Kolot Chayeinu Oral History Project
Laura Tanenbaum interviewed by Grace Lile
March 14, 2023 10am via Zoom
Length: 1 hour

Abstract

In this interview, Laura describes her path to Kolot, including her upbringing in the Midwest, college years, move to NYC for graduate school, political activism, search for a meaningful Jewish community, and starting a family.

She talks about the death of her mother in 2017, and how the Rabbi offered support that drew on Jewish tradition but was also responsive to her own particular circumstances. As an activist/organizer, she reflects on the evolution of the political climate, generally, and in particular related to Israel-Palestine. And as a writer, she reflects on the intersections and possibilities of writing and poetry as ritual and in spiritual practice.

Transcript

Grace Lile

[00:00:07] good morning, Laura. Today is March 14th, 2023. My name is Grace Lile. I'm a Kolot member and I'm here interviewing Laura Tanenbaum as part of Kolot's Oral History Project. And so I think we'll just jump right in. So, we've talked a little bit, Laura, but maybe you could start with, you know, something about your background. Obviously, we're going to talk a lot about your path to Kolot and your experience, but, really, anything about yourself that you would like to share?

Laura Tanenbaum

[00:01:01] Sure. So I grew up in the Midwest. I sometimes joke where, like, I pass as a New York Jew, but I'm actually on both sides one of the - actually, I say rare, but I don't think it's that rare. Families that, you know, came through Ellis Island but didn't stay and went straight out to the Midwest. So some, my father's family, went right to Chicago. My mom's family was from the Minneapolis area, settled in the Minneapolis Saint Paul area, where there's actually a big Jewish community in Saint Paul. If you've ever seen the Coen Brothers' more personal movies about that, that's where they're from, the Midwestern Jews. And so I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, and my dad was a first generation born in the U.S. His mother came from Kiev and his father came from what's now Belarus. So he had sort of more of that experience. And my mom's family went farther back, actually, some of them, in addition to Minnesota, actually were part of a wave of Jewish homesteaders. That's the word they use - I don't know what we would say now - in North Dakota and tried to farm in North Dakota with mixed degrees of success. So but I grew up outside of Chicago

and it was, you know, a town called Naperville. It was a very middle class neighborhood, not very Jewish. And so my parents were not religious. They were both very scientific in their backgrounds, and, uh, personality - you know, instincts. My dad trained as a physicist, so in my earliest days, actually, I grew up outside Chicago. My earliest days, we were moving around when he was doing an academic career and then left and became a programmer. So we settled in, outside Chicago and they were, you know, sort of rational minded people. But they did join one of the sort of few synagogues in the area, which was a Reform synagogue called Etz Chaim.

And so I went, you know, I had a Jewish education there. And they, you know, they really made it clear it was up to me. And I, for whatever reason, was kind of interested and wanted to go, even though there wasn't a lot of rigorous education, there was a lot of, I guess, kids who were sort of well-behaved, nerdy kids at school, and Sunday school was sort of the time you could act out because it felt more - less pressure, I guess. But I was sort of drawn to it. I wasn't quite sure why, or what I was looking for, you know, but I was sort of - I mean, being in a pretty non-Jewish area. And I think also growing up in the eighties and then early nineties, it definitely sort of fed this sense of being different, you know, because it's very, it was a pretty conservative suburb in a very conservative time in history. So I think it was definitely in my mind - the two things of, like being one of the only Jews, and the only parents who were Democrats kind of went together in my mind a little bit, you know. But that said, the synagogue itself was sort of conservative in its own way before, I mean, denomination, but sort of conservative looking back now, definitely in its attitude towards Israel and also in its attitudes towards Judaism, even though it was Reform, I think it had a very clear sense of these are things that are important. You know, these are things that we would do. They were very focused on Hebrew. And years later, my mom actually left that synagogue. And she said one of the reasons she left was because the rabbi said that if you didn't speak Hebrew, you were illiterate as a Jew. And she had not learned Hebrew growing up. And she just found that very off putting, you know, to be told that she was illiterate. So. But I went through there. I didn't I didn't do a bar / bat mitzvah. A lot of, some of the kids there did. I didn't. But I did do a confirmation year. So at the time, a lot of the Reform synagogues had, I think, some of those things. I don't know if confirmation was imported from Christianity, but we had a confirmation year where it was like as a class when you graduated from the Sunday school. So, you know, it's hard to say too much what I what I took from that other than the sense that I was looking for something, and this wasn't quite it, you know? But I wasn't ready to give up on it altogether. I was always very interested in history, very interested in Jewish history. And again, sort of felt there was something off or lacking in, you know, what we were being presented as, as our history.

