do you want people to remember about Kolot?

franny silverman 1:22:38

[pause] Well there are things about Kolot – a lot of this stuff I've already said – which is that you know Kolot formed of – there's a lot of diversity in Kolot, and Kolot has been able to – When I was working at Kolot, and before that to some measure, Kolot was able to address challenges or conflicts within the Kolot community face-on, which is super important. I'm speaking to the anti-racism work – Kolot's anti-racism work was not let's do a meet up with a local black church. Kolot's anti-racism work was like: who are we? What is happening here? How do we...? It was internal work that was able to grow and move beyond. The Israel/Palestine work was like: we're talking about this thing here, and what it means to us as community here. I think there's great value in that. I don't think that happens a lot. I don't think Kolot's done it perfectly all the way, all the times, but I hope that as the Kolot community grows and shifts that people can continue to retain the ability to look inward at a collective level. That feels really important.

I also you know, I didn't name this, but one of the things that I love about Kolot is that – personally I love that Kolot's not affiliated with a movement and that the strong member, lay-led pieces of Kolot, including rituals and services and, midrash-ing, you know sermonizing, and all of those things. I think that even as there are more ways for people to access Jewishness, or people are understanding that there are more ways of being Jewish that are outside of specific structures and hierarchies. I think Kolot continues to be able to model that and be a place where anyone can read Torah. Anyone can do a drash. On any given Shabbat, you'll hear from the rabbi, but you will also definitely hear from congregants and you will hear their Torah. That's just very special and not common. I think that that's an important thing.

I'll say that the learning program is about like – there's no such thing as being too young to teach about race or oppression or equality or equity or identity. There's scaffolded, differentiated learning models for different ages and developmental stages. Kolot for a long time was a place where that could happen – where the idea that a child is too young to know about the world is an adult idea. And the learning program of Kolot – and I, you know, to be honest, I just don't know what's happening right now, I don't want to be like, I'm hopeful it's still like this – was definitely operating with the understanding that we're going to actually talk about stuff, instead of teaching that we don't talk about some things, which is what not talking about something teaches. That's why we had Black Lives Matter week at Kolot for the Children's Learning Program. That's why after the Tree of Life Massacre happened, we talked about it. We had circles at school to talk about it. That's why children in *kitah bet* are learning about Palestine and Israel. Not deeply, but it's not being avoided.

Yeah, what else? Those are things that I feel are really special about Kolot that are different, and that maybe I didn't mention yet. I'm sure there are other things.

I do want to speak to the race working group for a moment. Is that okay? [Lili nods] I know we talked about how Yoni's³⁵ being interviewed about the Race Working Group and during this part of the project, and that hopefully, there'll be an opportunity for the group to do a collective story sharing rather than a one on one interview around the origin story of the Race Task Force and the Race Working Group at Kolot. I just want to name that I hope that happens, and because I'm hopeful that that will happen, that is why I haven't spoken directly to the Race Working Group much. Some of my closest relationships from Kolot have been through the Race Working Group, and also through the Children's Learning Program with the educators. It is funny not to talk about it. I just want to name that I'm not talking about it because it's a collective story that will be told collectively and not through one middle-aged white lady's voice [laughs] – not today. That is just a testament to the way the Race Working Group is continuing to collectively teach – teach all of us and me, specifically. Yeah. I just didn't want to end without saying that.

Lili Platt 1:31:17

Thank you. Any other final thoughts, for now?

franny silverman 1:31:33

I want to thank Ellen Lippman. I want to have a moment about Rabbi Ellen Lippman.

There's a lot of things I learned from her, many, many, many good things. Something that is super rare that I want to point to is that like most brilliant public leaders, Ellen Lippmann, too, had many people, has many people, but particularly when she was on the Kolot pulpit, who would try to Guru-ise, in my opinion. Who would try to, I don't wanna say worship at the foot of the leader, but really like hold somebody to such a high esteem. Ellen never, I don't want to say, she didn't yeah, in some ways, she just kind of didn't accept that. She was just like, yeah no. Not that she said that to people, but somebody would say, "You should do a thing," and she would be like "You should do that thing!" Whatever it was, and then she would make space for that person to do that thing: to give that sermon, to share that Torah, to teach that class, to hold that rally, to organize that group, to organize those people to do whatever the thing was. If people were like: "You're so amazing!" and she would say, "Oh, thank you. You're so amazing." And then say specific reasons why the person is amazing and what they should do with their leadership. Her [Ellen's] leadership shines so much through the way she was able to power share with others and inspire other people to step into their leadership without dimming – it's not like her light was dimmed as she held the reality of the ways that she's magnificent and also made space for other

³⁵ Longtime Kolot member and current Co-Chair of both the Race Working Group and the Membership Committee, Yonii: <https://sites.middlebury.edu/kolotprofiles/portfolio/molly-rae-yonii-bock/>

people to shine and encouraging them to do so. Holding the reality of the ways that she's magnificent and also making space for other people to shine and encouraging them to do so. So that's just like super duper. She's a great mentor-teacher-friend boss. Yeah. I couldn't speak about Kolot without saying those things.

Lili Platt 1:34:27

I'm glad you did.

franny silverman 1:34:28

Yeah, thanks. Me too.

Lili Platt 1:34:30

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

franny silverman 1:34:32

No, I think that's good. That's good.

Lili Platt 1:34:35

Alright, thank you so much for the gift of this conversation and participating in the project.

franny silverman 1:34:40

Thank you, Lili. Thank you, Lana and everybody.

Lili Platt 1:34:46

Thanks, Lana. Thanks, everybody. Okay, stopping the recording.