

Carol Michael Transcript

Shayna Rhodes: Hello? Okay. This is Shayna Rhodes talking to Carol Michael on February 23, 2005, in Brookline, Massachusetts. We're discussing Carol's adult bat mitzvah. So, let's start with your background, your childhood. How many siblings did you have?

Carol Michael: I have two older brothers, so I'm the baby of the family. They're eight and twelve years older than I am. My parents grew up in Orthodox homes in New York, but we always belonged to a Reform temple. My mother kept a kosher home. We always observed Shabbat, but we always belonged to this Reform Temple, which was classic Reform.

SR: I'm interested in your parents. They both came from Orthodox homes, and they both wanted to belong to Reform Temple? Did they decide that before they met or when they became a couple? When did they change?

CM: I think that it was a slow process of letting go of certain traditions or what they felt were restrictions that felt unnecessary. There was a Conservative temple closer to our house, but they didn't care for the rabbi. They really liked the rabbi of the Reform temple. So, we actually went to another town, a neighboring town, to go to temple.

SR: So you would drive there?

CM: Yes. So, we weren't observant – I mean, my mother never sewed or baked or knitted or anything like that on Saturday. But driving to services was pro forma, was what she did. We went to Friday night services, so I don't even know if there were Saturday morning services at that time. But we went to Friday night services, and I went to Sunday school. My brothers were bar mitzvahed.

SR: Did they read Torah Friday nights?

CM: I don't remember. They must have.

SR: So your brothers were bar mitzvahed Friday night?

CM: As they were so much older than I am, I don't remember anything about their bar mitzvahs. So, I don't know if they had bar mitzvahs on Saturday mornings. I don't know. I just assumed that there were no bat mitzvahs because I was not bat mitzvahed.

SR: You can't remember?

CM: It could be that my mother just got tired at that point. [laughter]. But I was confirmed, and they definitely had confirmation.

SR: So, when you were going to synagogue as a child, it was not egalitarian as you remember? The men led the service? Do you remember at all?

CM: I don't think that there were women leading the services. There was no cantor. There was an organ and a choir and the rabbi, who wore white robes. But whether women read or not, I don't remember. I have no recollection. I wasn't at all concerned at the time.

SR: You had seders in the home?

CM: Always.

SR: Always.

CM: So, in our house – my mother was the oldest of three, so our house was always where everyone gathered for seder, also for Thanksgiving.

SR: That's interesting. Did anyone ever pray at home, or did you always go to synagogue?

CM: Well, we always lit candles on Friday nights, but otherwise, there wasn't any really prayer.

SR: Your mom lit the candles?

CM: Yes. Yeah, my father –

SR: Did they make Kiddush?

CM: Yes.

SR: They did?

CM: We always had challah. Actually, there's a wonderful story, an article about my grandmother baking challah, which was in the New York Times. She and my grandfather were Orthodox. My grandfather used to say to my mother, "Oh, well, in your religion." So we always had challah, and often it was something that my grandmother had made. But we didn't share. That was not something – I never went to services with my grandparents. They belonged to an Orthodox temple in the city – Manhattan. There's only one city. It's New York. [laughter]

SR: The island is Long Island; the country is the Catskills. I know. I lived in New York. So you went to Sunday school. Did you have any other formal Jewish education?

CM: No, and I don't think we ever learned – we didn't learn Hebrew. So it was Sunday school. There may have been one year where we learned the alphabet or something. But there was no real formal Hebrew training, at least for girls, which is why I think maybe there wasn't any bat mitzvah at that time.

SR: You did nothing at all? You didn't celebrate for your bat mitzvah in any way?

CM: No.

SR: Was it marked at all?

CM: No.

SR: Nothing?

CM: Never even occurred to me. I mean, it wasn't something that was important.

SR: Any Jewish camps? Did you attend anything?

CM: No.

SR: And public school?

CM: I went to regular public school.

SR: Regular camps?

CM: Summer camp, but not Jewish camp.

SR: Was your grandmother something of a role model at all, her Orthodoxy? Did you look to her?

CM: Not in her Orthodoxy. In many ways, she was a role model, but not at all in terms of her Orthodoxy. It was only that she baked challah every Friday, and that was really important. Keeping kosher was just what we did and what they did. But otherwise, it wasn't really part of – it was just who we were. It wasn't something that anyone talked about that I can remember. I think that my parents were of the generation where you were not – you were really trying not to draw attention to yourselves, at least in that way.

So, it just wasn't really a topic of conversation.

SR: But you attended services regularly?

CM: Yes, I think pretty regularly.

SR: So when you left home for college – did you leave home for college?

CM: Yes, yes.

SR: So, did you observe anything in college or associate with any Jewish organizations?

CM: No. I was in the first class of women at my college. It was more that, in terms of, feeling like a pioneer.

SR: Which college was that?

CM: Colgate.

SR: My nephew is going there.

