

Kolot Chayeinu Oral History Project

Janet Ruth Price by Lana Povitz

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In this interview, Janet Ruth Price reflects on her past ten years at Kolot Chayeinu. She talks about how she joined Kolot and the impactful trip to Israel she went on with the congregation shortly after becoming a member. Janet discusses being the “Mother Hen,” or coordinator, of Torah study and explores what the Torah study group has meant to her and Kolot at large. She reflects honestly on Rabbi Miriam’s departure from the congregation and shares her hopes for the future of Kolot as it enters into a time of transition.

Lana Povitz 00:04

It's Wednesday, June 28. I'm Lana Povitz, and I'm here with Janet Ruth Price in Brooklyn, at her apartment. And Janet, I want to thank you so much for being willing and with us today to record your oral history for the Kolot Chayeinu Oral History Project.

Janet Price 00:25

My pleasure.

Lana Povitz 00:27

Why don't you start off by telling us where your story with Kolot begins. How you got to Kolot, however you want to answer that.

Janet Price 00:37

Well, amazingly, even though I lived here in Park Slope since 1995. I knew nothing about Kolot. And then, my friend Sandy Abramson dragged me to Kol Nidre for services at Kolot. And the service began with the cantor, Lisa B. Segal singing "Let's Face the Music and Dance." And I said, "I'm home." So I joined Kolot. And shortly after that, very shortly after that, within a couple of months, my younger brother, who is very dear to me, suddenly unexpectedly died, he just plotzed at his desk. And it was, I was so happy that I had Kolot. And that sort of solidified my relationship to Kolot. The rabbi and the cantor both came to a Shiva here. And I mentioned that my brother had taken singing lessons, and for some birthday party, he'd come to town, he lived in Chicago, and we were all singing. And even though he's a little shy about such things, he sang the song that he prepared in the singing class which was "Ain't Misbehavin." So the cantor sang "Ain't Misbehavin." So it was Lisa B Segal really who brought me into Kolot but I, I wanted to say Kaddish every every Shabbat, so I became a Shabbat regular. And my brother who wasn't particularly into services, but he was married to a rabbi's daughter, so they went every Saturday, and his rabbi told me at the Shiva in Chicago, that my brother really loved Torah study, and that his eyes lit up when he had an idea, an insight. So I just sat in, to honor my

brother's memory, I would go to Torah study regularly for a year. And that's how I became a devoted Kolot member.

Lana Povitz 02:59

Wow. And that was what year?

Janet Price 03:02

He died in 2013.

Lana Povitz 03:07

And that was the same year that Sandy brought you.

Janet Price 03:10

Yeah mhm.

Lana Povitz 03:10

To Kolot. That was 2013.

Janet Price 03:11

Just was coincidentally, I had just joined Kolot because throughout my entire adult life, I hadn't had much relationship to Judaism at all. Even though I had grown up, I had a solid Jewish education growing up. My parents were very active in our Reform temple in Skokie, Illinois, but I kind of thought religion was a waste of time to tell you the truth. But just the right elements were there at Kolot for me, and I just felt I was home.

Lana Povitz

Okay, so much to unpack here. First of all, in what way did you think religion was a waste of time?

Janet Price

Well, it is a time sucker. And, and I have to say, Kolot, if I let it, would like totally dominate my life, there's so many different things you could do. But just like literally, it takes a lot of time to go to services regularly, let alone to do the other things you would do if you were observant.

Lana Povitz 04:20

Right.

Janet Price 04:21

So and I didn't see the point. It didn't do it. I had I had other things, other things to do. I had to write. I had to make social change. I had to make a living, I had to take care of my partner.

Lana Povitz 04:37

I understand. Now in your Barnard Oral history, which we can append to this interview for context where you do talk a lot about your upbringing, and a little bit about your family

background. One of the things that struck me is that you talk about Reform theology as, and particularly the idea that to be Jewish in the Reform tradition, is to have a special responsibility to bring about social change. And clearly that has woven through all your different career choices, and your time as a student at Barnard, which you talk about. But I guess when I read that, I thought, oh, that's perfect for Kolot. So I guess I'm wondering, if you wanted to just say anything more than you've already said in those interviews about that idea, and about the importance of Reform theology, I guess, in your life?

Janet Price 05:34

Well, I'm, I'm very, very, very grateful to my rabbi, and my parents, and the, the sort of gestalt of Reform Judaism at that time for sort of grounding me in really good values, really good Jewish values. And I do, I guess, I kind of think that part of what I'm on earth to do, is to leave it better than I found it, or at least try to, or at least participate in it, to join others in trying to. So another thing about Kolot, which may not have been the initial reason that I joined, but it's certainly the reason I've stayed is because of the emphasis on social justice. And at a certain point, when I was at Kolot, I was kind of retired, I flunked retirement, and I went back to work, but when I was really retired, I could get up early in the morning, and one of my jobs at Kolot was to rally people for these 5:30 in the morning, "\$15 and a Union" marches.

Lana Povitz 06:50

Oh, I don't know about this.

Janet Price 06:51

This is the fast food movement. And that was great. I really enjoyed, that was one of the jobs I took on at Kolot early on, I was on the whatever we called it at the time, the social justice committee.

Lana Povitz 07:05

The fight for \$15?

Janet Price 07:06

The fight for \$15, yeah. That was about 10 years ago. And it's now a New York State law. And there's also other laws passed by city council that help fast food workers and workers in similar industries to get decent schedules and stuff like that. So those, and another thing we did during that time period was the carwasheros. There was a carwash on strike near Kolot, and we sort of took them on, and we'd bring them coffee and donuts and picket with them and spread information about them. So at that particular point, in Kolot, the emphasis was on something that was near and dear to my heart, which was labor unions, and justice for low income workers. So I got involved in that. And that made me very happy, that felt really good. And of course, the other thing about Kolot that made me very comfortable, was that you could be as critical as you wanted of the Israeli government and, and the IDF. And that was very important to me, not having to be silent when people said things that were absolutely factually incorrect about the situation in Israel/Palestine, or that, or that or that didn't see the whole picture. And, and the

injustices, the injustice that Palestinians face. And, to have to clam up to keep the peace, that's not my style. So I really appreciated that.

Lana Povitz 07:06

Had that been your experience prior to Kolot?

Janet Price 09:04

Well, um, because it may have been one of the reasons that I avoided organized religion. I'm not "because it was a waste of time", this really can't possibly be the real reason. And I'm not sure what the real reasons were, and it was probably a bunch of reasons, I mean, we brush our teeth for more than one reason so, but I think one of the things was I didn't want to be all rah, rah rah Israel. My parents were avid labor Zionists. And I love my parents dearly, and I feel like I got my values from my parents. But of course, they were like, like all like, like most Jews at that time. They were conveniently forgetting that it wasn't a land without people that Jews were settling. So and I would like to think I'm pretty sure they'd be appalled at what's happened to Israel. It certainly is not, doesn't look like the Israeli constitution. There's been a lot of mission attrition and, and, and it's not it's not a labor Zionist Israel anymore. So I assume that they would be appalled. But it's, it's very, very difficult for me to say I'm an anti Zionist because I feel,, it'd be like saying, I'm anti union, like my parents would be haunting me for being anti Zionists, my grandparents would be haunting me for being anti Union. But the fact of the matter is, the Zionist project was misguided from the start. And, and just trying to study that and figure it out, of course, there's like, millions of Jews there, where are they gonna go? So there has to be a place for Jews as well as Palestinians in Israel/Palestine. It's, as they say, in Israel, it's complicated. And I like being in a place where there was not one right answer where the conversation was important, and it was respected. That was, that was a huge selling point for me about Kolot, huge.

Lana Povitz 11:19

And it seems that you went to Israel with Kolot pretty soon after you joined, right. Your trip was in 2014.

Janet Price 11:25

That's right. Yeah.

Lana Povitz 11:26

So that's a year in so can you talk about that?

Janet Price 11:29

Oh, that was yeah, it was a great experience. My favorite part was when it snowed in Jerusalem. And of course, the whole city shuts down. I mean, it was a snowstorm that we would have just laughed off in New York, and in Chicago, we wouldn't even call it a snowstorm. But this was Jerusalem. So everything shut down. Something I was really disappointed we didn't get to do which was to help an Arab family with their olive harvest. We didn't get to do it because it snowed. But we walked to the Western Wall and prayed with the Women of the Wall.

And the Haredi on the other side of, on the men's side thought we were too loud. And ordinarily they would do things like throw chairs over or something. But because it was snowing, they threw snowballs at us. We had a snowball fight with the Haredi.

Lana Povitz 12:37

You throw them back?

Janet Price 12:38

Well, yeah. And there were some guys with us. Sherri Levine's husband, John Adler was there for instance. And there were some other guys so they were throwing snowballs at those bad boys too. But it was, we had a wonderful wonderful guide who was very, very, who was studying the geopolitical issues in Jerusalem, was a Jerusalem native was very, very left of center. It was the perfect fit for Kolot.

Lana Povitz 13:13

An Israeli?

