

Interview with Miriam Cohen by Lana Povitz

Sunday, November 5, 2022

Length: 1 hour 32 minutes and 42 seconds

ABSTRACT: In this interview, Miriam Cohen recounts the evolution of her membership at Kolot. First a quiet participant, now an active and well-known member of the congregation, Miriam reflects on “her Kolot,” which provide the basis for a moving and memorable interview. Themes of loss, community, and Jewish identity are prominent in this interview. The dynamism of Miriam’s presence at Kolot is moving and vibrant, especially as interviewer Lana Povitz often remarks on her own appreciation of Miriam’s role in making new, young members feel welcome in the community. Miriam’s apparent warmth, intelligence, gratitude, and strength make this audio an active and engaging listen.

KEY TERMS: people, Kolot, holding, Shabbat, Rosh Hashanah, midrash, loss, Yom Kippur, walking, fasting, Torah study, passion, love, membership

This transcript has been minimally edited for readability. Some transitional language has been removed, but Miriam Cohen and Lana Povitz’s recorded language has not been altered to accommodate standard English grammar structure against natural oral speech patterns. Abstract and transcript created by Bella Cady, with input from Miriam Cohen and Lana Povitz.

Lana Povitz 00:02

So, here we are. I'm Lana Povitz, and I'm here with Miriam Cohen. And it's November 5, Saturday Shabbat. In Brooklyn, we're sitting in her backyard and her amazing garden.

Miriam Cohen 00:17

Oh, it's 2020.

Lana Povitz 00:19

It's 2022.

Miriam Cohen

2022. Right.

Lana Povitz

It's 2022, and an important year as any. So, thank you for making the time and place to do this. *[light laughter from Miriam]* I wonder if you could start by telling me where you see the journey with Kolot beginning.

Miriam Cohen 00:42

For me.

Lana Povitz

For you.

Miriam Cohen:

Well, I've always identified as a Jew. Growing up, and until I was in my late 50s, I had no relationship to organized Jewish religion. I said at one point that I was a devout—I was devoutly secular. You know? So I was very passionately Jewish, but *never* having any connection with a synagogue, and never assuming that I would. And then in 2011, my son Sam died. And it was a wrenching, wrenching, wrenching experience to bury him and to live with that loss. And the year after he died—it was almost exactly a year he died in October—and that following October, I decided that I wanted to go to Yom Kippur services having never, ever been to Yom Kippur support services before. And I didn't know why. And I didn't *really* understand what it was, but I didn't want to go to Rosh Hashanah. You know, I didn't want to do it. I wanted to go to Yom Kippur. That's what I knew what I wanted to do. And so, we had been in contact with a rabbi from a local Conservative congregation here that's on Ocean Avenue that had officiated Sam's burial. I had decided that I wanted a rabbi—I needed somebody to frame that burial, and that name was given to us. So, not ever having known any other Rabbi before in my life, I decided that I would go to *his* congregation for Yom Kippur. And I went, and I bought a ticket. And, I sat in my seat—and they thought it was strange that I was only buying a ticket for Yom Kippur, but that's where I was going, that's where I was heading. And I sat in my seat. And I had no idea what was going on. I had no. Oh, I just had no idea what was going on. I didn't—I had a prayer book. I had no idea what a prayer book was. They rarely told you what pages we were on. I had *no* facility with Hebrew. I think I could read Shalom. At one point, I was looking through it. I think I could read Shalom. And, it didn't work. There was parts of it that didn't work. I didn't like the congregation. The congregation was all very chatty. They weren't paying attention to the service at all. But, the space was beautiful. The Cantor's voice was beautiful. I *knew* these tunes. Some were in my bones. I *knew* these tunes. But, I just wasn't on the same page. It just didn't—it didn't make enough sense to me. Um, I appreciated fasting. And I appreciated walking, which was two things that we had done in the past year after Sam died. We walked. And I realized at one point that you can't cry and swallow at the same time. And so we did very little eating. It was always—both Stu and I lost a lot of weight because we would walk 8 to 10 miles. So—So I realized, “Oh, they're copying that,” or “I—there's something there's something about fasting and walking that puts you into a place where you can be contemplative.” I thought the space was beautiful. But I left early. I didn't even know anything about Yizkor.¹ I didn't. I didn't know anything about me. I didn't know anything about it. And I said, “Okay, I think I had enough.”

¹ Yizkor is a memorial service held by Jewish people on certain holy days including Yom Kippur for deceased relatives

Enough of these people that are chit chatting and not knowing what was going on. But I felt like there was something special about it. There was, there was—something was moving about the ritual. And I also knew I knew it. There was something inside me that: I knew this. And so, I came home to—my husband, Stu decided he did not want to go to Yom Kippur, he had gone to Yom Kippur as a kid. And he said, “That's when you have to wear your itchy pants and the little old ladies yell at you.” [*laughter from Miriam*] He said he didn't want anything to do with Yom Kippur. And when I came home and started talking to him about the music, and about just— just my reflections on this, which was brand new to me. He said, “Oh, I get it.” And he said, “Let's go next year.” And then I remembered that Sam had—had been in a youth theater project with JFREJ, for Jews For Racial and Economic Justice, that basically saved him from ninth grade.² I mean, ninth grade was *so* horrible for him, that this project was really a lifesaver. And what they did was, they took kid—Jewish kids from multiple high schools in Brooklyn—and high school kids from Prospect Heights. And what they did was they facilitated conversation about discrepancies within the school system between where the Jewish kids were going to school and the Prospect Heights High School. And then they made a theater piece out of it that they ended up touring the city on and it was right up Sam's alley. It was theater. It was politics. It was people listening to him, it was people respecting his opinion, it was absolutely perfect for him. And then I remembered that JFREJ had a real connection, that some people that we knew in JFREJ had a real connection with Kolot. And so we decided that the next year, we would go to Yom Kippur. And it was—it was the year that they had it at Brooklyn College. And they hadn't had it at Brooklyn College, before or since. But Stu and I went. And we sat in those seats. It was a theater. So we're sitting in, in, you know, in a college. So this is a college theater. So it's a little bit rundown, which seemed right. It certainly seemed right for Kolot. And we were awestruck. We couldn't believe—I mean, we were—we were completely wrapped up in what this was. I mean, Lisa singing. Ellen Lipman's, just—just her voice and just... she was holding us. She was just really holding us. And one of the things that I say I frequently say is that when—sometime in the afternoon—we did the morning service. We didn't know what else we did. So we went and took a walk in the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens. And then we came back for the afternoon. And it was the afternoon and it was still the services and we still hadn't eaten anything, we had, we had done this whole bunch of walking because it's not that close from the Botanical Gardens to Brooklyn College.

Lana Povitz

No...