So, after I graduated high school, I knew I wanted to come someplace in my mind more, you know, liberal. And I sort of was drawn to the East Coast. So I ended up going to Smith College in western Massachusetts and which is, you know, historically women's college. So it was a very, very different atmosphere. But what I was looking for Jewishly, still wasn't really finding - there was sort of the Hillel scene, which was I guess, you know, with it being a historically women's college, it was sort of it sort of had this leftover feeling of like the days when, okay, the weekend is for going on dates with, you know, from the suitable schools, like bringing together the coed schools so that there's Jewish, you know, guys in the mix. And I remember around that time that the Oslo you know, the peace process in the mid-nineties was happening. And I remember just like a lot of conversations about that that were sort of unsatisfying and again, just sort of knowing something's missing, but I don't know what it is. And it wasn't even like what people are saying is wrong. It's more like, this is the framework of how we're discussing this. And like, it's not the full picture, it's not the right framework. You know, like I only knew how to have - I would debate with people. I remember not wanting to go to some social event and I remember just saying to somebody, talking to a bunch of preppy guys from Amherst about what do you think about the peace process? It's just not my idea of a good time! And I framed it that way in terms of not fun. But looking back, what I think I was trying to say is, this is not the right conversation, right? Like I only knew how to think about it in terms of these talking points, of like, well, what about what happened? And there was no reality to it. You know, I had never been to Israel. A lot of the people I met had. But it was only - they had been on very prefabulated, you know like Birthright; I think may have even been too old for Birthright? It was just maybe starting when I was in the age group. So it wasn't as common. But there were other ones. Our synagogue had one called the SKIP, “send a kid to Israel,” but it was very clear. It was like, you know, you are to go, you are to have this experience. You are to take back certain things from it. So again, it was just this sense. And I had a wonderful college experience in a lot of ways, but Jewishly, it was definitely still that sense of looking for something but not knowing what.

So then I came to New York and I thought, Well, *surely* [laughs] New York City, surely, along with just, you know, having freely available cultural experiences and a beautiful apartment and I came to go to graduate school and all of that. You know, surely the Jewish community I'm looking for will be here. And, you know, that really took a long time. It took over a decade before I found Kolot. So I came in the mid-nineties to go to graduate school, in ‘96, right after I graduated college. So I guess Kolot was very young and fledgling, but it took me a long time to find it. And, you know, I think my experiences, trying different synagogues, trying different communities in those early years, I think is something a lot of people experience and I feel like one thing I just kept coming back to was, you know, over the years, I've known a lot of activists and gotten involved in various form of

activism. And, you know, there's this slogan "Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." And it did really feel like a lot of synagogues. There was some comforting the comfortable going on. You know, I'll never forget...

Grace Lile

[00:10:36] Can I ask you how actively you were sort of looking in that period? I'm just curious.

Laura Tanenbaum

[00:10:43] Sure. I mean, it was really fits and starts, you know, like I would find one that I liked and sort of go for a while and then I would stop, or I would go for a while, but then, you know, I found one I liked but wanted to go on the high holidays. But the high holiday tickets were $300. And I was a graduate student; and so someone would say something like, Oh, I can sneak you in or, you know, here's this one that's just for students. And I thought, okay, but you know, there's a lot of graduate students in New York City. We're here for seven or eight years. We shouldn't have to be like the extras, you know? It's like being at the singles table at the wedding, you know, and a lot of them, I went to some of the big ones, and you just definitely got a feeling like people were there to meet somebody which is lovely but it just felt very strained. And so I would say, yeah, fits and starts, periods of really eager and trying to do it and then getting discouraged and stopping for a while, you know. So yeah. And when I said "Comforting the comfortable", I'll never forget, after September 11th happened, going to a very prominent and much well loved by many people, you know, liberal Reform synagogue, and I don't know if it was the rabbi or somebody else who was giving a drash, but whoever it was sort of reciting the litany of the woes in the world and said, you know, and suicide bombers, it's so terrible, and, we really have to think about how in the world somebody... And it was just basically saying how awful or how terrible, how can somebody become a suicide bomber? But it wasn't a real question. It wasn't like, I actually want to question how in the world somebody could come to that terrible place. It was just like - it really felt like don't we feel good about ourselves because we're not suicide bombers? and Okay, I'm going to name the neighborhood. It was in Park Slope, but it's still not naming names because there's a lot of synagogues in Park Slope. And I just thought, you know, if you live in Park Slope, you don't get to feel good about yourself for not being a suicide bomber; like the bar for you is a little higher than that, right?

