

Shulamit Izen Transcript

Judith Rosenbaum: OK, so let me just introduce us to the tape so that anyone else who ever listens to this will know when we're recording this. Today is January 14th, 2002, and I am here at the New Jewish High School in Waltham, Massachusetts with Shulamit Izen. This is Judith Rosenbaum conducting this interview. Usually I start with family background, so maybe you could start by telling me a little bit about your childhood. You can start by telling me where and when you were born.

Shulamit Izen: OK. I was born in Boston on February 11th, 1984, and I've lived in Lexington my whole life.

JR: OK. I'm just going to write down your birthday, so we don't have to ask again later. Tell me a little bit about your grandparents and your parents and where they are from, what they do, and that kind of stuff.

SI: OK. My mom's parents lived in the Boston area their whole lives. My grandfather was, I guess, a manufacturer's rep, and went around to furniture shows and toy shows. And my mom kind of picked up that love of toys and dolls, and she's a doll and toy historian. It's really funny. My grandma is a yoga teacher and a real estate agent.

JR: Has she been a yoga teacher for a long time?

SI: I think like 20 years now. Started rather late in life, but she loves it. My dad's parents grew up, I think, in the Connecticut area. His mother is a secretary. And when my dad's father was alive, he was a theater manager.

JR: So your mom's parents live in the area still?

SI: Right.

JR: So were you close with them as you were growing up?

SI: Yeah. I'm pretty close with them. I love them. Like in terms of GLBT stuff, they've been amazing. My first meetings happened during the summer when my parents were away at their house.

JR: Oh wow, cool, so they've been very supportive.

SI: They've been really supportive. My grandfather always tells me he loves me no matter what. And they just seem really funky to me. They're more hip than my other grandparents. I'm just really into them.

JR: (inaudible) kind of break down the assumption that the older you get the more staid and conservative you get.

SI: Yeah, definitely.

JR: And you have siblings, right?

SI: I have a brother who is 15 and a sister who's 10. My brother goes to New Jew, and my sister goes to the Jewish Community Day School. They actually started going to Jewish schools after I went to New Jew for a year. Because I would just come home so excited about school and learning that my parents wanted that for my siblings.

JR: Cool. Well, we'll get to some of that stuff. I do want to ask you about how you ended up coming here. But we'll get to that in a few more questions because I want to ask about your family. What kinds of issues are your parents or grandparents involved within their communities? Do you think of them as more involved in their communities, or particular issues that are important to them?

SI: Yeah, my mother is definitely involved in the Jewish community. She always wants to learn. She's involved in Adult Ed. at the temple and rituals. And I think she's a pretty

spiritual person. We're not at the same -- we don't have the same type of spirituality or religious expression, but she's definitely really involved, and always Judaism has been really important in her life. And it's not really so much for my father. So she's kind of been the main person. And she does so much stuff for other people, and I think that's really where my activism comes from a lot. I'm not sure that anyone else in my family -- like my grandparents or my father -- have causes. Just kind of laid-back people who kind of do their own thing. So they think of me as kind of a radical, or someone who should be focusing on her schoolwork instead of doing extracurricular things.

JR: How do you describe your family's politics?

SI: Pretty liberal. My mom and her family are extremely liberal -- at least in the way they talk.

JR: What are the kinds of things that they talk about, for instance?

SI: They're definitely pro-choice -- I mean, I think for issues that affect all people, they're pretty liberal. I mean when it gets to specific groups of people, like minorities, they can get kind of scared. Like afraid that their jobs will be taken or something. My dad's family is more conservative. And definitely has a hard time even talking about gay issues.

JR: Did you say what your parents do for a living?

SI: No. My mom -- her training is in public health. She's a psychiatric epidemiologist. But she doesn't practice anymore since I was born. She writes about toys and dolls. My dad is the vice president of a filter company. (inaudible) membrane separation. He's into it.

JR: OK. So now I want to move on to ask you some questions about Jewish stuff. How would you say your family identifies Jewishly?

SI: My mom always identifies as Reform. However, she's really not into the Reform shul that we belong to. She's been involved for 15 years there, and the other night she was just complaining, "I need a community that nourishes me instead of me nourishing it." So even though she likes that label, I don't think we fit into that category. We were always more religious than -- I went to Hebrew School at the Reform shul, Isaiah, up until seventh grade. And my friends would always tease me because we were "the Jewish family." So we have that label, but I don't think it fits.

JR: What about your grandparents? How were your parents raised, Jewishly?

SI: Definitely classical Reform -- my mom at least. She went to Hebrew School. But she always wanted more. She went to summer Hebrew School when they were at the beach. She'd look forward to that every year. But my grandparents don't observe anything really.

JR: And what about your family in terms of celebrating Shabbat and holidays? How does that work in your house?

SI: It's always been really important. When I was growing up, I always had to go to shul on Friday night. But that was the big thing -- Friday night -- you know, we'd even light the candles and the kiddush, and say the *bracha* over the challah. And we wouldn't have a special meal. That was just what we did. And then we would go to shul. Shabbos wasn't kept otherwise -- my mom would always say "day of rest," so then it was -- no computer. But you know. The holidays -- the major ones -- were kept. And we would be with my grandparents usually -- have a dinner. We would -- most of the time we wouldn't go to shul, I don't think. Unless the Reform shul was having services. We would always go if there were services, but most of the holidays they didn't have.

JR: And so how did you decide to go to New Jew?

SI: Since seventh grade I decided that I want to be more religious.

JR: How did that happen?

SI: I'm not really sure. Something drew me to it. And I didn't really know so much. I think I went to a [shlivel culva?] service. My mom took me to one and she really didn't like it, because the men and women were separated. But I was just awed. You know? I was like, "I want to be like that. I'm going to be frum." So I started just reading on my own. And so in middle school I was just "the Jew." And everyone would come to me with their Jew questions. It felt really good. But I knew that I wanted more, because I was playing teacher and I wanted to learn. So Rachel Burstein, who went to my temple, was telling my mom about New Jew, and my mom was like, "Hmm, sounds good." And my mom always says things, and she doesn't usually follow through with them. So I just thought 'OK, we'll visit New Jew, here's no way I'm going to private school' because my dad was really against it -- a firm believer in public education. So I visited and I loved it. It definitely wasn't what I expected. Just the whole idea -- people wearing tefillin -- I didn't even know what tefillin were, and they were so beautiful. So I think it was my mom and me really wanting to go that got me there.

