

Ruth Anna Putnam Transcript

Shanya Rhodes: Hello, testing. Sounds good. Okay. This is Shanya Rhodes with Anna Putnam. We're sitting in Anna's home in Arlington. Are we in Arlington?

Ruth Putnam: Yes. Arlington.

SR: December 20th on a snowy –

RAP: Morning

SR: – morning in December. Okay. I'd like to talk about your adult bat mitzvah.

RAP: Yes.

SR: But I'd like to start with the Judaism you experienced as a child.

RAP: Well, as a child, I experienced almost no Judaism. First of all, my father wasn't Jewish. [Adolf] Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933 when I was five going on six. My parents were in the antifascist underground, so I was given to my gentile grandparents to take care of. The assumption was that Hitler would not last. That assumption, of course, proved to be wrong. So I was raised basically in this Christian household. I did see my Jewish grandmother until she died in '42, but she was not a religious woman. She did have a – it's not even a sister-in-law, but something like a sister-in-law who was a religious woman. Whatever I learned as a child about Judaism I learned from her, which was snippets.

SR: So you didn't attend synagogue or anything like that?

RAP: No.

SR: Interesting. What happened to your parents? Did you see them again?

RAP: My parents managed to leave Germany and end up in America. In 1948, I came and joined them. But my parents were not religious, so that's not where I got it from.

SR: No. So you had no bat mitzvah as a child.

RAP: No.

SR: Nothing.

RAP: No.

SR: Interesting. So when you left home, when you left Germany, you came here?

RAP: Yes.

SR: Did you attend college here?

RAP: Yes. I came here, and I had to leave school at the beginning of ninth grade because of my Jewish mother. When I came here, I went to high school for one year. I did twelfth grade, taking all the courses that you had to take to graduate, so some were eleventh-grade courses, and some were twelfth-grade courses. Then I went to UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles].

SR: Was that a culture shock?

RAP: I think I was much less sophisticated than the high school kids. I think by the time I got to college, it had worn off.

SR: So did Judaism begin to play more of a role in college or after college? When did you start becoming more interested?

RAP: Well, I think I was always interested in it, but it didn't occur to me that it was a religion. [laughter] I read all those books that were written shortly after World War II, not just The Diary of Anne Frank but The War by [inaudible]. There were other books. So I sort of accumulated this bit-by-bit knowledge of some Jewish customs, and most of my parents' friends were Jewish, but they were also not religious. But what really got both my husband and I involved was, when my older son was twelve, he said one day to me, "I want to have – what do you call it?" And I said, "Bar mitzvah?" [laughter] I don't know how I knew that that's what he meant. So my husband took him to meet Rabbi [Ben-Zion] Gold at Harvard [University], and Rabbi Gold said, "Well, we don't let people just come and have a bar mitzvah. He'll have to come to services for a year." So we started going, and as [Rabbi Gold?] once said to someone else, "They came, and they never left."

SR: He's a very nice man.

RAP: He's a wonderful man.

SR: So you all went together for the year.

RAP: Yes.

SR: And then never left.

RAP: Yes. And then never left, yes.

SR: And how was that bar mitzvah?

RAP: That minyan was still very small then, so it was very intimate. We had never been – well, that's not true. We had been to a bar mitzvah of a cousin of my husband's. They were having a big luncheon or something. But I think we thought that was because that's a big family. It didn't sort of penetrate. I said, "You celebrate at home." So all we did for

my son was we took him to a restaurant with his best friend.

SR: Did he have an aliyah in the synagogue?

RAP: Yes. Oh, yes. He studied for a year, and he had an aliyah, and he sang the haftarah, and he probably gave a d'var Torah.

SR: Before that, he didn't know Hebrew. He learned everything starting then?

RAP: Yes, he learned it.

SR: So, at that point, did you think about it for yourself or not really?

RAP: Oh, no. When he was born, I started to learn some Hebrew. Then I had more kids, and there was no time to do anything like that. So I started again when he started.

By the time my daughter had her bat mitzvah, we knew that there is supposed to be some kind of party as well as what's in the synagogue. [laughter] So we had lunch in here, in this house. I remember she insisted that I wasn't allowed to cater it. It all had to be homemade, although my friends were allowed to cook.

SR: That's interesting. You still didn't think about it for yourself at that point, either?

RAP: No, no. I don't think at that point we had adult bar/bat mitzvahs in our minyan.

SR: Did your daughter have the same kind of bat mitzvah as your son? Did she read the Torah?

RAP: Yes.

SR: So it was the same.