And so it just really made me think about wanting, you know, some different sense of something, and I was getting more politically active and I felt really, this is the early 2000s, and it was a really, really hard time for anybody who wanted to have a different perspective on Israel-Palestine, where the suicide bombings going on. And you just couldn't even engage, right. Because it

was just right away, “well, what about that? Are you defending that?” And there was just there was no opening, no conversation, both in the Jewish community, but even just in the world. And then, of course, the Iraq war came, I think that it was just a really, really hard time to be a young person wanting to find politics and all of that, you know. So I do think for a lot of that time, like in my later twenties and in that time period, I sort of turned inward. I had been very active in my union in graduate school. But I sort of, you know, after the war time, sort of turned inward and was focused on trying to start my career and trying to find a partner and all that. And the Jewish thing kind of maybe fell by the wayside, you know, a little bit. [14:32] **And so when I first, I don't remember the exact date I first came to Kolot, I think it was somewhere around 2009, 2010; I had a friend who invited me to a - they used to have an event for twenties and thirties. It would meet Friday night. It was like a potluck dinner. So I went to those for a little while and just right away, you know, I mean, I didn't rush and join but just right away I just had this feeling like, Oh, this is something very different and this is something very special. You know, just talking to, you know, one of the first people I talked there was an important activist in JFREJ[1]. And, it's just like, seeing in color when you've been seeing in black and white, you know; not feeling that judgment of being single or, not being from the right place or, I don't know, whatever it was that I felt. So that was just a big, big shift for me, you know, sort of mentally and everything. And when I found out that the high holiday services were free, it's a little thing - I don't know - actually, it's not a little thing. I think it's really, really big. I think it's really big because, you know… I understand, people have to fundraise in some way. But I think it's a real issue for a lot of people. It really stops a lot of people from exploring synagogue life. So I think that that was huge for me.** [16:23]

Grace Lile

[00:16:23] Funny because I'm just, you're reminding me that, years ago when I was on the board, Ellen[2] was just like upfront, that's the one thing I'm never, ever going to compromise on, ever. Yeah. I mean, obviously there were a lot of things she had had opinions about, but that was like so core and so it's…you know, and I think that's true for a lot of people. Thank you for highlighting that, because that's so foundational.

Laura Tanenbaum

[1] Jews for Racial and Economic Justice
[2] Rabbi Ellen Lippmann

[00:16:56] Yeah. And I've been able to, you know, like just this year for being back in person for Rosh Hashanah, one of my son's friends from school and his mom was sort of talking about wanting to go somewhere. And they don't always go to synagogue, but were kind of interested. And I said, oh, you should come here. And they were like, okay, well, what about the tickets? I was like, No, no, it's free. And I had to say several times, No, it's free. No, it's really, *really* free. Because it's so different from their experience. And so they were able to come and they're probably not going to join, they don't live nearby, but it was just a great experience to be able to share that with them without that…you know?

So that was around, I guess, 2009, 2010. And then the other big thing that was happening for me then was that I had started teaching full time. I teach at CUNY, so I was a little more settled in that life, and I really wanted to have a child. And I was in my mid-thirties and single, you know, it happens to a lot of people. And so it sort of started a process for me where eventually I did become a parent and eventually did marry my partner. But it wasn't quite all in the standard order, you know. So that was another thing that, you know, we've had two kids together and we're married, but it didn't happen, like, totally sequentially. So that was just another time when I just felt really supported and not judged, when I had my first son. And it was a little overwhelming. And, you know, his dad, my now husband, was kind of going back and forth with work stuff. And so they came and did the laundry. And we did a naming for both of them. **[18:54] And the support there was just amazing. And I just again feel like, my husband is not Jewish and is very interested in the community and has participated but is not converting, has the Quaker tradition and brings that to the table. And so I think…I know a lot of people have spoken about the openness to interfaith [at Kolot] - I'm not sure if interfaith is even the right word. But, you know, couples with non-Jewish partners, I think is along with the not charging for the high holidays, I think is just something concrete that's *so* important. And so, again, I feel like a lot of presumably liberal places - it just always feels like this conditional acceptance, you know, like everything feels conditional. Like it's okay to be queer if you're married, you know, it's okay to be single if you want to be married. And it's okay to have a non-Jewish partner if they're going to convert. [19:56]** But you've got to be on that track. And I remember hearing that all the time at the liberal synagogue I grew up in, you know, it's just like the demographic thing in Israel. You know, it's that mentality of like, we're small, we're small, so we got to lock the doors. You know, we got to, you know… I remember they used to say interfaith couples are interfaith-less, because, they would have these statistics that would show like, oh, if you raise them with both, they end up as neither. And I'm like, well, maybe they end up as neither because you're judgmentally terrible to them!

Grace Lile

[00:20:35] Because it's, it's so much focused on bloodlines, like the matrilineal descent. And I mean, I mean, again, not to interject, but, you know, I have…my sister [-in-law] and brother in law are both Jewish. They raised their children *completely* free of Jewish content of any kind, not even like, you know, maybe they lit a menorah once. And my sister-in-law is just like, why would anyone want to be Jewish? I mean, they're very secular, but it's also like, you know.

Laura Tanenbaum

[00:21:10] Yeah. Yeah.

Grace Lile

[00:21:11] No, it's just a thing you are. It's like, why would you? Because they. You know, but. Yeah. It's interesting and… I mean, has that been true the whole time you've been at Kolot, that you've felt that's not a thing?