Janet Price

An Israeli yes. I think his name was Eldad. Yeah. Which isn't that wonderful? One of the guys who prophesizes and, and Moses says would that there be more. Would that every Israelite were a prophet. Yeah, that was a wonderful, wonderful guy. Very, very well informed. And, and on the same wavelength as as our group. And we did go to visit [the occupied territories]. We did go south of Jerusalem into the occupied territories and visited a group called Shorashim, roots. I say roots because of my roots right. That was a group of, of Palestinians who just lived there. And Jewish settlers who were settling there. A Protestant minister had brought them together and they were in conversation, which is really, really important. And the, the Palestinians in Shorashim, I forget what the Arab word for it is, Arabic word they, they felt like the people really to get to were not the were the settlers, because if they if they could shape the settlers thinking they had a ghost of a chance of of getting what they needed. They could shape their Jewish settlers thinking in certain, towards seeing their story and incorporating their needs into the bigger picture.

Lana Povitz

What was their needs? Like land back?

Janet Price 14:56

No not, uh I don't, simply to get building permits that they needed, simply to get the same level of services that the Israelis got. And then and then going forward, yeah. There might have been a larger agenda. But they were, I think they were incrementalist for sure. And the guy who led it had believed in civil disobedience and nonviolent, nonviolent protest, and he'd come to that belief in Israeli jail. During maybe the Second Intifada when he'd gone on a hunger strike and he really, he felt empowered by that. And actually, they got some of their demands met through that hunger strike, and he realized, Gandhi was right. Martin Luther King was right. There's a whole lot of power, if you can get it on TV anyway, in non violent protests, so it's very interesting. At the

end of that trip, I visited my bestie from Hebrew University, I'd spent my junior year of college at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. And he had moved to a settlement because he had a big family. And he was a teacher and his wife worked in the schools and they couldn't afford Jerusalem anymore. So he'd moved into a settlement where he could be close enough to Jerusalem and he could commute. And he totally swallowed the Kool Aid. It was very, very interesting seeing how this dear friend of mine had changed. Yeah.

Lana Povitz 16:47
Interesting.

Janet Price 16:48
Very interesting, very interesting. For instance, he said to me, "Not all Arabs are terrorists, but all terrorists are Arabs." So gives you a sense of how, how much of the Kool Aid he ingested.

Lana Povitz 17:03
How was that for you?

Janet Price 17:05
It was very, very upsetting. Very upset. Yeah.

Lana Povitz 17:15
That was part of your Kolot trip? Did you process that with the group?

Janet Price 17:18
Yeah. No, it was after the Kolot trip. So I've talked about it with the Kolot friends afterwards. But it wasn't something we could process on the trip.

Lana Povitz 17:28
Can you say anything about how that trip came about in the first place?

Janet Price 17:31
Well, I think it was, there had been a Kolot trip some time previously. Before I joined, I think it was the second trip that Kolot had organized as Kolot. But it was after a particularly terrible, what the Israelis call mowing the lawn, in Gaza. where many, many, many Gazans died. And it was just appalling, and I think it opened up a lot of people's eyes who maybe were on the fence or or weren't paying attention, or were sort of willfully not paying attention. And I think, to a certain degree I was one of them It wasn't something on my everyday radar, what was going on in Israel/Palestine, just how unbalanced the situation was and how unjust the situation was. I couldn't ignore it anymore. So I think that was the impetus.

Lana Povitz 18:36
Was Ellen on this trip?

Janet Price 18:37

Yes. Yes. Ellen was on the trip. And that was wonderful.

Lana Povitz 18:40

Who else was on the trip you remember?

Janet Price 18:43

Oh, my goodness. Let's see. I won't remember everybody. But Sandy Abramson was on the trip. Betsy Biele was on the trip. Somebody who had spent some time in Israel and has since left the congregation because she just couldn't deal with the anti Zionism conversation. And the election of certain people who identified as anti Zionists to the board. She was on the trip, which was very interesting. Sherrie Levine and, and her husband John Adler and their daughter were on the trip. Stacey Simon and her daughter Ruby were on the trip. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[Andrea Artzt who was president] at the time and her husband and her son were on the trip, okay. And it was John and Sherrie's daughter who was on the trip. And a lovely girl and her mom. The girl is Ida Holcomb, who's going to be leading Torah study soon. She was on the trip just a few months before her bat mitzvah, she gave the best drash and her mom who was doing an exhibit for The Met on Jerusalem was on the trip, that was so cool, she was very knowledgeable. Later on, we went to the exhibit. And many many many other people, a gal who's a judge was on the trip. Roger Westerman and his partner were on the trip. Just a whole bunch of Kolotniks were on the trip. And then a few people who weren't Kolotniks, including my friends, Mimi and Jose, we were supposed to go to El Salvador to Jose's farm. And I couldn't because of the trip. So I asked them if they wanted to come on this. And they did. And it was kind of interesting having Jose who's Salvadorian on the trip, and there were a few non Jewish people on the trip, spouses. And then there were a bunch of women. I can't I don't know who or why they were on the trip. But they kind of stayed together and didn't have much to do with the rest of us. They weren't Kolotniks. But lots and lots and lots of Kolotniks.

Lana Povitz 21:31

It sounds like a big group.

Janet Price 21:33

It was. I think there were over 30 of us.

Lana Povitz 21:35

Oh, wow.

Janet Price 21:35

And which sounds horrible, right? But everybody was so incredibly considerate of each other that it wound up not being inconvenient at all. And the trip was so well planned, what Ellen and Eldad cooked up was just so swell, we went to a lot of things that tourists see, like we took a Jeep ride in the Golan Heights, and we stayed at a Kibbutz Hotel, which was very interesting. But the very first thing that we did when we got there to Jerusalem, one of the first things we did, is we went to Rachel's Tomb and that was a particularly distressing experience because it abuts the wall of a refugee camp and and on the way we can see the walls that had just been built, the wall

Lana Povitz 22:27

The apartheid wall?

Janet Price 22:28

The apartheid wall yeah, it had just been built, hadn't been there of course, when I was there the last time and, and inside, all these women traipsing in in their pants and getting stared at because everybody there was super observant. And there was an air of sadness about it. I think a lot of women who are infertile go there, to pray to Rachel. But there was a, I felt this great sadness— outside Palestinian sadness, inside infertility sadness and all around disapproval. It was just a horrible place. It was just awful. It was interesting going to the church of the Holy Sepulchre, which I had done when I was a student at Hebrew University, I did the Stations of the Cross, don't ask me why. But I found it very moving and interesting. The other thing I will say about when I was a student at Hebrew University is I would not go up to the Temple Mount. I just refused to.

Lana Povitz 23:37

Why?

Janet Price 23:37

It was wide open then, it wasn't a big deal. It is now because of subsequent events. Because I felt that we weren't really supposed to step, go there until the Messiah came. I had this idea that there wasn't really supposed to be a Jewish state until the Messiah came, and that this thing was somehow kind of like a, an extension of the fake Messiah phenomenon, this whole Israel project, even back then, even though my parents were labor Zionists, I just had this feeling that this wasn't what it was supposed to be. And I see now I'm talking about going back and forth between the first trip when I was like, 20, and the second trip when I was like, pushing 70. But in this first trip, I spent a weekend I did a lot of adventurous things that, they offered all kinds of experiences for foreign students. And I took advantage of them. And one week, one Shabbat I

spent in Hebron with some of the early settlers, and they were like carrying guns on Shabbat to the cave of Machpelah. And I said, no, no, no, no! This is crazy. They are crazy. This is wrong. This is nuts. And I, I wasn't a particularly sophisticated 20 year old, I didn't have a particularly sophisticated analysis. But I knew in my gut something was really wrong here. Yeah, it kind of cured me of Zionism that year in Hebrew University.

Lana Povitz

Well, I guess there's all these you hear, there's all these stages, there's like a way you know something, but don't necessarily integrate it or you don't act on it, or you don't speak about it or it lives somewhere in you, but it's not a part of how you operate.

Janet Price

Right. And what was wrong, I think, was it was certainly what was wrong was not Jews being in the Holy Land. No, that was a good thing. But Jews controlling, having unilateral control over the Holy Land, that didn't sit well with me.

Lana Povitz 25:59

Yeah.

Janet Price 26:00

It didn't seem right. It didn't seem like, that can only come, something like that would only be possible when the Messianic age came. And then it wouldn't be the control of one people over another. It would be the Messianic age for pete sake.

Lana Povitz 26:16

The whole world would be different.

Janet Price 26:17

The Messiah would figure out how to do it right. Yeah. So that was my thinking, even when I was 20. Yeah.

Lana Povitz 26:26

Well, when you came back from this trip, what I mean, how did the trip change things for you?

Janet Price 26:33

Which trip?

Lana Povitz

The second trip.

Janet Price

The second trip? I think I saw more viscerally how, how tough it was to be a Palestinian, not only from the stories, I heard at Shorashim, but just seeing the Palestinian workers lined up at the checkpoints. The existence of the wall, which separated families, I mean, the apartheid wall,

which separated families, I learned that the cement from the wall had been supplied by a company owned by the head of the Palestinian Authority. So I saw just how convoluted and corrupt really, the whole enterprise was. And, and I really got a much stronger sense about how Israelis, most Israelis, had just dug in their heels, and preferred not to know what they didn't know. They preferred not to find out what was going on in the occupied territories, but basically justified, whatever was happening. "Well, they want to push us to the sea." And what was important to most Israelis was, was in no particular order, security and economic well being. And if you could provide that to them, they were happy to look the other way.

Lana Povitz 26:35

When you did that Barnard interview that I read or one of them at least it was I think, 2015. And so you had it was shortly after you had gotten back from that trip. And you were talking in the transcript about sort of looking to different you know, where you're going to join a group, you talked about J Street, you talked briefly about JVP.

Janet Price 28:42

Right.

Lana Povitz 28:42

You didn't talk very much about Kolot, although it gets a shout out. And I guess I'm wondering what became of that?