RAP: She refused to give a d'var Torah. [laughter]

SR: Sounds like a character.

RAP: But she probably did more than he did otherwise. She probably led the Torah service as well as reading.

SR: What year was that?

RAP: She was born in '66, so '79.

SR: '79. Were you aware that in other synagogues, women were beginning to have adult bat mitzvahs, or it really didn't—?

RAP: I don't think I knew that then. That fall, I was sent by the American Jewish Committee with a group of academics to Israel, where we were all picked as potential campus leaders. That was my first time in Israel. For years afterward, things that I learned on that tour would make clear some things that I saw. It was a fabulous tour.

SR: Did you go all over Israel?

RAP: We went all over Israel. We had lectures by sociologists, social workers, and all kinds of people.

SR: So what made you first think of having an adult bat mitzvah?

RAP: Well, then people started having them. I guess my husband must have had his before I did. He also never had one as a child. He also was raised in a mixed marriage and non-religious home. So I think he had his bar mitzvah first. We sort of slowly drifted into keeping kosher and finally went completely kosher after my mother died. Because I said, "I can't have a kosher home as long as my mother is alive." She wouldn't understand. [laughter]

SR: Usually, it's the reverse. Interesting.

RAP: So then I felt that if I assumed the burden of the [inaudible] I really was able to keep some of them, and then Shabbat fell on my seventieth birthday, so I decided that was the time to have a bat mitzvah.

SR: What year was that?

RAP: '97.

SR: So, what did you first do?

RAP: Well, I mean, of course, I didn't have to learn Hebrew anymore, or at least not that kind of Hebrew. I had given d'var Torah before because we do that in our minyan all the time, so I didn't have to learn that. We've been going for years to a conference at the Hartman Institute every summer. So we've learned a lot. But I did need to learn how to chant. And since I'm bad at carrying a tune, that wasn't exactly easy. But my friend Lois Welber was my tutor. She's a cantor as well as a mathematician. Mathematics is her mainstay, but being a cantor is what she loves doing.

SR: Math and music go together.

RAP: Yes.

SR: My daughter's interested in math and music.

RAP: Yes, lots of famous mathematicians were more than amateur musicians. So she taught me how to chant the haftarah and how to chant [inaudible] of Torah.

SR: So, what did you think —?

RAP: Can't do it anymore.

SR: No?

RAP: No.

SR: You let it go.

RAP: Yes.

SR: Maybe you could pick it up again?

RAP: No.

SR: No. And leading services?

RAP: Well, I did that. The first time I led the Torah service was when my husband had his bar mitzvah. So I was very nervous, and people said, "We thought only mothers were nervous, not wives." [laughter I wasn't nervous about him.

SR: So, what did you hope to gain from the bat mitzvah itself?

RAP: I think I really thought of it more as making a promise, undertaking something, which I felt I was able to do because I was already doing what I was undertaking, so I knew I could do it.

SR: That would be specifically the kashrut and –

RAP: Keeping kosher, yes – trying to be, in my fashion, shomer Shabbat. I mean, I tried one Shabbat. Conservatives turn lights on and off, which helps. But I try not to cook, not to shop, and that sort of thing.

SR: As far as spiritual or relationship with God, did you think that might change by the bat mitzvah, or were you looking for it to change?

RAP: No. I think that's an evolving or fluctuating thing probably for everyone.

SR: Were you aware of changing roles of women? Did that have any [inaudible]?

RAP: Oh, yes, sure. Can't go to the Hartman Institute and not be aware of changing roles of women, and also, there were a number of vocal feminists in our minyan.

SR: So when you began preparing for your bat mitzvah, how did your family feel about it? How did those around you feel about it?

RAP: Well, at that point, there was really only my husband and I, and since he had already done it maybe two or three years earlier –

SR: Did your children think it was a good idea?

RAP: I don't think I asked them. [laughter]

SR: Did they voice any [inaudible]?

RAP: None of them were at home, so, no.

SR: How about your friends?

RAP: Well, most of my friends are in the minyan by now.

SR: So they were supportive.

RAP: So they were supportive, yes.

SR: That's good.

RAP: When you prepared, were you preparing by yourself, were you with a group at all, or just one on one?

SR: No, just one-on-one.

RAP: So you did haftarah and the maftir.

SR: No, actually, I did three verses in the middle. I think I did. I don't think that's where we stopped.

RAP: Were you nervous about it?

SR: No.

RAP: Had you been gabbai since your husband's bar mitzvah and until yours?

SR: I was gabbai while I had my bat mitzvah, and another lady my age had hers the week after. So (Janie?) was the gabbai when I had my bat mitzvah, and then I was the gabbai when this other lady had her bat mitzvah.