CM: Really?

SR: He starts in the fall. He just got in.

CM: Great. Well, I hope he likes it. It's now fully co-ed. But at that time, we were the first class of women. So I really don't – I didn't think about it. I didn't join Hillel. I don't know. There must have – I'm assuming there was a Hillel, but I don't know. So, it wasn't, again, something I really thought about.

SR: And kosher food on campus – you didn't even think about [inaudible]?

CM: No.

SR: So, after college, what happened next?

CM: Well, I met my husband there, and we got married. At that point, we wanted to get married – he was Jewish – wanted to get married by the rabbi with whom I'd grown up. His family did not belong to a temple. His parents were refugees from Germany, and he was confirmed. He was actually given a choice whether he wanted to be bar mitzvahed or confirmed, and he chose to be confirmed. But they did not belong to a temple. So, it was just sort of assumed that the rabbi at our temple, Harold Saperstein, would marry us. We went to speak with him, just to talk to him, and to say that we wanted to say our own vows. He told us no. He said if we wanted to do that, we could have the assistant rabbi, which we did. But that really turned me off to Judaism in many ways. I mean, not that I sought to do anything else in terms of belief. But I was so hurt by that, that I felt, "Well, that's fine. Forget this. I'm not interested." So there wasn't ever any thought that we would join a temple when we lived in New York. We spent a year in Europe. In fact, my parents came over during Passover, and we celebrated Passover in Paris. We went and bought kosher meat and all that. But then we went back and lived in New York and didn't belong to a temple. [We] celebrated Passover, Hanukkah, all those things. When our son was born, it never occurred to me to have a bris, except to have him circumcised in the hospital. He was multiply-handicapped. So, Judaism seemed to be the furthest thing from our minds.

SR: Did he live with you at first?

CM: Yes, always, until he was eighteen. It wasn't until we moved up here and both of the kids were of school age that we thought we should join a temple.

SR: Was your husband ever bar mitzvahed?

CM: No.

SR: No. Interesting.

CM: But he was a religion major in college.

SR: Is he still possibly considering it or probably not?

CM: No. He is very cerebral about his religion and with a small 'r' in many ways. He is quite knowledgeable about religion generally, is not so interested in the ritual of Judaism, which I find wonderful. I'm really interested in ritual and all that. He has a more cerebral approach.

SR: So, you moved to Brookline.

MC: Brookline.

CM: And you joined Temple Israel?

CM: Yes.

SR: That was the first one you joined?

CM: Yes.

SR: Did you start attending at all?

CM: We did stuff with Sunday school, with the kids. One of the reasons we joined was we lived across the street in Longwood Tower, so it was convenient. We were looking for a place that would accept and include him. They basically said all the right things, so we joined. We never looked around, really. I didn't look at any other temples. So we did go from time to time for holidays and so forth. It wasn't until we had probably belonged for four or five years and Rachel decided she wanted to become bat mitzvah that I really became involved there.

SR: Josh is your son?

CM: Yes.

SR: He did not have a bar mitzvah?

CM: No. He's very severely impaired. We could have done something, but at that point, I didn't really know enough. I didn't feel like I knew enough, and that sort of ritual didn't feel particularly important to us since neither of us had been bar or bat mitzvahed. So we didn't really consider –we thought about it, but we didn't really consider it for him. Rachel was interested, and we actually tried to discourage her because we felt like she was just doing it because everyone around here did it. But she was quite insistent. It wasn't like a serious trying to discourage her. It was more: "You really want to do this?" At that point, I also felt like it was getting more difficult at the temple to include Josh. I didn't really feel connected there in any way. I can't remember actually if it was before she was bat mitzvahed or after, but at that point, I went to Rabbi Zecher and said, "I don't actually feel very connected here. I'm curious about that." She came back to me about a month later and said, "You want to get connected?" [laughter] One of the things that I had talked about was the fact that there was always social justice work or whatever outside the community. It was so hard for us with Josh within the community, and I couldn't understand how people felt compelled to go and do work outside the temple when there were clearly people in need within the temple. At that point, we got together, and we, together with some other people, created a kind of community of healing and a mitzvah network, and all that. It was from that point on that I became very involved and began to study more and learn more.

SR: First, your daughter had her bat mitzvah?

CM: Yes.

SR: Then you became more involved?

CM: Right. Because I actually found it interesting. I mean, I found the process of her becoming bat mitzvah interesting.

SR: What did she do?

CM: Well, she studied. She was already in Sunday school learning Hebrew, so she was doing that. We had a tutor for her who was wonderful, and I got to know her. Doing her d'var Torah was the first time that I can remember I had ever actually read Torah, where it had any meaning, and trying to work it out with her. She had the golden calf [story], so it was like, "Oh, well, this is great. This is interesting. What does this mean?" So, as she went through it, I really found it quite fascinating.

