

# Karen Geggel Transcript

Shayna Rhodes: Hello. Yeah. Okay. So it's March 16th, 2005, and this is Shayna Rhodes sitting here with Karen Geggel in her home in Dover. We're doing an adult bar mitzvah. This is a little unusual since you weren't born Jewish. We'll go through the childhood anyway. I think it could be relevant and interesting.

KG: Yeah, I think it is.

SR: So, let's start. So could you just talk about your childhood and describe it [inaudible]?

KG: Well, as I put on my form there, I have six brothers and sisters, three brothers, three sisters, and one deceased sister who died in 1967 at age three and a half. We lived in an intact family. My parents have been married for – I don't know – close to sixty years, maybe fifty-eight, fifty-nine years.

SR: Wow.

KG: Yeah. They'll be celebrating soon. It was a Catholic home. Should I just sort of describe –?

SR: Sure. A practicing Catholic home?

KG: Yes. Now my father was not real into it, but my mother was very much so. She was raised in a boarding school basically by nuns. It had a very strong influence on her – a French boarding school in Massachusetts. Her mother was divorced and a working woman, so [she was] sent to boarding school.

SR: That's unusual.

KG: Yes. From age five, she was there until ninth grade, and then she went to Brookline High School. She was a very spiritual person. Even though she was a very strongly identified Catholic, to me, she had something more than just going through the motions. She really was a person who searched and read and meditated. She meditated actually long before meditation was a word in our vocabulary. So I would sometimes find her early in the morning praying. So she was very deeply connected. Then we went to Catholic school, some of us. The first three finished Catholic school, twelve years. Then my parents lost my sister, and they moved, within six months, out of Brighton, where I was raised, to Ipswich. Those kids did not go to Catholic school. I think after the death of my sister, my mother grew distant from her faith. For many years, more than twenty, she probably didn't even go to church. And then, in recent years, she's gone back. I'd say in the last five years or more, she started to really become deeply involved. Again, she's not the same kind of Catholic she used to be; going back to her more – she's not someone who likes to recite the rosary repetitively or whatever, but she really still goes to services and finds ways to connect to her spiritual side. She's very liberal politically. So that presents a little bit of a problem at times with her groupings. But she finds ways to reconcile it, and I admire that. Back in Brighton, when I was growing up, I had a strong religious background, doing everything the way I was supposed to. And then you hit adolescence, and of course, that threw me off. One of the things that made me become less fond of Catholicism was the fact that because my father didn't always go to church on Sunday, that was considered a mortal sin. A very grave punishment for not going to mass on Sunday was if he died, he'd go to hell. I looked at my father, who was a very hardworking, loving, affectionate father of eight, who gave his life over to his family, and it wouldn't matter. In the eyes of the Catholic doctrine, that wouldn't matter. The fact that he didn't wake up and go to mass on Sunday mattered more. It didn't make sense to me. So I started questioning the whole idea of what is doctrine and what does it serve? I still felt like some religion was good.

SR: You were still in Catholic school?

KG: Yes. Twelve years. So, in high school, is when you start thinking about that. But I belonged to a youth group, and I really liked it, but then I started cutting out on mass too when I was [in the] twelfth grade. My friend and I would go to Dunkin' Donuts. [laughter] but I also loved the ritual. The ritual was really important, and it really was very grounding. I found the values – I belonged to this youth group, and we went to do tutoring in Roxbury, and we did other community service things. I felt that was really important, and that taught me or laid the foundation for values that I feel like I have. I also felt like the ritual and the sense of God in my life for all those years was something that I couldn't just put away. Couldn't just now send off with all the other feelings of – or all the questions or all the other rejections. I couldn't ultimately reject the concept that God would be in my life, but I didn't know where to put it. So that's when I just didn't do anything for many years.

SR: During high school or after high school?

KG: After high school. So after high school, I was sort of getting away from it.

SR: During high school, did you speak to your teachers and ask them questions, or were you just sort of keeping to yourself? Would you speak to your mother?

KG: No, I didn't. I think there were several – the friend and I, who went down to Dunkin' Donuts together; we'd talk about this sometimes because she had some of the same issues. And my sister and I – my sister was in college when I was a senior. She and I would talk about some of this stuff. Not teachers, but we did question – the youth group leader was a young priest, one of the Father What-A-Wastes. [laughter] He was actually very good about talking about some of this stuff too. But it really wasn't where we were. I was headed in a different direction at that point. I think a lot of Catholics are. Some of them go back, and some of them don't. But it's such an ingrained lifestyle for so long that it affects you forever. Do you want me to keep –?