Janet Price 28:49

Ah Trump became of that, and I my attention turned back to this country. Yeah, that's, so I mean, I pay my dues to JVP. But I haven't been an active participant.

Lana Povitz 29:05

Well, what have you thought about Kolot involvement since 2014, with the issue of Palestine and Israel?

Janet Price 29:13

Well, that's very interesting. I'm not exactly sure what we mean when we say open tent. I think what we mean is that we respect, we have the right to express our viewpoints and we respect and listen to viewpoints other than our own. There was a very, very, very good. There's a few things that happened at Kolot that I'd like to mention, a few, I think, three occasions, three occasions that I thought were particularly Kolotish and, and sort of stick in my mind about what's special about Kolot and had great meaning to me. And one of them was, I think Frannie was involved in organizing this and I think it was "Resetting the Table." But it was an evening where all Kolot members were invited to come and tons of people showed up, tons. And this was after the Gaza lawn mowing, the lawn mowing is what the Israeli government calls it. And before Trump, so that period of time.

Lana Povitz

Between 2014 and 2016.?

Janet Price

Yeah. And and we were, they were, they used a four corners strategy or some variation thereof, and they asked us different questions. And we had to stand. We had to pick where we stood based on how we stood. And almost all the questions were really easy for me. The two questions that were the most interesting were: Are you against the occupation? There wasn't a single person, a single Kolotnik, we were all in the same place. So that seems to be the line, that we're against injustice to Palestinians, we're against the occupation. It's hard to imagine somebody feeling comfortable at Kolot who, who, who felt the occupation was justified, or, or the right way to go. But then the other question was, are you an anti Zionist? And I had such a hard time with that one. Partly because I don't know exactly what it means. And partly because, well, there's all these Israelis, all these people, and it's, they have to, they have to be considered also, there's facts on the ground, right, human beings, that happen to be members of my tribe, even though a whole bunch of them are big assholes. They're still members of my tribe. And, and if I'm anti Zionist, am I saying that they all have to leave? You know? Yeah, I think there should be a right of return for Palestinians or at minimum, appropriate reparations, commiserate with what was lost. And P.S. I think that that could be done. It won't be, but I think it would be possible for Israel to maintain its economic well being and provide reparations, just like the German government did. But to say, I'm anti Zionist, like I said before, I think it's a good thing for for some Jews to live, certainly within the green line. If there were a different form of government beyond the green line, if there was justice for Palestinians, and there was like, say, a one state solution beyond the green line. Does that mean that I'm not an anti Zionist? I don't know. I think the answer is that, that it's more important to me that there be a democracy than that there be a Jewish state. And, and a democracy where the rights of all are protected. That's much more important to me than a Jewish state, particularly given that a Jewish state seems to be governed in many ways by the ultra orthodox. And so many Israelis have to go to Cyprus just to get married, that's nuts. So I always, until recently, I thought, I always thought I was a two state solution person, but for a whole bunch of reasons now, that train has left the station, that's not going to happen. And now I think on the one hand, I'm a one state solution person. On the other hand, I can't imagine how it could be pulled off, given look at Lebanon, where people have a lot more in common than Palestinians and Jews do. The Christians and the Muslims could not pull it off. Look at Northern Ireland, religion is such a, and maybe this is another reason why I have abstained for so long. Religion is a really dangerous drug. I mean, even the Buddhists can't be trusted. Look what happened to the Rohingya. If you can't trust the Buddhists to do it right who can do it right? So, but, but it distresses me so much that so much evil is being perpetrated in a sense in my name. The bottom line is, is that. One of the things I did as a Kolotnik was I joined a conversation that was organized by the Jewish Community Relations Bureau. It was a conversation where different kinds of congregations were coming together to talk about Israel. And there was one woman in the group who I could not stand her way of discourse. She was very anti Zionist, she lived in Israel for a bunch of years and I couldn't stand her way of discourse, but boy was she right. Israel as it exists now is bad for the Jewish soul, it's not good for the Jews. We were talking to mostly it was it mostly wound up being Kolotniks with a couple of other people from other congregations that had similar views to your average Kolotnik on an Israel/Palestine. And then Chabadniks. Chabad was in the room, but it was fascinating it was

actually a great conversation. I really enjoyed talking to them. It was except for this one woman who was a little off the wall for individual reasons, individual mishegoss reasons. It was a very civil conversation, we listened, we listened to each other. There was virtually no common ground. But I being a kind of a tactician, said my biggest concern is Israeli security. And that's why I'm against the occupation. I was being a little disingenuous, and I'm sure the Chabadniks saw right through me because they were very smart people. But I said, I cited that wonderful film Keepers of the Gate, where all of these, you know the film? Oh my God, Lana. All of these heads of Mossad or Sherut Betachon or whatever they were from different political stripes, different personalities, different time periods. They all agreed on one thing: that we were pointlessly making generation after generation our enemies, by the occupation, and particularly the way the occupation was handled. And of course, if the head of Mossad says that, you know it must be true.

Lana Povitz 30:12
I'll have to see it.

Janet Price 38:05
I didn't convince them. I didn't change their minds. But that was really my thinking, that in the long run, it's very, very, very bad for the Israelis living in Israel, to have this kind of occupation.

Lana Povitz 38:20
Well, just to bring this back to the you had said, there were three occasions that were very Kolotish and you'd started to talk about this "Resetting the Table" one, is there anything you want to say about more you want to say about it?

Janet Price 38:34
The other two ones?

Lana Povitz 38:35
Well, even anything more about the "Resetting the Table?"

Janet Price 38:38
I thought it was a wonderful, wonderful way of involving everybody and having a conversation. And it was a wonderful way to understand in this almost like, almost like charts (which are a good way to organize information.) The spread of opinion at Kolot, it was really really, really interesting. And it made me convinced that it was important to have an open tent and not just say you had to have a party line, that there was a Kolot party line. Because if it's so important to have the conversation in the Jewish community, and and it's so hard to do, and if we can't do it at Kolot, nobody can do it. Right. But we've lost Kolot members who either were very unhappy with board members who were JVP or, or identify or one Kolot member left because somebody who was Pro Palestinian, who identified as Pro Palestinian was elected to the board and she left. It was very interesting. And it did tend to be people who had experienced anti semitism themselves or had spent time, enough time living in Israel that they identified with Israelis for more than a year. I never identified with Israelis the year that I was there. I never felt more part

of the Diaspora than the year I was in Israel. I made some lovely, lovely friends there, Israelis, but ...it I thought I thought it was a genius thing to do. [The event just described] And I thought that the Israel, the Israeli Palestinian? I don't know what they call it

Lana Povitz 40:33

Working group?

Janet Price 40:33

Working group or whatever it was, I thought they did a mighty fine, a very good job in the various things that they did.

Lana Povitz 40:41

Were you part of that?

Janet Price 40:42

Yeah, no, but I really liked their work. Yeah.

Lana Povitz 40:46

And these other two occasions,

Janet Price 40:48

Ah.

Lana Povitz 40:48

I'm curious what those were.

Janet Price 40:50

One was the night that Trump was, the night after the election night when we knew Trump was going to be the president. Ellen and the board pulled together a gathering. And it was, so needed, and it was so beautifully done. And so that we could kind of mourn together and sort of begin that resistance together. And the two things that I remember were the, the guy who's now a rabbi, who, who ran the B'nai Mitzvah program at the time, is an African American, I think he might be from somewhere in the south, maybe Texas or New Orleans. Anyway, he got up and he said, "Look, this may be a surprise to you that so many people would want to vote for a racist. But it's not a surprise for people with my skin color." That was very interesting, that, that he had a much better idea than your average Kolotnik about how many maggots were underneath the rock. The other thing that was very moving was something that Ellen did, and she re-did it. She kept it going for a few weeks. Ellen Lippmann is a genius at building community and a genius at coming up with really good rituals for things and all I have to do is tell you this and I can rest my case. She said that there used to be in the temple somewhere or near the temple in Jerusalem, a place where you could go if you'd lost something. And and she invited us to say what we've lost because of this election result, and it was just so moving and so cathartic, and and later on, some weeks later, we got to say what we found. And what

everybody found was a deeper sense of community. There's nothing like a common enemy to draw people closer. But it was so beautiful. It was so needed, you know?

Lana Povitz 43:23

Where did you gather?

Janet Price 43:24

At Gethsemene Yeah. Yeah, the third one was after, it was after Trump was elected. And it was on the steps of Borough Hall when Eric Adams was the borough president. And some Muslim allies were with us, and it was a Hanukkah celebration. And I don't know if it was, it was around the same time that all the Yemenite Bodega owners had gone on strike, it was in that general time period. And that was very, very moving.

Lana Povitz 44:14

So what happened at this Hanukkah celebration?

Janet Price 44:16

It was just, I can't remember exactly what was said or what happened. But the whole point of it was to be in solidarity. I think it was during like the boycott of,

Lana Povitz 44:27

Of Yemen, the Muslim ban?

Janet Price 44:30

Yeah, yeah. It was to be in solidarity with our fellow children of Abraham. And that was the whole tone of it, and it was just really beautiful. So those were three sort of little moments in Kolot history, that that resonate with me as as as being particularly meaningful, but also particularly illustrative of what makes Kolot special.

Lana Povitz 45:00

Kolotish.

Janet Price 45:01

Kolotish, yeah.