JR: And so then once you were here and you were having a positive experience here, you were saying it kind of carried over to your siblings and (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) them?

SI: Not them so much, but like my mom saw that this was really good. And it convinced my dad. They were actually kind of upset I think in the beginning, they saw that I was really happy, but I became kind of a religious zealot. I started davening with the Orthodox for the first half of ninth grade. And so I would come home and be like, "We cannot do this, this, and this on Shabbos." And they'd be like, "Oh yes, we're going to." And I just had like some really strict, set ideas that I got from what I thought Orthodox people were supposed to be. And I guess I'm more relaxed now so we can kind of live together more easily. But in the beginning, it was hard.

JR: So how did that process happen? How would you say your relationship to Judaism changed over time?

SI: It started – OK, so I was davening with the Orthodox mostly because the first friends I met were Orthodox and they were just so sweet, and they knew so much. I was like, “Wow, I want to be like them.” And then one day at the end of davening, one of the Rabbis said, “Whoever wants to learn to ‘leyn,’ come see me.” And I was like, “What’s ‘leyning’?” And they said, “Reading Torah.” And I said, “I want to do that.” And they said, “But you can’t, because you’re a woman.” And I was like, “Hell yeah, I’m a woman.” So I left the minyan after that and I went to the traditional egalitarian -- it was like, “I have the right to read Torah.” So I stayed there for a while. I wasn’t so comfortable with it. It just seemed kind of dry. I went to Reform, and I was like, “No, I’m not Reform.” I always knew I wasn’t Reform, so I went back to traditional egalitarian. I think I change based on the community that I’m with. So when I’m with people who are much more liberal -- like my family -- I take a much more conservative stance, because I feel like I need to counter them. But when I’m really with religious people -- like halakhic Jews-- I disagree with a lot of the stuff that they say and do. So I don’t really have a label now. I guess I hope, in time, I can be a halakhic Jew while being a feminist -- being in the egalitarian community, and being in a community that accepts me as a lesbian.

JR: That seems like a good goal. It’s definitely ambitious. But it makes a lot of sense. Have you participated in other kinds of Jewish activities like summer camps, or organizations, and stuff like that?

SI: A little bit. In fifth grade and sixth grade -- the summers of them -- I went to Young Judaea, basically because my parents wanted to get rid of me for the summer. I was kind of hard to live with. It was fine. I’m sure it affected me Jewishly, but I can’t really think about it-- even then, I would daven -- they had two minyans and I would daven at the more traditional one where the campers didn’t usually daven at -- only the

counselors. And I just love the feeling of being in this musty cabin and people muttering words and I had no idea what they were saying. And I remember Shabbos and people dancing and it's just like – ‘wow, I wish I knew these songs.’ You guys have robbed me, my parents have robbed me because I don't have this tradition. So that was like I think my first more traditional Jewish experience. Since I was twelve, I went to the Women's Spirituality Conference with my mom at the JCC. And that was always so powerful. The first time I went I was like, “What's up with these women? They're crazy!” Shefa Gold was there, and she was chanting. She was doing one of her-- just screaming it out with a drum. And I was just like, “Oh my God.” After a few minutes, I was like, “Yeah, I love that.” That's my scream also. And I think knowing -- I went there since it stopped happening. It's just so powerful having a community of women, and just seeing a different model in Judaism. And at Hebrew School I was always involved. I was kind of always the teacher's pet because I was the only one who really cared about it. But I wasn't involved in youth group because I didn't like the social aspect. I was always really shy and was at a different place than the other kids. So it's like I wanted the Jewish stuff, but I couldn't be with them.

JR: Was your mom involved in women's movement stuff? I'm just wondering if you had kind of gotten some of that stuff from her, or that was something you then came to more on your own.

SI: I don't think she was involved in the sense that I think of people being involved. She's definitely a feminist -- I mean, she doesn't wear a wedding ring. I have her last name. But she doesn't do things politically, nothing is really political for her. And it's just like, “This is a decision I'm making.” And I think she'd very conscious about her decisions. We only eat organic food and just really good stuff that I've come to value. But it was never instilled in me, I don't think that-- lectures on women's liberation or anything -- and she's never really told me about it.

JR: Would you say that your family is Zionist? Or did you get any kind of Zionist training as you were brought up?

SI: My parents dragged me to Israel for my bat mitzvah in seventh grade. I really didn't want to go. Coming back my mom was like, "I don't like Israel. It's dirty."

JR: Had she been before?

SI: I don't think so.

JR: Why didn't you want to go?

SI: I think I was afraid. People at my shul always had their bat mitzvah there and I was doing something different and going with a group that I didn't know. I didn't really have a connection to the land. I protested going a lot. I came back, and then in seventh grade I was like, "I want to make aliyah." It definitely had an effect on me. I think my parents are also very critical of Israel. I complain to my mom about Israel a lot and she agrees with me. You know, "It's horrible what they're doing to Arabs," and all this stuff.

JR: Right.

SI: So no, I don't -- I think they like the existence of Israel, but they're definitely not pro-Israel.

JR: And where do you fit, how do you feel about Israel?

SI: Oy. Tough question.

JR: I mean, you don't need to give me your whole political take. But just sort of more generally. Do you still feel like you want to make aliyah or is that something that isn't as much a (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)?

SI: Part of me wants to live in Israel for a while. I definitely want to speak Hebrew fluently. I feel like I'm connected to the land even though I try to break away from it. It keeps pulling me back. I'm a harsh critic. There's so many problems, and I'm beginning to see that it might be hypocritical to call Israel a Jewish democratic state, because I don't know if it can be both Jewish and democratic. So that's pretty difficult. But I'm definitely still connected.

JR: Hopefully you'll get to go this spring, spend a little time there. OK, so here's -- this is sort of a good question. I'm interested in knowing -- obviously the activism that is important to you and the stuff that you've done here in terms of for your Jewish stuff, obviously it's related to Jewish issues and Jewish identity and all that kind of stuff is a big piece for you -- fitting into the Jewish community and making the Jewish (inaudible (community space?)) and all that kind of stuff. I don't need to say all that for you. But I'm interested in hearing you talk a little bit about how you see your activism as related to Jewish values and how you feel Jewish values -- I'm kind of assuming you feel Jewish values inform your activism in some way. I'm making that leap in asking this question.