SR: So, after high school, did you leave home, or did you stay? Did you go to college?

KG: I went to nursing school, and then I quit. Then went back to nursing school, and then I moved to California. I finished my degree out there. I was there for six years, from ages twenty-three to twenty-nine.

SR: Were you going to church at this time?

KG: No.

SR: [inaudible] spiritual?

KG: Yeah. A lot of Eastern religion started in the '70s in California. So there was a lot of talk about Buddhism and meditation, TM [Transcendental Meditation], which I never did – yoga. I had lived in Cambridge, too, before I moved to California, so it was really the new-age lifestyle. Religion was defined more like that, I think, for many, many people than organized church/synagogue. Because I knew plenty of – I had Jewish friends in California – and same thing. We were all doing the same thing. I felt like I had another spiritual breakthrough, I guess when I was about twenty-eight or twenty-nine.

SR: In California?

KG: Yes.

SR: Can you describe that?

KG: [laughter] Well, I was on a backpacking trip. I could describe it more in-depth, but I'm not going to go into it all right now. Ultimately I think I just woke up. I think there are a lot of places where you can find a sense of spirituality, and there are places that feel like sacred places. I didn't necessarily feel like this was one of them, but I felt like there was an openness in me that I instantly recognized. It was before everyone else was awake, and I just got out of my tent and sat in the sunlight at, I don't know, nine-thousand

feet or something and had a real sense of God's presence. I knew what to do with it on one level and then really, really didn't know what to do with it on another level, meaning that I knew I had to not ignore that. But I didn't know where I wanted to go with it because I didn't really want to be a Catholic again. So that was when I was twenty-nine. It was Berkeley, California, and I tried different churches, and I did even go to a college-based Catholic – they call it the Newman Center. Like we have Hillel, Catholics have Newman, and they're usually, because it's college-based, a more liberal, inclusive way of getting kids interested. So I went to – because I lived near the University of California, Berkeley. I lived right near the campus, so I went there. But I wasn't real hooked-in. I'm going to fast forward a couple of years.

SR: So was there anyone there, though, that you could speak to at this Newman Center?

KG: I think we all spoke about stuff. I mean, but it wasn't really –

SR: [inaudible]

KG: Yeah, yeah. I tried a Presbyterian church, and I felt like they were conservative. I just didn't know what exactly. I remember having this funny feeling. It was putting up a little – I was living by myself [for] the first time since I had moved out there. I had a little apartment, and I was putting up this little, tiny Christmas tree, and I just had this very strange sensation that I didn't really understand this idea of Jesus Christ. I didn't know what to do with that. It felt foreign to me. Because here I am going to Christian services, and they talk a lot about that and Jesus, the savior, and all that. It didn't quite sink in with me. I remember having that experience with this little Christmas tree, and I remember feeling like, "Well, I just want to talk to God." [laughter] You're always taught, you sort of go through Jesus to – blah, blah, blah. It was like this dichotomy that was presented to me, and I didn't know what to do with it. I basically just ignored it. What was interesting is when I was younger, in my high school years, my first boyfriend was Jewish, and my

first job was in a Jewish bakery, and I worked babysitting for a lot of young Jewish couples in Brookline. So it wasn't that Judaism – I didn't know much about Judaism. We were actually taught more about Judaism in Catholic school than most kids learn in any other educational setting, except for obviously Jewish schools. Because we learned about Yom Kippur. We learned a lot of things. So, I had a little bit of an inkling. Then, I met my husband-to-be, who was Jewish, is Jewish. That's when it sort of started. It just felt right at that point when I first started taking the classes.

SR: When was that?

KG: In '82. I got married in '83. So, I guess it must've been '82. Maybe before that. Maybe a little bit. I converted in '82, December 16, '82. We were married in May of '83. So I must have studied for a year or something before that or most of the year. I don't know.

SR: Where did you study?

KG: Temple Aliyah because we were living in – not Aliyah, I'm sorry. Temple Israel. We were living in Brookline, in Boston. I was living in Brookline, and he was living in Jamaica Plain. So we were going there for classes. Somebody had recommended that I go see Ronne Friedman, and so that's who – I had actually talked to someone at Harvard Hillel, but he wasn't real encouraging – Rabbi [Ben-Zion] Gold. So someone said, "Well, go to Ronne Friedman." So I did. I remember going to the Hillel service with Rob for Yom Kippur or for Rosh Hashanah and thinking, "Oh, this is wonderful. This is beautiful." So I thought, "Well, maybe." And I liked him. But then I read you have to be rejected three times or something. [laughter] I said, "Oh, okay. Once, that'll do." Then I started studying there with him and read and read and read, and it was great. So we had lots of – he met with me, and then we had class. So I had the material for the class, but really, the thing that I loved the most was studying one-on-one. That was great.