Miriam Cohen

But we had been so used to walking. You know? That's what we do. But, we walked. I turned to Stuart at one point in the afternoon. I said, “Do you feel it?” And he said to me, “It's crackling.” I mean, you could just feel that. You could just feel it. And then we had no idea what, what—I had

² More information can be found here: <https://www.jfrej.org/>

no idea what Yizkor was. And Ellen Lippmann asked those of us who had lost children to stand up. And, she blessed us. And who knew I needed a blessing. Who knew I needed a blessing? And we were stunned. We were just absolutely stunned. And so we went back to high holiday services the next year. [09:13] I had been—Yeah, the next year. And then we went back the next year. And we kept thinking about going to Shabbat services. But it just seemed—it seemed odd. It's like, what are you gonna do there? [*Lana laughs*] It's just, what are you gonna... You know? so—so I guess three years went by. And that year, we thought we acknowledge Sam's yahrzeit on the Gregorian calendar.³ It didn't make any sense to us to do it on the Jewish calendar. And there's a lot of reasons but you know, it just doesn't make sense. And so, Sam's yahrzeit. The high holidays were really, really early. And because Sam died at the end of October, there was this big gap between his yahrzeit and the services. And so, Stu and I said, “Well, why don't we go to Shabbat services on the Saturdays in between.” And we went and we didn't talk to anybody, and we sat there, and we sat right next to each other, and we sat in our same spot on the left hand side all the time, that's always where we sat—more to the back. And, we just let the services wash over us. And then, after services, we would go take a walk and usually walk to Manhattan from—from Kolot, usually to Union Square. We would walk over the Manhattan Bridge. There is something nice about city, a little park, going over a bridge, water, ending up in Manhattan, and then we'd take the train back to the car or home or wherever it was—we'd finish... that's the way we would walk. We would walk until we didn't want to walk anymore. And then we'd come home. And then Sam's yahrzeit came. And we would say to each other, “Are we going to Shabbat services? Shabbos services?” And we'd go, “I don't know, I have no idea if we're gonna go.” And we would go and we went for a year. We went for a whole year. And we skipped a couple. But mostly we went to Shabbat services. And we never said anything to each other. We just sat there. Never put on tallis.⁴ We had the prayer book. Sometimes we knew where we were in the prayer book, and sometimes we had to catch up. Lawson once, one time, we were completely on the wrong page.⁵ And Lawson came over, and he said, “No, no, no, we're on this page.” And my heart just went out to him. It's like he wanted us to be on the right page. You really want—and to this day I love Lawson. And it started with him showing us that we weren't on the right page. Yeah, and just very gently, “This is where we are. You know? C'mon, c'mon you can come.” But there was something about—I don't remember the question—so I'm just gonna keep going. There's something about sitting on a wooden pew—which aren't very comfortable, not uncomfortable, but they're not very comfortable. You don't have that much room between the pew in front of you, your knees or your—you can't fidget much. And we know that we didn't want to fidget. And letting Lisa's voice just absorb me. And that's all I wanted to do. Every week, I needed a dose of sitting on a bench... really being held. I mean, there was something about being in that space. And I knew I was being held. And we started getting used to it and we got used to saying

³ (among Jewish people) the anniversary of the death of a parent or other close relative, marked by the burning of a memorial candle.

⁴ Jewish prayer shawls.

⁵ Lawson Shadburn, a Kolot member that leads services from time to time.

Kaddish which was—was completely foreign to me.⁶ And then I realized—there was a couple of things that I realized when I would sit there—one is, here's the time that everything else didn't matter. And everything else stopped. And I was there being held, and I could stroke my broken heart. I could just sit there and say, 'Yes, my heart is broken. I can hold it and so can this.' I don't—I don't know if I was afraid of my broken heart but I didn't have a place for it. There wasn't—there wasn't—there wasn't—it either beat me up or I was beating it up or I was—I was immensely, you know, entangled in it. But there was never a place that said, "Just stop and this is where you stroke your broken heart." And I—one Yom Kippur—I remember I didn't want it to end. I said to Lisa and she said, "Oh my God, it has to end!" And the cantor—the cantor goes, "Oh no, I can't keep doing it..."

Lana Povitz 14:52

"...I need it to end." [*Lana and Miriam laugh*]

Miriam Cohen 14:54

But um, I just didn't want it to end. I wanted that—I wanted the spaciousness, this place that just—that just was good at holding. So, then we stopped being—then we stopped being so anonymous. We thought that, alright, that whole year, we barely talked to anybody. I mean—

Lana Povitz 15:15

So hard to picture!

Miriam Cohen 15:21

I mean, That's very Stu. He didn't want, you know—and then I wanted to join and he goes, "I'm not joining." So we gave them the money as a donation but we didn't join because. [*Miriam laughs*] Because that was just—and I agreed—'You can't join. You can—you can give them money, they want money? Fine! Give them all the money they want. But let's, what does it mean to join?' Which may be sort of a flipside of a lot of people who want to join, but find the money part hard. So, a *whole* year passed! We had gone to Shabbat services that *whole* year. And then the next year was Rosh Hashanah, was the high holidays. And we got ready and I got dressed up. I wore this one dress on Rosh Hashanah that I've been wearing—that I really liked it. I liked the way it fits. I like the way it feels.

Lana Povitz 16:23

What's the dress like?

Miriam Cohen 16:24

⁶ Kaddish is an ancient Jewish prayer sequence regularly recited in the synagogue service, including thanksgiving and praise and concluding with a prayer for universal peace. A form of the Kaddish is recited for the dead.

It's a salmon-colored denim shirt waist dress that I *feel* nice in. It's got pockets, and it's got a row of buttons down and it's got cuffs on the sleeves. So it's a real bear to iron. I mean, it's like, you know, so I don't wear it very often. Because yeah, I mean, I'm an ironer, I do iron. I iron a lot. But that dress just takes just, just a little bit too much. And also it makes it more special. Yeah. That salmon—that salmon dress makes, that salmon dress makes Rosh Hashanah a little more special. So we went to Rosh Hashanah services that year. We pray the unetaneh tokef.⁷ We went back for the second day because they had second day services then. And that—I think it was a Monday—I called my other son Amos to wish him happy new year, which most of his life I never did. But this year, you know, these years it felt, you know, it felt—it felt like I wanted to do, I couldn't get him. And that was unusual because he would, especially after Sam died, he would—he would be very available to us. I tried him again. And I tried him again. And then it just didn't make sense that I couldn't get in touch with him. And then his friend Andrew called us and he said that he couldn't get in touch with Amos. And it was very unusual. And he thought something was wrong. And we were just about at the edge of saying well, “You know, what's going on, this is, there's something wrong, we can't get in touch with Amos.” And so we called the police. And Amos was working in Buffalo. And Stu said, “You don't call the police on your son. He's gonna hate us for the rest of his life. He's gonna hate us because who calls the police—the police come knocking—your parents want you.” And then the police called us back about half an hour later saying that he had died, that they found him in his apartment and that he had died. And it made no sense to us whatsoever. Absolutely no sense to us. I almost felt like I had protection. I was protected. I did this already. How could this happen? Um, so that was—that was the Days of Awe, you know? Rosh Hashanah day one, Rosh Hashanah day two, and then the third of Tishrei, Amos died. And so the High Holidays just sort of flow into his death. And then we buried him the day before Yom Kippur. And the next day we went to Kol Nidre and then we went to Yom Kippur services.⁸ In an absolute state of—I don't know—I mean, I've never been there before. And Ellen Lippmann—even though we weren't members, even though we paid dues, paid money, but we were not members, said it was okay, that she would officiate and Kolot would be there. Yeah. And that's when I needed Kolot. I needed a place to stand up every Shabbos and say Amos's name. And three weeks later, we stood up and said Amos's name and Sam's name. And then, we were held. And so then I stopped being anonymous. Every Shabbos after services, after V'shamru I would go up to Ellen and she'd hug me.⁹ **[21:02]** And she would just give me this very special hug. Just like, “Okay, you got another week to go, and maybe come back.” And she knew it. She took a sabbatical in January those days, those years. And Miriam was the student rabbi. And she said to Miriam, “You gotta hug Miriam after services. Every Shabbos, you have to hug Miriam, she's gonna come up, and you have to hug her.” And Miriam goes, “Great. That's one thing I know I can do.” And, Ellen, I've heard say that she doesn't know what to do for us.

⁷ A moving prayer, describing the awe of the Day of Judgement, that is recited on the High Holy Days.

⁸ An Aramaic prayer annulling vows made before God, sung by Jewish people at the opening of the Day of Atonement service on the eve of Yom Kippur.