RAP: That's great.

SR: Yes.

RAP: Are you still gabbai? You say not so much.

SR: No, no, thank God, no. [laughter] I guess that must have been the second year of our three-year stint.

RAP: And you gave your d'var Torah?

SR: Yes.

RAP: Do you remember what it was about?

SR: The parashah was Ki Tavo. I have it somewhere on my computer, I suppose. I have a feeling I talked about the very beginning, which is what I tend to do. You know, when you come into the land. But I don't remember what I said.

RAP: You seemed to really enjoy being the gabbai. It's difficult running the Torah service.

SR: No, I liked very much – the least of being gabbai is standing up on Shabbat. I mean, that's the gravy because you make people so happy when you give them aliyot. Every so often, someone would come up to me afterward and say, "Thank you for calling on me. I really needed that today," or something like that.

RAP: So, as a gabbai, did you do things before the service? Were you responsible for the Torah readers or anything else?

SR: No. Someone else. There are many people who do each, a little bit, something. But as a gabbai, all the problems come to you. We went through a period where there were two women who absolutely didn't get along. This wasted a lot of our time.

SR: So, as a gabbai, what did you do for the two that didn't get along?

RAP: Well, I think it was a good thing that there were two of us, so each of us could listen to one of them. Mainly we just listened.

SR: What was your role? Why would they be coming to you as the gabbai?

RAP: Why did they come to us? I don't know. They came.

SR: So the gabbai is not just someone who stands up there at the Torah service then. It's more like a moderator.

RAP: Oh, no. As Rabbi Gold explained to us: the gabbai is like the chairman of the board. The gabbai, with the rabbi, plans events. You may get someone else to do the actual work, but you are the ones who decide that there should be a Melaveh Malkah or there should be a tzedakah event, or there should be whatever.

SR: So that's a responsibility.

RAP: Oh, yes, it's quite a job. The standing up at the Torah, that's not the job. That's a reward.

SR: I see. In my minyan, we divide it up, so the gabbai just does the Torah, and then we have a moderator who has all the headaches.

RAP: I see, I see. No, no. The gabbai has the headaches. When kids had their bar/bat mitzvah, I would try to invite the family for dinner once shortly before.

SR: So, is it a rotating position?

RAP: Yes.

SR: So you had it for three years.

RAP: Yes. It's usually three years.

SR: There was a co-gabbai with you. You and (Janie?).

RAP: Yes. (Janie?) We were the first time that there were two. Our predecessors said it's too much of a job for one.

SR: How many families are in your (Minyan?)?

RAP: I think there are about a hundred and fifty on our list. Not all of them are active. Maybe five, six are no longer here but still feel attached.

SR: How many would come on a regular Saturday morning?

RAP: Fifty to seventy people.

SR: That's a nice number. You'd just meet Saturday mornings?

RAP: Yes.

SR: Do you function as a community outside of Saturday morning, if there's a shiva or something?

RAP: Oh, yes. We are very good at coming to shiva. Three times a year, we have a lunch after services. Our kiddushes are famous. We have, I guess, one Melaveh Malkah at someone's house. We have a Hanukkah party at someone's house to which fifty people came this year. Some years, we've had retreats.

SR: So, the bat mitzvah – did you feel you were well prepared for it?

RAP: Yes.

SR: No problem?

RAP: No problem.

SR: Was there anything that surprised you about it? How did you feel when you actually got up there?

RAP: I think I was most surprised by Rabbi Gold's little speech to me. He makes a speech. When he was our rabbi, he made a speech to [inaudible] bar/bat mitzvah child, and I didn't expect him to say what he said.

SR: What did he say? You've got me curious.

RAP: Well, I said something about the fact that I was doing this now when I felt I could actually keep some of the mitzvot, and he said, to my great surprise, he hoped I would find more to keep, which I was not prepared for at all. [laughter]

SR: Did you find any more?

RAP: No, I don't think so.

SR: Did you ask him what he had in mind?

RAP: No, no.

SR: Did you wear a tallit?

RAP: Yes, I always wear a tallit.

SR: And tefillin?

RAP: No.

SR: Have you ever considered wearing tefillin?

RAP: No. I do daven in the shacharit in the mornings. Maybe that's something I've done since I had my bat mitzvah, but I don't remember when I started doing it.

SR: At home, you're talking about.

RAP: Yes.

SR: Do you wear a kippah?

RAP: At services.

SR: At services. The davening at home, you do that by yourself.

RAP: Yes.