SR: How did your family [inaudible] feel?

KG: They felt okay about it, I think. My mother wasn't in her most Catholic phase at that time. She was in her not-going-to-church phase, but she also felt that this was something that – because she is a spiritual person, she felt that this was right. If it felt right and it was heading me in the direction – the path of my soul, you might say. I think she felt good about it. My father, the one that didn't go to church much, felt more conflicted. My mother wanted to come to my conversion and my father didn't. So my mother didn't come, which is unusual because they often do things separately, but this was something where she felt it was just too personal and wanted to do the right thing. So she didn't come, which is fine. I didn't feel badly about that, and I completely understood. Both of them came to my bat mitzvah. [laughter]

SR: Did any of your siblings come to the conversion?

KG: I think not because I think just geographically, it wasn't like the – I can't remember.

SR: How do they feel about your being Jewish?

KG: Oh, they think it's fine. My siblings? Yeah. The younger ones aren't anything because they weren't raised really – they were raised in that time when my mother was having issues. The older ones – my sister's Episcopalian, and she's into it. She likes that. It's a good compromise. My older brother married a woman who raised the kids Catholic, and he would've been fine with whatever. He would have just shrugged it off. Whatever the wife wanted to do. [laughter]

SR: So, what was Judaism like in your house?

KG: My brother didn't go to twelve years of Catholic school. He went to public school in high school. What was the question?

SR: What was Judaism like in your home when you first married?

KG: Here, in this home? That's a really good question because I feel like it basically all – I want to say this in a way that doesn't sound like I'm criticizing my husband. [laughter] It was basically up to me to create the level of observance, the kind of home life with Jewish themes, threads, whatever. It was just completely up to me. Whatever I wanted to do was fine. It wasn't going to be initiated by Rob, but he'll go along with it. What happened was he not only went along with it but started to really enjoy it. [laughter]

SR: Did you belong to Temple Aliyah at this point?

KG: When we moved to Needham, Amelia was six months old, and we had a baby naming. Ronne Friedman came to our house for Amelia, for a baby naming. So we had that. Then, when Ezra was born, I wanted a bris, and Rob said, "Sure." That was fine with him. But it wouldn't have been initiated by him because his twin brother had a son, and they didn't have one. There was just not much observance in the family. So we had a bris for Ezra, and that was good. I wanted to light candles on Friday night, and I wanted to get them involved in a preschool situation. Actually, Amelia went to daycare, family daycare, and she was Jewish. Then it just started happening; every daycare provider basically was Jewish. So my kids have little – their early experiences were Jewish-based. At one point when we were living in Needham, somebody recommended that we try Temple Aliyah. There were 125 families belonging back then. Then it grew to 250 shortly and stayed there for a while. Then it grew to like 450, which is way too much, way too many. But the first time I went, I think I just went and I met my friend. Ezra was quite small. He was probably two, two and a half at the time, and Amelia was three or three and a half. I walked in, and it was the old sanctuary. I heard our cantor, the same cantor, Cantor [Harry] Gelman chanting. We had been to services at Temple Israel. We were there for – we got a year's membership afterward, and we would go sometimes on Friday night, and they had a choir, and I guess an organ too. It just never felt that Jewish



to me, but I didn't know why. But then I knew why. Because when I walked into Temple Aliyah and heard Cantor Gelman chanting, I said, "Oh, this is home."

SR: That's interesting.

KG: Yeah. "This feels right." We have a cousin who is a rabbi, married to a rabbi. I was talking to her. It's Ruth Sohn. She's written – *Reading Ruth*. She wrote one of the Midrash, [the] first chapter, I think. She was delighted that we were thinking Conservative, and she really encouraged me because I was a little scared.

SR: What scared you?

KG: Scared me? "Oh, it's so Jewish, and I'm just a neophyte." [laughter] It's intimidating. I think, even for Rob, it was intimidating. It wasn't just because – I mean, more so for me. He grew up with an organ and a choir and the whole business, never wearing a tallis or kippah. So it was an adjustment for him too.

SR: Where was your Hebrew level during all this?