⁹ In the prayer V'shamru, we recite the biblical command to guard the Sabbath. This prayer is recited following morning Shabbat services as part of the blessing over Sabbath wine.

Like, what do you do for these people? You know, I think she's never said that to me. But I've heard her. I've heard that she's said that. And I'm, like, "Oh, she knew what to do." She knows, if I need a hug. She knows that I just need to come get a hug. And she'll hug me and then I, then I can go on my way. And after a year, I didn't need that. After we stopped standing up for Amos, for a whole year, we acknowledged it. And we said, "Okay, now we're just going to stand up for him once a year." And then I didn't need that hug anymore. I may need it periodically but I didn't need it every week. I didn't—I didn't go. And then I could go. I couldn't leave with—How do you leave? How do you leave being held? Unless somebody gives you, like, a really good hug and says, "Okay, you're okay. You're, you're still here, you're here." So, what was the question?
[Miriam laughs]

Lana Povitz 23:03

I don't know, but one of the things you said that I caught on—of many, just now—was that you used the phrase, "We stopped being anonymous." And I wonder if you can tell me about some of the other ways that that happened? Like, who were some of the people who made connections with you? Or, what were some of the moments where that feeling of anonymity subsided and was replaced by something else?

Miriam Cohen 23:38

Yeah, I'm not sure it's a "who?" You know, I think it's a community. I could say, you know, this one, and this one and this one. Of all ages. People wanted—People wanted to hold me. People wanted to come close to me, in a way that I felt I was completely accessible to.

Lana Povitz 24:19

There's a line in your Parshah—I call Sh'mini *your* Parshah because it's yours.¹⁰¹¹ And I think the line is: "I am sanctified through those near to me." And when I was rereading your—you know, what you said about it for your bat mitzvah—that line was in there. And I thought that seems very perfect, because I think that from how I've heard you talk about Kolot, for you, like—that seems very true. And maybe it's not the particular who's, but the community of nearness.

Miriam Cohen 25:07

I spent 20 years being a critical care nurse, a floor nurse, being a staff, critical care nurse. And, because—I worked with people that were not like me at all, I mean, there were so few Jewish women in—in nursing at that time that I don't— think, at that time, maybe only one. At the time also, you could be a nurse by an associate degree in a diploma degree. And I had a bachelor's degree. And that separated me too, because I was more educated. There were many Filipino nurses that had a completely different background and a different sensibility. But you learned to trust them, because you had to, every day. Every shift, did you go, you weren't, you entered with

¹⁰ A parshah is any of the sections of the Torah read in sequence over a yearly cycle in the synagogue.

¹¹ Sh'mini is a section of Torah that is part of the book of Leviticus.

a different combination of all these people. There might be a staff of 20, but there's only five on a day. And so, it rotates. And so the dynamics change a lot. And I realized at one point that I loved these nurses. I didn't know them. I didn't particularly like them. I had to trust them. They had to trust me. And I realized that there was this real bond of love among us, because they were hairy, hairy times, there was, you know, it was—it was—you were dealing with a lot in an ICU. And just creating, creating that, and I don't think I could tell you anybody's name now. *Maybe* one or two, but I don't think I could tell it. You know, it's a long time ago, more than 20 years ago now. But um, I remember thinking that I had to love them. And there was, there was something that I learned about creating that kind of community and that kind of trust and that—that I drew on when—when I needed community. It's not that it didn't matter who it was, because I have good friends at Kolot. I mean, really good friends that I like. And I will—I will you know, I tend to, I will go that way. But I realized that I love everybody. I love—if you show up, I love you. [*Miriam and Lana laugh*] And if you show up, I think I trust you. I trust that you're here to hold this thing together.

Lana Povitz 28:12

I love how you put that into words. I feel that feeling.

Miriam Cohen 28:23

And I felt it in pandemic too.

Lana Povitz 28:27

You mean on Zoom? Certainly.

Miriam Cohen 28:29

I loved having the rabbi on my laptop on my dining room table. She was on my dining room table! And Lisa, Lisa was on my dining room table! There they are!

Lana Povitz 28:41

Yeah. Yeah, in their dining rooms!

Miriam Cohen 29:02

I feel very badly for the people who lose trust in Kolot. And there have been—I've known of some who have lost trust. And that seems to—it breaks my heart because they used to trust it and now they don't. I can't see losing Kolot. But there's also no other—there's no other synagogue for me. I mean, I'm not going back to Ocean Avenue. We took a course with Sue Oren on Judaism 101, because we thought we didn't know anything. It ended up that we knew a lot, you know?

Lana Povitz:

You and Stu?

Miriam Cohen 30:03

Me and Stu, yeah. But we really thought, “Oh, we got to learn how to be Jews.” And that was not true. It really wasn't true. But the course was, the course was really good. I mean, I really enjoyed—we really enjoyed the course. Just being in discussion with it, which we never had been in discussion with it. I forgot what I was gonna say ...

Lana Povitz 30:34

Well you were saying that you can't imagine falling out with Kolot.

Miriam Cohen 30:37

Oh, yeah. So in this class, we had to go to other synagogues. We couldn't stay in our synagogue. Oh, she made us go to other synagogues. And so we went to a big one on Eighth Avenue. And we really didn't like it. It felt more like Ocean Avenue than it did. And then we went to this real rundown one on Church Avenue and Marlborough. That's a conglomeration of all these other synagogues that have sort of fallen apart and can't get—they can't survive—either they lost their space, or they lost enough congregants, you know, they lost too many congregants, and they can't be. So it's—it's got a name that's got about five synagogues in it. And the building was falling apart, and it had all this—you know, tarps? You know, “Don't sit over there, you will get wet.” You know? It's over here. And um—it had a different feel? But everybody there loved each other. It was—it was... It was just a different kind of crowd. And Lisa wasn't there. It was somebody else who had sort of a spectacular voice, but it wasn't Lisa's voice. So it would take a lot for me to lose Kolot.

Lana Povitz 32:06

Well I hear you saying that there's also a commitment to not losing it, like it's a decision. And from that, it's almost like you can find—like what you set out to find...you find, to some extent. And it kind of reminds me of Torah study. It's like: here's this text, it can be anything for any number of people—can be different things at different times in your life. But you approach it in your present moment with your own set of stuff. And you see what you need to see. It kind of reminds me of that.

Miriam Cohen 32:38

And if you don't like it, lead Torah study. *[Lana and Miriam laugh]*

Lana Povitz

Is that how you came to lead Torah study?

Miriam Cohen

No, no. Torah study at that time was led by invitation only.

Lana Povitz 32:51

Oh! So when did you start going to Torah study? Like how long in?

Miriam Cohen 32:59

Oh, after Amos died.

Lana Povitz 33:02

Oh! So pretty much right away? I mean, pretty quickly.

Miriam Cohen 33:07

Well, you can't dismiss that whole year that we went and didn't talk to anybody.

Lana Povitz 33:12

Well I didn't dismiss it, but that seems its own particular—But it's been, it sounds like when you stepped in you really...?

Miriam Cohen

Yeah.

Lana Povitz

You dove. You know, you really dove in. It wasn't like hanging out in the shallow end with your ankles. It was like: deep dive. *[Miriam affirms]* Okay. Well, I only ask you this because Torah Study is such a—you know, it's, I think it's, I mean—it's how I met you. It's certainly an important part of both of our lives. We are quite committed to it in our ways. Can you, like, talk about what Torah study was for you, has been for you. What that means, how it connects to you?