SI: Yes.

JR: But anyway, that's what I'd to hear a little.

SI: I think to answer that question I have to talk about the process of becoming like a Jew (inaudible)? Is that --

JR: Yeah, sure. It's sort of segue question.

SI: OK. So when I decided that it was an issue that I was a lesbian and that I was Jewish, I went to a Rabbi at my temple and I asked her, "Can I be Jewish and gay?" And she said, "You're so special for a reason, and you need to know that." And so I think that was the first time I realized that it wasn't really about me being gay, but it's about people feeling accepted in our community. And that's the core, I think, of Judaism -- is loving

and inviting the stranger in your midst, and they should be just like you. And the more I started reading about GLBT youth and seeing the suicide rates and the craziest stuff -- like more likely to get pregnant, higher uses of cocaine, like everything. I was like, "This is a *pikuach nefesh* issue." So it's not about me. It's about them. And I need to protect people in my community. So I link it to Judaism a lot. Definitely at Pesach, in terms of coming out and liberation. And I just see a community so oppressed. And I just -- the whole metaphor of mitzrayim is so powerful and potent. I don't think there's specific Jewish values that I can name.

JR: Well, you've named a few already, actually.

SI: Right, but I can't give you a whole list of them. But it's definitely important to what I do, and I don't think I would do it if I didn't feel -- no I probably would, because I was brought up in this society that -- it definitely informs it.

JR: It sounds like you're almost saying -- correct me if I'm wrong -- but sounds like you're almost sort of saying that you had to sort of confront the Jewish aspects of this issue as soon as you were coming to terms with realizing you're a lesbian. Is that true?

SI: Yeah, because it was the same time period when I was like, "I want to make aliyah. I'm going to be frum—"

JR: When you were in seventh grade?

SI: Seventh grade, I was like -- 'but then I'm a lesbian, so what do I do?' I had heard stories that Orthodox parents kick their kids out of the house and sit shiva for them when they come out to them, so I was like, "Hmm, this can't work." I needed a way for it to work. And I don't think I resolved it. I don't think I can ever really resolve it. But I've kind of just taken a spin of, "OK, so it's not about me personally, it's about making other people feel safe."

JR: OK, so tell me a little bit about some of your experiences as you've tried to kind of make that happen -- create a safe space or a community that's confronting some of these issues of homophobia within it.

SI: Hmm...

JR: Where to begin, right?

SI: Yeah, wow. Most people have been really receptive, I think. I have different instances sticking out in my mind.

JR: Well, maybe try to start as much as possible at the beginning. Like how you -- well I don't know how to tell you what the beginning is -- but where would you say the sort of the beginning of your activism on some of these issues?

SI: Well, when I came to New Jew I joined Amnesty. And talking about human rights, so then I was like, "Hmm. Part of the Amnesty agenda -- Amnesty's agenda -- is GLBT rights, so I'll just be part of that." So that was the first time I think I talked about it a lot. That was just the first thing -- trying to raise people's awareness. People were OK with it, because it wasn't about me yet. I was just the creative girl. I wasn't the lesbian yet. They didn't get it. So that was the first time I think I tried to raise awareness. And it was fine. It got kind of sticky when it was about me. Because then people had to relate to me in my face. And it was harder. You know, they kind of pushed it away.

JR: And when did that happen, that it became more about you?

SI: I think in tenth grade -- I don't know, people just suddenly got that I was gay. I guess because I was talking about the dance and that maybe I would bring a girl or something. "Ugh, what?" And people had issues with that. I had a friend who was like, "I don't know how I can be your friend anymore." She just kind of broke down, but then she talked with her mom and was like, "Hmm, my mom's best friend is a lesbian. I guess it'll be OK." So

we're still friends now. I think... I don't know, there's so many instances. Starting with the GSA at this school, it was really hard in the beginning.

JR: So maybe tell a little bit about the process that you went through to make that -- to bring the GSA into existence.

SI: OK. Well, one day at the end of tenth grade, I was recycling. And I was back in the teacher's room. And I saw a rainbow beaded thing on a teacher's keychain. I was like, "Wow," because I didn't know that she was gay. And then she was driving me to some event one day, and I started talking to her about GSA, and I kind of wanted her to come out to me. I was trying to get her to do that. And she did. And she agreed that a GSA was a really good idea. So we started talking about it a little. We talked over the summer. And then I got in touch with Keshet -- in Boston -- and Annie. And I interned with her at the end of the summer -- tenth grade. And we talked a lot about organizing and she kind of prepared me for the fight that a GSA would be at New Jew. And I didn't really think it would be an issue. I guess I was doing all this prep work, but I didn't see what the conflict was.

JR: Right. Well for you, but you must have had some sense, given that you had seen that there was other people that didn't always react to you in such a positive way.

SI: Right, but I thought the case was so strong. I was like, "Well of course, we're talking about life and death here." So I interned with her. I learned how to tell my story, which is really powerful. It was the first time I had to be like, "Hmm, this is the line and this is how I got to this place." And that was all really in preparation for my meeting with Rabbi Lehmann, which was so intense. I don't know what I can say. Should I tell you what happened?

JR: Tell me what happened, and if we need to censor parts of it afterwards, we can do that. I mean, unless you don't feel comfortable.