KG: Well, during conversion classes, I had to take a fundamental Hebrew reading. So, I could memorize some prayers, but that was it. I could follow a little bit, [but] not very well. But the more I went – and that's really how – I just started being able to follow. I could basically pick up after going to services enough. I could pick up where they were reading in the Torah and pick it up somewhere. I could find it and then follow it. I can't read it out loud very fast, but I can follow it and read it internally. So that's what I did for a long time. Still, I'm not real good at reading Hebrew, but it's getting better. We got the kids involved in Hebrew school there. I don't know. I looked into Schechter, and I looked into Rashi, and I thought that maybe we would go that route. We enrolled the kids in Rashi. Ezra was there for four years, and Amelia only one because it was sixth grade, and she wasn't happy. So that's when she went to Nobles [Noble and Greenough School]. I wanted more for my kids. I wanted them to have something solid because I

felt like I was on a little film here. I didn't feel real rooted. I mean, I did, and I didn't. Naturally, your circle of friends becomes more Jewish. Your life is centered around the Jewish community, the holidays, [and] the cycle of the year. All that felt very comfortable, and that rhythm was wonderful. I started being the one to do the Seder. We have first night here. Done that for years. We usually have eighteen to twenty-one people, and I do all that. And then I go to another friend's house who converted for Rosh Hashanah. We do first or second night there. We just started building our community around – because I didn't have a family – building it around people who were more similar to my situation.

SR: How about your spiritual journey? Did you find the services at Temple Aliyah were connecting you to God or was that more in your home?

KG: That's an interesting question. Because I felt like I wasn't sure how much services at Temple Aliyah did that. I knew it did more than Temple Israel, definitely more than Reform. I don't think I ever heard the word God in Reform. I mean barely, kind of in passing. [laughter] It was in the prayer book a little bit when there was a sermon or anything. I felt like that was more out there during the service at Temple Aliyah. I think, especially after Carl Perkins came, there was a level of spirituality that – not that the others weren't, but there was something that changed to some extent. Probably would have continued, but then it grew to be so big that it started losing it again. So there was this window when it was just, I think, ultimately the best of all worlds or something. Then it started to get bigger. What I [found] was doing the adult education and doing some of the classes, like I told you, with Leslie Gordon. Some of those were very good in terms of connecting. As far as prayer and spirituality, sometimes at services, it happens, but usually, it's not really directly there, but the space it puts you in. I think just going – and I don't go regularly, but when I do – sometimes I'll go more regularly, and it does remind you to stay more connected and be in that space. Sometimes it's a recommended reading, or it's just pick up something and start reading sometimes, probably more at

home. That I do more on a personal basis. Then I have a Rosh Chodesh group, and there's a variety of ... in my Rosh Chodesh group, there's a range of what people want. As time goes on, I think we're getting closer to what we want, even though we've been doing this for ten years.

SR: Is it all women?

KG: It's all women. It's been almost the same women for most of –

SR: How many?

KG: We went anywhere from ten to twelve women. For a long time, it was a core of twelve women, and then it was eleven women. I shouldn't say core. I mean, it was a group really solidly there for a number of years, and now it's changed again. I think that change is actually good because I think – I mean, it was good before. It's just different. But I think it's going to become a little bit more comfortable really talking about spiritual things and delving in study. I think more of us want that now. We've had periods of that. I remember we'd take a theme, and one time it was meditation. I did a presentation, and we all talked about it. A couple of times, we've done prayer. I think we touch on it, and then we back off a little. This particular group, even though it hasn't changed that much, it's enough that we'll, I think, pursue that a little bit more, which I think that's going to be really fun. We visited the mikvah.

SR: [inaudible]

KG: Yes, it was lovely. I brought Amelia. [laughter] That was great. We've been doing more of those sorts of things, I think. But I don't know, I guess it's something that I think a lot of us feel that you can get into a space in the service that can be very elevated, but a lot of times it's not there, or you're not there, or you're talking, or there's a lot going on. But when I say that, I still love that. I love that sense that there's life and lots going on, and there's something up there, and it connects me in a different way. It's a very fulfilling

experience, but it's not necessarily the most spiritual experience.

SR: So what made you start thinking of bat mitzvah?

KG: Well, I jotted that down about – I guess every so often, I start thinking, "Well, what's my next level going to be in terms of who I am?" Just being Jewish or being a spiritual person or whatever, I just want to know kind of what the next step is, how to find it, and what it means. So some years ago, I actually took the class where you take a year of study every week. I took that, and I think actually I took it twice. [laughter]

SR: That was for your bat mitzvah?