Laura Tanenbaum

[00:21:31] I think so, I really think so. And I really think it's one of the things that's most kind of special about it, is that it's just coming at everything from such a different place. You know, because I feel like, coming out of, it's okay if you're going to convert. [21:52] **It's that limited view of diversity. You know, it's okay to be different as long as you're also really like us. And I just feel like, you know, for whatever reason, I'm not the only one, but coming at it from a whole different perspective that like we actually have things to learn from other traditions, you know, and that there isn't one thing that's the norm, I think is just so important. And so I think that that difference was really, really huge for me. As I mentioned, both my sons are boys and I had namings for both of them that were not brises, that were not circumcisions. That's - I don't know if people talk about this, but I actually think the openness to that is also really unusual. Again, so many people who, you know, are not religious, who don't practice a lot, but for some reason they have this idea like you must do a bris. And I was like, why? You know, you eat meat, you eat a cheeseburger. You don't follow this set of rules, but you're going to impose that on a kid, you know? So I just think the willingness to - and I've shared the program that we did, which was like nothing special, but I've seen in other even very left-wing Jewish communities, people asking, oh, can you have a naming that's not a bris? I was like, yeah, you can do that. So I just think it's like – it's that idea of – permission, you know, sometimes it just feels like people are waiting for permission. And I think a huge thing that Kolot does is just**

give you the permission to be Jewish in your own way, or not be Jewish, but take something from the community. And I think along with that, what's interesting for me is that even as there is just that radical openness to different faiths and not having to do this one particular ritual, I think there's a spiritual sort of rigor, I would almost say, or seriousness or depth that some of those other communities don't have, because I think sometimes the fear, right, is like, well, if you don't have to convert and you don't have to do the bris, then like what's even left that's Jewish...[24:14]

Intellectual, I mean not to sound... but the craft of some of the dashes and the commentary and the sort of genuine wrestling with things that I see at Kolot, I felt like I just didn't see the places where you were getting congratulated for not being a suicide bomber when you are a brownstone owner. [laughs] You know, I teach writing at a community college, one of the CUNY schools. I've always just been interested in writing, and that's how I explore ideas and express myself. And I think one of the most remarkable things for me about Kolot is just there's speeches, there's particular drashes from years ago that I'll remember, you know? Arthur Strimling, you know, his particular sort of blending of art and theater with commentary, I just find so rich. So sort of my own little silly tradition on Rosh Hashana, I always listen to Leonard Cohen, who has a song about the binding of Isaac, which is about the death of his own father. You know, he tells that story about, he talks about his dad coming in, I was nine years old, how old he was when his father died. And he tells a story about how, his father was a rabbi, and how after his father died, he wrote his dad a letter and then he cut it up and stuck it inside one of his dad's bow ties and buried the bow tie in the backyard, and he realized that writing was some kind of ritual or sacred thing, you know. And it always kind of stuck with me. And so I always would listen to that song and I would joke like, Leonard Cohen is one of my rabbis, you know, But it's not really a joke, right? And seeing Arthur do that, and he's brought in like different versions of the binding of Isaac's story, doing the Bob Dylan one and poems that tell that story and all these different ways of telling that story. And I remember one year he had one that brought in Ta-Nehisi Coates. And the Dylan song has like, you know, all these different layers. And I just I love that kind of writing and thinking and that it can all be kind of, you know, mixed in together.

Grace Lile

[00:27:01] Because you're also a writer, I think. And I'm just curious if you, in any context, have written about, I don't know, Jewish themes or as ritual?

Laura Tanenbaum

[00:27:11] Yeah. I mean, a lot of a lot of writers and poets that I really love, a lot of my favorite poets just happen to be Jewish, and a lot of them do that. The wonderful, wonderful poet Linda Pastan, who just passed away - she has this very short poem I just sent to everybody. It's called *A Brief History of Judaic Thought in the 20th Century*. And basically it says, "the rabbis say, you know, it is forbidden to touch a dying man, but if the house is on fire, you may remove the dying man. And she says, Oh, that's so barbaric. Are not we all dying? It's, as you say, in your great negotiator's voice, But aren't all our houses burning?" That's a drash, right, to me. That's a drash. You know, you could write a whole thing on that. I sent that to my friend Kolotnik, who goes to the morning meditations to share... So a lot of writers I really love do that. I would say mine is just sort of Jewishly shaped, you know, because a lot of the writers that influenced me are Jewish and there's sort of references in there. So I'm on sabbatical this year from my teaching job, and I'm working on a book of poems that actually does owe its inspiration to Kolot.