Lana Povitz 45:06

Well, one of the things you said, at the, as we started to talk, which I did not know, which was very moving to me in sort of talking about how shortly after you joined Kolot, your brother died, and mentioning that he had loved Torah study. And that that's how you initially became a Torah study regular kind of an homage to him, which is really poignant, because now you're like Ms. Torah study. And I would love to spend some time in this interview. It's a bit of a skip. But I would love to talk about how you have come to be the at least you could say the coordinator. I mean, that seems like an understatement, of Torah study.

Janet Price 45:47

That's what, I call myself the coordinator.

Lana Povitz 45:49

I think you're more than the coordinator title implies. But yeah,

Janet Price 45:52

The Mother Hen is what really I am.

Lana Povitz 45:54

I mean, that feels right.

Janet Price 45:54

I'm the Mother Hen.

Lana Povitz 45:55

But can you just sort of talk about that? Also, I was interested to know and this may or not be related, but learning from your Barnard interview that you as a teenager got to New York because you had been in a Bible, like you memorized large chunks of the Bible?

Janet Price 46:10

Yes. And I was just like woah! Oh, that's it. That was looking back at it. It was so stupid. Because all it was was like

Lana Povitz 46:19

Memorizing

Janet Price 46:19

Memorizing, yeah. But I was very, very interested in Torah study back in the day, and that was what was available to me. Yeah,

Lana Povitz 46:27

That's so interesting.

Janet Price 46:29

Right, and I had a friend Stewie, and we both studied with a family friend, Harriet Becker, whom I adored, who was like the principal of our, of our religious school. She was also, she and her husband were also family friends.

Lana Povitz 46:40

What was her name?

Janet Price 46:41

Harriet Becker.

Lana Povitz 46:42
Harriet?

Janet Price 46:42

Yeah. Shout out to Harriet Becker. One of my influences. But yeah, so it, and I must have gotten something. It I wasn't particularly into memorizing things. I wasn't like some sort of idiot-savant. So I was neither idiot nor savant. So I didn't know, I don't know how I got into it. But I must have gotten something out of it besides the memorization, but yeah, I got to, I got to go to New York with my family. And we had a fine ol' time. And then I didn't do so well, in the contest, because I wasn't cramming at the last minute, we were out seeing the sights. But yeah, I was in a Bible contest.

Lana Povitz 47:23

So you have those deep anyways, you have those like deep Torah study roots. But I mean, more recently, with Kolot like you. It sounds like you got to going regularly sort of in as a way of staying connected to him or being close to him?

Janet Price 47:38

Yes. And then I just enjoyed it. Because there were so many different points of view and kinds of expertise at the table. And it was, people were very respectful of each other's ideas. And every year, you read the same portions, and you see them completely differently. It's the darndest thing. It's like, oh, I never thought of that before. Oh, I never noticed that before. It's so amazing. And it's such I guess it I think it brings out my endorphins, I, I just find it so incredibly fulfilling. So what the reason I took on a leadership role is because of Covid. And when it [Kolot Torah study] started, I think something long before I joined Kolot, it was something that Arthur and Ellen cooked up. And first it was after services, and then for some reason they moved it to before services. So only early risers could come, I don't know why. But during Covid, Arthur continued to coordinate it, and often lead it.

Lana Povitz 48:59
During Covid?

Janet Price 49:00

Yeah, at the beginning of Covid.

Lana Povitz 49:02

Oh.

Janet Price 49:03

At the very beginning of Covid, right when the shutdown happened, he was still in charge. So that was in March. In August, I took over along with the guy who has moved to California named Noah Phillips. Arthur couldn't do it anymore. And it's interesting because the precipitating thing, and that kind of drove him over the edge. I mean, he didn't enjoy running it on Zoom. But the

thing that really pushed them over the edge was there was a person, a non member, a non binary person who went by, whose name was a number, who went on the attack against Arthur and any decision Arthur made, became a federal case. And they complained to the board and they complained to the rabbi and they complained to the staff and they dragged Arthur's name through the mud for absolutely no reason whatsoever other than their own insanity. And Arthur just needed someone to take over to get some relief from this mishegos, and part of it was everybody was a little crazy during Covid But this person was beyond the pale, crazy. And so Arthur asked me, and I just couldn't say no, I felt I, I really cared about Torah study, I really wanted to help him out, I felt his pain. And he came up with this idea of Noah, a much younger person doing it with me, and it worked out really well. And we each had our own skill set and worked really well together. And that was lovely. And I wound up doing most of the recruiting of leaders, and the helping people who needed help getting ready to lead. And Noah took care of the technical stuff. And when there was a interpersonal problem. Because for instance, eventually, we had to ask this person to leave to Torah study, this particular person, because they continued to be problematic after Arthur left. Not attacking us. But making like, doing totally unacceptable things in the breakout groups or whatever. So we had to process that to death, right, although it was clearly a no brainer. But of course, we had to have a lot of process and five meetings with the rabbi and the executive director and stuff. So he, Noah wound up doing a lot of [the interpersonal stuff], he's a social worker, by training, he wound up dealing with a lot of that kind of stuff. And so it was, it was pretty easy. Now, Noah moved to California. And I got a couple of the newer younger members that I met through an Introduction to Judaism course, that I took, because my wife wanted to take it. She was raised Catholic, and she wanted to know more about Judaism. So I took it with her. Kolot did it with a congregation in DC. And they [the younger members] were part of it. So I liked them. And I recruited them to take Noah's place and then one of them has moved to Philadelphia since then. But Ben still does the techy stuff. We probably need a second person because Ben's not always available. But that frees me up to really enjoy Torah study. It's one of the nicest things that's happened to me at Kolot is getting this gig. It makes me really really happy because it's, there's hardly any downside to it. It doesn't take an inordinate amount of time to do what needs to be done. People are really, really good when when I do the call out for leaders. They're really good at responding. It's not hard getting people to lead. Sometimes people need my help, and I really enjoy talking it through with them or, or even if they don't need my help. Sometimes people who need it the least ask for it because you know how it is.

Lana Povitz

They want a thought partner.

Janet Price

Yeah, right. Because there's

Lana Povitz 53:25

With you.

Janet Price 53:25

Yeah.

Lana Povitz 53:26

Yeah.

Janet Price 53:26

And I just love doing that. And it's like a great niche for me at Kolot. So I'm just really and and the amount of appreciation I get for doing it is completely outsized compared to how much it costs me to do it. It costs me nothing. It just gives me pleasure and people are so grateful to me, it's the perfect gig.

Lana Povitz 53:56

Why do you think they're so grateful?

Janet Price 53:58

Well, because Because Torah study has become well during the the Covid shutdown. And even still today, Torah study has become a like a real a high point of a lot of people's week. And it's a high point of my week, because it's just the conversation is such a thoughtful high level, and I learned so much from it. There's a lot of smart people at Kolot. And the nice thing now is that we have these breakouts. So if you're new or you're shy or you're intimidated, there still is a place where you can have voice, and that's really important and when there aren't and so some of the things I take care of is sometimes leaders have have the whole group conversation so rich that leaders have had have forgone the breakout and then I get a pushback about that from the people on Zoom. So I now am emphasizing you got to do a breakout, you got to do a break. It's really important because some people aren't going to talk in the whole group or some people don't get a chance to because there's so many people on stack. So it's important that we have breakouts, it's important that we be mindful that it's hybrid. And we don't have Zoom people being second class citizens, because some of them are contributing mightily and some of the Zoom people are leaders. And I want them to stay. And I don't want them to feel like they're just watching a TV show. So balancing that has become really important. Every once in a while. It we created the we have these norms in Torah study. And the norms have been really, really, really helpful in keeping the conversation civil. One of the norms is give people the benefit of a doubt. Another of the norms is put a fence around one's words, which can mean many things, but one of them is don't talk too much! And it's not in the norms, but we have a two minute limit, and I will call people on it. If they talk a second more than two minutes. They're going to, they're gonna hear from me, and everybody understands it. And nobody's I don't think anybody's offended by it, or if they are. That's their problem. But it's really important, because otherwise, there's some people that who have very interesting things to say, but they would never shut up. You know?

Lana Povitz 56:29

I know. I do know.

Janet Price 56:31

And especially when there's a long stack, and there's a lot of people with interesting things to say it's really important. So I think people are grateful to me for doing that. And I've been able to do it in a way, once or twice, maybe I've given offense, and I had to make amends. But that was towards the beginning of my tenure. And now I think I pretty much have it down pat and I know how to do things so that nobody's feathers are ruffled.

Lana Povitz 57:00

Do you remember how the breakouts got started? Because it's not obvious how to transform something that's been meeting in person all these years to a Zoom format, like who proposed these initial sort of this program that we sort of now follow?

Janet Price 57:16

Oh, I know how we get the norms. I can tell you that I'm not exactly sure when we started doing breakouts, except that we did. Rabbi Mariam Grossman likes breakouts, and she would do them when she was leading Torah study in person in the balcony, where they didn't work as well as they do on Zoom. Zoom is perfect for breakout groups.

Lana Povitz 57:37

They didn't work because it's a small space and it's noisy?

Janet Price 57:40

Yeah, it was very hard not to hear what somebody else [in another group] was saying. But so I'm not I'm not sure when we started doing them. It's a very interesting question. I don't know, it may be that some of the leaders decided to do them, like Lisa Grant, who very, very generously leads once per book, and she wrote the guide to leading Torah study that we share with the leaders.

Lana Povitz 58:12

She made that during Covid or she had written it before?