KG: Yeah. But that was right before Amelia had to have all her surgeries. After I finished taking that class, I just couldn't keep going. That set me back for a long time. And then, they offered the class as an open class for anybody, but it would also be one of the classes that would prepare you. So I think Rob and I took that, or maybe my friend Bonnie and I took it. Anyway, my friend Bonnie and I took it. She grew up with me, and she's also very interested in Judaism. So we took it together, and it was really fun to do that.

SR: Has she converted?

KG: She has not.

SR: What year is this?

KG: This is a long time ago. After Amelia's surgeries, but before the kids had their bar and bat mitzvahs, I think.

SR: So, eight years ago?

KG: Yeah, eight or so years. Eight or nine years ago. She has just dabbled with it, but she hasn't really taken the next step. We took that, and it was good. But it wasn't quite the time because it was a lot going on still for us. Then, the kids had their – they had to go through theirs, and my daughter really wanted me to do it with her basically the same year, but I couldn't. I just couldn't. So now they're settled. This is how I was thinking it might be time for me. So, every couple of years, a class for adult bar and bat mitzvahs come up. They offer it at Temple Aliyah, and so we decided to take it. We, meaning this other person and I. Not Bonnie, but a member of our congregation who also converted to Judaism. She and I made a little pact. We were going to do it together. So we did. She was one of the people in the class. There was another woman in the class and three men.

SR: So it was just six?

KG: Just six.

SR: Is that unusually small?

KG: Six to eight. It's usually about eight, but then it might drop down. They'll do it if it's, I think, over five because it's just not worth it for –

SR: Had any of the people in the class had a bat or bar mitzvah in childhood or no?

KG: No.

SR: The three men didn't?

KG: Yeah. The three men did not. One of them had an older brother who did.

SR: [inaudible]

KG: Yeah. The three women – two of us converted and the other woman – her father was Jewish, her mother was not, but she wasn't really raised in too much of anything, but she did have some – because she had a Jewish family, she had some exposure and then she went to Israel. When she was a teenager or something, she decided she was going to go to Israel. So she spent some months in Israel, and she's been studying modern Hebrew for a while now. So she was one of the people. It was very nice.

SR: Had she ever converted?

KG: She did. Yes, she did a formal conversion, but I can't even remember when that was, whether it was when she was in college or before, or right before she got married or something. She always sort of considered herself Jewish. But then I think there was a formal time when she was going through this self-discovery thing. She married a man who is Jewish. I know before they got married – because I know she had a Jewish wedding – she converted.

SR: So you saw bat mitzvah as a next step?

KG: Yeah, I did see it like that, but also more of an integration into the community. I felt like that would – it's not like I felt like I was a little bit on the outside. There was still a little bit of a mystery to it all, even though I had done an aliyah various times because I was on the school committee. There were various times that I was called to do that. So it wasn't that I was never on the bimah. But there was still something there that I had not experienced, and I felt there was a reason to do it. There's a reason to get close to the Torah right up there. I didn't know what it would make me feel. But I felt like it did bring me more connection to the community, the greater community, the Temple Aliyah community, and the community of the bimah every Shabbat. Just different levels.

SR: How do you view the Torah? What does that [inaudible] to you?

KG: Well, the cantor, Cantor Gelman – I remember when we were practicing for Amelia, and he would say, "Okay, come on. Come on. Just get real close here. Get real close. This is your Torah. This is your Torah." I just loved that. I loved that. I loved how he did that. Even if I was going to be up there for an aliyah, it just was really nice the way he made it feel like this was the way we – it's us. It's hard to really explain it. Just the way he said it really had a lot of resonance with me. I think that was one of the things that I really enjoyed about practicing and preparing is going up and just seeing those beautiful – the calligraphy and seeing that different Torahs have different looks about them and the parchment. Everything was just fabulous and very tactile and sensual. So, that experience is wonderful. We just read for Rosh Chodesh – I think it's this coming week – this parshah on slaughtering and sacrificing. It was like one after another. We read the first five chapters. And yet, it really generated a lot of discussion. How much can you say? But there's always a lot to say, and that's what I love about the Torah, too. It's like, "Why are we reading this?" Then it goes on and on. I love that any number of people can get together and talk about it, and you don't have to be an expert to have it happen right then and there.

SR: What did you learn in the classes?