SR: Then, what did you do to start thinking about your own bat mitzvah?

CM: Well, after getting involved in this community way within the temple, I had a lot of questions about prayer. I had already had questions before that about Josh and how could something like this happen, and what do you do with all these questions. I hadn't gotten any satisfactory answers when I had spoken to the rabbis earlier – so getting connected at least made me feel as if I had a connection to a rabbi there. That was the first time I ever felt like I had a connection to a clergy. I mean, it was amazing to me that you could actually have a real connection to a rabbi. Growing up, there was this wonderful guy – I mean, Harold Saperstein was this incredible guy in social justice and in Birmingham, all this kind of stuff. But he was not ever someone I ever thought I could actually approach or that you were allowed to. So, I think that the first thing was having this incredible connection to Elaine Zecher and her being interested. The questions that I began to have, she said, "You should study first." It was through that that I decided I wanted to become bat mitzvah. But as I wrote in there, it was really just having some kind of structures that I could learn Hebrew. It wasn't as if I felt like I had missed anything by not having a bat mitzvah or that I felt some need to become bat mitzvah. It was really, well, this a great thing. I'll have to learn Hebrew. This will give me structure.

I want to learn Hebrew, and this will be a way of doing it, and who knows what I'll learn as I do it. So it just felt like a vehicle. That's how I came into doing that process. There was an adult in b'nai mitzvah class.

SR: Was it all women? Were there men?

CM: There were two men that started and one that finished. The rest were women.

SR: How many women?

CM: I think there were about fifteen of us altogether.

SR: How long was the class?

CM: Was it two years? I feel like it was two years. Although, now I can't remember if that was my – I think it was probably two years.

SR: You met once a week?

CM: Yes.

SR: Did you enjoy the class?

CM: It varied. It was interesting. It was the beginning of my study.

SR: Was it always the same teacher? Did you have different teachers?

CM: We had two different teachers who sometimes taught separately and sometimes taught together.

SR: So, what did you study?

CM: It was when I think back on it – first of all, we had to learn Hebrew somewhere else. We didn't learn Hebrew there. So that's when I went to Hebrew College. When I think

about how naïve I've been all through this, what was incredibly shocking to me was that I signed up for Hebrew I, and suddenly I had no vowels; it was modern. It never even occurred to me that [laughter] I would go, and it would actually be modern Hebrew. So, that was really interesting because I had just, over the summer, taught myself the alphabet and just barely knew the alphabet and the vowels. Then went to class and said, "What is this? They took away my vowels." [laughter] But I loved that class. I got to know my teacher very well. The rest that we learned was a little bit of liturgy, a little bit of the structure of the service because we were going to create our own service, little of history, little text study. It was kind of a taste of things that I don't know if they completely hung together to me at the time. But now that I'm going into things in greater depth, I realize, "Oh, yeah. This was the beginning of text study. This was a little bit of history. This was the structure, the rubric of the service."

SR: Were you taking classes at the temple?

CM: I'm taking Me'ah. It's my second year of Me'ah. I'm working with one of the younger rabbis, Jeremy Morrison. We have a small group. We're doing text study. The other things I've learned have been through whatever activity I've been doing at the temple. So we created a weekday minyan. So, I now know the weekday melodies. I now really understand the rubric of the service. I had already been doing shiva minyans before that, so I knew a little bit about the service. So it's been through that that I've really learned more. Through the class with Jeremy, we've been doing text study, and so it's been how do you create a d'var Torah. I've been going to Torah study on Saturday morning.

SR: How do your parents feel about that?

CM: Well, my father passed away about five years ago. I think my family is not quite sure.

SR: Your extended family or your nuclear family?

CM: Yes, my nuclear family. Kind of like, “What’s all this Jewish stuff?”

SR: Your family origin? Your mother?

CM: Yes. So, I think she’s a little puzzled.

SR: Everyone is kind of puzzled?

CM: Yes.

SR: How about your daughter, after her bat mitzvah?

CM: She told me that she would continue. She would continue and do confirmation as long as she didn’t have to do anything extra. Luckily, I didn’t push her. I just said, “Look, this is your decision. You do whatever you want to do.” She then had a really wonderful connection with Rabbi Pesner. She has this wonderful connection to Judaism. It’s interesting because she’s adopted. Joshua’s disease is a genetic disease, and there was no genetic marker. There was no test or anything. So we didn’t know if it was something that we would pass on or not. So she’s adopted but has a very strong connection to Judaism. In fact, already, a month or two ago, she said, “You better call Grandma and (Allen?) and Mary. You better make sure they’re coming up for Passover. I’ve already invited so-and-so and so-and-so.” So, it’s a very interesting – so, she’s got a really strong connection. In fact, she was out in Nevada last semester, and she lit candles, I don’t think every Friday night, but definitely, there were Friday nights where she lit candles. She has a really interesting and strong connection.