So my mother died in 2017, and it was while I was pregnant with my second child, who's named for her. So that was obviously incredibly difficult physically and emotionally and everything. And so you know, I did all the normal stuff but it wasn't quite... you know, it just stayed with me a lot. And I remember actually, I'm so grateful to Rabbi Miriam for helping me through that process for any number of reasons. One was that I think it was about coming up on her first yarzheit, the first year, and I just had this thing of like - because that ritual was really meaningful to me. And, you know, I had the idea that I would go say kaddish every week in synagogue with that. And I had a newborn. And so I went to Rabbi Miriam and I said, you know, oh, well - I guess she was still the student rabbi at the time - and I said, you know, it's been a year and I didn't do it! Like, I didn't do my homework. I didn't do the job, you know, like, it feels so fresh and raw. And she said, well, you know, there's this one tradition that says that, you know, when you have a new baby, the clock stops there. You know, like there's a change in the fabric of time or something. And I was like, oh, you mean I get an extension? I don't know. Because, you know, officially, right, it's a one year mourning period. And you know, I was like, I'm not there yet. Like, it's I haven't done it yet. And she's like, you get an extension - I mean, it was the one thing of something in the tradition that says you get an extension. But it was also like, of course you're not done. Of course you're still mourning.

Grace Lile

[00:30:42] Beautiful. Really beautiful.

Laura Tanenbaum

[00:30:43] That was so meaningful to me. And then I think a couple of years later on her yarzheit, once COVID had started in fall of 2020 when it was her third yarzheit, and I was really struggling because, you know, I had had different ways of marking it with family and everything the first two years and then all of a sudden it was three years. And, COVID was happening. So I couldn't go to synagogue, I could do it on the Zoom, but it didn't feel, you know... So I just had talked to Rabbi Miriam about, you know, what can I do? What kind of ritual or what. And I just I just kept saying this thing about, oh, I write, I write, but I can't find the words. I can't find the words. And she said this thing to me, I'm not going to remember exactly. But she basically said, there's a tradition that says - I don't know how they do this, they always have a tradition that's perfect for the occasion - she said, there's a tradition that says, if you can't say a prayer, just write Dear Mother. You know, like an offering or a letter. And then I started just, you know, writing in journals and writing letters to my mom and like, speaking to her and writing to her in a way that was very different from how we communicated when she was alive. And then it sort of turned into these sequences of poems. So that's this manuscript, which is called Dear Mother, which has a sequence running in it through it, which are epistolary poems, poems in the form of letters where I, you know, and some of them are just silly, like telling her things. Part of it is just, you know, my way to try to tell her about what's happened to the kid that she didn't get to meet, you know, So just like little silly anecdotes and stuff and then some other stuff going back into family history woven together with other stuff; so, yeah, I mean, Kolot's had a big impact on my writing.

And I think Rabbi Miriam told me at one point, I'm not telling tales, but mentioned that she actually had was interested in poetry and actually at one point was choosing between an MFA and rabbinical school, and I was like, I can see that. And I think the blending of those for me is really powerful because, you know, I know some other - like the Reconstructionist tradition I think is really open to this. And then there's some other like Jewish renewal communities and stuff I know that do this, that make more use of poetry in the sense of like... and what I find really interesting is just thinking of poetry that I read, like listening to that Leonard Cohen song every year, just thinking of that more as a form of meditation or prayer or some kind of practice, because it's not about like, you know, it's easy to get caught up in like, you know, I do publish and stuff. But it's easy to get caught up in, I want somebody to tell me it's good and publish it, and that's what makes it meaningful. Right. Rather than the act of it. And so I think just the idea of ritual or the idea of something, a poem that people speak or share in community and that makes that connection. And that's what it's about, right? Not about having a career in it. I mean, you know, no career in poetry anyways! And I think there's a lot along with there being a lot of spiritual seekers and people with non-Jewish partners in Kolot, I

think there's also just a lot of very creative and artistic people in Kolot, and I think that sort of brings another layer of seeking in ways of expressing and knowing that's, I think, really, really powerful.

Grace Lile

[00:34:44] So I want to want to hear a little bit more about your activism, in particular related to Israel-Palestine, both in terms of outside of Kolot, but also within Kolot, which, you know, we discussed a little bit, has been an evolution as well, and obviously still ongoing. But yeah I'd love to hear about that journey for you.

Laura Tanenbaum

[00:35:17] Yeah I think it kind of goes to what I was saying earlier; it wasn't so much like I believed one thing, and then I changed to believe something else. It was more like I knew there was something wrong with the way this is being discussed. And then that just became so illuminated. So, you know, I think a lot of people have, there's a lot of progressive Jews have this when they first become political, just the sense of like, I don't want this to be my issue. And of course, looking back, it's such ridiculous privilege to be like, I get to pick my issues, you know, like, most people don't get to pick their issues. They happen to them. But I just I sort of felt like because, you know, there's a certain defensiveness, right, where you feel like, well, I'm American. Why should I have to defend what Israel does? You know, I've never been there. That's not what I'm about, you know, which I think sometimes comes from a legitimate place - Israel really, nationalism really has hijacked this tradition and this faith, which, you know, has a lot of ugly things to it, but it has a lot of beautiful things, too. And I think there is this natural impulse to just be like, you know, we can be this other thing over here that's not that, you know.