Janet Price 58:15

I think she'd written it before because it's part of her teaching load at Hebrew Union College. But we, with very few changes, we adapted it and, and, and, and still use it to guide leaders, especially, the first or second time they're doing it,

Lana Povitz 58:38

Right. So wait I want to hear about how the norms came about in a second, but I just want to make sure I understand, was there rotating leadership? Like now we have a different leader each week? Was that true before Covid as well?

Janet Price 58:52

It didn't used to be true. Usually. When I first started, the leader was usually Arthur. But he was more of a facilitator. Now the leader actually decides what aspect of the parsha to focus on,

right. And provides a resource sheet. That didn't used to happen. Arthur was the facilitator. It worked very well, it was a lot of, it was I imagine a burden on him, but it worked very well. And and we would have, we would actually read part of the Parsha out loud. And then we talked about what what we'd read.

Lana Povitz 59:41

Who chose what part to read, Arthur?

Janet Price 59:44

Probably, but not always, sometimes Ellen did. But at some point, Arthur started enlisting other people to be the leader of it. And other people started doing resource sheets.

Lana Povitz 59:59

Before Covid?

Janet Price 1:00:00

Before Covid yeah. I know I had led once or twice, which is one of the reasons why Arthur asked me to do it because he liked the way I led it.

Lana Povitz 1:00:11

Do you remember those early times that you led it what they were?

Janet Price 1:00:15

Oh, yeah, I'm a teacher. I was a high school social studies teacher. And then I was a principal. So I know how to run meetings, and I know how to run conversations. And I did all kinds of things that I might have done with my high school kids. And there was one thing that I think Miriam was still a student rabbi at the time that she got a big kick out of, we were looking at the plagues, and the words that they use for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, because different words are used. And we actually created a chart. I made people look at it and come up with the chart. And then once we had the information, then we said, well, what does it mean? Why this word? And why that word? Yeah, that was a lot of fun. That chart stayed up for like months.

Lana Povitz 1:01:01

Do you have it?

Janet Price 1:01:02

No, not anymore. But it stayed up for months. Yeah, that was fun. Yeah, another time. Another time, I did a chart that I sent out for everybody. Right. I did the homework myself in advance for Mishpatim, after all this wonderful revelation at Sinai, you get Mishpatim, which is the most random set of of laws and that you could possibly have, everything from how you treat slaves, to weights and measures, to don't put a stone in front of a blind man. It was really motley and, and, and chaotic. And so I did an analysis about how many were about slaves. And how many were about this. And how many were about that. And I can't remember what the questions were. But that was a lot of fun. So, but everybody does things differently.

One of the things that happened with me is I, we had at some point Arthur and a guy named Josh Rubin, and a guy named Bob Hartman, all Kolotniks, organized a Jewish history group, and I participated in that, how could I not? And that totally changed the way I view Torah. So that's why I'm always the one in Torah study to bring up who, what the source was. Or, or, or, like, and when we do Deuteronomy, how well it's, it's mentioned in Second Kings, how this book is discovered. And, who actually were the early Israelites. And there's no archaeological evidence that there was ever a conquest. Give me a break, the conquest was the fantasy of this little people squeezed between two mega powers. So that's, that's why I spout these things because it's all the fault of Arthur and Bob and Josh organizing this group. Well, it was really great.

Lana Povitz 1:03:04
What did you read?

Janet Price 1:03:05
Oh, my God. It went on for several years that we read all kinds of things from, we read a lot about, we read some about Sephardic Jews read about whatever we were curious about. So we read about who wrote the Bible, the Friedman stuff.

Lana Povitz 1:03:20
Isn't it Kugel?

Janet Price 1:03:21
No Friedman, and and the, and the different sources, the J version, the E version, the P version, the redactor, the Deuteronomist. We read who were the early Israelites. We read Schama. I think we started with Schama. But we read two volumes of Schama. We read about the beginning of Rabbinic Judaism, that was really interesting. We read about false messiahs. Oh my God. We read about Jews in the Middle Ages

Lana Povitz 1:04:03
I would love that syllabus seems like it'd be good to know.

Janet Price 1:04:06
Yeah, there, isn't a syllabus, we just would pick books. So it would be really hard to reconstruct it, but it's worth it. I'd often ask Lisa Grant for suggestions.

Lana Povitz 1:04:18
Yeah.

Janet Price 1:04:21
We read about the origins of Reform Judaism.

Lana Povitz 1:04:25
Wow, what a sweep.

Janet Price 1:04:28

Whatever we were curious about. And there was no expert in the room. No. So it was very it's very much a bunch of peers trying to learn

Lana Povitz 1:04:42

The Kolot way.

Janet Price 1:04:43

Yeah.

Lana Povitz 1:04:46

Well, in terms of the norms.

Janet Price 1:04:50

Ah the norms

Lana Povitz 1:04:51

Yeah, it's not self evident how those came about.

Janet Price 1:04:53

I will tell you. One time Arthur asked me to lead Torah study this was way before Covid, maybe a year before Covid. And he wanted it was, I think it was during the time between Pesach and Sukkot or between or just before Pesach when a lot of people read the Pirkei Avot. So we said should we do Pirkei Avot? It was probably when we would have been doing Leviticus instead, right? Because nobody wants to do Leviticus. Turns out Leviticus is fascinating.

Lana Povitz 1:05:04

Yeah

Janet Price 1:05:12

Who knew? Right? So I was assigned the job of doing Pirkei Avot.

Lana Povitz 1:05:40

Instead of Leviticus?

Janet Price 1:05:42

Yeah.

Lana Povitz

You guys did that in those days? I can't imagine now someone just saying we're not going to do, a particular parsha or Leviticus.

Janet Price

Yeah, cause imagine somebody focusing on the Haftorah that's happened from time to time.

Lana Povitz 1:05:54

Yes. Yes.

Janet Price 1:05:55

And that's good. I like that.

Lana Povitz 1:05:56

Yeah.

Janet Price 1:05:57

But so one of the things I did in Pirkei Avot was 6:6, which is like, I think it's the 48 attributes you need in order to study Torah. And I had, I asked folks in the chat to write down what they thought was the most important attribute. And then I did an analysis of that. And I said, Okay, maybe after group was over, these are the things that that Kolotniks, that Torah study people think are most important to study Torah. And that, and I typed it up. And I suggested to Arthur, that we have these norms for Torah study.

Lana Povitz 1:06:40

Oh, whoa, whoa, so you're seeing these norms are like democratically produced?

Janet Price 1:06:44

Well, that's how they came about. I mean, they didn't know that they were creating norms. But when they did that, after they did, they said, These would be great norms. So I suggested it to Arthur and he wasn't really into it. But when I took over, I published them. I asked Noah, if he was into it, he thought it was a good idea. And so and now, that's the ceremony at the beginning of every session, we read the norms.

Lana Povitz 1:07:13

Wow, that's amazing to know, I think people would be really interested to know that these were initially people's sense of what was most important, rather than just somebody's, you know any one person.

Janet Price 1:07:27

That's right. It was whoever was at Torah study that week.

Lana Povitz 1:07:30

Yeah.

Janet Price 1:07:30

And it really was drawn from Pirkei Avot. It wasn't drawn from people's own you know, just the air, you know?

Lana Povitz 1:07:37

Wow.

Janet Price 1:07:38

Yeah.

Lana Povitz 1:07:38

Speaking of oh, sorry, go ahead.

Janet Price 1:07:41

But it's very funny, because it's similar to what a woke group of people might come up with

Lana Povitz 1:07:47

I know it is, it sounded like some woke norm thing that a number of our groups already sort of use rules like that. So or agreements like

Janet Price 1:07:56

What it was, it was a kind of a Venn diagram, that sweet spot in the middle between what was important at the time at Pirkei Avot and what's important today.

Lana Povitz 1:08:03

Yeah.

Janet Price 1:08:04

Which is exactly what's most important.

Lana Povitz 1:08:07

And that's what we're always trying to do blending tradition with the the pressing needs of the moment.

Janet Price 1:08:12

Right.

Lana Povitz 1:08:14

So speaking of traditions, this is really, you know, your answer could be part of the story that would be important to talk to Stacey herself. But I'm curious how Stacey became the poet of Torah study, how that ritual evolved?

Janet Price 1:08:30

You know, sometimes when somebody's really good at something, they just get, they just wind up doing it. Stacey is wonderful at picking poems, and she's even more wonderful at reading them. And I actually don't know, that predates it's so old that it predates my participation in Torah study. So this was something that came up before 2013. But Ellen Lippmann is a big fan of poetry. And she and Kathryn read poems to each other. So it could be an it could be that it was Ellen's idea that Stacy do this. I would, I would put money on that. Okay. But we have to ask Stacey when she's

Lana Povitz 1:09:15

When she does her, oral history I hope

Janet Price 1:09:17

And, and she may not she may not remember. It was it's been so long. But it's a it's a lovely tradition. Yeah, I like the fact that we there's certain things we do every week. That on the one hand, and but that what the leader chooses to do can be completely different from what was ever, ever done.

Lana Povitz 1:09:42

What were some kinds of innovations that come to mind?