SI: No, I can. It was harsh. I went in and the first thing I said was, “Rabbi Lehmann, I'm not here to ask you for a GSA.” And he said, “Good, because we can't have a GSA.” Because Annie just said, “Get the feel of what he wants.” Just trying to get a feel. I was like, “Can I tell you my story?” And he said no. I was like [gasp]. Because I learned how to talk to people through telling my story. And he's like, “I don't want to hear about your sex life” or something. I was like, “That's not what I want to tell you. I want to tell you why I care about this issue and how I got to this place.” And he wouldn't hear it. And then he started to talk to me about homosexuality. He just started talking to me. And he said, you know, “Don't think that you can change a three-thousand-year-old tradition overnight. Sexuality isn't like skin color. If this was an issue of racism, I would be behind you all the way. The text would be behind you, but this isn't the same thing.” And I was like, “But for me, it kind of is like skin color. It's just here and it's part of me.” And he's like, “No, there's a difference.” It was a long meeting. We went on for a while. He basically talked and when I tried to say something he would cut me off -- and included a lot of text. And he definitely was scared. He said some things like, “You don't know what I'm doing in my bedroom.” Just crazy things that--he was definitely scared of the issue. He did say that he appreciated me bringing it up, because it's an important topic. But the year or two before, there had been a discussion about patrilineal descent, and all the students got really revved up -- there were crying scenes and everything. And he didn't want sexuality to get that intense, or so he said. I don't think it would have had the same effects. Then the last thing he said to me, which really hurt, he said, “It's sick to look at the world in terms of sexuality.” I left that meeting and I was totally broken inside. It's this Orthodox rabbi, he's telling me it's sick to look at the world in terms of sexuality. Well, that's how I'm looking at the world. And I wrote after that, “I don't know if I could do this -- if I could be holy and be gay. I think I need to be straight.” And I called up Annie and she came over and helped me be queer again, which is good. But I was a total mess. And what I had thought was going to be so easy, I realized this is such a big struggle. From there, I started talking with students and got them involved. And we formed a diversity

alliance, which planned the first GLBT Beis Midrash.

JR: So what kinds of conflicts did you have with students? How did you -- tell me a little bit about the process of sort of organizing students.

SI: They were pretty easy to organize. I think most people in the school are pretty liberal, or there was a big enough core that it was good. I mean, I talked with a lot of them one-to-one, and I told them my story. They're like, "OK." You know, "What am I supposed to do?" I think it was really the Beis Midrash that got people questioning on a larger level -- I mean, because the teachers were questioning also. And all of that together made Rabbi Lehmann say, "I never said we couldn't have a GSA." And it was so clear that he said that we couldn't.

JR: Well, I think one thing -- I mean, I'd like to hear you talk a little bit more about the experience of the Beit Midrash for you -- but one thing just to say to have on the record since we've said all these things about the meeting, which I think are really important to have on the record also is just that one of the reasons why I think it's OK to tell those things is because Rabbi Lehmann clearly has made a lot of *t'shuva* himself --

SI: Yeah, he definitely has.

JR: -- and so that I think really, really speaks strongly in his -- you know, what's the word -- speaks strongly for him. And so in some ways I think it's not disrespectful to sort of report how things were, because I think they're very different now.

SI: Yeah, I totally am amazed by the change that he's made, and I'm so thankful for it. So it's been a pretty short amount of time. I think-- it seems to me that he changed a lot because of the teachers who came out to him. And knowing them so well and talking with them --

JR: So tell me a little bit about the Beit -- I mean I know I was there, but for the record.

SI: Well, we really wanted the student body to see how it was a conflict in this school. We thought that it would be really important to have a teacher come out -- going to tell her story. And to have a student tell her story also. And we had two Rabbis there -- one Orthodox and one Reform to talk about homosexuality from a halakhic perspective. I mean, that was kind of Rabbi Lehmann's insistence. We didn't really think that was so important. And as it turns out, no one really cared what they were saying. It was basically the teacher who came out and myself who were the focus of the questions after. It was really powerful. People were crying. I mean, I was so moved by what the other teacher had to say. Just about how hiding takes energy and the assumptions that people make. Like, "How was your weekend? When are you going to get married?" It's just all this stuff. And I think it really hit people because it was really concrete. And then after we spoke, there were questions. And one student stood up and she said, "Well, why can't we have a GSA?" And I feel like that question kind of popped up around the school after that.

JR: What was it like for you to speak and come out to your classmates?

SI: I didn't think it was going to be a big deal before, but I stood up there and I was shaking. I'm not much of a speaker. Like I don't speak in general. I didn't speak in class. It felt weird to read my life off a piece of paper, but I was too afraid to look up. I know I was just turning really red and just was like, "OK, let's get this over with." But I sat down, and I was just reading through my writing, so I guess I remember through that -- Ms. Tanchel put her hands on my head and said something. I don't remember what. And it was like, "Wow, OK, I did it." I'm grounded. And then I looked up and people were clapping. And I was like, "People are clapping for me?" It was amazing.

JR: You spoke beautifully. It was really -- it was amazing.

SI: Thank you. I really felt like I was part of the New Jew community for the first time, then. They've accepted me in, and I see that. Yeah, it was amazing. And just seeing

you and the other teachers in the front row. I was like 'yay!' I knew I had a lot of allies out there, and that felt so good.

JR: And what was the response from people afterwards?

SI: It was crazy. People would just talk about -- they were talking about it for so long after. And to me personally, the people who weren't there wanted to see what I wrote, and they were just hugging me for days after. It was like, "Wow!" You know? It felt so good, and people were asking me questions and were saying, "I never knew it was like this for you. I'm really sorry." I was like, "Thank you. I'm sorry I couldn't have told you this before."

JR: Like you could see very concretely what the impact was of what you had said.

SI: Right. And I mean, who would have thought? Like everyone knew I was a lesbian, so...

JR: Well, people sometimes only know what they want to know. They don't -- you know what I mean? Like sometimes people only hear the things they want to hear and can ignore other parts of what's clearly -- people are trying to tell them... or whatever.

SI: Yeah I definitely -- I mean, I always felt like I was a lesbian walking around New Jew before, like before [it was in a residence?]. But after that I definitely was more aware of everything I did. I was like, "Hmm, are they going to interpret this as a gay thing?" So it impacted me also -- I guess it made me think more about my sexuality. I couldn't forget it now because everyone knew.

JR: Right. So after the Beit Midrash, what happened? What were the next steps in terms of getting the GSA off the ground?

SI: A lot of it was teachers talking to Rabbi Lehmann, I think, and getting him to say, "Well, if you give me a serious proposal." So they said, "OK, we'll give you a serious proposal." And then the heads of the Student Council went to Rabbi Lehmann also and talked to him. And he said the same thing that he said to the teachers. So we wrote a proposal, we submitted it to him. We had to meet with him and we had to change it, and meet with him again. And nothing was really resolved before the summer. So that whole period from January, February to the end of the school year was basically meeting with Rabbi Lehmann and trying to get more support for it. The beginning of this year -- wait, maybe I'm mixing up my dates.

JR: No, I think that seems right.

SI: OK.

JR: Well, when did you have to bring it in front of the Board?

SI: Right. That's what I'm trying to remember. I think it was--

JR: It might have been in the spring or over the summer.

