Mindy Portnoy Transcript

DR: Let's start with your decision to become a rabbi. Was there an "aha" moment?

MP: The timing was very fortuitous. I was a junior in college when Sally Priesand was ordained a rabbi in 1972. I was beginning to think about what was I going to do the rest of my life, and I was spending my junior year at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. My parents sent me The Famous Article, as we call it in the women's rabbinate, about Sally Preisand, the title of which was "Her ambition is to be a rabbi and a housewife". It was a picture of Sally in a mini-skirt in the HUC library and she was the first woman rabbi. I think that's when it became an option. Had I not done that—I was majoring in religious studies, I was spending my junior year in Israel, I knew Hebrew--probably my direction would have been perhaps getting a PhD in Judaic Studies, or going into Jewish social work, or even law school, the fallback position for everyone. Suddenly this became another real option. Here was a woman who was going to rabbinical school.

DR: Did you consider it a calling, or a career?

MP: I never considered it a calling. I think at the time I really wanted to study what I was studying in rabbinical school. In the end I spent a year in graduate school in Jewish studies, and worked for a year before I went on to rabbinical school. Partly because I was a woman I thought that one should really be sure about wanting to go to rabbinical school. I didn't want to go, and then discover I didn't like it and drop out, because I thought it would reflect badly on women.

DR: Was your family encouraging?

MP: Very encouraging. I come from a Conservative Jewish background, not a Reform Jewish background, but of course Jewish Theological Seminary at that point was not

ordaining women. I thought it would be another lifetime before they would do so. I was wrong, but it was too long for me. I had been influenced by a number of Reform rabbis, had worked in a Reform Hebrew school, so going to HUC, Hebrew Union College, was not such a big leap. My parents thought it was a great idea. They loved to argue with people about it.

DR: Do you have brothers?

MP: No, one sister, an older sister.

DR: So in your family there was no distinction between what the boys could do and what the girls could do.

MP: None. No, no. It was just the right moment in history. I had been in the first class of women in Yale. I always joke about how I go to schools that only accept men, and then I enter them.

DR: The decision to apply to Yale as a “first”: what gave you the self-confidence to do that?

MP: I grew up in New Haven, so I was a townie, I was a local. When Yale decided to accept women in 1969 that was a big deal in New Haven. Everyone talked about it. I had already applied to all the schools I was going to apply to, so it was a matter of just sending in another application. It seemed like kind of a lark at the time. Then I was accepted. My sister had gone to Smith, and my theory was that since she spent most of her weekends coming on buses to New Haven to meet guys at mixers, I might as well just stay and go to school at Yale during the week and be there on weekends. It really was not so complicated a decision.

DR: In both your undergraduate education, and your rabbinical school education, did you have a sense of being a “first”? Or that, this was different?

MP: Yes, I think so. Now it's just funny when the women rabbis, the younger ones, come up and say, Oh, you were one of the pioneers! Really? I really didn't think of that so much at the time. I think it occurred more at Yale because the world made a bigger deal out of it. There was a lot of press about it, and it was a very big deal because it was literally the first class, the first freshman class of women. Rabbinical school, well, even though in retrospect I realize there weren't many of us--my class had maybe seven women in the class--and there had already been a few women ordained, maybe five by the time I was ordained. It didn't quite have the same feeling, and because I had already been at Yale there were always a lot of guys around so it didn't feel as special. There were a lot of people at that point who were still not at all happy that there were women in rabbinical school.

DR: How did that manifest itself?

MP: I was a student rabbi for one year at Ellenville New York, in the Catskills and the year before they had also had a woman student, and many people in the congregation did not want a second year of a woman student. They said, well you know, we did it; we did our time. Of course, the school's policy was, You get whichever student we send you, or you don't get anybody. I went to the congregation and I'm a new student, I'm young, I'm not experienced, and the first Friday night—I still remember—this man came up to me and said, "I just want you to know I don't think women should be rabbis." It was not very encouraging.

DR: How did you respond to that?

MP: I said, I hope we'll learn to get along (I had a good sense of humor in those days) and I ended up officiating at his son's bar mitzvah by the end of the year. I think we did pretty well. You're dealing not just with the Reform Movement, which was getting used to it, but also with the larger Jewish world, which was getting used to the idea. All our professors, of course, at rabbinical school were male. Only our homiletics, our speech

teacher, was a female.