SR: When you were learning, were you aware of changing roles of women? Was that in the mix at all or not really?

CM: Here?

SR: Yes.

CM: I think I just came into it assuming that women were completely involved in this community. I mean, Temple Israel is completely open and diverse. I don't think I would ever consider being part of a place that wasn't.

SR: So your bat mitzvah was on a Friday night or a Saturday morning?

CM: Saturday morning.

SR: It was a group bat mitzvah?

CM: It was a group.

SR: All of you? The one man and the fifteen [women]? Did you read from the Torah?

CM: We did.

SR: And haftarah?

CM: Yes.

SR: Did you give a d'var Torah?

CM: Yes.

SR: Do you remember any of it?

CM: Yes, I don't remember. I couldn't tell you now what I said. But what I wrote, I'd spent a lot of time writing it.

SR: What was the parashah?

CM: It was during Passover. Song of songs was the haftarah. The parashah was Ki Tisa. When I read about – I wrote about Moses asking God to show his face. Was that what that was? I think it was Ki Tisa. Then I wrote about Moses insisting that God come

along with them. It was a very powerful experience to read from the Torah – to chant.

SR: The chant from the Torah?

CM: Yes. For me to learn the trope, to actually sing it, to chant it. Writing the d'var Torah felt really serious and wonderful.

SR: That was the first time you ever read from the Torah?

CM: Yes. I think I'd only held the Torah once or twice before that. One of the things I forgot to say was that I did spend a week, at Elaine Zecher's urging and encouragement, at HUC [Hebrew Union College] in Cincinnati, again, a few summers ago, in what they had called – at that time, it was called a para-rabbinic program or something. Now it's called, I don't know, [inaudible] or something. They keep changing the name. They can't quite figure out what to do with these lay leaders. But I spent a week doing that. That I actually found really interesting because, again, we had a group that created our own service. I had never done that before. That was the first. So when we did the b'nai mitzvah and created our own service, I felt like I knew what I was doing. I found that I love to do that. I love the liturgy and figuring out.

SR: So, when you create your own service, what do you do? You take from the liturgy that's there and make up your own?

CM: Yes. Well, I think part of what I found really interesting in the bat mitzvah was learning what the parts of the service meant. So before, none of it had any meaning at all. It was just words or prayers or whatever. But once I began to understand the different parts of the service and what they represented, and why you did this, and why you did that, the service then had more meaning. I actually found myself enjoying going more and more because I understood what was going on.

SR: As the bat mitzvah approached, were you nervous at all?

CM: Well, it was my fiftieth birthday, so I made a lot of jokes about coming of age, finally. I was kind of nervous because I had a big party. Basically, it was an excuse to have a fiftieth birthday party.

SR: Was it the same day?

CM: No, I turned fifty in March. I broke my ankle four days before my birthday. I turned fifty, and then the bat mitzvah – the b'nai mitzvah there is always during Passover. Must be the Saturday during Passover when no family wants to have a bar or bat mitzvah. It was during that. So, I still had my cast on. I was nervous. Part of that was just trying to make sure I had learned all the Hebrew, knew the haftarah blessings, could chant.

SR: You each did the haftarah – a part of it?

CM: We each had a couple of verses for Torah and also haftarah. Not everyone did both; not everyone chanted haftarah. Some people just didn't quite feel comfortable or get around to studying or whatever.

SR: Did your whole family come to your bat mitzvah?

CM: Yes.

SR: Was your father alive at that time?

CM: No.

SR: No? But your mother came?

CM: Yes.

SR: What did she say about it?

CM: I don't think anything of religious moment.

SR: And your husband?

CM: It was my daughter that said the thing that was most powerful. My husband thought it was [wonderful]. If this was what I wanted to do, great. He's a little more adjusted to it now than he was before. My daughter said something like, "Welcome to the other side," or something like that. "You finally caught up with me. You finally came of age." It was something really wonderful. I don't remember exactly what it was, but that was really the most wonderful piece, her welcoming me into the tribe as if she had set the stage and I was following her, which was basically true.

SR: Did you change your observance in any way once you were bat mitzvahed?

CM: Not really. We were still doing – most of the time, we do a Shabbat dinner. I started going to Torah study. So I don't do it every Saturday, but that's something I do much more frequently.

SR: What's that exactly?

CM: Saturday mornings at Temple Israel, there's almost always – one of the clergy does some study. Well, actually, now there's an early morning small service. Within that service, there's forty-five minutes of Torah study.

SR: So the main service is really Friday night?

CM: It's still Friday night, and it's a Kabbalat Shabbat service there. The big Saturday morning service in the sanctuary is the bar and bat mitzvah service, which is not really a community thing. It's whatever family. They haven't quite figured that out at Temple Israel. Eventually. But the little Saturday morning service with the Torah study in it has become something that I've been doing and really like and just understanding, again, the Torah.

SR: Have you read Torah since?