SI: It definitely wasn't over the summer. It couldn't have been -- yeah, it was probably the spring. Yeah, I think it was late spring. We had to meet with a religious policy committee. That was horrible. We were supposed to just go and make a presentation to them and then they were supposed to discuss it, and vote, and we would have a GSA. Not what happened... They were grueling. They were debating so many different aspects of our proposal. They were saying that we can't be both a support group and an advocacy group. That we would alienate so many people in the school. You know, there was one person who was likening a GSA to an NRA -- or saying that having a GSA would be like having these Lubavitch people in the school putting up a picture of the Lubavitch Rebbe and calling him the Moshiach. And I don't think we really saw the correlation between the two. But that was what the discussion was about. And it was

just so intense. And again, I didn't realize how impassioned people would be about it. So they discussed it again another time. We weren't invited. And I don't think they ever came to a conclusion, but the beginning of this year -- I think it was this year -- we went to Rabbi Lehmann and Rabbi Lehmann was like, "OK, you can have it." He made it sound like, "Of course, you could have always had it" -- except there are conditions. We're only a support group, and not an advocacy group -- which means we can't march in Pride, and we can't put up GLBT posters. Basically, I feel like it's putting us in the closet of the classroom. Like 'OK, but don't try to get people to come to your group' kind of thing. But at least it's something, and we'll challenge that once we get stronger. And so many people come --

JR: Really?

SI: For clubs at New Jew, there's ten people on average every week.

JR: And so what kinds of stuff have you been talking about and doing?

SI: Mostly it's basically history stuff. Because the two advisors -- or the two teachers who come every week are Mr. Kadden, who is the history teacher, and Rabbi Noam (sp?) who is a Talmud teacher. So basically, we fluctuate between history and Judaism of GLBT stuff. I think it's basically like whoever has a question, we just kind of discuss that question for the day. It has a long way to go. It's definitely not a safe space yet, even though we've talked about confidentiality a lot. And I don't feel like it's a place where people could come out. And we're still talking about what the role of allies is and the assumptions that we're making when we're talking like 'we' and 'they.' But at least it's there, and we have first-year students coming and it's good.

JR: That's great. That's really great. So, can we move on to talk about G'avah a little bit?

SI: Yeah.

JR: OK, so tell me a little bit about the process of forming G'avah.

SI: OK, so while I was trying to start the GSA -- and I realized that it was going to take a while, I was like, "Hmm, there must be other Jewish queer teens in the Boston area who don't have a place to be gay and Jewish -- and I can't really wait for New Jew because it's taking too long." So since I was already pretty close with Keshet folk, I talked to them about it, and I got the name of someone from someone else that I was studying with who -- he called her a 'gay Jewish activist.' I was like, wow. So I didn't know her -- I called her up and I said, "Doesn't it suck that there's nothing for GLBT Jewish youth?" She says, "Yeah, it sucks." So I said, "Do you want to do something?" Or no, I think she said, "Do you want to do something?" I was like, "Yeah." So we had a meeting. She brought her girlfriend. And Annie came. And we just formed a group. We had a meeting in the JCC. We decided that we were going to have a Havdalah coffee house. We had it -- it was amazing -- because they brought all their friends. Pretty popular people. We had like thirty people in the room for Havdalah in this queer coffee house. It was amazing. And then we made our own pride Haggadah, which was an awesome experience.

JR: I would actually love to see that if you would be willing to give pieces of that to put on the exhibit, maybe.

SI: Sure.

JR: If you could send a copy. I mean, I probably won't put the whole thing in, but if we could maybe like pick a few pieces from it.

SI: Yeah, definitely. I have pieces from it downstairs in my locker.

JR: Oh, well so maybe you could afterwards. I saw it. I've seen it before. You did show it to me, but just to have for the exhibit, I think it would be really cool.

SI: Yeah, it's really cool. It's so exciting. And then we had a Seder, which was just so fun. So during the *magid*, we told our coming out stories. And people's coming out stories were so funny. Because I mean we're all so comfortable with ourselves and we're a pretty liberal group, so the parents were pretty comfortable. So it's just the joy of being gay. And we had spoken at the GLSEN conference about being religious and queer a few weeks before. And one of the women who went to our workshop was really moved and wanted to do something for us. So for our Pride Seder she made us this rainbow assortment of grilled vegetables with a saffron aioli sauce. We were like, "Wow, aioli sauce." So we had our Seder, and we had this beautiful rainbow vegetable platter.

JR: Cool!

SI: So cool. It was just really nice that the community was being involved with our group.

JR: Yeah. And so what other kinds of things have -- or what do you see G'avah doing in the future -- or are there other things you want to sort of tell us about that?

SI: I personally would, like I said, have more of a Jewish face. I like to talk about Jewish sexual ethics. And we were supposed to have a safer sex workshop this Sunday, but because of the snow we canceled it. So hopefully we'll do that. Making the Haggadah, we had to talk about identity, and our Jewish identity in relation to our queer identity, which was really great. And I'd like to do more stuff like that. Because I feel like we do fun stuff, but we're not really getting in the core of like, "Yeah, we're Jewish queer youth."

JR: So, this is another sort of big question. What role would you say your activism plays in how you define yourself?

SI: Hmm... I think here at New Jew it plays a big role. It's kind of what I'm known for. It's kind of hard for me to separate being a lesbian from being an activist because I feel like they came really linked. I think my activism defines me a lot, although I usually -- for the past little while I've been feeling like I haven't been doing a lot of activism. So I was

kind of like, “Who am I? What's my role now?” And yes, so I mean I did feel lost without having that and feeling like I was actively involved in something. So I guess in that sense it's pretty core. And I would like it to be more central. I like to do other stuff besides GLBT work.

JR: Well, you do. I know you've talked about -- we've talked about sweatshop stuff, and I know you're involved in some of the anti-slavery stuff here, right? And recycling.

SI: I know, but I don't -- I know I do -- I do these little things, but I don't feel like I'm actively engaged in solving a problem, or something. You know?

JR: Yeah, well that's aiming pretty high. How would you say your work on queer Jewish issues has informed your Jewish identity?