DR: Did you have a role model, or someone who mentored you?

MP: Not really. There were no other women rabbis out there except for young ones, and I think we kind of mentored each other. One of the things we did was create our Women's Rabbinic Network. I started rabbinical school in '75, and around '76 we started it. We used to meet in the ladies' rooms at conventions. Then we started meeting in hotel rooms because there got to be more of us, and now every other year we have a big convention in all parts of the world. So it's really changed. We would meet with each other and talk about things, really practical things, like salaries, and maternity leave, and then things that might be less important like, what do you wear for a bar mitzvah service where you're invited to the party afterwards? Who do you ask that type of question? I think our mentors were more women who were in other professions, who had done these things, First, the idea of what did it mean to be a woman and a rabbi? Then what did it mean to be a woman and a rabbi, and a mother? There were all kinds of stages to it.

DR: If you had to identify someone who might have been a role model for you, subconsciously, or consciously, who would that has been?

MP: I think it's kind of a clichéd answer, but my mother because she had gone back to work as a teacher, got her masters degree in mid-career, and was very involved in the teacher's union activities. She was certainly someone who was out there, well educated, and had stayed at home for a long time until her kids were going to school, and then had gone back to work. She was very supportive of my doing this. There was never any question about, Should I do this? Would this be a good thing? There were women rabbis whose parents were not supportive and who really thought it was a bad idea. Or, "You'll never get a husband. Who's going to marry you?" Of course the advantage I had was that I was already married before I started rabbinical school. So my parents didn't have that argument.

DR: Obviously, your husband was supportive…

MP: …not a rabbi! That's one of the most common questions people ask women rabbis. They used to. Maybe not so much anymore.

DR: Why do you think they ask that?

MP: I think it's because (I'm trying not to be too negative here) they can't imagine anyone else would marry a woman rabbi, so they always say, Well is your husband a rabbi too? I always say, No, he's a lawyer. I would get that question for years. There were three questions. I used to want to hand out a card. The first question was: How many women rabbis are there? Who was the first woman rabbi? And, What do they call your husband? Those were the three questions that were asked. I really could have literally handed out business cards with the answers to those questions.

DR: It seems like you don't see yourself as such a pioneer role model for others, even though others see you that way.

MP: I do more a little bit now, because people respond to me that way. I guess especially because (In addition to being a congregational rabbi, I write children's books) my first children's book was Ima on the Bimah, My Mommy is a Rabbi. The first time a younger woman rabbi said to me, Oh, you know my mom read that to me, or My dad read that to me when I was a little girl, I think, Oh my God, I'm that old! It was the sense that it was possible to be a woman rabbi and that for those of us who were out there we were really serving as role models for little girls growing up that they could be rabbis too. I don't think I thought about it quite as much while I was going through the experience. Now I see it more.

DR: Do you consider yourself part of the women's movement, a Jewish feminist?

MP: Absolutely. Absolutely. There is no way any of us would be doing what we do without the women's movement, with out the influence of women going into different professions, and just opening the possibilities. The fact that Hebrew Union College, which had thought about this idea since 1922 finally actually accepted a woman who would enter the school, and finish, and be ordained, and backed this up, there's no question that came out of the feminist movement. It wasn't necessarily an internal Jewish process. It fit into the same process of everything else that was going on in the world at the same time.

DR: Do you consider the Washington to be a good place for a female rabbi? Was it at the time you began your career?

MP: Yes, I think it was because there were so many women professionals here. Therefore, it's not really strange to be a lawyer here, or a doctor, or a policy person. It just fit in with what a lot of other women were doing at the time. I was a Hillel director at American University for five years with students, and students, of course, accept things as they are. They were going through changes in the world; I was a few years older than my students, and they just thought it was very interesting that there was a woman rabbi. People would come to a service, especially faculty members, they would come up to me afterwards and say, Well this is the first service I've ever been to with a woman rabbi! You always wanted to think, Well, what did you think would happen? That the roof would cave in? Or they'd say, Oh, it's really nice! I've never been to one of these before. Over the years of course those questions changed to "I have a cousin's cousin who goes to a congregation and they have a woman rabbi", and now, I almost never get a comment about it.