And I think that comes from a place of recognizing that like - I mean, I remember as a kid, listening to the rabbi give a sermon about Israel, and I remember this vivid memory of listening to this one sermon from the bathroom, because my friend and I had snuck out and we were in the bathroom just gossiping. But I was still kind of interested in listening. And he was just talking about like, well, can Yasser Arafat really speak for the Palestinians? And what about the Jordanians? And, you know, he was sort of talking like he was a political science professor. And I remember what really struck me was not so much like he's wrong or I disagree with him. I just - why when we're supposed to be learning about God or how to be better people, why are we getting this very dry geopolitics, you know? And so it's just like, how did this become so confused, right? That rabbis become like political pundits, you know? I mean, at the same time, like, I'm a deeply political person. So I always thought, like, it is your space to speak on politics, but you have to speak from

some place of, you know, owning what are your first principles, what are your morals? Not just, you know, sort of like coming in and being like another talking head on the TV, which was another thing that I felt like I experienced before I found Kolot. Synagogues where they were basically on the right side of most issues, Israel aside. But it just felt very bereft of spiritual or moral. it just sort of felt like, you know... If I want to just hear generic liberal talking points, I can stay home and listen to the radio. So, I just had that sense some people have, thinking something's missing and then, as I mentioned, the political atmosphere, especially in the early 2000s, with the second intifada and the suicide bombings was just a very difficult political climate to try to have any real different discussion. And I think a lot of Jews who, you know, I was active in my grad union, you know, we were active in other issues and just sort of avoided that as an issue.

And I guess that started to change first in in 2008 with the bombardment of Gaza that happened then and there started to be a lot more voices. And I think I was sort of vaguely aware of - not sure exactly when JVP[3] started, or when I first became aware of it, but I think it was after 2008 that it sort of crystallized, okay, this is something very different. This isn't about this conflict with two sides, this is about this sort of ongoing story of occupation and the bombardment and...I mean, I think for me, the difference in the discussion in JVP or Kolot was just more of this discussion of like - not even having a different political position, but just talking as if you're talking about real people's lives, you know, because in the liberal communities I grew up in, in the college dorm rooms, like people just did not talk about Palestinians if they were human beings. You know, it was just this like, you know, "well, they say that they condemn this..." but, you know, it's just like, who are you? You're some 19-year-old who's never experienced anything or gone through any real hardship in your life, and you're just like putting yourself up there as like this judge of who's allowed to do what in what way in response to their own circumstances. It was just so absurd. So, just, you know, starting to have a sense of this, this very different conversation and people who actually had been to Palestine and were in, you know, dialog and conversation with Palestinians...I think after 2008 I think it was when there started to be a real shift in the community and when there started to be a real difference among younger Jews; and then even more so in 2014. I remember that summer of 2014 when the really, really horrific I mean, they were all horrific, but that really, really horrific bombing of Gaza was happening. And, you know, my older son was a toddler in childcare and I was supposed to be working on some writing projects, you know, I don't remember what it was. But I was just scrolling the news constantly, and just posting on social media like, look at this outrage! Look at this outrage.

[3] Jewish Voice for Peace

And that was like, okay, I have to try to do something because otherwise I'm just doing, you know. So then I think I was already a member of JVP and became more active for a while, and during that period was quite active. And that was just such a, you know, like Kolot, just so night and day in terms of just the reality of the conversations. I mean, you can tell the difference when people are talking about the real world and when they're talking about nonsense. So that's been very important to me. And even though I haven't been able to stay as active as I'd like, you know, two kids in pandemic and everything, I think where Kolot is on Israel-Palestine right now is really interesting. I don't want to say it's unique because there's, you know, lots of newer communities out there and there's lots of evolution happening. But I think it is quite unique. I have friends who are active in Tzedek Chicago, which is this actively anti-Zionist congregation, which is a really special, you know, community with its own history that hopefully will do its own oral history someday. And Kolot is not that. But I think what Kolot is, is also very precious in the sense that even though it's not explicitly anti-Zionist, it's the fact that so many activists around this issue and so many people within JVP have found a home there, where it's maybe even more the norm or you know, it's not something you feel like you're being tolerated. You know, like, "it's ok despite the fact that we disagree with you or despite the fact that we think this about you..." I think is just really important and it's interesting.

You know, I think it'll be interesting to see where that evolves, you know, because... I was listening to one of the other interviews with someone who was very involved in this, in the work of the [Kolot] Israel Palestine Committee, which I have not been involved in. But just talking about the idea of an open tent, you know. And in some ways, it just sort of seems simple, like, of course, we will progressively accept all views. But of course, that's not true. I mean, in a certain way. Like, if you're a homophobic, transphobic person who thinks that women should not be in positions of leadership, of queer people, who should not be in positions of leadership, this is not the shul for you! There's other shuls. So, it's not - "open tent" is an important sort of concept in a way. But it's not the be all and end all. And I think even on Israel-Palestine, like probably someone who's a right wing Zionist who believes in the settler project would not find a home at Kolot, nor should they because, in the world that we would like to have, there could be a home for everybody, regardless of politics. But that's not the world we live in. We live in a world where there are real value differences. And I think that's where, again, going back to the insufficiency of the liberal model, right? It's like if you just think, oh, it's just about diversity, you really sort of miss… in the world we live in, somebody is going to be excluded, you know. So do you want it to be the bigot or do you want it to be the queer person?