SI: Oh, wow. I think it kind of is my Jewish identity now. I can't be in a Jewish place now without bringing that in. It's kind of how I measure if a place is comfortable for me, and if I could be part of that community-- is by the acceptance of the queer folk within it. I kind of -- it's so central now, that I kind of hope that it won't be in the future. I feel like I've had to make it a core of my identity, which I don't think it really is, but just being here -- for a while I was the only out student here -- and I needed to play that role, I think -- pretty vocally. But I kind of hope in the future that it will be less so, and it will just be--maybe being a feminist Jew, or being a committed Jew -- you know, just other definition.

JR: Right. That makes a lot of sense. Have you experienced any conflicts between your family and your activism?

SI: Yeah. I don't -- I think they're scared. No, I think they're better now. But in the beginning, they were scared -- you know, “People are knowing that you're gay. That's going to make your life so much harder.” I mean, my dad's pretty conservative in terms of sex, like we just don't talk about it together. And so when he hears me on the phone talking to people about sex and sexuality, it just totally weirds him out. And I think that's

kind of a conflict. I feel like they haven't been as supportive as I would have wanted them to have been.

JR: At what point did you come out to them?

SI: When I was fourteen, I came out to my mom. She was reading to my sister in her room. I had just been online looking at gay websites -- trying to figure out what was going on. And I was IMing this thirteen-year-old lesbian -- I don't know who this person was (inaudible). And I said, "Are you out to your parents?" She said yeah. And I said, "Why?" And she wrote back, "Because you just, you know -- I just don't give a fuck." I was like, "Yeah, I'm just not going to give." So I walked upstairs, my mom was reading to my sister who was -- -- she was like five or six or seven or something. No, probably six. And I said, "Mom, I just went online and I looked at gay websites." And she goes, "Oh?" And I said, "Yeah, I'm gay." And she goes, "Oh." And that was the end of the conversation. It's really like not an elaborate coming-out story. It kind of (inaudible). She didn't talk about it after. I had to bring it up again. I never came out to my dad. He just kind of heard about it.

JR: I think that happens with a lot of things with dads.

SI: I know, I kind of feel bad, but I don't -- I just didn't feel like he would even think about it. My mom's kind of the core figure in my life.

JR: One of the things that we've been talking about this year with the Women Who Dared group -- each year we sort of try to think about what are sort of the common themes that -- because obviously all of different women who are honored do very different kinds of stuff. One of the things we've been talking about this year is that most of the women have taken -- the work that they've done has been sort of taking a risk within their own community as opposed to some other years, we've honored people who have traveled to Bosnia and help people there, or whatever. So one of the questions that

we want to focus on a little bit is what it's been like for you to take risks within your own community.

SI: The first thing that popped into my head when you said that was -- I was doing a program on Jewish GLBT inclusion work at the temple where I went to Hebrew School -- where my parents still go -- and I went to a Board meeting of the youth group to try to tell them about it, to get them to support this. And it was so scary. I went to school with these people and they knew me as this straight, shy little girl. And I was commanding their attention for ten minutes while I told them my story and what I wanted to do. And that was kind of weird, like I was changing the past or something. But in general, I wasn't really brought up in the communities that I'm working in now. So they know me as the person that I am and what I talk about. I feel like coming to New Jew I was out -- and I think the more traditional communities that I go to...A lot of people have heard about what I -- I think I'm a good piece of gossip or something. It seems like most people I meet have heard about me. I come in with that. Do you know what I mean?

JR: So you're sort of prepared because you know that it's already out there.

SI: Right.

JR: But certainly, you've taken certain -- I mean, it's still a risk that you're taking. It's not like it's a new risk every time but that you've had to deal with not only standing up for this issue, but also standing up for yourself. As you were saying -- I mean you were sort of saying actually, at the beginning, that from the beginning you sort of felt like it wasn't so much a personal thing, it was more like the issue. But you come along with that issue too, obviously. And so that -- you must experience some of that in a personal way.

SI: Yeah, I think the most personal thing was I was with school and going to Washington for the JCI program. Have I told you this already?

JR: I don't know.

SI: Oh, it's horrible.

JR: What does JCI stand for again? Jewish Civics Initiative?

SI: Civics Initiative. So we had to introduce ourselves, so we had to draw pictures. So of course, I drew a woman's symbol and a rainbow. And no one understood what that meant, because people had to pick it out and try and decipher it. So I had to stand up in front of the group and say, "Yes, I'm a feminist and I'm into gay activism." And then we went back to our rooms, and -- so there were four people in a room. And I thought before we could have -- I could have shared a room with someone else from New Jew, but I was like, "No, I want to meet new people. It might be cool." So I was in a room with three Floridians. And I walked in and they stared at me and they said, "What does it mean you're a gay activist?" And I said -- well I knew what they meant -- like 'are you gay?' So I told them what it meant to be a gay activist, and then I ended, 'and I'm a lesbian.' And they stared at me some more and they said, "We're strictly dickly." And I was like, "OK, don't worry. I'm not into you." So that was scene one. It was crazy. And then that night, I was trying to go to bed and they were so wild. And the TV was on and the radio and everything. And I guess -- I mean, I was trying to go to sleep. I was in bed, sleeping. And they were talking about me. They're like, "Do you think she's going to try to have sex with us while we're sleeping? What are we going to do with this fucking fag in our room?" They call up their friends down the hall and they start talking to them about me. And I had this tear go onto my pillow. And it was just like, these are people in the Jewish community. They go to a Jewish day school. We're here to talk about activism -- but this isn't my community, and something's really wrong. So then the next day, I told people about it. And that was risky. I was thinking, "Am I being a gossip? Maybe it was OK that they said stuff?" I was just really doubting myself. So they were talked to -- but actually the girl who I was sharing the bed with I think was really thankful that I didn't have sex with her.

JR: So nice of you.

SI: I know. So she started talking to me. We went out to lunch at the Smithsonian, and I told her my story and all that. And afterwards she's like, "Hmm, I don't think I'm a homophobic anymore." I was like, "Oh, good."

JR: You're like, "Good, I've done my activism for the week."

SI: Yeah, I know. It was a really good feeling that she could change, and that I -- I guess the risk was that I stayed in that room for the next night. And I didn't want to be there. I thought there was so many other cool people, and I would have loved to share a room with them, but I was like -- I know I have to teach people something. I didn't think they were going to be violent, but it was kind of scary. Like, "What are we going to do with this fag?" Whoa.

JR: You're right. That is scary.