DR: That must be extremely gratifying.

MP: Yes, thirty years later it's nothing. No one notices. I also used to be able to say that I knew every female rabbi in the world. And I literally did, and I probably knew everything

about them too. Now, I go to conferences, and I don't know three quarters of the women rabbis there. So that's great.

DR: Moving to a congregational position from Hillel, there was in the atmosphere, all these issues about women: they aren't tough enough, men don't want to unburden themselves to a female, just general resistance. Did those thoughts occur to you? Were you worried about any of that?

MP: I don't think so. First of all, I'd been working for five years before I came to a congregation, I was a little older, I was kind of settled in my personal life, I was married, I had two children, so I kind of felt like a "grown-up" coming into a congregation. Also I always worked here with a colleague who was male, so I was never in a congregation where I was the only rabbi. It just happened that way here at Temple Sinai, and I think it was to everyone's benefit because people had different role models. People could make a choice as to which rabbi they wanted to confide in or, which rabbi they liked better. It was kind of ironic that the rabbi I worked with until just recently (he just retired) was not into the traditionally male things like sports, which I was very into. So I just joked that I was really the male rabbi here because I would talk to the guys about sports, and baseball and basketball and all of that. This congregation at Temple Sinai is an extremely politically correct congregation, most people are politically liberal Democrats—not everybody, but many—and they'd had a couple of women student interns over the years, so having me as a woman rabbi wasn't shocking.

DR: It sounds as though you were never nervous, never had self-doubts, or worried about acceptance.

MP: Well, no. I was nervous like anybody is. I always tell my bar mitzvah kids, You know when I get up on the bimah on the High Holidays, in front of 1500 people in the sanctuary, I still get a little nervous. I'm thinking, Is my sermon OK? What are people going to think? So it's OK for you to be nervous before your bat mitzvah, it's OK. But I

don’t think much of it ever had to do with being a woman. It had to do with just being a rabbi. It’s rather a bizarre job in many ways. As my daughter used to say to me after I’d say something about what people would come talk to me about during the day (obviously without using names) and she’d say, Mom, I can’t believe people would come talk to you about that. I mean, why’d they come talk to you? Kids keep you grounded. But I don’t think it was ever so much being a woman as just, Was I able to do the job? I think I was just born at the right moment in history in terms of women’s roles.

DR: And you took advantage of it.

MP: Yes, and my sister’s six years older and we are a little bit different in terms of—she’s professional and everything—how women saw themselves in the world. That timing was very special.

DR: Do you feel lucky?

MP: Yes, I do, I do. I feel very lucky that I had the opportunity. Sometimes I feel especially moved by women cantors more than women rabbis because in Jewish tradition a traditional man will not listen to a woman sing. I think of the generations of Jewish women who sang beautifully but who were not able to be cantors and you feel as though there’s this great loss over the centuries of women who could have contributed that to their community. I always feel very privileged to have lived at this moment where I could do what I wanted to do. I had the right background at the right moment.

DR: You say that being a rabbi is a “bizarre” position in some ways. Do you want to explain that?

MP: Well, it’s very eclectic. There’re a lot of different kinds of things we do that can be explained in clear language. I preach, I teach, I lead services, I do counseling, and I officiate at life cycle ceremonies. But there’s the role of the rabbi that means different things to different people, often based on how they were brought up. For example, if you

get on an airplane, and you sit next to someone and they say, So, what do you do? My husband might say, Oh, I'm a lawyer. Maybe they'll ask one more question, they'll say, do you work for the government, or do you work for a private firm? He'll say, I work for the government. Then, unless they're really interested, the conversation ends.