CM: No.

SR: No? Haftarah?

CM: No. I've often done the blessing. I've written some Divrei Torah.

SR: You're good.

CM: But I haven't done any more.

SR: How long ago was your bat mitzvah?

CM: Two years.

SR: Two years?

CM: It will be two years.

SR: If someone gave you a little push, would you –?

CM: I probably would. I feel like I've been doing other things, but I would do it if someone asked me. So, there's a women's Kallah at Temple Israel; I'm doing a workshop for it. I'm part of a little Rosh Chodesh group, and we write ritual each month. So those kinds of things. If someone asked me to do it, I would study it and do it. I've been meeting – I stopped taking the Hebrew at Hebrew College probably because I didn't like our new teacher and partly because last year, my son needed brain surgery, and it was just too much. I couldn't do everything. I have a friend, actually, a young woman who works with me. For a while, we were doing Biblical Hebrew. Now we're doing modern again because I'm going to Israel in April.

SR: Oh. Have a good trip.

CM: Thank you. I've never been.

SR: Oh, that's amazing. Did you wear a tallit to your bat mitzvah? Do you have a kippah?

CM: I did. Not a kippah.

SR: Have you put on tefillin ever?

CM: No.

SR: Has your spiritual life changed in any way? Do you feel more spiritual, or not really different?

CM: No, a lot more spiritual.

SR: A lot more spiritual.

CM: Yes. I think it's come with knowledge and understanding.

SR: What meant the most about your bat mitzvah? What stood out?

CM: The bat mitzvah itself wasn't – I think it was just one piece of the journey. So I don't know that it was in and of itself such a momentous thing. Like any other group of Jewish adults, it was rather complex in terms of personal dynamics. [laughter] So I can't say it was – I get a lot more out of the Rosh Chodesh group that I have.

SR: What's that like?

CM: We meet once a month. It's a group of friends.

SR: Women, men?

CM: Women.

SR: Women.

CM: We take turns at people's houses, take turns creating ritual. In fact, now, over the last year, I've been part of a – what I guess I would call –Bible study, with ten Jewish women from Temple Israel and ten Black Christian women from a church in Jamaica Plain, from the Bethel AME Church. So, we've been studying women in the Bible together. That's been fascinating.

SR: I bet.

SM: So it's been a constantly expanding universe.

SR: Do you have any role models at all who you think led the way? Other than your daughter, it sounds like.

CM: You mean Jewish role models?

SR: Any clergy or [inaudible].

CM: Well, Elaine Zecher definitely, I would say, has been a mentor, really.

SR: Do you think that there are other women out there that feel the same, that want to connect but don't know how?

CM: Yes. I think that feels like that's been my mission or will continue to be my mission at Temple Israel. Because I felt very much like an outsider for a long time, partly because we had a handicapped child, and that set us apart. And partly just because I didn't really know much about synagogue life. I always see myself as the voice of the outsider. I think because my – whatever you want to call it – journey has been so interesting to me that I have to imagine that there are other people out there who have similar interests. If they can get hooked, it's fabulous. I mean, seven or eight years ago, I didn't even know what a weekday minyan was. Somebody in this group called Hineinu,

which was this group where we created – where we made meals for people and that kind of stuff. A guy's mother died during that time. There was no minyan at Temple Israel. He went every day to [inaudible] Shalom or whatever, and he talked about it. At that point, I couldn't imagine why someone would go every day to a service. There was no connection at all, and now I'm leading them. I don't think I'm that unusual. I think that there are people – the more you learn, the more interesting it is. I didn't have bad experiences. I wasn't tortured in Hebrew school or anything like that that I had to recover from.

SR: You don't pray at home, or do you?

CM: Well, I have, in fact, tried to create some kind of morning prayer. I haven't really done it. I've written some stuff up. I haven't really done it. But it's definitely on my to-do list to figure that out because I think it would be cool and helpful. I feel like I need to do something that's not just the traditional thing. But it's, again, learning about the traditional morning prayers and what they mean and taking from them what works.

SR: I wonder if a workshop on creating your own morning ritual would work. It's so interesting. Is there anything you would have done differently, either on your bat mitzvah or along the journey, something you would have liked to see changed?

CM: Well, I always feel like I wished earlier that someone would have pointed me in the right direction. But I'm not sure that it hasn't actually been more valuable to figure it out along the way this way because I did feel like I was just groping around, trying to figure out a connection. I think it would have been nice to have had some support. When Josh was young and we were really floundering, it would have been really nice to have had some spiritual support, but it wasn't there.

SR: There was nothing like a (Hesed?) committee?

CM: Well, when Josh was an infant, we were in New York and then in New Jersey. It never even occurred to me that belonging to a temple might be supportive.

SR: How do you think rabbis could help to connect? I mean, you talked to the rabbi first in your temple, Rabbi Zecher.