Miriam Cohen 33:49

I used to think—well, before the first cycle, or maybe I thought that it would contain every single story and every protagonist and every idea that that a story could have would be—it'd be in the story—would be in this book. And then I realized it didn't. And now I'm starting to think it does. *[Miriam and Lana laugh]* And so what Ellen Lippmann says is, you turn it and you twist it and you take in, and you twist, and there's nothing in my life that I twist and turn that much. Do I do that to my relationship with my husband—with Stu—we twist it and turn it? Not with such interest! *[Lana and Miriam laugh]* I mean we do. Yeah, the relationship has to get turned and twisted and yeah. But um, it's not as much fun to do it as it is with Stuart. I mean, it's stories.

Lana Povitz 34:49

Well, and midrash, really?

Miriam Cohen

Yeah, those are stories.

Lana Povitz

I mean, yeah. Yeah.

Miriam Cohen 34:57

I tend to like the older midrash than newer midrash. I tend to get annoyed by new midrash.

Lana Povitz

Why?

Miriam Cohen

It's like, that's not the story! That's your story. That's not that story. Um, and somehow or other I can—I don't conflate the old midrash so much, that it's the old rabbis' story. It—to me—they fit, they fit better with that, even though there's so much contortion. I see them closer than newer midrash. But, I like *my* midrash. So I don't know why. [*Lana and Miriam laugh*]

Lana Povitz 35:43

What do you mean by *your* midrash?

Miriam Cohen 35:45

I like what, you know, my interpretation. Like, okay, so I twisted and turned it. Okay. So, for the past six years, I have twisted and turned Sh'mini with my bat mitzvah, and I think I've done it either four or five times. And I've got another one coming up too. And every year, it changes a little bit. I'm, it's not only that, I'm focusing on a little bit of a different—I mean, it's something like 16 lines that I've done five Torah studies on, or a drash on.¹² But, the story gets deeper. The story, the story just lives inside me a little bit more.

Lana Povitz 36:33

Do you think you could say, I mean, I don't know if you're at—you know—recalling, with this level of detail, all these different sort of interpretive encounters, but I would be curious to hear how you've articulated those evolving meanings. Like, when you first encountered it, it was what? And then how did it change?

Miriam Cohen 36:59

When I first encountered it, I could not imagine—Okay, so Sh'mini, is—has, contains the story of Aaron's two sons, who take strange fire, offer it to God, and God swipes them (kills them). But that's, that's very brief, but that... So, here are my two boys. And so, I decided, I decided to

¹² A drash is a Sermon, an interpretation of text.

become an adult bat mitzvah because I felt like I wasn't being—I felt like an imposter. And I thought that if I did a B'nai Mitzvah, then I would come in, because otherwise, maybe I'm not, because who knows?¹³ So it was sort of my commitment. And for that drash, it was just completely incredulous that you smite young men that have passion. That they chose the best fire. They—they were, they did this, they they... How do you? How did G-d do that? And I talked a lot about passion and about how important it is to have passion. And, how... you know? And my two boys had an *enormous* amount of passion. And that can't be wrong. I mean, that's, that's what I did. That was what my *whole*, the whole thing was about, that—that having passion can't be wrong. And then, four years later, or five years later—the last one—it was... “Yeah, but if you have that kind of passion, then maybe you can't be a high priest, you can't lead somebody. That if you, if you—being, you know, I mean? The word zealot comes up, but I'm not even not talking that much on the spectrum of it. But if you have too much of your own passion, then you're unreal— You can be unreliable. And if you're unreliable, then there's certain things that you couldn't do. You really just can't do. And that's a *huge* shift for me. There's nothing wrong with having passion. Passion is wonderful. That you *need* passion... But it'll prevent you from some things, that you can choose to be prevented from. That's okay. But it's—So, to me, that's a much more nuanced sense of passion, then, “What are you talking about?” Passion, you know? How can you? How can you dismiss passion?

Lana Povitz 40:16

I think it's so amazing to be part of a tradition and a community where there's a structure for the ripening or the like maturation or whatever growth, develop-however you want to say it, of a thought, like that, like—how good that there are sanctified spaces for coming to these things. It's kind of amazing. To be able to be in conversation with something for so long, I guess that's why we read it over and over.

Miriam Cohen 40:49

I have really appreciated that the people who lead Torah study keep letting me do Sh'mini. My my Parshah cause its my parshah—

Lana Povitz 41:01

My Parshah! But I think everyone benefits from it being your Parshah. I mean, because you're not saying the same thing each year, also. Like, it's very urgent—the interpretive work is urgent each time. I think everyone needs that from you. You know, everyone needs you to do that. So we can, I mean, I think I've spent two or three cycles, maybe just two that I've heard you through it, but I'm here for it. The whole time. Nobody else better take it! [*Miriam laughs*] But you've done—you've also led when it's not your Parshah.

¹³ B'nai Mitzvah is The plural of “bar mitzvah” or “bat mitzvah” is “b'nai mitzvah.” In our times, “b'nai mitzvah” is used so as not to distinguish a grammatical gender.

Miriam Cohen 41:38

Yeah, yeah. And, I've never repeated a Parshah. The only one I've ever repeated is Sh'mini.

Lana Povitz:

Right.

Miriam Cohen:

But, I think there's real value in doing a Parshah again.

Lana Povitz:

Yeah.

Miriam Cohen:

I mean, I don't know if anybody needs to have it be their Parshah. Oh, well, you know, Arth-. There's a history of this. Arthur had the Akedah.¹⁴

Lana Povitz:

Oh, right.

Miriam Cohen:

For a decade or more.

Lana Povitz:

Right.

Miriam Cohen:

And he would drash on that—he would lead Torah study on that. That was the story that he struggled with. Nobody said to him, “I want to do Akedah now. Why does he...?” It's like, no, we knew that Arthur had to struggle with it. And we benefited.

Lana Povitz 42:24

I wonder if there are any others? Anyone else who has—if that happens? I can't think of that. It's been nice that—you know, you did it with Ilana. You're gonna do it with Cara. I mean, this collaborative leading is kind of a nice development. I hadn't seen that.

Miriam Cohen 42:44

No! We didn't—Ellen Lippmann leads sometimes...

Lana Povitz 42:49

¹⁴ *Akedah* (Hebrew: “binding”) referring to the binding of Isaac as related in Genesis 22.

Oh true! I've seen her do it with Imani. Yeah, yeah, that's right. How was it different to work with somebody, on that? For you?

Miriam Cohen 42:59

Um, well, in my style, I get all excited about an idea. *[Miriam laughs]* And I sometimes feel that I push it on people. It's like, "This is *such* a good idea. We can do another idea. But this is *such* a good idea." It's like, and I think they come to it as, "Well, why not? I'm gonna say no to this great..." *[Lana and Miriam laugh]*

Lana Povitz:

It's a good idea!

Miriam Cohen:

Ilana came with resources that I never would have been able to access.¹⁵ And I'm not sure why not, or maybe I would have, but she came with resources that were so spot on-ly gorgeous that it really helped us go, you know, really to gel.

Lana Povitz:

When you say resources, like what?

Miriam Cohen:

Um, midrash!

Lana Povitz:

Ah... lucky. She knew that.

Miriam Cohen

And then she can chant. *[Miriam laughs]*

Lana Povitz 44:09

Right. Do you sing in services? Like you talk—you know, what we've learned—as we do talk about Lisa singing? Is your own participation in singing important?

Miriam Cohen 44:31

Yes. Yeah, and I can't wait to stop wearing a mask.

Lana Povitz

Oh, yeah.

¹⁵ Ilana Levinson, a young Kolot member.