KG: Well, this was an unusual situation. Usually, you have to have a fairly good working knowledge of reading Hebrew. You don't have to be proficient, but you have to be able to read it, which I did. I could read it slowly. I didn't have all the rules and this thing and that thing in reading Hebrew, the liturgical Hebrew. But I had that, and three of the people did not. So it was really hard because two men and one woman just did not have much skill. I mean, they really couldn't even identify the letter sounds. So how they slipped through – because that was supposed to be a prerequisite, basically. The cantor really had spent a lot of time with that, which was, I think, discouraging for him, but he was also very good-natured about it. In the end, he saw what these people did, from knowing nothing to reading. It was amazing, and he just loved that. So he was very

patient. Endless patience. But he really thought he was going to get a class of people who had some rudimentary reading skills, and they didn't even have that, which is okay. So, we did a lot of that, unfortunately, because that took up more time than we would have normally had for other things. But we've still had a lot of discussion. He would explain certain things that were always fun to hear. What else did we do? Well, that was just the cantor class. The class before was a year-long discussion, and I had already done that. So I didn't take it with this group. There were only actually two or three that had taken it consistently because other people had taken it [at] different times like myself. So, that was another odd thing. Most of the classes go a year and a half, and they go together. This was a little more fragmented. We did not take that year's class because I went to a couple of classes, and I felt like I'd had this so many times. It was hard for me to sit through because it was basic. In many ways, it was basic. So, we had that to start off with, but on the other hand, it brought us together as far as all of us struggling to really conquer this Hebrew reading. So, we had six months of that, more or less.

SR: Were you bar and bat mitzvahed as a class? As a group?

KG: Yes. There were six of – yes, each of us.

SR: When did that happen?

KG: That was last May for Shavuot.

SR: Oh, nice.

KG: Yeah, Wednesday morning.

SR: So what did you do [inaudible]?

KG: Oh, I'm going to draw a blank.



SR: Did you read Torah?

KG: Oh, yeah.

SR: Haftarah?

KG: Yes.

SR: Did you [inaudible] speech?

KG: Well, we decided as a group we didn't want to give a speech or speeches, but we had the rabbi talk to us individually, and we wrote down a few things. He compiled a talk regarding what our thoughts were and what it meant to us, and all that. So it was actually quite nice. We each had a Torah portion, and we each did an aliyah. We did the blessing before the Haftarah together as a group, and then, each of us – there were six of us, and there were six segments of the blessings after. So each of us – we had to memorize all of that because he wasn't telling us who was going to have what until the end. So we had to memorize all of it. Then, we sort of narrowed it down at the end [and] polished it off for our particular piece. [laughter] Then we had parts of the service. Usually, the group tries to lead as much of the service as possible. Since we had to spend more time reading Hebrew and learning the Hebrew, the cantor had us do a little less, but we still did good chunks of it. So that was nice.

SR: Have you done any of that since then [inaudible] or chanting?

KG: I haven't. It's not to say that – in August, I was actually going to, but then they said – they asked me if I would do one in August. I said yes, and I gave them two weekends that I was around. And then they said they have – this is the ritual committee, and they said they had those two filled up. Could I do –? But I wasn't going to be here. Then, I said, "Okay, another time. Just call me." But then it's the holidays, and then my father-in-law got sick, and then my daughter. So it's been almost a year, and I haven't. But I'm

not saying I won't. I'm just waiting for that time again. We have a lot of – the cantor will always make a tape for us, and we have other people who will help us. So it's not real scary if it's a small portion. [laughter] Some of the other people have, so that's been good.

SR: Do you think that your bat mitzvah was itself a spiritual moment in your life?

KG: Yes. On some level, yes. Yes. It was an exhilarating moment in terms of that moment up there, I think, being really connected to those words, and – I don't know – just having them be part of me there. There are lots of different spiritual experiences, and this was one. It was really lovely that way. [Telephone rings. Break in recording.]

SR: Does your bat mitzvah impact your Judaism at home or on your practice at home or any [inaudible]?

KG: Well, I think preparation for it impacted my son's perception of me somewhat as more of a Jewish woman as opposed to – because I think my kids see me as Jewish, but because they know my non-Jewish family, they see me on this cusp. Even though they know I'm Jewish, they also know that I'm from this family that wasn't, and they don't always know how to put that together, I think. So, I think with Ezra hearing me chanting, I'd ask him – I tried to involve him a little bit because I wanted to make him – because he hasn't been as involved as he should be. But I wanted to ask him, "Oh, how do you read this?" Or "How is this pronounced?" Or "Do you remember this prayer, Ezra? Start me on this prayer." That kind of stuff. He liked it. He was a little flattered that he could help his mom. He was really proud of me because I would practice. I'd make him listen, or I'd put the book in front of him, and if I made a mistake, he would – he liked that, and I liked it, and he was proud of me. Amelia and I have always had very good discussions about religion. She was really pleased that I was doing this. This was something I think that meant a lot to her personally because she's been wanting me to do it for a long time. So in terms of my children, I think it did have an impact in the way they not just perceived me

but felt it was really more grounding for them, too, to have their mother be in that club with them in a way. Yeah.