Janet Price 1:09:45

Well, one of the big surprises was I can't remember what the Parsha was or exactly what he did. But Robert Berkman, who is a math teacher, did something with numbers. And we had to play around with these numbers and what was the significance of the numbers? And it was so much fun. And it was just a refreshing change. If we did it more than one week, I wouldn't have liked it. But it was great that one week. What are some other innovations? Eddie doesn't lead Torah study nearly enough, I can only think of once when he's done it. But he did. He did a really interesting thing when he led that had a lot of influence on on us, I think, as a group— certainly had influence on me. It was during the plagues. And specifically the plague, of the first born, the killing of the firstborn, and how could that be right? How could that be justified? And all of the ways that the rabbinic commentators twisted themselves in pretzels to separate Moses from from, from that plague. And, and should we be twisting, twisting ourselves in pretzels? Or should we be just facing that there's things in Torah that we think are just wrong. And that was, it was a wonderful conversation. And, and, and what was nice about that, as it came from, it was informed by his own experience, as somebody who been raised in a religious background and was deeply, deeply deeply knowledgeable about Torah and Talmud, and his own personal, intellectual, spiritual struggles, it was something that was really, really important to him. And some of the great, the great Torah study sessions have that flavor to them. Another great one was Ann Eisenstein, who's a therapist. And she was talking about the moment when Rebekah has the twins fighting in her belly, and she says, why am I alive? And I can't remember exactly what the questions were, what the point was, but I just remember that, expertise in psychoanalysis and like seeing things from a woman's point of view, it just was very, very meaningful. But there's 10 million of them like that, those are just the ones that pop into my head, but every week is good, and, and every third or fourth week is great.

Lana Povitz 1:12:55

This conversation is making me think about and I've never really thought this even though I've been going to Torah study for a few years, how on the one hand, every week is new. And you can read the same book each, you know, the same, Chumesh sequence, you know, any number of years in a row, it's always new. But it does seem to me that there must be some kind of cumulative learning that happens, like different people come in and out of the group. So that changes things. Not everyone is there for the same experiences, but there is like a certain regularity and there must be I don't know, it's hard to track. It's hard to think about how it manifests but like, how does the collective learning accumulate?

Janet Price 1:13:38

Well, I'll give you a serious example and a silly example. There's a there's a portion that where the Israelites are complaining, one of the many where the Israelites are complaining, it's probably in Numbers, but maybe it's in Exodus and they missed the cucumbers.

Lana Povitz 1:14:01

We just did this with Rabbi Miriam when you were in Sicily.

Janet Price 1:14:04

The cucumbers one?

Lana Povitz 1:14:05

Cucumbers

Janet Price 1:14:05

And people were joking about the cucumbers?

Lana Povitz 1:14:08

Yeah, yeah.

Janet Price 1:14:09

Well, part of it is that it was my older niece's [bat mitzvah] parsha and I remember her saying "cucumbers, that's ridiculous." And I when we did it that one year, one year or another I said, "Well, my niece nailed it. She said "cucumbers, that's ridiculous." So cucumbers is always the example that everybody gives for what incredible kvetches and ingrates the freed slaves were. Cucumbers! So I don't know how did it parse out that Shabbat?

Lana Povitz 1:14:44

I can't remember, but there was recognition of of all things you know.

Janet Price 1:14:48

Cucumbers! So like cucumbers was like a code code for oh my god, what kvetches? But the serious thing is, it's not so much the content as the process, like figuring out, are we doing peshot? Are we doing something else? Are we thinking about the text as it as, as it must have meant when it was written? Are we we connecting? [to our own times, to other texts, etc.] You know, what are we doing here? And sort of being aware of what we're doing, and not. Ellen Lippmann was very instrumental in getting us to think about what is the? Not instrumental enough? Since I can't remember the acronym but you know, there's an acronym for the

Lana Povitz 1:15:38
Pardes?

Janet Price 1:15:39
Yep. Pardes Yeah. Yeah. Thank you. Yes, names of things are the first to go, right. There's nothing wrong with my memory, by the way, it's just I need another chip. It's just too full.

Lana Povitz 1:15:54
Yeah, yeah.

Janet Price 1:15:56
Anyway, Pardes Yeah. So she was really good at getting us thinking about that. And that's very important. So I think it's how we go, how we approach the text. So not as much as what we think about that. You know, any particular thought we have about the text.

Lana Povitz 1:16:16
The odd time when you're coaching somebody who's never led Torah study before? And they're, they've agreed to do it, but they are full of doubt, or they don't know what to do, or they're seeking your counsel, what are some things you find yourself telling people?

Janet Price 1:16:28
Well, the most important thing is, what are your questions? Usually when they come to me, they already know what part of the parsha they they want to focus on. But it's getting them to ask questions that really get at what's on their mind. And that people will be able to wrap their heads around, that aren't too abstract. And it's, and the other thing is, of course, timing, we only have an hour. And we have to have time for breakouts, we have to have time at the end, we don't want to go too much past 10. Because we want people to have time before services. So usually people try to stuff in more, and so I'll say that I'll work with the person and say how many minutes realistically, this is going to take? How many minutes is this going to take? And then we don't have that we don't have enough time. Sometimes I have to get them sources. I'll show them how to use Sefaria and get the Rashi, and the Rabbi Bahya, all those people or we will look up things together and tales of the fathers, the Midrash or I'll get out the Nechamah Liebowitz or whatever. But usually that's usually that's not necessary, but sometimes it's necessary. Sometimes I'll do it just because I don't know. I'm not such a Torah scholar. I'm not a scholar, really, I'm not an expert. So sometimes before I talk to somebody, I'll refresh myself by looking at the books I have.

Lana Povitz 1:18:15

See all these little things that you do that don't seem like heavy lifts for you. They're really not things that most people have in their repertoire of doing. I think.

Janet Price 1:18:24

Well, I have the time to do it. I I'm almost completely retired now. I wouldn't have had the time for this 10 years ago.

Lana Povitz 1:18:32

Well, it's a big gift to Kolot.

Janet Price 1:18:34

It makes me so happy. I enjoy it so much. Yeah,

Lana Povitz 1:18:39

I mean, I think I mean we can maybe move to talking perhaps a little bit about this but I think especially now we're having this interview in a time of transition we will be finding a new rabbi to not ever replace but replace Rabbi Miriam and we need examples within Kolot of really independent, member led stuff that's vital. And that is connective and that represents the things we do well and what our values are and it seems like Torah study is just as it is now such a beautiful embodiment of that. So I just want to acknowledge this for this record, that it is a great gift even though people tell you all the time, you probably can't hear it too much because it I mean certainly for me it's been really like a big part of helping me into Kolot, just showing me who's there and what people are capable of and what I'm capable of as a total non expert, you know, just being able to participate in these ways.

Janet Price 1:19:39

Well, you know, on three things the world stands. One of them is is Torah right, is studying Torah. So of course it has to be central to what Kolot does.

Lana Povitz 1:19:49

What are the other two?

Janet Price 1:19:50

Avodah you know, prayer and Gemilut Chasadim.

Lana Povitz 1:19:53

Oh, right. Right.

Janet Price 1:19:57

So I Uh, and I don't know exactly if there have been in the past, I don't know if that's still true, the Gemilut Chasadim committee was extremely effective and active. I don't know how it works these days because I'm not involved. But like, for instance, when we had the shiva and I was a brand new member and knew hardly anybody. All these like angels came, some, a couple of them were people that I knew from the past, like Ellen Garvey, but like, and Ann Eisenstein, I didn't know her, and she was like one of the people who came and, you know, set up the Shiva and cleaned up afterwards. And, when somebody was sick people did all kinds of things. So I'm not, it used to be lay led. Now you go through, I think, Elissa, or somebody, so I don't know exactly how. It's a big job Gemilut Chasadim, and particularly as the the congregation gets gets bigger, but it's very important, it's very important for a particularly for any religious institution to take care of people's needs as they arise, to bring meals to the new parents, to deal with things for people, it's very hard to draw the line, how much is too much? I remember I I took on the job of organizing it for one Kolot member who was very ill. And, and, and Ellen said to me, "No, you know, you have to draw the line, you can't ask people to stay overnight. That's something that they have to take care of themselves." Ellen was really good at knowing exactly where to draw the line. And she had reasons, right. But that [Gemilut Chasadim] is something that I think was another organizing principle for the community. And that really brought people together similar to Torah study.

Lana Povitz 1:22:01
All Hands are needed.

Janet Price 1:22:02
Yeah, right. I don't know what things there are in the congregation now. Are there comparables to Torah study? The nice thing about Torah study is it's open door, some of the good work of the that's done at Kolot is not open door, you have like the Race Work group or the Israel/Palestine work, some of the stuff that's touchy and controversial, is handled differently, and you have to apply and be accepted in order to be part of it. And that's a little problematic, you know, it may be necessary, but it's problematic. But what is there like Kolot, where there's a, I mean, like, Torah study, where there's a regular opportunity to participate, and anyone is welcome to participate, and how you participate is very clearly defined, so that it's easy to join in?

Lana Povitz 1:23:01
Low bar for entry.

Janet Price 1:23:03
Huh?

Lana Povitz 1:23:03
A low bar for entry.

Janet Price 1:23:05

Yeah, that's right. That's right. I, that's really important. There probably should be a few other things like that besides Torah study.

Lana Povitz 1:23:13

Really important. I mean, I think the Membership Engagement Committee is trying to make such events and opportunities, not with the regularity of Torah study, though. But like the book clubs and the kind of what like the gatherings that they have held the knitting circle, you have to know how to knit maybe, maybe you don't even actually, but there are there are sort of

Janet Price 1:23:34

You have to have the capacity to learn, which unfortunately, I do not, I've tried.

Lana Povitz 1:23:41

But I think that I had never really thought of Torah study in that way. But that's actually so important that it really is it's a regular entirely open, clearly delineated.