And so I think with Israel Palestine, because of where the community is, it's not as clear where those lines are. But they are shifting, right? And so, it may be that in some point in the future, in time, more people will view being a Zionist in any kind the way that people now view being a settler or a right wing Zionist. But that's not where we are now. So I think what Kolot is doing is a really interesting balancing act and a really powerful thing of taking both into consideration, right, that like we're not just whatever, like we do stand for certain things and anti-racism is one of those things. You have to believe Palestinians are human beings. That's like a baseline, you know. But what that will look like in 5-10 years may change, because to a lot of people like the step from Palestinians are human to not believing in a Zionist project, which is about having a Jewishly exclusive state, for a lot of people that is now. It wasn't a very logical step, but not for everybody yet, and that is the reality of where the community is. Both take the reality of where the community is, but also not just say, Well, if the community is bigoted, then we're bigoted. So I think it is really interesting where Kolot is at with that right now, and it'll be really interesting to see where it goes.

Grace Lile

[00:46:32] It's interesting because I think, you know, what struck me about being part of JVP is similar - I mean, yes, there are absolutely boundaries, but you know I was involved when the endorsement of full BDS - I mean, people thought JVP had already endorsed BDS. But it was a big process. But the point is, you know, you want some hospitality to the people that are struggling, right? And that always made a big impression on me that there are people that were kind of coming from J Street or more liberal Zionists or really, you know, struggling wrestling or whatever, and that it wasn't like, I'm sorry, you can't be with us until you're full BDS and anti-Zionist, and I thought that was actually very tactical in addition to being an expression of an ethos, and also just the reality of what it was for a lot of people to move away from a, you know, a Zionist upbringing or background or whatever. So, I mean, has that ever been a conflict in your family like, your politics? Like were your parents...?

Laura Tanenbaum

[00:48:00] Yeah, it's interesting. You know, I think there's probably a certain amount of just not talking about it. You know, my mom's not around anymore. My dad's not especially political. You know, he's kind of generally liberal. And so it's kind of let it go, you know, a lot of the time. There is definitely like in some extended branches in my family, more of the generational divide, you know, that people, especially the ones younger than me, I'm sort of middle age, but the people younger than me, definitely there's more who are, who consider themselves more Palestinian activists than the... I

think a lot in my parents' generation just, yeah, the dream of liberal Zionism just kind of dies hard and the kibbutz and all that. It's just was real to them in a way that even for somebody like me but even more so for somebody younger was just never a reality, you know. So I think there's a lot of that. I also think that, part of where I come from it too, is like, I mentioned union work and I'm very involved in my union where I teach now and from doing union work I sort of have been exposed to this idea about there's a difference between organizing and activism, and both of them have their roles, right. S

So that activism, you go in the street with like-minded people, you make demands, but organizing is really about bringing people in. And when you work in a union, you know, you represent all your members; and the union I'm part of has tens of thousands of members. Obviously, we don't agree on anything, let alone Israel-Palestine, right? And so, you know, we have members who voted for Trump, and I will still help them get their paycheck if they didn't get paid on time, because that's what you do. So I think that, you know, I'm not going to do certain things in spiritual community with Trump supporters. So it's like there's that thing of, we say, taking people where they are. And I think really the hope with organizing is that when you come together around common goals, that brings people together politically in ways that eventually hopefully helps them expand their sense of solidarity with others. And it does happen. You know, it does happen - like in unions, that people who, you know, are not fully down with racial justice move because they've had the experience of being in solidarity in a multiracial organization fighting for their paycheck or whatever. So I think that there are some parallels there to what you're saying about with JVP is that you have to always have that balance of like holding your principles, but also, you know, meeting people where they are and bringing people in because otherwise you end up in, whether religion or politics, in ever shrinking sectarian, you know, cultish, you know. Yeah.

Grace Lile

[00:51:19] Yeah. And I think also just the so many... there's a spectrum and that it's not, again, this this sort of binary, you know...and I'm thinking back to an event, Israel-Palestine event I went to at Kolot a few years ago and I was so impressed by it because it was, because people were really able to talk honestly with each other instead of just thinking, Oh, I know that guy. I kind of know where he stands on Israel, then actually hearing people's complex thinking. And that, to me, was, like, hugely powerful in terms of just the way the community was moving forward within, you know, what is so often in these binaries and... I don't know, I think it's really interesting. I mean, have you seen or felt a difference between the time you became involved in Kolot and say, now... I mean, just your own sense.