There's no way to tell someone you're a rabbi and have it just die. If they're Jewish, they'll tell you all about their religious school background, how they hated Hebrew school when they were growing up. If they're Catholic, they'll tell you about their priests. They'll ask you all kinds of questions. Oh, you're a rabbi, how long have you been a rabbi? It's just unusual enough. Most people don't know rabbis, or they don't have regular conversations with rabbis. They come in with all the stereotypes. After 25 years here, I still have people tell some off-color joke, and they'll say, "Sorry Rabbi," as if I've never heard an off-color joke. And they know me well as a person. And, the kinds of things people are willing to come and talk to me about, some people would say it's like a free psychiatrist. People are willing to come and talk on just an incredible range of issues because of the rabbinic title and what that means to them. Often it has more to do with them than with who I might be. That's been interesting to contemplate over the years. Sometimes it feels very good because I can be helpful to people, and sometimes it feels a little fraudulent. I'm really not God, that's really not what I'm doing. But overall, it's been good, it's been very positive. I wouldn't redo it and do something else instead.

DR: Do you ever have the feeling that you don't want to tell someone what you do because you don't want to get into it?

MP: Oh, I have. I have done that. Especially with hairdressers over the years, with other people you're going to see again and are going to have to continue the conversation. Absolutely there have been times—I'm admitting it in front of the camera—I've said, I'm a teacher, which is not untrue, or something, because you don't want to engage in the conversation. I also think that it takes [affects] young rabbis;

maybe it takes [affects] women, because back then perhaps there was a feeling of inauthenticity. Did people really think of us as rabbis? Like when you are standing in a public place and suddenly you hear someone say, Rabbi! I thought, well, they couldn't be talking to me! After the years went by, I assumed they were talking to me. It still took a while to feel, Oh, am I really a rabbi? Yeah, I guess I am. Some of that was interesting to experience.

DR: Do you think that women approach the rabbinate differently than men?

MP: Well, you know, that's a tricky question. I'm an old school feminist in the sense that I think women and men should be able to do the same things in whatever ways their own unique personalities affect what they do, but that there's not a women's way to do things. I know there's a sense, and it may not be totally wrong, that women in some ways made the rabbinate more accessible and less distancing, that somehow people felt more comfortable talking to women rabbi. It wasn't like the old model of the rabbi with the deep male voice, and standing on the bimah, and literally looking like a stereotype of God. Perhaps there's some truth in that but I think that's also generational.

I think my generation, we grew up in the sixties, and we're different in many ways from previous generations. I'm not sure all that is male or female, or gender. I think it's other factors. Of course, we expanded the range of experiences people have. Before there were women rabbis, there were no rabbis who were mothers. There were fathers but there were no mothers. Clearly, certain experiences we've had we are able to share with congregants. We are able to understand things that perhaps our male colleagues would experience only vicariously and I think therefore, that's helped the rabbinate in general. I know female rabbis who are very distant and sort of tough, and others who are much more gentle. I just hate to put everybody in the same box. I am willing to say it's certainly opened up the role models for little girls and little boys to see the rabbinate differently.

DR: That must be one of the most rewarding parts of your career.

MP: Oh, yes. Kids don't even know it's an issue anymore. I remember the early years here going to speak. Every group and congregation in town invited me to speak about being a woman rabbi. You know that was like, A Topic. Nobody asks me to do that anymore. I remember going to a class one day at a Conservative synagogue, and the teacher introduced me, Here's Rabbi Portnoy, to talk about Hannukah I think, and that's all she said, Here's Rabbi Portnoy. And then she said, She's a woman rabbi. Now the kids in that room, they were introduced to a rabbi. They accepted that, as children do. It was adults in the early days who would be so amazed that it was a woman rabbi. Wow! It could be positive, but they noticed it in ways that kids just, well, that's who she is. I thought that was kind of interesting. I'd say, Hi, I'm Rabbi Portnoy and they'd say, Hi, Rabbi Portnoy. Certainly for my children, that's just what I did.

DR: Did either of your children express interest in following in your footsteps?

MP: No, (laughter). My son made aliyah and moved to Israel a year ago. He's a good secular Israeli, which is his goal in life. He lives in Tel Aviv. As he told someone, he's been to enough services for a lifetime. He's happy in Israel, but not happy to be religious. My daughter is in law school and she's not planning to be a rabbi.

That's an interesting question. A lot of rabbis' sons become rabbis. I'd be interested in seeing, over time, what the percentage is of women rabbi's children who become rabbis, whether there's more or less than children of male rabbis. I think that there will be fewer with women because women come home and share more—again, this might be a stereotype, I don't know—and their children see more of the reality of what a rabbi's life is like and then they say, Oh, my God I would never want to do that. I just made that up, but I'd be interested in someone studying it.