Miriam Cohen

You suck in it. And you don't quite hear yourself and everybody else is muffled and... you know. Yeah—I don't have great pitch. I mean, I have great pitch if I sing it over and over again. But, just off the top of my head. I don't—you know—and most of the time if I think it through the first time, you know, I'm all over the place. But, the act of singing, using my voice, there's some kind of vibration in there that you vibrate your body with it, you know, and, and to have a continuous vibration by singing, is another thing like fasting and walking, it's another trick to get you into a space.

Lana Povitz 45:24

I mean, it's how people talk about prayer. It's to get you into that space. I mean, it's, yeah.

Miriam Cohen 45:44

I wish I could sing. I used to sing—the time I was the best singer was when I sang the kids, the boys to sleep. And I would sing to them for about 15 or 20 minutes every single night. And I probably did it way longer than they wanted to because of how much I liked it. But I would be in their room, it would be dark, they'd be settling down and I would sing. And I—my pitch got so much better after singing that much. But I haven't given myself the opportunity to do that again. I mean, services help.

Lana Povitz 46:22

I was gonna say services. We sing the same songs—you know—over and over.

Miriam Cohen 46:26

But once a week is different than once a day.

Lana Povitz 46:30

For sure. Have you ever considered doing like the morning minyan or like any more of a daily kind of thing? No. Yeah, once a week is a nice, nice rhythm. So, one of the things that seems to be coming up in these interviews, as we've talked a little bit about, is this idea of like, “My Kolot.” You know, everybody has their own Kolot. So if you were to describe your Kolot, how would you describe it?

Miriam Cohen 47:06

There's a very funny thing that I talk about “My Kolot.” When B'nai Mitzvahs were in person, and they're starting to be again, the parents always give the welcome because they're welcoming their family and, you know, into the Kolot community. And they go, “We've been involved with Kolot for 15 years, or for the past 10 years.” And I look at them, I go, “Where have you been? You haven't been in *my* Kolot. I don't know you! You know, you are passionately connected... to what?” I believe—it's not that I don't believe them. But, I don't—I never saw them before. So, my

Kolot is services. My Kolot is Torah study. I'm on the Membership Engagement Committee, and I'm not a party person—you know—I don't I don't, I don't— And I don't see myself as a gatherer. Um, I guess I am, I don't know. Um, and they like me to give the pitch to the new members and the prospective members about the Membership Engagement Committee, but I don't think they would give a pitch about the Membership Engagement Committee if it wasn't my pitch. And my pitch is, “I'm only here to have fun. We're here and we meet every week and we think of fun things to do. And if it isn't fun, we don't do it.” And I love being on the Membership Engagement Committee and for a bunch of reasons. I think it's really, really important that committees become—there are strong committees in Kolot. I think that the board needs to get unloaded and I think there needs to be more opportunities for members to feel engaged in the structure of and there isn't that many, much opportunity. So for me, the Membership Engagement Committee is a way for me to say, “I'm part of this structure. I'm part of keeping this structure going.” But it's sort of fun to say, “But we're only going to have fun. We're not going to do, we're not doing anything that's not fun.” I don't think the board says that. I don't think the board says “Oh, let's go have some fun!” You know? *[Lana laughs]*

Lana Povitz 49:48

Different mandate.

Miriam Cohen 49:52

I think they could. But that's not the sense that you get from this board. It's all really hard work. You know, they're all so committed, and they're really hard. I don't want to complain about the board.

Lana Povitz 50:13

What are some of the fun things that you've done with the Membership Engagement Committee?

Miriam Cohen 50:18

We do book clubs. So we—there have been people from the congregation who have suggested a book, and then we suggest that they lead it. And so we started to help them, you know, I'm actually always the one person that helps, that helps them. And, they feel engaged, and the people who are reading the book feel engaged, and we tried to pick books that are, sort of, you know, reflect the diversity. And they're fun! They're really fun. Yeah, that's all been pandemic, though, and so it's been on Zoom, and it works really well on Zoom. So we have to decide whether we're going to keep it on Zoom or not. We do still do this thing called Shabba Yachad, where families would offer to host a Shabbos dinner, or Havdalah dinner.¹⁶¹⁷ And then other members would volunteer—would say, “Okay, I want to go to your house.” And there would be a very small contingent of Kolot people celebrating Shabbat together. And that actually takes an

¹⁶ “Shabbat Together.”

¹⁷ “Separation or distinction”: a time to take leave of shabbat.

enormous amount of organization. Who's vegan? Who's not? Who has kids? Who doesn't? Who's allergic to cats? Who... you know? Who can travel and who can't travel and, and then matching all this up? Takes a lot of talking to individual people. And, people have really enjoyed these dinners. And it's really fun to do. It's really, I mean, you're promoting fun. You're promoting community.

Lana Povitz 52:05

Hanging out. Yeah, that sounds great. And has that been possible to do even during COVID?

Miriam Cohen 52:13

Well we've done them on Zoom. But not small ones. Just. We've had a Shabba Yachad. And then breakout groups for—

Lana Povitz

Yeah, I think I've been to that before.

Miriam Cohen:

And you could choose what breakout groups...

Lana Povitz 52:26

Yes, I did the Shabbat breakout group last time. I think—that... Okay, so that's the Membership Engagement Committee. So, this is also the one that organizes the like, welcome to new members and the prospective members and all that.

Miriam Cohen

Yeah.

Lana Povitz

Wow. Okay. What are some of the challenges with that group?

Miriam Cohen 52:44

We're tiny. We're about three people. Which is probably why they like me to promote it, that we're just having fun. We've gotten some really good new people that want to. I changed the name, I suggested we change the name to—it used to be the membership committee—and it sounds like we have to recruit members. And that's not what we do. And so we changed, the name got changed to the Membership Engagement, because what we do is we engage members, we don't, we're not—I mean—we are, we don't go out and recruit.

Lana Povitz 53:23

No... Also, Kolot doesn't need that right now. I mean, it's such a time of growth. I mean, it seems like because of—if you started coming like a decade ago, you've definitely seen that growth.

Miriam Cohen

Yeah.

Lana Povitz

You've experienced that, you felt it. We—can you talk about what kinds of effects you've seen that have, even in your own experience or on the congregation as a whole?

Miriam Cohen 53:59

Um, I'm very attractive, attracted to the younger people. I'm just, I'm just, I'm just attracted to them. I think they're all gorgeous. I mean, they're just so good looking.

Lana Povitz 54:21

I mean, that's true.

Miriam Cohen 54:24

And there's—so there's a spark that I love. And it had been that those people, the young people that I was, I was meeting would be about the same age that Sam and Amos were—are growing into that age. And now that Sam is dead 11 years and Amos is dead 6, I don't know who they would have been. And so the attraction—I can't fit them in the way I used to fit them in. It was for me to stay in touch with Sam and Amos, for me to stay in touch with the younger people. But now it's—that's all I have. It's something I haven't figured out, you know, Sam would have been 37 and Amos, in December would have been 35. But when Sam died at 26, who was he going to be at 37? I don't know. They didn't grow. They didn't get old. They didn't get—they didn't age. They didn't, they didn't have that. So, it's a different kind of grief at the moment that I haven't—I haven't... that it's unfamiliar. But, I'm still very attracted to young people.

Lana Povitz 55:56

And they to you. And we to you! I think it's fair to say. I mean, I'm sitting between their... I mean, I'm 36. You know, it's interesting to hear you talk about that.

Miriam Cohen 56:10

Right, you're right in the middle.

Lana Povitz

Yeah.

Miriam Cohen

1986?