SI: I kind of feel like that was the biggest risk. Like Baruch Hashem, that was it.

JR: Right. But there are also, I'm sure, daily risks that -- not risks like risks to your safety -- but...

SI: Emotional kind of.

JR: I don't know. And I don't mean to at all push you on this. I just think that you're not -- I think you're being modest in not -- I mean, I think that there's different kinds of risk. There's the risk where you're in an acute situation like that, where it's like people you don't know. And then there's just -- and I think this is often true in a lot of the interviews I've done in the Women Who Dared, that people downplay just like, what it is to -- on a daily basis, push an issue. You know what I mean?

SI: Yeah, yeah I do. It's kind of like, people know it's my issue now, so I don't even have to push it. They just kind of assume that I would say something. It's kind of hard knowing that that's my role and I do have to say something. And it's not an option ever. But I guess that's what it means to be an activist. Always -- you know, you're on top of it.

JR: And how would you say that your community has responded to your activism?

SI: Speaking here now, they've been amazing. It's incredible what New Jew has done. And I think it's just really radical for them. And I'm so thankful. Today I was in the library, working on my senior project which is all about GLBT inclusion.

JR: Oh yeah, and don't let me forget to ask you about that.

SI: OK. Jewish institutions -- and I was just like screaming out statistics to people across a table, and everyone was so cool with it. People are OK now, talking about being gay. And it's so wonderful. They definitely weren't in the beginning. And there's less homophobia here now -- I think. I hear it less -- slurs and stuff. So it's wonderful. I feel really supported and loved. And there are moments when -- one time a kid came to GSA and he started saying, "You can't be Jewish and gay because" -- and then he was giving all these reasons. And at first, I was kind of like, "I don't want to hear this" -- but then it's like, no, this is the dialogue that we wanted in the beginning, and he's coming to GSA -- this Orthodox guy -- like wow, you know?

JR: Right, so it's successful.

SI: Yeah, I think we're creating a strong, safe community. And there's a long way to go, of course, but it's beginning.

JR: It's very exciting.

SI: I know.

JR: What would you say were the greatest challenges in doing this kind of work?

SI: Well, OK. Definitely talking. I guess I knew that it was so important that I kind of put that aside. But through this work, I've kind of lost my identity of shy little girl, which had been like a really big part of me. I mean, that doesn't carry over into class.

JR: Not yet.

SI: But-- some classes. Yeah, I think just knowing that I have to meet with these adults. Like, wow. I'm asking them to listen to me. That was really hard. It's still scary sometimes.

JR: What do you think are -- actually [I forgot about this question... interesting (inaudible)]. Do you think that there have been any specific challenges because you're a woman? I don't know if you can separate that from queer issues. But I just always ask it because I just think it's interesting.

SI: I think it's easier because I'm a woman. Guys in this school won't talk about being gay, really. The ones who I think are, make it a joke. And I think I would have known earlier, probably, if I was a guy. And other people would have known. When I came out to people, people had no idea.

JR: It's easier for women to be positive.

SI: Right, so I think being a woman has been to my advantage. But I also feel like I can't reach a section of the population because it is so much harder for them, and I don't have -- and I don't really know how to make this space where they can come out. At least they're coming to GSA.

JR: What do you think has been the most rewarding for you about this work?

SI: Let's see -- more people are out at New Jew now. And that's so good. And I know, at least for one of them, she said that a lot of the work that I've done here has made it so that she can come out. And just being able to talk to her about the process and everything. Like a lot of people in school come to me at random moments and ask me if I think they're gay or not. And they'll tell me why I should or shouldn't think so. And I guess just being a resource like that -- like, wow, there's a student who will talk about it. Like, "I don't have to make such a big deal out of it that I should go to a teacher." So that's really rewarding when people will tell me you made me feel more comfortable and safe. That was the purpose in the beginning.

JR: This is sort of related, but I'll ask anyway. How do you think your contributions have affected others?

SI: I think there's a lot more awareness here now. People are definitely questioning more. I think that the questions about sexuality are linked to questions about society. And I try to show that link, so people see me questioning everything. And I think there's -- at least my close friends have picked that up, which is amazing. I want people to challenge these norms. And hopefully now at New Jew, there's a lasting group that's going to be there to support people, so no one has to fight for it anymore and it's here. And that name is really important.

JR: It's really important. We're going to be some sort of legacy and impact other places also. How do you think your work as an activist has affected you? You've talked a little bit about some of this, but I'll ask you.

SI: It's really defined high school. It's kind of defined who I am here. I think it's going to become my life, which at times is kind of hard. I can't really separate it. And I don't even do it all the time. It's just of the assumptions and how people relate to me, because now I'm this lesbian who's really into making change. I feel like -- I mean, it's been wonderful but there's also times when I'm like, "Hmm, maybe I didn't develop other things that I

really wanted to because I was out every night at meetings trying to get support,” you know what I mean?

JR: Luckily you're only seventeen.

SI: I know.

JR: Have you had any role models?

SI: Yeah. Definitely. In terms of GLBT stuff, Annie has been amazing, and I look up to her so much. She taught me a different mode of activism. Just the whole organizing theory and everything. So I'd say she's my main person for GLBT stuff. And then just in terms of being a feminist, Vonna (sp?) has been really influential in my life. I guess she's a person who will challenge everything -- just is really critical of society, but has so much joy. And I think that's been hard in this process, is being faithful that things will turn out right, and that-- being able to smile even when someone just said something really rude and obnoxious to you. So she's definitely taught me that. And then, I'm really thankful to all the out teachers here. So thankful that they're able to be out. I know they're really important for other students here too, because one of students who's out talks to one of them a lot about it. So yeah, I really look up to them. And then also the teachers who are allies, who've been allies in different ways. Just thinking back, it's so important to be able to just go to certain teachers and complain about things or ask their opinion. I think, yeah, teachers have always really been my role models. Yeah, basically.

JR: It's a nice thing for teachers to hear.

SI: I think the Rabbi who told me about my soul is kind of -- she wasn't so important then. And I don't really know her personally now, but her words have really affected me and guided this whole process. So I think I owe a lot to her.

JR: My next question is about the projects you're involved in now. And I was thinking maybe you could about your senior project.