DR: Boys want to be like their dads, and girls don't want to be like their moms?

MP: Well, I don't know, I think it's very real. I always came home—it's not like I shared confidences with my family—but they knew there was stress, they knew when the phone rings and it's a funeral and someone died. I do know children of women rabbis who are becoming rabbis.

DR: Your son is Israel. I assume you feel connected to Israel.

MP: Yes, very. I just got back actually from a trip to see him. I hadn't seen him in ten months.

DR: Do you remember your first visit to Israel?

MP: Yes. Oh yeah. I spent my junior year in college at Hebrew University. I had never been to Israel, and I had no relatives there, and I just went off to do my junior year in college.

DR: Did it have some kind of a transformational affect on you?

MP: Oh, yes, it was the highlight of my life, that year in Israel. I then spent my first year in rabbinical school in Israel as well. I had an Israeli roommate, I had an Israeli boyfriend, I spend a lot of time not necessarily with Americans, which was really good for my Hebrew, and for my experience of Israel. I've been back many times since. The first year of Reform Rabbinical School it's required to spend a year in Jerusalem. I was married by then, but we spent another year and of course I've travelled a lot there since. So yes, I feel a very strong connection to Israel.

DR: Did you grow up in a Zionist home?

MP: I don't think we called it that, but yes. We were connected Jewishly in the Conservative movement, and Israel was very much a part of it. My parents never got to Israel until I was in Israel, mostly for economic reasons, but they finally got there. They

came to visit me. It was the first time my mother was ever on a plane. It was great, they had a wonderful time, and I'm glad they did that.

DR: I know you've written three or four books…

MP: …five…

DR: The three I know are Ima on the Bimah, about a young child whose mother is a rabbi; one about two seders, where a child's parents are divorced; and Matzoh Ball, where a little boy goes to a baseball game and has to take his bag lunch full of matzoh. In all these books, there's someone who's an outsider, who's a little bit different. Do you think that there's some sensitivity that you have from being a female rabbi?

MP: Well, that's interesting, because my second book is about someone who converts to Judaism, and then Where Do People Go When They Die? which is about death, and for children to read about death. I don't know, I don't think I ever saw it quite that way. The outsider, maybe. It may be partly being a woman, I think it's partly being a rabbi, because I think rabbis are a little bit outsiders, like journalists. I always compare rabbis to journalists because we're in a community but we're not really part of the community. There's a distance. I'm leading a service. Am I in the service, or am I leading the service? I joke with people on Friday night: I'll say, I haven't seen you in a while. They'll say, Oh I'm sorry Rabbi, I'm sorry I haven't been to services. I'll say, Don't worry, they pay me to be here. I can't judge you. I know I have to be here.

I think there's a whole sense that you're not quite in the community. You're out there, and you're leading it. Also having to be strong when someone is experiencing a funeral, and it might be someone you know really well, but you're still the rabbi. I always wanted to be a journalist when I was younger, and I always thought it was similar. Journalists are not in the story, but observing the story. Kind of part of it, but not really a part of it. I think there's a certain similarity in that sense. You have to be willing to be a little bit of an

outsider. A loner's not the word I want to use, but an outsider, to be successful as a rabbi. I think I'm very personable, I'm friendly, there are people I'm close to in the congregation, but you always have to remember there's always a boundary, there's a line there somewhere. Someday the person you're really close to is going to call you and say, My father died, or something happened, "I have cancer", terminal cancer, and you have to be able to be the Rabbi, not just a the friend. It's a little tricky. Sometimes it can be a little lonely.

DR: One area that I see you as being in the story is in Jewish history, because this is such an historic change in the life of the Jewish people. Do you ever reflect on that, and the role you've played?

MP: Yes, and what's exciting is that it worked. I think a lot of us at first, and I think a lot of people in the outside world thought this would be a trend: for a few years women would be rabbis, and then it would end. And then, of course, the Conservative movement started ordaining women, and the Reconstructionists before that, and even the Modern Orthodox have women who aren't called rabbis, but are really functioning as rabbis. So, who knew? Who know that it would really succeed? The idea of women being rabbis seems pretty obvious now (obviously not in the Orthodox community, but even there the role of women—except for the Haredi community have changed in terms of girls education,) and a lot of things have changed. I think that's what's exciting. It worked! It wasn't something that happened for a couple of years and then they said, oh come on, this can't work.