SR: Do you remember why you started doing that?

RAP: We went on vacation to Williamstown, and I said, before we went, “I’m going on vacation from Judaism.” Instead, I started davening. [laughter]

SR: That’s a surprise.

RAP: Yes.

SR: Can you tell me more [about] what propelled you to start?

RAP: I don’t know. It just felt right.

SR: So when you daven in the morning, do you daven in English or in Hebrew?

RAP: In Hebrew.

SR: In Hebrew. Do you say the whole—?

RAP: I start with yishtabach, and I end with the Amidah. No, I add – at the end of the Amidah, the prayer for peace in Siddur Sim Shalom that I usually end with.

SR: Does your husband daven with you or not?

RAP: No, he davens too, but by himself.

SR: So now you do this every morning.

RAP: Yes.

SR: So interesting. Do your children have anything to say about that?

RAP: No. I don’t think they know.

SR: They don’t know. That’s interesting. Do you talk to your grandchildren about Judaism at all?

RAP: Well, to my oldest granddaughter, who spent a lot of time with us because her parents are not together, never were together, even when she was born, but my son was living here, and so she was here a lot of the time. So yes, I taught her quite a bit. She comes to Hillel with us every other week, although she usually just sits outside. We've just started a service for that age group, so maybe she will. She went last week, so we'll see what happens. Technically she's not Jewish because her mother isn't.

SR: Would you be interested in her converting?

RAP: I would like that very much, but she feels that's too big a decision to make at her age.

SR: Sounds like the smart thing to say. How old is she?

RAP: Eleven.

SR: Eleven. I wonder if she'd like a bat mitzvah.

RAP: Well, when she was little, she did, but now she understands that this is all combined. If we had belonged to a Reform minyan, then maybe she would have just sort of slid into this, but since it involves this decision, she doesn't feel ready to make. But as she said, very sweetly, "Maybe when I'm twenty, and maybe when I'm seventy."
[laughter]

SR: Like her grandmother.

RAP: Yes.

SR: So, is she getting any Jewish education there?

RAP: No. She did have a tutor for some years. But right now, she doesn't.

SR: If you could change anything about your bat mitzvah, would you want to do anything differently?

RAP: No.

SR: No?

RAP: It was very nice. All my kids came.

SR: They did? And your grandchildren were there too?

RAP: What grandchildren I had at that time were there. Yes. So I had Tanisha, Mara – Mara is eight. Let's see. I have a feeling she was there as a baby. The other two wouldn't have been.

SR: So, would you recommend others to have adult bat mitzvahs?

RAP: Yes. I think especially if – I was already so involved in the minyan and also had done quite a bit of studying elsewhere. But [for] people who haven't, in particular, I think it would be such a great experience.

SR: What do you think an adult bat mitzvah says about women's roles in Judaism?

RAP: Why do you think it's just women?

SR: That's a good point. That's my bias. That's where I'm coming from because where I grew, up the boys had bar mitzvahs and the girls didn't.

RAP: Yes, yes.

SR: So I guess I see more of a need for women because they have to make up for what they didn't have as children.

RAP: Yes, yes.

SR: But you're right. I should stop being so sexist. [laughter]

RAP: [laughter] No, I think anything that is a motivation to learn more – more Torah, more Tanakh, or more whatever – is a wonderful thing.

SR: So when you go to Israel now, will you take any classes?

RAP: No, no. Because now when we go to Israel we – well, this year my husband has a research grant, so he won't? be teaching. He'll give a lecture. I'll give a lecture. He'll give some more lectures in [inaudible]. Basically, I'll do my philosophy thing. It's easier, actually, to study here.

SR: Where do you study here?

RAP: I haven't been lately because I'm not able to drive at night, and it's sort of cut down my opportunities. But the Orthodox rabbi at Hillel gives a Talmud class, which people from my minyan go to, and we went.

SR: What were you studying?

RAP: What were we studying? [inaudible] Honey, what were we studying with Rabbi [inaudible]?

Hilary Putnam: What?

RAP: What did we study with Rabbi [inaudible]?

HP: Oh, just a few pages of Talmud, but it wasn't –

RAP: I know, but which pages?

HP: It wasn't very consecutive because he would pick something each time, and we only went to about three sessions.

RAP: Okay, well, never mind then.

SR: Thanks.

RAP: But I can tell you what we did at the philosophy conference at the Hartman Institute.

SR: That'd be great.