Lana Povitz 56:15

Yeah. I mean, to hear you narrate that—it's not a chall—it doesn't sound like much of a challenge—doesn't sound like a growing pain. I mean, although there's a pain in the heart in it, there isn't—like it's not a problem. The—you know—you're not talking about the growth of Kolot Chayeinu, like, something that has to be mitigated or controlled... you know, changed, you know, compensated for, I think a lot of people do feel that way that with the growth, things are lost, but it doesn't sound like that's your experience at all.

Miriam Cohen 56:55

No. We're on the oral history project. And we're on the design committee, design team. There weren't that many of us. And there's some people who have been in Kolot for a long time. There's a couple of people who've been in Kolot for a minute. And I thought that would bother me, that they were only there for a minute. And here you want to collect the stories, the archives of a place that you barely know. And I knew I made a conscious sort of about that. And then it doesn't matter. It doesn't—it doesn't matter. I've been listening to some of the other interviews. And nobody says, “Oh, I just belong to Kolot. You know, it's the synagogue down the street. And it's convenient. And you know, I can roll out of bed and I can go to Kolot.” Nobody says that. Everybody goes, “It's my Kolot,” I, that they have—there's a passion about being a part of this. Even if it's people who are just dipping their toe in it, they understand that this is a very special place, and that people regard it very special. It's something very special.

Lana Povitz 58:39

Right? I think that really comes through, especially in how people talk about Ellen and Miriam—for those who joined as Miriam's people, like me. But, you know something, just listening to you before say this, that you expected to have, you know, maybe a struggle with people who had, you know, only been in for a minute who want these histories? I think that, in a way, thinking about you, you can't possibly really struggle with it, because it's so—that impulse is so about a yearning for community, I think like the people who want to be—to want to know the history. It's a curiosity. It's a love, that is also a passion. Which I think is something that you have in such abundance that you probably—maybe I don't know—but maybe part of why it didn't bother you is because it's a kindred inclination, although expressed, you know, for a different reason, in a different way. But I think also, that's why it's so easy for you to connect with people in some part of it, because there is this shared yearning for connection. And this is one of the things I, you know, have loved about you immediately and identified with—is just this lack of, there's no need to, like, hide that or pretend that's not what you're here. It's exactly why we're here. It's just so refreshing. I wish the whole world was like that.

Miriam Cohen

Yeah.

Lana Povitz

Well, as you know, since we are on the project design team together and had a lot of these conversations here, we talked a lot about, you know, what our areas of digging would be, although we didn't really call them that. And, you know, the question of challenges for Kolot—I think—was something we all agreed would be important to talk about. So, I wanted to just make space for you to talk about that if you want to, in whatever way.

Miriam Cohen 1:00:38

Um, space is going to be an issue. If we grow—and we can't—and we're too big for the space. And we're going to—and maybe we might have to leave Gethsemane, which I have a very dear connection to.¹⁸ And I know people are trying to figure that out. But, the first board meeting I went to, way back when. I don't—maybe it was even pre—I don't think I was a member yet. Oh, no, I had to have been, I couldn't have gone to a board meeting or anything?

Lana Povitz 1:01:23

You could do anything! I don't know. It's possible.

Miriam Cohen 1:01:27

It was a long time ago. And I asked the question, “What's the ideal size for Kolot?” They were talking about it growing or, or, you know, wanting it to grow. It was way before this surge of new members. And it was almost as if they didn't understand the question. Like “Kolot, what's the right size for Kolot? It's the size that Kolot is. Whoever wants to be there. And that's the right number of—everybody wants to... a lot of people want to be there? That's the right number.” And it was interesting to me that that was wholeheartedly. Uh, you know, everybody said that. And it was almost as if they didn't know what the question was, “What's the right size?” The right size is the size it is, you know,

Lana Povitz 1:02:17

Did you have a different answer in mind?

Miriam Cohen 1:02:19

Well, I thought that it may not want to grow quickly. That, that there would be things and even sort of things that you're used to would change. And that maybe growing too quickly would not be a good idea as a goal. You know, let's grow quickly. But I didn't get that sense from them.

Lana Povitz 1:02:46

¹⁸ The Church of the Gethsemane on 8th Ave in Park Slope, Brooklyn is the space Kolot holds Shabbat services, and some of the education classes and meetings.

Well, it doesn't sound like "to grow" wasn't a goal either. From what you just said. Like they—it sounds like that's an answer that says you're open to growth. If it happens, great. But if it doesn't. Is that how you think they meant it? Like they were just gonna go with whatever or did you feel like that meant that they wanted to grow?

Miriam Cohen 1:03:08

I think it meant both. That it's okay as it is, but it'd be good to grow too.

Lana Povitz

Uh huh. Yeah.

Miriam Cohen

I think growth also means more money. I mean, means more expenditures, but I think, I think Kolot, especially then, really wanted more money. Yeah, I don't have—I don't know where they are at this point. But I think... they always want—they probably always want more money.

Lana Povitz

Yeah.

Miriam Cohen

You can do more things.

Lana Povitz 1:03:46

Totally. We talked about this in my interview bit. But to me, it hasn't felt like—I've heard what people say they miss about a smaller Kolot. And of course, having no experience of that it doesn't—you know—I can't relate to it exactly. But it does seem like there's—because of what you said earlier about this thing that, like, you... not that you go and everybody loves each other. Exactly. But there is a kind of commitment to the existence of this place that people tend to share. There are ways to have, like, small communities within the big community. And I mean, I think Torah Study and I think services—not that many people go to services weekly. You know, it's not a huge group. You can be a regular. So—

Miriam Cohen 1:04:42

Yeah, but the people who come to services, you can't add a whole lot more family for a B'nai Mitzvah. I mean, if you want to invite 40 people from your family, they're not gonna fit.

Lana Povitz 1:04:59

Do people try to do that and find that they're not all—that they can't? I wonder how it's handled.

Miriam Cohen 1:05:06

I don't know. I don't know how it works at the moment. But um, I have no idea how it works. But you know, and also you don't want to be squished the way we were squished back then. Maybe you can be squished with people you know, but you don't want to be squished to people you don't know.

Lana Povitz 1:05:30

Where were you squished?

Miriam Cohen 1:05:31

Oh, during a B'nai Mitzvah, when all the family would come, you'd be squished into your pew. They would set up extra chairs in the front for the friends of the B'nai Mitzvah. Sometimes they would line up chairs in the aisle, so they'd put an extra seat in an aisle. And I mean, that hasn't happened since COVID.

Lana Povitz 1:05:58

So, you've named the challenge of space. Are there others that you would want to think about?

Miriam Cohen 1:06:13

Israel-Palestine is a *huge* passion of many people. And I think that—now, I have never had a relationship with Israel at all. And so my relationship with Israel is much more political than it is any kind of personal connection to. Nor did I have any relationship with it growing up. We didn't have a synagogue that raised money to plant trees. I don't know, I don't know what synagogues did—you know—with Israel. But, I do know that there has been a real passion for Israel that has been embedded in many people. And mainly because—and so, I do not belong on any Israel-Palestine working group. I just don't care enough or know enough or feel enough about it. But, I know that there are people who care enormously about this. And I really, I really don't want to become an anti-Zionist congregation. I don't. The same way we open the doors up to everybody who wants to come in. That can't be a group that's excluded.

Lana Povitz

You mean Zionists?

Miriam Cohen

Yeah, the Zionists. And I worry about that. I don't worry about it enough to do anything about it. I mean, you know, because I don't feel like I have any stake in this other than: open the door. Keep the doors open. I have a lot of stake in that. And we're so good at it. We're so good at keeping the door open.

Lana Povitz 1:08:05

Yeah. Yeah, I hear that.

Miriam Cohen 1:08:14

And I think we would be worse off if there weren't. And I don't mean–Netanyahu people, I mean, just people who are pro or not anti-Zionist.