You know they always worried: What's going to happen when you call the rabbi in the middle of the night, and she's got her baby crying and you're on the phone with her. There were all kinds of issues. Men aren't going to go to synagogue any more because once women were leaders men would stop going to services. All kinds of things people raised as what they saw as serious issues, they really didn't happen that way. So yes,

that’s exciting.

I’m excited just to know Sally Priesand, who’s the first woman rabbi. I remember introducing her once to my young colleague and I said to her, Shayna, “I want you to meet Abraham Lincoln”. That’s how it felt. I know Sally’s a person, she’s a great person, but I know I’m standing next to someone who’s really an important part of Jewish history. She was very courageous. She did it when they kept telling her not to apply. They kept writing back, saying, We don’t accept women. She just kept pushing. Even just having that connection to those people is very special.

SR: Do you consider yourself a spiritual person?

MP: People who know me, my classes, would laugh because they know that word is something I’m not really comfortable with. No, I think I’m a religious person. Spiritual always seems to me a way around using the word “religious” and I think I’m very grounded in Judaism and religious tradition. I just don’t use the word “spiritual”. I think a lot of people use it—not the way you used it—as a way of connecting to God and transcendence without necessarily to institutions and behavior. I tend to like using the words “liberal religious Jew” rather than “spiritual”. It’s just semantics, but I tend not to use that word so much.

DR: Are there any characters from the Bible that you particularly identify with, or relate to?

MP: I’ve been doing a lot of study recently on women in the Bible for a class I’m going to teach, and there are some very strong women in the Bible. I like for example, not necessarily the most famous ones, but the daughters of Zelophochad, the women in the Book of Numbers, who went to Moses and said, You know, we’re not getting the inheritance from our father and we deserve it because he had no sons, and we should get an inheritance. I wrote a sermon once about them and who they would be today in

the Jewish women's community, the different daughters. They even have names, which is remarkable in the Bible. They're all named, instead of just "the five daughters", unlike Lot's wife, and Job's wife, who don't have names. These women had names. I think about them a lot in terms of being not as well known, but important women.

Or women like Hulda, the prophetess, or Deborah, because they are women who had jobs in the community, people who were very normal, they weren't strange, who were really leaders, and nobody said, Oh, well she's a woman, isn't this unusual? They feel more historical, too. When you get back to the earlier women, they're more types rather than real people in my mind. Those are some of the women I think about when I think of the Biblical text.

DR: Is there a prayer or a psalm that is a favorite?

MP: I don't know if there's a psalm, but in terms of the prayer book, I do love the prayer after the Baruchu, where we praise God for the creation of the world around us, helping us appreciate God, and that day turns into night and night turns into day; an awareness of the regularity of nature, that life continues, that there are cycles of life. Whenever I read it, or pray it, or chant it at a service, that always means a lot to me, that prayer.

I also think that whenever I'm standing in front of the ark, it feels really powerful. Standing in front of the Torah, looking at the Torahs, facing the Torahs and thinking about what that means in terms of Jewish history, Jewish tradition, and that I'm there, hopefully helping to carry it on means a lot to me, especially at bar or bat mitzvah services. I'm thinking, OK and you're here too and you're going to keep it going somehow.

DR: What have you learned about human nature?

MP: Oh, never to be surprised at anything. I'm always amazed at people's secrets, that there's so much going on in people's lives that you don't know about underneath the surface. I'm also amazed at people's resilience. I've seen such terrible things happen to

people, the kinds of things where we don't want our minds to go, let's say a child dies, or some kind of terrible illness, the things that people have to live with. The fact that people, mostly, mostly, survive those things and find some way to keep on going. I have always been just overwhelmed by that, and really moved by it. Really, I just can never get over it, the fact that, and they find different ways, but people live and want to live. The life force is very strong, and so people's resilience just really makes a big impact on me still.

DR: Anything you would like to add?

MP: You didn't ask me about baseball (laughter).

DR: Thank you very much, Mindy.

MP: You're welcome, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]