SR: So they [inaudible]?

KG: Yes. I would say ultimately, yes, because Amelia is – she and I talk about it a lot. As you know, she's a religious studies major, and she's taking classes in everything but Judaism. [laughter] But her feeling is she knows a lot already, and ultimately she will be studying that in some way or another all her life. I don't see her being distracted by all these other classes in Pentecostal religion. Now she's going to take a class on Mary down in [laughter] Chile, the theology of Chile is one of the classes, and one of them is the influence of Mary. This is something she wants to know about, but it's still kind of strange to her. Judaism feels really like comfort food for her. She loves the way Judaism has a place in her heart. She goes to services with me when she's home. She doesn't want to necessarily, but she'll come with me. One year – I mean, this is before – this is why I think she wanted to be a religious studies major. She wonders why people turn to religion and why people need it and why, and what does it do for a community. When she was in high school, one summer, she read – during the year, she read the Torah, and then she read the Quran. She didn't get through all of that because she started school and then she was reading the New Testament. So she wanted to see what is all of this. With Ezra, he's seventeen, and he doesn't want to even think about that stuff. He's always been very good about certain things that we've asked them to do about making food choices and that sort of thing. We're not kosher-kosher, but over the years, he's never had cheeseburgers and things like that. So now he's kind of pushing the limit a little bit and trying it out. He said the first time he – what was it? – he did something, he was scared. [laughter] Scared something bad was going to happen to him. It's funny. I thought, "I never told him that." It just was there.

SR: How about Rob? How does he feel about all of this?

KG: Oh, he was very proud, very happy.

SR: [inaudible] bat mitzvah.

KG: Oh, yeah.

SR: And your parents, you said.

KG: Yes. Yes, my parents went, and Rob's parents. So it was nice.

SR: Do you have any work colleagues?

KG: One work colleague, one colleague who – she's Jewish. She and I are the only Jewish ones right now in our group. She came. Then I had a number of friends. My sister tried to come down, and my other sister – I didn't make a big deal out of it. I called my sister a couple of weeks before, and I said, "I feel like I should invite you." She lives in Maine. She said, "Oh, I wish you had told me." I felt a little odd saying, "Come to my [bat mitzvah]." But the people who I know connected to Temple Aliyah were there.

R: Did you have a party afterward or just the Kiddush afterward?

KG: We had a big Kiddush there and stayed around, and a lot of people had parties, but we just came back here with my in-laws and my parents and had a little lunch, some food. My friend Bonnie came. Other people who I normally would have here couldn't make it. It was Wednesday, Wednesday afternoon, and somebody was flying off in the morning. Somebody else – whatever.

SR: Did you wear a tallit at your bar mitzvah?

KG: Yes.

SR: When did you start wearing tallit? Do you wear one every time you [inaudible]?

KG: Now I do.

SR: When did that happen?

KG: That was wonderful. That was one of the big things. At our shul, the women are always invited to wear tallit. That's not a problem. I sort of wanted to because I usually put a kippah on. I always had been for a few years now. I like the idea of some ritual preparation. So that was one thing I did. I wanted to wear a tallis, but I was sort of uncomfortable with it for some reason. I'm not sure. So most of the women who – just personally – because it's not uncomfortable because I shouldn't. I just felt I wasn't quite ready. I don't know what it was. Men can wear it. They don't even have – as soon as they walk in, they can put one on, and they don't think about it. For us, we work with that concept of what does this mean? Most of the women I knew were wearing them that I was close to, I should say. But not all. The three women decided that we were all going to get them, and none of us had our own. That's with the men as well. So, my mother-in-law and I went to Brookline, and we picked out one. She wanted to buy it for me. So we picked one out, and I really love it. I'll show it to you, but it's really nice, and I love it. So when I put it on that day, it felt like a change had taken place. There was a transformation for me. I do feel when I put it on each time I feel something is – well, each time it is a little transformative each time you put it on as well as being – what I said was wrapped in this sense of warmth. It's really a great experience. If you've never really had to think about it, you just put it on, I guess. But I really loved it.

SR: So you wear now [inaudible]?

KG: Yes.

SR: Do you ever pray at home and wear it at home [inaudible]?