Janet Price 1:23:53

You don't even have to be a member, you have to be [a member to be] on the listserv, but you don't have to be a member to join and

Lana Povitz 1:23:59

Right, as we know.

Janet Price 1:24:00

It's a gateway drug to membership.

Lana Povitz 1:24:03

Yeah, we can think of examples of people who've come in that way.

Janet Price 1:24:08

Yeah. Yeah. It's a wonderful way to come in, actually. Yeah, but I think we need more of that. And the I think the Membership Committee is doing a really nice job, Miriam. I didn't see it because I was in Sicily, but there was some sort of booklet that was created.

Lana Povitz 1:24:27

Yeah, it's amazing.

Janet Price 1:24:28

Yeah, I need to get my hands on a copy of that.

Lana Povitz 1:24:31

I have one for you.

Janet Price 1:24:32

Oh, good. So that every group shows what it's doing. So that it whether or not you're part of it, whether or not you want to be part of it. Whether or not you're allowed to be part of it. You can find out what's going on. That's really important.

Lana Povitz

Yeah.

Janet Price

Yeah. Which gets us to the elephant in the room, doesn't it? Yeah, yeah. I have to say that my heart is permanently broken by Miriam Grossman leaving us and I thought she was going to be my rabbi for life, not her life, my life, for the next 10 or 20 years, what's left of it. Given how healthy I am, it might be 30 years, but, but I thought she'd be our rabbi for life. And she's such a special person. I hesitate in saying this, because if she heard that she might be, it might be embarrassing, and it's a legend. And there's problems with a legend. But the legend of the Lamed Vavniks, my, my mother always thought that my grandfather, who I'm writing a novel about, was a Lamed Vavnik. And maybe he was, but the idea of the Lamed Vavniks is they are these wonderful people out there, for who, for whose sake, God keeps the world going. Right. And, or, there's these wonderful people out there, whose talents allow us to keep going. This way is more the way I think of it. And I wouldn't be a bit surprised if Miriam Grossman wasn't one of them. I'm sure she's one of them. She's so gifted, and so wise, beyond her years, and so learned, and it's such a loss to the congregation. And the, and we shouldn't have lost her. I mean, it's a loss, the small loss is that it's a big process, hiring a rabbi, so it's a pain in the butt to have to go through it so soon after we hired Miriam. But the huge loss is her unique qualities. And one example of how special she is: My wife was raised Catholic, with the nuns in the schools with the nuns through 18. And at age 18, she said, genug, I'm through. And she has an allergy to religion, right. And she wanted to learn about Judaism to support me and, and because it was important to me, but she never was interested in in going to services. But because I was giving a drash, she went to a service, and she just fell in love with Miriam's joy, and she really enjoys going to Kolot services because of the joy that Miriam brings to them. And that so if even Linda of all people can get something out of services because of Miriam, what a loss. How did we manage to let her slip through our fingers? And here's the problem. We don't know. Maybe somebody knows, I assume Miriam knows, maybe some board members know what went wrong? And what could we have done about it? Right? If we don't, it's a huge problem for two reasons. Number one is lack of lack of closure. It's kind of like we, like we somebody's missing in action, but we don't have the body. That sounds terrible. But it kind of feels like that. It's very hard to say goodbye to Miriam without knowing why we have to say goodbye. And even more importantly, if we hadn't been able to create the conditions for a rabbi, to stay and thrive, this is going to happen again. And so we better figure out what went wrong, what did she ask for, that she didn't get? And how do we make sure that if, if the next rabbi if the if the rabbi is worth keeping, that we find a way of keeping them, I do it in analogy to like, in a way Kolot is production, and the board are the executive directors, and when you have a star of the show, who's keeping the the production going. You do whatever you need to to keep that star. Well, I don't want to put blame on the board particularly because I've declined running for the board more than once. So I'd have a lot of nerve blaming the board for this. But they're the

executive producers. What didn't they do that they could have done to keep Miriam? I don't know, because I don't know what it was she wanted that she didn't get from them. And it's a very frustrating situation, not just for me for everybody I talk to, or everybody who comes to me and talks to me and wants to inveigle me in this inquiry, which is more like it. So I don't know what the solution is, because part of it, maybe, is properly confidential. But but we have to find some middle ground where Miriam gives some sort of exit interview, where she explains what it was she asked for. And the board explains why they didn't understand it, or why they couldn't give it to her. I don't know. I think that's a little dangerous. But I think it may be more dangerous not to do that. And we just can't stay in this crazy state of not knowing. It's the elephant in the room every Shabbat. I wrote a note to the rabbi, which I haven't sent her, maybe I will, maybe I will, maybe I won't. And I'll say like, she's my rabbi, this is the rabbi I want. If she goes to another pulpit, I'm following her. If she goes, she starts a chavurah I'm davening with her chavurah. But I'll never leave Kolot's Torah study.

Lana Povitz 1:32:05

Well thank goodness for that.

Janet Price 1:32:06

Never. Unless I can't do it anymore. And there's somebody else who can.

Lana Povitz 1:32:18

I'm just thinking about what you're saying and the Lamed Vavnik idea.

Janet Price 1:32:30

Because I have never heard anybody say that she wasn't doing a wonderful job as a rabbi on the pulpit, representing Kolot, pastorally. Sure 10 years from now she'd be even better. She's, she, she did a wonderful job. And, and the thing that I particularly appreciate that I need is 1. her joy. And 2. her learning. In her interview, which I listened to as homework before this one, she talks about her education, she went to a Orthodox Jewish Day School. Which was problematic for her in many ways. Because her family wasn't that rigid, but also was the source of incredible opportunities to learn, the Midrashim, she learned. I mean, she seems to be able to pull out of her hat, a wonderful story for every occasion, right? My favorite is the one that she talks about, sometimes for when we Mi Chamocha, that the Israelites could see, when they were crossing the Red Sea, they could see all of their ancestors, and they could see all the generations to come, oh, my God what a wonderful story. But she has a million of them. And she just knows which one to pull out when. And I think a lot of that she got because of her early education in this crazy Orthodox Day School. And, it's funny, some of the people who I love listening to the most and learn the most from come from these Orthodox backgrounds. And I think although for most intensive purposes, I feel I came from the ideal Jewish background, because I don't have to rebel against it and because it kind of grounds me in values. I'm kind of sorry, that I didn't have that kind of learning. So it's, and, and, you know, growing up in her father's knee so, so, her hope and all of her experiences, like on the on the, on the Indian Reservation and doing all kinds of social justice work. Everything prepared her to be the perfect Rabbi for Kolot and we couldn't keep her.

Lana Povitz 1:36:14

So in some ways, it's less about her and more about us.

Janet Price 1:36:16

Yeah.

Lana Povitz 1:36:18

What you're talking about.

Janet Price 1:36:20

Yeah. Look, it might have been if she were older, she would have known how to more effectively ask for what she wanted. That certainly was true for me, I'm much better now at getting what I want. I was much better at 40 and 50, and 60 getting what I wanted than when I was 30. But it just seems obvious, she's much too valuable to lose, and yet we've lost her. And it's just heartbreaking. And, it's one of these things, it's no doubt multi determined, and kind of a perfect storm of conditions. But I, I, I rather doubt that it was inevitable. I think it could have been prevented. And I feel a little bad that I said no to being on the board, because at least I would understand it better if I'd been on the board and maybe I could have helped prevent it. I don't know, maybe not. I mean, there's a lot of good people on the board. And people who are better at being board members than I would have been. So maybe I'm just, you know when you feel as helpless as I do in this circumstance, as we all do when you feel helpless, you come up with all of these theories, it's my fault, because if I'd been there, it wouldn't have happened. And you know, this is bullshit, probably, but at least I would have known why it happened.

Lana Povitz 1:37:58

Maybe.

Janet Price 1:37:59

Maybe? Right.

Lana Povitz 1:38:00

Well, I don't know that there's a way to talk ourselves out of the heartache. I think there is not. I mean, I share everything you're saying. I mean, I relate deeply to a lot of what you're saying. And I guess I'm wondering if we can talk about our wishes, or if you can talk about your wish for Kolot in the aftermath of her departure?

Janet Price 1:38:21

Well, one thing I, I wish for Kolot is to stay quirky. It's the, that first night when Lisa sang "Let's Face the Music and Dance", that was quirky, And we shouldn't take ourselves so damn seriously, we shouldn't like pat ourselves on the back all the time about how progressive we are. Because a lot of the bad stuff in the world can also be found at Kolot, not as not as bad, not as much and we try to deal with it. But it's because we're humans. We're not all that perfect. Some of the most progressive men on the face of the earth, wind up being sexual harassers. And

some of the most progressive women on the face of the earth wind up being assholes in some way. I mean, just the way it is. It's, I imagine it's true for me even. I know it is. All the mistakes I've made, oh, my God. But anyway. So I don't want us to be, I want us to keep striving to be a progressive congregation. But not to, but to stop patting ourselves on the back about it. Number one. Number two, I don't want us to, to succumb to all the conventions of the synagogue and, and, there's things we have to do to keep our nonprofit status, we have to have a certain board, right. But it doesn't, but we're unconventional. So the board is going to have to find ways of meeting Kolot where it is, and being more creative and being less board like.

Lana Povitz 1:39:26

Could you give examples of what you're talking about?