CM: Well, we joined first. It took me about five years to actually go talk to her. Once I connected, she's been amazing. I think that they probably do a pretty good job, or they try hard to connect with people. But it's hard. I think if you don't know that you can go to them for support –maybe most people do. I don't know. But if you don't come from a community where that's done, I'm not sure that that's where you go.

SR: Is there a (Hesed?) committee now at Temple Israel that would?

CM: Well, it's called Hineinu; that's what we created, and it's there.

SR: So you created it?

CM: Yes.

SR: How long has it been around?

CM: It's about seven years.

SR: Before that, there was nothing?

CM: There was something. It was something called "Friendly Visitors," I think. But what happened was that the Friendly Visitors got older and needed to be visited, and that's how this happened. I'm assuming it's different in a Reform synagogue, but I don't know. I don't know anything about Orthodox or Conservative. Do you come from an Orthodox background if your kids were at Maimonides?

SR: Yes, they were. Orthodox, I think, is different, first of all, because nobody drives to synagogue, which means you have to live within a very tight space geographically. They all go to the same school. The children go to the same school. So it just also makes for a really tight community. You just assume that's your community. If there is anything you need, that's where you go. There may be a few synagogues, one or two, but you definitely turn to the Jewish community for anything you want. I think once your structure's much more loose when you can live further away and go to different schools. Maybe it's not quite as obvious that is where you turn. A good friend of mine, actually, is working with [inaudible]

CM: Oh, sure.

SR: [inaudible]

CM: I don't know her, but Josh has –

SR: [inaudible]?

CM: No. Do you know (Genevieve Weiscovitz)?

SR: I don't.

CM: She's a music therapist. She graduated from Oberlin. I know her through someone else. I think she's working there. That's with kids who are disabled or whatever.

SR: [inaudible].

CM: They are?

SR: Yes.

CM: That's interesting.

SR: Thursday afternoons in the next-door classroom. They've been doing bar and bat mitzvah for handicapped children.

CM: That's interesting. Well, she was working there on Sundays.

SR: My daughter used to volunteer at the [inaudible] on Sundays.

CM: Well, she must be doing it at Mount Ida or Pine Manor, or one of those places. Anyway, she was doing music therapy, and so she's actually seeing Josh once a week for music therapy. I haven't done any group thing with him. Again, it seems like the groups that I've known about have been people who are less impaired, but I don't know. He has some language, and he's very musical. But group stuff is – he loves going to services. When you talk about spiritual, it's very interesting to me because I don't think he understands anything about language, really, but he knows all the music. There's something very special that happens to him when he's at temple. He has some kind of connection.

SR: How often does he go now?

CM: Whenever I bring him – and it depends because sometimes he goes through periods where his behavior is really hard to control. So we haven't been in a while. But the cantor just made him a CD of the Shabbat blessings. I'm going to write something up that can go with the staff at his house. So that if you don't know anything about Judaism, you could still do a Shabbat thing with him. He loved it. He listened to it. Rachel listened to it with him the other day, and he was like, "Temple, at home." So, that's the kind of stuff I've been working on.

SR: Now, you say you lead services, both in private homes, and have you led it at Temple Israel?

CM: Well, we have this small weekday minyan, and I've been leading it there.

SR: That's at the temple?

CM: Yes, yes.

SR: How many of you go there?

CM: It's rarely ten. It varies.

SR: Mostly women?

CM: No, not necessarily. It's a mixed group. We did it because we thought for people who wanted to say Chodesh at their own temple they should be able to. But there's not a huge – even for shiva minyans, there's not a huge calling for it. But we now have someone who's coming every day because his sister died. The rest of the group is largely the leaders who are learning and people who drop in, and we're hoping to expand it.

SR: Do you ever lead in that big sanctuary?

CM: No. [laughter]

SR: [laughter] There's a lot of [inaudible] that would be terrifying to me.

CM: No. It's a little chapel downstairs, which might be more doable. But the big sanctuary is very big. Although the clergy said that they actually feel standing there – and they don't stand up top anymore. They sort of stand right at the bottom of the stairs – that they actually feel very close to the congregants there, although they know that from the pews, or whatever you call it – from the seats, you feel very far away. But actually, it's an interesting feeling for them. They feel closer than it looks like they are. But it's pretty big.

SR: The service is mostly in English or Hebrew?

CM: The Friday night service is a lot of Hebrew.

SR: The morning and weekday minyan?

CM: Well, now we do – the weekday minyan is largely in Hebrew. We do some English. The Shabbat morning service is also a mix, but there is a lot more Hebrew than I was ever used to in New York. I came up here, and I thought, “Oh, Reform is conservative.”

SR: Does your husband come with you on weekends?

CM: Rarely.

SR: Do you go Friday nights?

CM: Mostly Friday. Yes, often Friday nights.

SR: So you go by yourself or with your daughter?

CM: Yes, I know a lot of people. She goes. From time to time, she'll come.