Laura Tanenbaum

[00:52:41] You mean about Israel Palestine? Yeah, I think there's been an evolution. I think, you know, it probably reflects to some extent what's happening in the wider community, especially with younger people. So I think, you know, I think that's kind of the challenge in a way, that's where it's moving, but you don't want to just sort of discard people who've, you know, put so much into the community who aren't sort of where, you know, younger and newer people are. But of course, it's not one on one. It's not uniform. So I think there's been evolution. I think, you know, a lot of people, have seen Rabbi Miriam speak at demonstrations, as she did just the other weekend on behalf of, you know, in solidarity with the people facing ethnic cleansing right now in the West Bank is, I think it's really powerful for people to see that, see that as a spiritual leader, taking that position. So I think her leadership is exciting to a lot of people. You know, at the same time, it's difficult because I think that opinion has shifted because the situation has gotten so terrible. I mean, you know, the conversation in the American Jewish community has gotten better, but the situation has gotten obviously worse and worse with the current, I mean, fascist sort of turn in Israel government. So it'll be interesting to see what happens because I think this is a much bigger question than Kolot, but how to turn this changed consciousness into leverage and change.

Because I think, you know, building up the Jewish community and building up institutions like Kolot and building up institutions like JVP, where people with an alternative view of Palestine feel at home and don't feel excluded and can...don't have to leave their politics at the door. All that has been so important and so much progress has been made there. And I feel like now it's this real question. So now that we have that, you know. But the situation continues to deteriorate, because the monopoly on opinion in the established Jewish community was so bad for the American Jewish community. But it's not necessarily what's driving the actual situation in Israel Palestine. Right. Because American Jews are already, you know, maybe not where some of us would like them to be, but they're already way further along than their official leadership, that's for sure. And they're already way further along than our government and they're certainly way farther along than where Israel is going. So, I think it's going to be kind of interesting to see, you know, just kind of what happens if Israel continues down that path. The fraying of that relationship isn't going to be the problem. The problem is just like, how do we - you know, as more and more people are sort of completely alienated, how do you - because, you know, there are activists on this issue and, you know, people who really believe in justice for Palestine, who have, you know, family and connections to Israel and to see their country go that way, you know, it's really awful. So I think…I don't know. There's a big question that then we can't solve. But I think it's sort of a disconnect of this moment. I was just

saying to my husband last night, you know, sometimes I envy young people because there's so much exciting politics going on now, that wasn't around when I was younger, in all kinds of areas, but I don't envy the world that makes it all necessary, that they're facing. It's a lot harder in so many ways. So I think it's going to be, you know, with all the challenges that we're facing in the world right now, I think it's a real challenge for spiritual communities to be real about what people are facing in the world, but to still sort of provide that community and that haven, you know, still doing laundry for the new moms and doing the bat mitzvahs and doing all the things that a community does that renews itself and reproduces hope for the future. You know, even as we're facing all of that.

Grace Lile

[00:57:27] And just thinking about Kolot as a community. What do you, do you see particular challenges for Kolot? And do you - two part question - do you have particular hopes for the community or for your own self as a member and a participant.

Laura Tanenbaum

[00:58:00] Yeah, I don't know. I mean, I think the challenge is, I might leave to people who, you know, know more about the leadership and all of that. I think, you know, that the transition between little and scrappy and a big and thriving community has actually kind of happened amazingly well. I think now, we're not necessarily so scrappy, but I think there is still that specialness and that like - I don't want to say individuality because it's so much about community, but just that sense that people can find their place. And I think, you know, along with the bad politics and everything, what I didn't find in those other synagogues, they just, I don't know, it just sort of felt like, if you belong here, you would already be here somehow, you know what I mean? Like, why are you just coming now? Or why don't you already know this other person? Or why don't you know anybody, you know? And so I think it's just, maintain that ethos of like, wherever you are is okay and, you know, you can be brand new and at any age or any stage of life or any set of needs, you know. So, I mean, for me, there's a lot of things I would love to kind of deepen, you know, as my kids get older and sort of time and space, and they're finding their own paths on what Kolot and Jewishness would be for them. But for myself, I don't know. I think going to kind of what I was saying about the poetry and the text study, you know, I haven't really studied Torah in decades, if ever, so I think I'd be curious to maybe get my toe in that and sort of like, all right, you spent all this time in graduate school reading text, Let's see what you can do with this bad boy, you know? So I'd be curious about that, I guess. Yeah, I guess my dream would someday be to be able to get involved in Torah study and maybe do a drash one day.

Grace Lile

[01:00:23] That's lovely. Any final thoughts, or just anything that you want to share about Kolot, or want to want to share that's important to you.

Laura Tanenbaum

[01:00:47] I guess. I guess I just want to thank you for taking this time and to thank Lana for making this happen, because I've just realized things in the conversation with you that I hadn't quite put into words before. So that's really great.

Grace Lile

[01:01:04] Well, I appreciate that. And I just want to thank you, Laura. I've learned so much. It's you know, it's so interesting and... So I'm happy to be in this project with you together. Now, you know...

Laura Tanenbaum

[01:01:21] We've done the circle.

Grace Lile

[01:01:24] We've done that, we've done the switch. So. So I'm just going to turn off the recording right now.