Janet Price 1:39:27

Well, last night, we had a very good conversation, I thought with the committee that's hiring the interim rabbi. And like, one of the suggestions I made was that they take into account the competencies that we're saying we need, construct questions, to get at those competencies, share the questions they're going to ask with the community. And take and get input on revising the questions from the community. That's, that's not generally done. It certainly wasn't done last time. But it would make people, it would make the questions better and it would make people feel like they had some input in the process without necessarily slowing it down, because it has to go fast. So, there are ways of being creative, a, creative community, creative ways of involving people without breaking the rules or, grinding things to a halt. And, and the board has to you know, the fact that there are a lot of people on the board who have experience on other boards or experienced running organizations is both a blessing and a curse. Because people can have blinders on based on their own experiences. So you keep on looking for ways of, of, of interacting and involving and creating opportunities for participatory democracy. And not worrying so much about the conventions. The other thing is any organization, any group of people takes on a life of its own and becomes somewhat insular. And that has to be true for our board just like any other group. I'm not saying it's particularly true for the board, it probably is less true than for most boards. But it's something that the board has to watch out for. Be aware of their [interaction]. It's like you have to kind of the way you metacognate on your own thinking you metacognate as a group, on what the group is doing as a group. I'm sure there are people who are really good at that. It'd be nice if one of them was on the board.

Lana Povitz 1:43:32

Yeah, I mean, we also have some new people coming onto the board.

Janet Price

Good people.

Lana Povitz

Great people.

Janet Price 1:43:39

Good people yeah. And there's nothing wrong with the people on the board.

Lana Povitz 1:43:40

No, of course. We've great, an amazing roster of talent.

Janet Price 1:43:41

Wonderful people I am grateful for.

Lana Povitz 1:43:42

Reflected by the board. And I mean, everywhere you look in Kolot.

Janet Price 1:43:44

Yeah, but the danger is to become less than the sum of your parts because of ideas about what you can and can't do.

Lana Povitz

Right.

Janet Price 1:43:48

It may be that, and I say this, from the perspective of, a K through 12, educator who had to deal with bureaucracy and had to push, push the proverbial envelope a lot, and try to get away with things in order to serve my students well. And the board always has to, you have you have to think about what you have to, you know, pay unto Caesar what is Caesar's.

Lana Povitz

What does that mean?

Janet Price 1:44:21

Christ said, Jesus said this, in some it's in the gospels somewhere else you pay unto Caesar what is Caesar's and you pay unto God, what is God's. Oh, so you get the lunch, the free lunch forms [in on time], and because otherwise, you don't get your extra Title One money, you take care of that business, but you don't necessarily hire the way you're supposed to you hire, you know, you, you, you get your staff involved in the hiring, you don't follow the conventions that the principal [does the hiring unilaterally].

Lana Povitz 1:45:00

I see. So we've covered quite a bit of ground so far, there's some things that we had talked about in our pre interview that we didn't really get to discuss. Which might be okay. But

Janet Price 1:45:11

What were they?

Lana Povitz 1:45:12

One thing that of course is dear to me, that you had mentioned, in the context of kind of somehow we talked about this in the context of of joining Kolot, you had a sort of brief comment about coming out, you said something, and it has to do with my coming out. And I didn't follow up at the time about that you're looking puzzled. Now. So you may not remember what I'm talking about. And it may not be relevant to your story with Kolot here, but it is, to put it mildly, a place where it is queer friendly, slash, maybe, to some extent, queer matriarchy. More or less. I mean, you came in also under the, under the time of Ellen. And now we have Miriam, we have a lot of leadership at all levels and participation at all levels, where queer people, in particular lesbians, and queer women are doing a lot and taking up a lot of space. And I just wonder if you want to talk about that at all?

Janet Price 1:46:25

Well, I mentioned that, I, I imagined that one of the reasons I wasn't involved in organized religion was that it wasn't queer friendly enough. But I imagine that must have been one of the reasons. I can't remember anymore. See, I joined CBST at one point and then lost interest in it, because it was too big and impersonal. And on the one hand, it was very, a little bit too homogeneous. For me, I like that I like to, I like variety in the people that I'm around in age and, in every way, so I prefer Kolot, because it's so varied. I don't want to just be with other gay people, on the other hand, and the nice thing about it, the nice thing about Kolot is that it's become a magnet for Jews of color and for and for trans people. And that really, it just adds so much texture and richness to the congregation. It's just a much more interesting place. The more diverse the congregants are. On the other hand there were so many people in in CBST, who were so far to the right of me. You know, I didn't like it, it was too.

Lana Povitz

Right. They were gay, but they were like not sharing your politics.

Janet Price 1:48:12

Yeah, right. Yeah. So, so Kolot. It was a much, much better, much better fit. But I mean, I would never be a member of of a congregation that wasn't queer friendly, obviously. Yeah. But But how could Kolot be all the other things it is without also being queer friendly?

Lana Povitz 1:48:25

I mean, right. Yeah. It's almost like the queerness is like a, a byproduct of its progressive heartbeat more than it is like to be queer friendly, as such.

Janet Price 1:48:29

Right. Right. That so it comes as the starting point is different than CBST for that reason.

Lana Povitz 1:48:32

Yeah.

Janet Price

Right.

Lana Povitz

Yeah.

Janet Price 1:48:36

And and I've never been a separatist in any way, shape or form so that it's totally alien to my way of thinking. So

Lana Povitz 1:48:49

What you're saying now also is consistent about the point you made or with the point you made earlier about the extent to which you like an open tent is the extent to which you appreciate being able to have the conversation with people who don't all exactly, necessarily agree with your perspective, but are engaged in thinking about, opposing the occupation, what does it mean to

Janet Price

Right. Concern with the same question even if they have different answers, yeah. But concerned with the same question. Right, right.

Lana Povitz 1:49:27

That's a nice way to put it.

Janet Price 1:49:30

Yeah. I like that. Yeah. But, one thing I really liked about Kolot, is that I'm in a mixed marriage. Right. And it's a place that is very accepting of that, and the fact that Ellen's partner is Kathryn. Ellen once had a gathering, I think Kolot had some sort of grant to do this, of interfaith families. And what what, what soon became obvious was the only faith in the room was the Jewish half, that our partners were not the least bit interested in their childhood religions, it was very funny. And, and Kathryn said, the most fascinating thing that day, she said, she thought that to convert to Judaism was very similar to transitioning to the other gender, that it just had to be something in you that you had to do that, you had to be born that way. And that she feels very comfortable being a fallen Irish Catholic, so I think that's true. But Linda wasn't born to be a Jew, although sometimes I worry that she's gonna want to convert, because then she's gonna like, insist we do all these things that I don't necessarily have the time or patience or interest to do but

Lana Povitz 1:51:23

Making challah and so forth.

Janet Price 1:51:24

Exactly. Or, Oh, my God.

Lana Povitz 1:51:32

You could walk to services, though.

Janet Price 1:51:34

I should walk. It's only a mile and a half. I should walk to services. But I don't think that Linda was born to be a Jew. But sometimes she surprises me. I love the fact that Kolot is open to families that are diverse.

Lana Povitz 1:52:00

Yeah. Yeah, that's an important thing that comes up over and over in these in these interviews. That also I guess I'm wondering if there's anything that we haven't touched on yet that you'd like to talk about before we conclude this conversation?

Janet Price 1:52:20

One thing that falls under the category of things I want for Kolot is and we've sort of touched on it, but it's the issue of communication, being more creative and mindful about what to communicate and how to communicate and if anything over communicating. It is not just an issue for the board. So I remember running into a Kolotnik who lives near me who was doing something, nevermind what, but she was doing something that was, that could have been under the purview of an existing Kolot group. And she didn't know about that group and didn't know what they were doing, wasn't on their listserv hadn't, had no no idea that that group existed. And this was somebody who was like a Shabbat, regular, you know, who, wasn't like she didn't read the newsletter or show up and hear the announcements and stuff. So even groups that, that that are for anybody who's interested, not, these groups where they're talking about something controversial, and you have to apply to just like any group in Kolot, they don't necessarily communicate. Now, I think staff can be helpful in figuring this out and getting people who are doing similar things talking to each other. But I think the Membership Committee is aware of this issue and is trying to address it, like through that booklet, wherever they said what they were doing. But it's a huge issue in Kolot, and Kolot's not that big, even with its growth. Right. And so I think I think it needs to be addressed much more intentionally. Yeah.

Lana Povitz 1:53:20

Well, I think you're not alone in expressing that. I mean, that was sort of the theme, I think of the annual meeting that we just had.

Janet Price 1:53:23

Yeah, right. Yeah. And I think it's one of the things I've noticed in different organizations, I've been in, places I've worked. There seems to be a natural, human tendency to silo. And we shouldn't do that at Kolot.

Lana Povitz

Well, that seems to be as good a place to end as any.

Janet Price 1:53:24

Yeah.

Lana Povitz 1:53:25

I want to thank you so much for all that you shared. It's amazing to think it's 2023. You joined in 2013. So this is 10 years in.

Janet Price 1:53:27

Yeah well, that's a lot of time.

Lana Povitz

That's a lot of time well.

Janet Price 1:53:38

But but not, we were all just like we were all at Sinai. We were all at Ellen's dining room table. But I add but physically, literally, I was not, even though I think I was already in Brooklyn. So I know nothing about or only very little only stories, only Midrash about the first what, 20 years, but I've been around for the last 10.

Lana Povitz 1:54:17

Yeah, it's been a big 10.

Janet Price 1:54:18

Yeah, a wonderful 10. That's one of the best things that ever happened to me.

Lana Povitz 1:54:24

Thank you.