KG: I haven't done that. But now that you mentioned that, that's something I should do, I should think about doing. I think that would be really great. Maybe that's something

– that's an idea. Talking about the tallis as a symbol. That will be a theme for our Rosh Chodesh. Maybe I'll bring that up for it. Because we do things like that – something comes up. We talked about the mikvah once. We had a pool. We have a pool. So I decided it was my turn to host. We're going to swim, and we're going to talk about mikvah. [laughter] [inaudible] Our cousin, when she comes here and stays, will do that. I've seen her pray with it on. It's lovely. So I like that idea.

SR: You ever thought about tefillin?

KG: No, that hasn't really done it for me. Do you?

SR: No, it's too out there.

KG: Yeah. [laughter]

SR: It's too masculine.

KG: It's very masculine, yeah. There are women who do it.

SR: [inaudible] my classmates.

KG: Oh, yeah?

SR: A lot of them. Some women say if they could think of more of a feminine version.

KG: Yeah, I think they should.

SR: [inaudible] masculine approach [inaudible] specific, so they could make it more feminine –

KG: I know.

SR: – in concept.

KG: And they could change that little box. [laughter]

SR: They could, and some of them are thinking about it.

KG: Yeah. Yeah.

SR: So let's change [inaudible] completely. I wonder if this applies at all in your case. Was there any aspect of feminism [inaudible]?

KG: That worked into this?

SR: That worked into this.

KG: Well, there's sort of women bonding stuff that happened. Our cantor has gone through an evolution as well over the years.

SR: How old is he [inaudible]?

KG: Sixty-eight. Well, he was last year when he told me what his age was. He's just a wonderful person, but he has a – he was raised Orthodox, and in the ideal world, he'd still have men and women separated for praying because, as he says, "Hey, you're near these beautiful women. Maybe you just want to get into your space and pray." So, that would be his ideal. He had a hard time with – we have in our siddur, the Amidah – just the patriarchs and then with the matriarchs. He was uncomfortable with that for a long time once we got our new siddurim. But now he does. He announces it. Unless the little bat mitzvah or bar mitzvah kid is going to lead [inaudible], he usually does. Not always. Congregants do sometimes, but he does. The rabbi would announce that he could have either page, but he would only chant with the patriarchs. Then, at some point – and I don't know why – he now chants with the matriarchs. Since the rabbi has been on sabbatical, he will do that. He just goes right to the matriarchs. I don't think he has to. There might be some pressure to, but he does what he wants usually when he wants to.

So if he really wanted to, he could. He used to think it was weird that women would want to wear tallises. At some point, he said, "Are you women going to wear –?" He said, "Okay, that's good." He taught us, using our tallis, what to do. I think he's come around on a lot of issues with women. But I don't think he ever had any problems – or maybe he did before I knew him – [with] women on the bimah. He used to just love women to come up and pray. Yeah. I don't think that was ever a problem for him.

SR: Did you yourself feel you were taking a stand or making a statement [inaudible] statement by having a bat mitzvah?

KG: Not in our shul, no. So many women lead services. [We have] women presidents. Now we have women rabbi taking over for Carl. Yeah. I mean, it just doesn't feel that way. It doesn't feel dominated by men at all. It just feels very, very egalitarian. We always have a sisterhood Shabbat, and the women do everything. Yeah, it didn't feel like that. What more was a personal thing about the tallis for me – that was crossing over a little bit into a territory that was more male-dominated. The service and the reading, no, but just putting on a tallis, that felt that I was [in] a little bit of a different place – in a little bit of a different place with the male/female thing.

SR: Is there anything else that we didn't touch on that is significant to you about the bat mitzvah?

KG: Well, it is all a journey. When you have points on the path, they really help you know where you're at, I think, and help you understand the point at which you're standing. It made me feel more solid and can look back, look forward, and it just made me feel much more solid with it. So I guess that's why I did it.

SR: [inaudible]

KG: Yes. And I also feel like – because I said it – it makes you look ahead, too. I am open to more. Every now and then, as I said before, as I said before, I need to take a



look, see where I'm at and where I want to go.

SR: Next step [inaudible].

KG: Yeah, I think more study. What you said about putting the tallis on for prayer, I think that's really wonderful. Because sometimes, at home, it's very distracting, and you're trying to find a little bit of a spiritual spot. I think that's a great idea because it does set you apart from the other chores and distractions of home. It's very meditative. I think that's very good. But that's just one little step. I don't have any big plans. [laughter]

SR: Well, thank you so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]