Lana Povitz 1:08:29

Well, I think that that's really one of these words where it means different–Zionist and anti Zionist mean very different things to different people. You know, I guess you were around when there was that whole survey study happening of what Kolot members think and feel about this issue. And some huge number, I think like 90% of people said they oppose the Occupation. But not, you know, didn't necessarily call themselves anti-Zionists. And, I think some of the people who were trying to make sense of the survey, it sounds like they were trying to think, “Okay, well, we don't necessarily want to name anything, but what are the values here?” Because Kolot is so values-driven. You know, what it means to be a progressive congregation in Brooklyn. I mean, there's content to that, you know, that people care about being able to say, “I'm part of a progressive organization.” And it seemed to me from what I–you know–I wasn't around for those conversations. But, what is helpful, and potentially good for Kolot, about it is that it can get people to realize the values they do share, even if language sometimes gets in the way of that, which is not always what's happening. But okay, let's talk about this values thing. I love this. I was talking to Arthur the other day about the oral history project. And he was sort of saying like *l'dor va'dor* is about the values we want to pass down.¹⁹ And I think it was Ellen who asked maybe BC, or BC who asked Ellen, and one of the other interviews was like, “What do you wish for Kolot?”²⁰ And if you want to think about that question in terms of the values, I would be curious to know what you'd say.

Miriam Cohen 1:10:17

Well, I can only talk about my Kolot.

Lana Povitz

Your Kolot.

Miriam Cohen

And I don't–how valuable it is to wrestle... that you question things and think–you know–Torah does not really... I mean, don't you go what? And then you start to wrestle with it, and what can you adopt? What are they saying? Can you find something in it? Can you find the metaphor? I mean, I had a breakout group with somebody that I just said, “It's a metaphor. You gotta find the metaphor. What's this a metaphor for?” You know, you can't just say it's war. There's a metaphor here. And that's the value. And I think if we–you know–I don't know if all of us, I mean, I'm one

¹⁹ “from generation to generation”

²⁰ [Ellen Lippman interviewed BC Craig](#) for this project, and [BC Craig interviewed Ellen Lippmann](#).

that will always go there. Go—what's the struggle? What do you want to wrestle with? Don't throw it out. Don't skip over it. It's there! And I think that in many ways, Kolot does that very, very well. The drashes do it. The kids' drashes do it.

Lana Povitz

Oh my god yeah.

Miriam Cohen

Struggle... struggle with it. It's—don't throw it out. And I think that's a huge value. And also almost a timeless value. And, I love that the B'nai Mitzvah kids are learning how to struggle. I think they're getting better, too. They used to be—like in the first year—that we went... The year before Amos died, Stu and I thought, “Oh, my God, another 13 year old takes on Parshah.”

Lana Povitz

But, they're still 13. Yeah, do you think it's possible that your ears are changing too? Like, maybe you're hearing things differently. Just a nice thought.

Miriam Cohen 1:13:21

I think the bar is higher now too.

Lana Povitz 1:13:29

In the spirit of struggle, you know, the need to struggle and kind of question and turn it, whatever. What do you think the questions are? Or what questions do you have, for your own life in Kolot?

Miriam Cohen 1:13:51

So, hardly anybody in my family could understand why I'm connected to a synagogue. A synagogue? It's like, “Okay, Miriam, if that makes you feel good. You... okay. Yeah, we know you've been through a lot. And so you know, if it makes you feel good. Yeah. Okay, good for you. Keep going, keep going.”

Lana Povitz

Patronizing! [*Lana and Miriam laugh*]

Miriam Cohen

Oh, I forgot what is gonna go. What was..?

Lana Povitz 1:14:19

I asked you about the questions you have for yourself in Kolot.

Miriam Cohen 1:14:25

Oh, yeah. Okay. So, the last week: “do you believe in God?” And I had to look up the meaning of belief. What does “believe” mean? I don't know what “believe” means. And what I remember about what “believe” means is that you have some certainty that it's true. And so I go, “No, I don't believe in God.” And then I read a quote from Heschel that talks about radical amazement and wondering.²¹ And I said, “I love to wonder about God.” I don't believe in God. But I love to wonder about God. And I think yes and no, I don't believe in God, but I wonder about God and that, I think, really captures it in a way that—that really makes me feel okay. So, I can continuously wonder about God, and feel good when I'm—when the wandering part comes and makes me feel good, and struggle when we're at the wandering part I don't get. But, I like to wonder about it.

Lana Povitz

Love that. Yeah.

Miriam Cohen 1:15:47

So do you believe in God? No, I wonder about God. But it was a whole lot of pieces that got me there. I'm not absolutely sure that God's there. I mean, not God, there's... might be something, but I'm wondering about it.

Lana Povitz 1:16:07

And what good does absolute certainty do most of the time? I mean, you're really better off wondering, I think, than being absolutely sure.

Miriam Cohen 1:16:19

Yeah, I think so. Yeah. Because, you know, it can change. You don't have any stake in it. I mean, you have a stake in it, but it gives you absolute permission to say, “Okay, now it's different.”

Lana Povitz 1:16:35

I mean, that does seem to be another value, too, kind of threading its way through our discussion today. That, like, the... what? Welcome inevitability of change? Dynamism? I don't know really what to call it, but like *change*, you know, as something that we expect and welcome and are curious about. I mean, that seems like really—when you were talking about, you know, revisiting your Parshah. I mean, it's the opposite of static, it's like a real commitment to change. That's a really, that's a really strong value. I don't know that most congregations are as interested in that. I mean, not that I know, like, I don't know, but I don't get that feeling. Like, even in what you said, the board said, of like, “What size should it be? You know, the size that it is!” Like, what you know, which, which, which has so much room for that? I have a question that we had never

²¹Abraham Joshua Heschel is a widely read Jewish theologian whose most influential works include *Man Is Not Alone*, *God in Search of Man*, *The Sabbath*, and *The Prophets*.

discussed at all. But I am curious about this, which is, you know, at the beginning of your narration of the story, you talk a lot about Stu as being with you. As you, you both tried to go to a Yom Kippur service, then you both went to Kolot and you both felt it crackling, you know...

Miriam Cohen 1:18:06

He didn't go to the first Yom Kippur services I went to.

Lana Povitz

Oh, he didn't go?

Miriam Cohen

No.

Lana Povitz 1:18:12

Because.. oh, right. You're right. He said he was—Yeah. Okay. But then he did go with you to Kolot. And I—you know, has gone and has gone to Torah Study and has got... . But so, I'm just wondering, like, how it has been to have your Kolot and your journey and also sort of have—be alongside someone who's also having some kind of journey with it.

Miriam Cohen 1:18:39

Let's not go there.

Lana Povitz 1:18:40

Okay. Thank you for that clarity. I appreciate that.

Miriam Cohen 1:18:45

It's complicated. And it's—it doesn't, it has more to do with us than it does with Kolot.

Lana Povitz 1:18:53

Right. I mean, that makes a lot of sense. I appreciate that.

Miriam Cohen 1:18:57

But, I love his mind. I love when he thinks about something. He's such an interesting reader that—even if he's not completely connected, I want to run these ideas by him because he's so wonderful at having an articulate perspective that's one that usually I haven't thought about. So, I appreciate that. Even though... are you in, are you out, are you in...?

Lana Povitz

Well, you're lucky to have that.

Miriam Cohen

Yeah. Oh, I feel very lucky to have that.