SR: Is there anything else that we've missed that you want to talk about? Spiritual life, bat mitzvah? You're taking classes still at this point?

CM: Yes, I'm still learning Hebrew, although doing it privately. I'm in the second year of Me'ah and then still doing this text study with one of the rabbis. I don't know exactly what I'll do next year.

SR: Well, you're welcome to visit us in our morning services if you ever want to come in.

CM: Yes. Tell me about what you do there. I'd love to know more about the program.

SR: Well, we are a trans-denominational rabbinical school, which means our services are sort of a mixed thing. On Thursdays, primarily, the faculty leads. On Tuesdays, it's

student-led, which means it can vary greatly from student to student. Some of us feel that we're no denomination, and some of us feel that we are a particular denomination, ranging from Reconstructionist to Orthodox. So we get very different services on Tuesday morning.

CM: What time do you do it?

SR: Quarter to eight. 7:45 we start, and we expect to be done by 9:00. Sometimes we make it. We like to sing a lot, sometimes with words, sometimes without words. Sometimes we have more silences. It really depends. We vary from Ashkenazi, Sephardic – it keeps you on your toes when you don't know what you're going to get on any particular morning. They don't do it other mornings because they feel that we should be able to go to our own particular synagogues the rest of the days of the week.

CM: So it's just Tuesday and Thursday mornings?

SR: That we daven together, and now we're davening one Saturday morning a month together. We try to get together in (minhag?). Usually, we do that every day. [inaudible] together. It's funny because I grew up Orthodox. I also grew up Conservative, and we switched. If someone told me when I was twenty-two that I'd become a rabbi, I would have never believed them.

CM: Can you talk about that now? How that came about?

SR: Sure. I have five kids. So I have two boys, and then I have three girls. I was a feminist way back – way before I became a feminist in religion, I was a feminist. I went to Barnard, and I became a real feminist.

CM: Did you grow up here?

SR: I grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, very Orthodox. I went to Barnard, and I became a feminist in everything but religion. Though, when my son was bar mitzvahed in Newton, I asked the rabbi there if I could give a d'var Torah because bat mitzvah girls did, but mothers never did. This was after the service from the bimah. He said, "Yes, because halachically, you can't say yes to bat mitzvah girls and not to a mother. There's no really difference." So, I gave a d'var Torah. People started to say, "You should become a rabbi," and I thought they were crazy. It just didn't make any sense. It wasn't in my universe. Then my second son had a bar mitzvah. So, of course, I had to give a d'var Torah because if you do something for one, you have to do it for the other.

CM: Right.

SR: Again, people said I should become a rabbi. Then, I had three girls. It should have struck me sooner, but it hit me all of a sudden: what are my girls going to do for their bat mitzvah in an Orthodox temple? There's nothing for them to do. They could give a d'var Torah. My husband could read the haftarah. That wasn't what they wanted, nor what I wanted for them. So we changed, and we joined the Newton Centre minyan. Then, when I was part of an egalitarian service, and I gave a d'var Torah, people said, "You should become a rabbi," I thought, "Well, you know?" I was walking to services one day, and a friend of mine – I met her, and she said, "I'm going to rabbinical school. I'm going to AJR [Academy for Jewish Religion]," which is in Riverdale in New York.

CM: Oh. So what is that?

SR: Academy for Jewish Religion. It's trans-denominational. They would let her go to Hebrew College for the first two years and then commute for the last three years. She was technically going to AJR, but classes were at Hebrew College, which is in Newton. I thought, "Gee, you can be a middle-aged housewife in Newtown and go to rabbinical school all at the same time." Then, she came over to my house a few months later and said, "You know what? They're opening a rabbinical school at Hebrew College." So I

was the first in line. And I went to David Gordis. He's the president of Hebrew College. I thought I was too old. I said, "Is age a criteria?" He said, "Yes, everyone must have one." It was great. My husband said, "You won't get in because you're too old." They had one spot for someone who was older. My friend who was in the AJR was going to apply to change. "She's already in rabbinical school. She will get it. You will not get it." Turns out, I'm not even one of the oldest in the class. My whole year is on the older side.

CM: So, when you say older –?

SR: Then [inaudible] Emmanuel. He must be sixty-one or sixty-two. I'm forty-nine. I started at forty-seven. There are three women my age. One has my exact birth date and birth year. I'm about in the middle of my year. It's just amazing. Sometimes I think, "Wow, if this had been available when I was twenty-five, how much further I would get, how much further I would be." But I'm glad it's available now.

CM: Well, it's interesting because I've been thinking about it over the last few years and thinking, "There's no way. I don't know enough. There is no way."

SR: For rabbinical school?

CM: Yes.

SR: I was thinking about that while you were talking to me. I thought, "This could work."