SI: So for my senior project I'm trying to make a guidebook -- kind of like the guidebooks for GSAs in public schools, but bringing in Jewish text, and the process that I've gone through at New Jew, and the writings that I've done, and trying to focus it on a day school audience -- for day school high schools to bring GSAs into their schools. So I think it's kind of ambitious. I'm not sure if it's going to be exactly what I wanted it to be. But I guess I want people to know that it's possible, and also that there are difficulties and ways to organize -- because people aren't so lucky that they have someone like Annie where they can call up every time there's an issue. So I guess, trying to write down a lot of her wisdom, and different pieces of advice that people have given me along the way.

JR: Have you been involved in other activist causes. I know you were just saying you haven't, but think broadly.

SI: I feel like I haven't so much. I've done a lot of different things. I've been to a lot of different events -- on homelessness and hunger and domestic violence. I'm on the TJCC -- Teens for Tzedek Committee. So all the stuff that we've done, I've been involved in. Like AIDS activism and affordable housing -- but I don't feel like that defines me that I could talk to you coherently about any of those subjects. I'd like to know more.

JR: OK. Do you think of yourself as political?

SI: Parts of me.

JR: And what does that mean, I guess is the other piece of that question.

SI: I don't follow politics really, but I feel like most of the stuff I do is political. I was thinking about going to prom, and only because it would be a statement to go with a woman. I think that prom is a stupid idea. And a lot of the time that I'm out or will bring

up GLBT stuff in conversations is not because I personally want to, but because I think it's important to have that voice out there. And now I go to the statehouse fairly frequently, and so I guess I'm following things more. And I just see that that's another side of activism, which is really important to go with the one-on-one stuff.

JR: What kind of leadership roles have you had?

SI: Do you mean like different organizations?

JR: Yeah, it's sort of a bookkeeping kind of question.

SI: I think the main things have – well, I was the head of Amnesty here for a year. And I'm the head of GSA, and G'avah, and I don't know. I'm on the TJCC committee. I was in charge of recycling here for a while. I don't know. I'm not really into formal stuff, so I just --

JR: I know, I hate this question, but I kind of always -- I always struggle with whether to even ask this question, because I feel like it's basically asking people to list their resume.

SI: Yeah, I feel like I could show you my college application.

JR: But I feel like the thing -- the reason why I feel like I push myself to ask it is because part of what this project is about is getting people to take ownership over the things that they do, which women a lot of times kind of are like, "Oh, it's no big deal, whatever. It's just a little thing." And I kind of don't project in the same way that history and men have. And so I'm trying to fight this tendency to be like, "Well, these kinds of things are sort of formal and not so important." So even though I also sometimes have that feeling and never want to ask this question, I try to do even though it often makes people (inaudible) and uncomfortable and whatever, so just to know that. What are your plans and goals for the future? I mean you're going to college.

SI: I'm going to college. I don't know, I'd like to do something like G'avah there. I'd like to find a new issue. I think it's time for that. I'm not really sure what -- yeah, I think I'm really into mental illness, and I'd like to do more about that and learn more about that. Long-term goals, I don't know -- I know that I want to work for a non-profit or something. I always want activism to be a core part of my life, and I think teaching is a really good way to do that. I don't know if I would want to be formal teacher. I'm thinking about doing Teach for America after college, or something.

JR: Cool. That'd be great. I'm sure you're going to do great things. I always end by asking if there's anything you haven't covered that you'd like to tell me about.

SI: I don't think so. I'll let you know if there's something I think of.

JR: Well the only question that I was wondering if you feel like you've answered fully is that as we've talked, you've kind of talked about telling your story. And I just want to make sure you feel like your story -- I've asked you the kinds of questions that make your story come out so that there isn't a piece of the story that you think is important to tell that I haven't gotten to.

SI: No, I think we have the key parts of it.

JR: OK, so then there's some bookkeeping questions. Your full name.

SI: Shulamit Elisheva Izen. Can I say something about that? I changed it when I was sixteen. I mean, going into high school I went by Shulamit. But that's my Hebrew name.

JR: What was it originally?

SI: It was Sarah Elizabeth before. But I was like, "Hmm, I want a Jewish name." And like Shulamit means a lot. Just the whole idea of wholeness, and I always felt like I was kind of broken in different ways from different experiences when I was little. And

Shulamit comes from the Song of Songs. And it says “*shumi ha-shulamit*” [‘turn and return, Shulamit’ in Hebrew] so the idea of returning -- I don't know what I'm returning to, but in terms of GLBT stuff and activism, I always think about returning. So it's just like a really powerful name for me.

JR: That's beautiful. So did you change it legally?

SI: Yeah.

JR: You already said your birthday was February 11th, 1984. One thing that we have to do -- this is this annoying thing for the exhibit, is we have to have a one-sentence sort of description of what you do that -- just to sort of code you with. And so now-- I didn't do this in the past, and then I've had to come up with the one sentence, and I feel like it's not really fair for me to label everyone. So I'm giving you the opportunity to give your one-sentence activist description or role or whatever.

SI: Wow. I don't know. Celebrator -- is that a word? -- of queer Jewish identity. I don't know. Whatever.

JR: I can talk to you about it afterwards (inaudible). So let's take a break for a second. I just want to go through some of these things just because there's certain information on them that we need to have just legally -- so we can list them in our archive. Because part of what the JWA has is this virtual archive so that everything that we use in all our exhibits gets put into that. So it's something that other people can then use for different things. So that for instance, if someone came to the site and was doing research on like GLBT stuff, they could not only look at the piece of the interview that are up there, but read the article, and know where the article was from and quote that in a paper or something like that. So anyway, so we just need certain information to make that possible. So for instance, for this picture, do you know what date this is from?

SI: Yeah that was -- I don't know the exact date. It was a twelfth-grade picture.

JR: Twelfth-grade picture, which is -- do you remember when pictures were taken? Aren't they taken in November or something like that?

SI: I don't know, it was 2001.

JR: I'm just going to write it down. So it's like -- OK. So we had -- so it's your school picture. Let's see. So like Fall 2001.

SI: Yeah.

JR: OK. So then we have this article, which is from the New Jew Paper. I'm looking for a date. January 2001. OK, that seems to be basically straightforward. When is this poster from?

SI: Hmm. It's from our first GSA meeting, I believe. Do you want an exact date? I can try to find...

JR: If you have one, that'd be great.

SI: (shuffling sounds) Hmm... Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]