Lana Povitz 1:19:44

There was something you said. I don't know when we spoke some other time in the past. It's gonna sound out of left field, but it isn't really. You talked about Mondays being your favorite day of the week. And you said something like, that it was because you could make as many plans as you wanted—on Monday— as the week was full of possibility. Which I really identified with, you know, I'd never, I always I kind of, I haven't greeted Mondays that way. But, since you spoke those words, I started to see it that way too. And part of what I liked about you saying—is it filled me, like it reminded me of that feeling of, like, possibility, and all that we can do together. And I guess I just wanted to invite you to share if you had anything to say about how, what plans you have for yourself with Kolot? Or what, you know, when you think of that feeling of possibility toward this community that we love, and that is so uniquely yours. How does it fill you? What do you think of that?

Miriam Cohen 1:20:48

Well, I'll go back to my interview with you. I want to learn. I love learning. I want to know more. I want to engage more, and I want to learn, and that just fills me up. And, there is opportunity to do that. Part of me wants to learn how to read Hebrew, which is sort of rote. But really, I want my heart to be smarter. I want to learn—I love learning with my heart. And sometimes it surprises you—sometimes learning Hebrew, your heart explodes. All the little squiggles.

Lana Povitz 1:21:48

Right, with the cantillation?²² I mean, you talked about that.

Miriam Cohen 1:21:52

And then you can know it. And it's and... Yeah, well, can I love trope.²³ I absolutely love cantillation as another midrash.

Lana Povitz 1:22:00

Right. I remember you saying that! Yeah.

Miriam Cohen 1:22:09

And that, to me, is learning with your heart, not learning with your brain. Like, like, where, where's the emphasis? Where's the music?

²² The traditional notation representing the various traditional Jewish melodies to which scriptural passages are chanted or intoned.

²³ *Trop or trope*: Yiddish for cantillations.

Lana Povitz 1:22:18

What's leading? And I think a lot of contemporary midrash, which you may not like, but I think a lot of it is written out of—it's led by the heart, not by the mind, particularly. It's like, this is the meaning we urgently need to make now. So, we'll—you know—we'll do it in stories. We'll do these stories, but I think it's that impulse, too. Yeah.

Miriam Cohen 1:22:49

Yeah, but I love Mondays. I wake up and say, “Let's do something *big* on Monday. It's Monday!” Clean something that you didn't think you're gonna clean up, and then it'll make you happy because it's a big thing you're doing on Monday!

Lana Povitz 1:23:05

It's doing the opposite of Shabbat. Although you are learning on Shabbat—

Miriam Cohen 1:23:10

So, yeah, that's, that... to me... It's absolutely brilliant that you can learn on Shabbat.

Lana Povitz 1:23:18

Yeah, it's not an exempt activity. Well, it's refreshment. Did you observe Shabbat before all this?

Miriam Cohen

No, no.

Lana Povitz

So, what has that meant? I mean, what's the difference in your life for observing it?

Miriam Cohen 1:23:35

Oh, the week is completely different. The week shifted. The week goes from Saturday to Saturday. It doesn't go from Monday to Friday and then you're off. I mean, it was hard to—for me to sort of figure this out as I retired at the same time that I got very connected to Kolot. So I was working that year that we went every day. I mean every week. But, very soon after Amos died, I stopped working. And so, there was a structurelessness to my week that, I mean, there still sort of is, but Shabbat really helps a lot.

[Lana sneezes]

Miriam Cohen

Bless you!

Lana Povitz

Thank you.

Miriam Cohen

So does alternate side street parking. [*Lana and Miriam laugh*]

Lana Povitz 1:24:32

But I mean, there's so much we haven't talked about, I guess. Thank you. Sorry, my allergies this time of year. But, I guess I just want to start asking you like, are there things that you really want to talk about that we haven't yet? Like, why wait to ask you that question? I'll ask you now.

Miriam Cohen 1:25:17

I feel like I'm talking about leading with an open heart. But really, it's from a broken heart. And I don't want to forget that. That—I wrote a letter to my sister one time, saying I had done something. Oh, I was in Florida. By myself. I had taken this trip by myself after Amos died, and I was in Florida. And I wanted to find a walk, a hike, a hiking trail to go by what's called The Sinks, which were a special land formation that—and I drove the road and I had the map and I was going, I was going and all of a sudden... it turns into sand.²⁴

Lana Povitz

Sand?

Miriam Cohen

Sand. And I had a four wheel drive car, but I didn't really think you're supposed to drive on sand if you're gonna go. So, I turned around and went 35 minutes back to the place where I got the map. And they said, "Yeah, you do. You just missed it." And I said, "I wasn't brave enough." And she said, "You're really brave enough. I've never done that without my husband. You know, I've never done that walk. You are just brave enough." And so I'm telling, I'm writing this to my sister. And I said, my mother never knew that the kids died. She died the year before Sam died.... And I said, "Do you think our mother would think I was brave? I want to just be brave. Do you think, do you think she could say I'm brave? I just, I just feel like I want to be brave. And sometimes I just don't quite feel so brave." And I don't, I want to get used to that. I don't want to get used to a broken heart. I want to be disarmed. There's something—there was a time when I completely understood why Italian women wear black after their husbands died, and that they never stopped wearing black. I sort of understood that, you know, it's like Tzitzit.²⁵ It's like you need to stay reminded. And I don't really feel like that anymore. I don't feel like I identify with the Italian women wearing black all the time, right. But I don't want to forget, I don't—I, there's a real power in that. There's a real... there's a real... it's not a motivation. It's a—it opens my heart.

²⁴ Refers to one of the most extensive underwater cave systems in the world.

²⁵ *Tzitzit* are usually attached to the four corners of the *tallit gadol* (prayer shawl), usually referred to simply as a *tallit* or *tallis*.

It never closed my heart. I understood what a heart was by having it broken. And I didn't ever want to be without one. I just never paid attention to my heart before that. Yeah, then Sam died. And then Amos died. And just like, "Oh, I had a heart all along. But I wasn't paying any attention to it." I want to keep remembering to pay attention to it.

Lana Povitz 1:29:05

And I mean, there's so much in Judaism that asks us exactly that question. How do you keep remembering? Right? I mean, the cycle of the holidays and the Days of Awe, all of the ritual to keep it fresh and bleeding in a way. Not scabbed over, not dried out. There's—it's like so many of the things you're saying. It's like you're speaking the experience of the thing that our practice is structured to do.

Miriam Cohen

Yeah.

Lana Povitz

I don't think I ever really realized... I don't think I ever got that.

Miriam Cohen 1:29:46

Oh, the first year we fasted, we said—for Yom Kippur, Stu and I— we said, "This is brilliant!" This is—what a great trick to get your mind into a place where you need to do this internal shifting around. Because, if you weren't hungry, or you were doing it a little bit fuzzy, it'd be much harder to do. This is brilliant, this fasting stuff!

Lana Povitz

Yeah, I mean it's figured out by people who understand that we have a body, that the mind—the thinking, feeling, perceiving self—is shaped by the body! That needs to be woken up or focused in all these ways.

Miriam Cohen

It's like meditating, a bit. ... It occurred to me at one point because we didn't go to services between High Holidays because I sort of knew that would happen... because I sort of knew something inside of me would shift, that couldn't unshift.

Lana Povitz

So, why did that mean that you didn't go?

Miriam Cohen

You can't unknow something. Once you know something you can't unknow it.

Lana Povitz

Right.

Miriam Cohen

Well, that's pretty powerful.

Lana Povitz

Yeah. I really want to thank you for everything you shared. It's amazing to be shared with by you. And, I love you. And I love knowing and listening to you share.

Miriam Cohen

And Kolot's pretty special too.

Lana Povitz

And I love your Kolot. You know, I love hearing about it through this set of experiences. So, thank you.

Miriam Cohen

This is great. Thank you. You know how to hold it... you do! And I know about holding, about being held.