CM: So, I've thought about it. I've really thought about it a lot. But I don't – again, I don't know if I could do it. I don't know enough Hebrew. So it's interesting to hear you talk about it. Are all the other –? Well, I know Jim, I guess. But he's a Slavic scholar.

SR: Jim is a scholar.

CM: How are you doing it? What if you don't really know Hebrew? I mean, my Hebrew is very rudimentary.

SR: You'd have to build up your Hebrew. That's for sure. But there are a lot of women who didn't know very much just a few years ago, who in the last two or three years have learned a tremendous amount. A woman from Emmanuel – she went to have a bat mitzvah ceremony, and she was on the bottom of the class. There was a convert who knew more – who had just converted and knew more Hebrew than she did. So, it's work. I am probably – well, I definitely am on the more – I have more background – my learning partner and I. It's amazing. I actually went to rabbinical school for the text skills, for learning. I thought, "I'm not going to change." I told my kids, "I'm forty-seven. I'm not going to change. Mama's not going to change." They've realized it's a life-changing experience.

CM: Really? So you're finding the –?

SR: Your whole spiritual life changes. I swear I never expected it. The learning is amazing. There are teachers there that just – and they really respond to what you need. I'm taking advanced Talmud. There's only six of us in that class. Everything I've wanted I've asked for, and they've responded beautifully. I'm not terribly interested in Kabbalah. A lot of people are. That's fine. [inaudible] very into Kabbalah. I'm into Talmud. That's fine. It's nice being trans-denominational because you don't have to be anything.

CM: Right. So do you know what –? Do you have an idea of what you –? Did you go into this knowing that you wanted to do something at the end of it? Or was it really just this is a wonderful thing to do right now?

SR: Well, I would love to go to rabbinical school for the rest of my life. But I will have to finish. I think I probably could teach Talmud. I didn't know the whole piece about singing in public. As Orthodox women, we didn't. I didn't know that I would have to lead services. Somehow, that escaped my attention. So the first time I led just the morning blessings, the [inaudible] in October of the first year of rabbinical school, I was terrified. I had never led. Now, I can do weekday service, some of the Sabbath service –not all of

it. I can chant the Torah. My ear is not that good. I tried to learn haftarah, and I started getting mixed up.

CM: Right.

SR: So I said to my husband, “Do you ever get mixed up between [inaudible]?” He said, “Oh, no.” So I, therefore, figured something is wrong with me. So then I asked my teacher; I said, “Do you ever get mixed up?” He goes, “Oh, yeah. All the time.” I felt much better. So now I can do haftarah and Torah. I’m going to try to do a little bit of [inaudible] the tenth chapter, that little chapter. Because my ear is just – if I hear things enough, I get it. But it’s time. Some people can get things in there so quickly. I can get Talmud fairly quickly.

CM: That’s interesting. [laughter]

SR: The singing. It’s funny how we all didn’t know exactly what we were going to get into. We all sort of bargained for [inaudible] rabbinical school. But it’s been wonderful.

CM: How much time are you spending on it? Are you full-time, full-time, full-time?

SR: Yes. They make mistakes on the – we’re the first year that there ever was a school. So they make the mistakes on us.

CM: Like?

SR: Well, even this internship is about ten hours a week, and it’s just too much. We’re still doing a lot of text. It’s just too many hours. So next year’s class probably won’t have a second-year internship. They’ll probably start in the third year. So we’re going to get all the –

CM: Bugs out.

SR: All the bugs out. But at the same time, there is something special about being the first year. So you win some, you lose some. I wouldn't change [inaudible].

CM: How many are in your class?

SR: There are twelve. Eight women and four men. I think it's fantastic. I'm getting better as a dominant person. [laughter] But it's hard for me.

CM: It's scary. I get out of breath. Actually, I realized when I do –

R: [inaudible] either.

CM: How many come to the Tuesday and Thursday morning service?

SR: Well, there's twelve of us in my year and fifteen in the year behind. So that's twenty-seven. Then there's a handful of teachers and faculty. So it's probably about thirty altogether. Some people come late. So, thirty, which I think is a nice number. Then, minyan on Saturday mornings is a hundred and fifty.

CM: Wow.

SR: [inaudible] it's big. I think it's too big. I like small. But we have rabbinical school Saturday morning, which is much smaller, which I like. But I'm just glad that – see, for me, there's much more of a feminist issue because I wasn't allowed to study Talmud as a child. Girls didn't study that.

CM: So is the Newton Centre Minyan Orthodox?

SR: No, it's traditional egalitarian. It's a little bit different than an Orthodox service. They leave out one song. They do include the imahot [inaudible]. They will do what is called [inaudible], where the leader starts the Amidah with the congregation, and then says the kaddish with them, and then you go on silently. They [inaudible] do that in Orthodox

synagogues as much. Otherwise, it's a very traditional service. But it's been amazing for me. I never had a bat mitzvah.

CM: You didn't?

[END OF INTERVIEW]