RAP: What they do is every year they pick a topic. Like, let's say, Nashim. In the morning, we study Talmud. Again, it's bits and pieces because it's a topic and not a tractate and [inaudible] that go with that. In the afternoon, we'd serve some philosophical book, like we read [Moses] Mendelssohn one year. We read Judah Halevi one year. Lately, it's been closer to contemporary. [Editor's Note: Moses Mendelssohn was an eighteenth-century German-Jewish philosopher who is credited for originating many influential ideas of the Haskalah, the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Jewish enlightenment. Judah Halevi was an eleventh-century Spanish Jewish philosopher, poet, and physician.] Then, in the evening, there would be lectures, one always on the current political situation and some on some other topic. So we've studied many subjects.

SR: Do you attend services at all in Israel when you go? Is there a synagogue you go to?

RAP: Well, when we were living in Jerusalem, the last several years, we lived across the street from this very nice synagogue, (Yakar?). Do you know about that?

SR: Do you know where it was?

RAP: On Halamed Hei in Katamon.

SR: In Katamon.

RAP: It's Orthodox. It's very musical. It's not [inaudible], but it's close. Many of the people are English speakers, so they have a d'var Torah in English and one in Hebrew, and you can choose which one you want to go to.

SR: Interesting.

RAP: So that's where we went. Last year, in Tel Aviv, we never went, but we were only there five weeks, and [inaudible] kind of mixed up. I don't know. This year we might find something.

SR: Do you look for non-Orthodox synagogues ever?

RAP: We used to. In Jerusalem, before we lived so close to (Yakar?), we used to go to the conservative synagogue on (Agron?). The main one [inaudible].

SR: So you bring your tallit with you to Israel.

RAP: I usually haven't worn a tallit in Israel because usually, it's an Orthodox minyan, and I go with the flow. [laughter]

SR: Have you gone to any of the synagogues in the Boston area? Or you are very happy—

RAP: We're very happy. I mean, of course, we've gone to others when we were invited to a bar or bat mitzvah or a baby naming. Basically, no. In Israel, we have friends who live on a religious kibbutz, and we visit them for a weekend, so we go to their synagogue, which is more orthodox.

SR: So, I'd like to get back to Rabbi Gold. Was he at all instrumental in getting you to have the bat mitzvah? Did he work with you at all?

RAP: I think he was very instrumental in us becoming so attached to worship and study. I don't think he was particularly involved in my bat mitzvah, although I certainly have learned a great deal from him and continue to learn a great deal from him.

SR: He wasn't opposed to it, though?

RAP: Oh, heavens no. I think he must have been the person who first introduced the idea to this minyan. We were egalitarian, I believe, now, although I didn't know that then. Before, most conservative minyanim were egalitarian.

SR: Do you know what year that was?

RAP: Well, we were there almost from the beginning, and it was already egalitarian, so I suspected it always was, and I'm not sure when he started. Nobody is sure when he started it. I mean, there is an argument among people who are involved in the starting of it.

SR: Does he have any affiliation at this point with —?

RAP: Oh, he comes to our services every week, sure. He's our rabbi emeritus.

SR: You say there was commotion, and you found a new one, a new rabbi? Who is that now?

RAP: Norman Janis, who grew up in our minyan, not as a child but from freshman on, I guess, when he came to Harvard.

SR: Have there been more adult bat mitzvahs? Has that become routine? Bat and bar mitzvahs?

RAP: [laughter] Yes, I can't remember now when we had the last one.

SR: But there are no classes; it's always individual.

RAP: Yes, it's individual. Oh, I remember the last one; it was very recent. The woman who had the bat mitzvah turned sixty, and her parashah was—I don't know what her parashah was—but it's where the value of a woman goes from thirty shekel to ten shekel when you turn sixty. So she said, "I'm a ten-shekel woman."

SR: [laughter] That's great. Do you think that —?

RAP: You are leaving?

HP: Yes.

RAP: You are coming back tonight?

HP: Yes, of course.

RAP: You may pick up my medicine.

HP: Yes.

RAP: You have the checks to put in the bank?

HP: No, [inaudible]

RAP: Why are you going?

HP: To finish writing that paper. I'm not a maniac.

SR: So would you teach [inaudible] time when you go to Israel?

RAP: No. I will give one paper. I'm old enough not to.

SR: So, what do you do in Israel?

RAP: Well, I usually am working on some paper or other. I'm in the very beginning phases of something. So I hope I get somewhere.

SR: We haven't spoken about the holidays, the Jewish holidays. Have you celebrated them? When did you start celebrating them?

RAP: Well, now you have it all.

HP: Yes.

RAP: Should I call you sometime?

HP: Yes.

RAP: Okay.

HP: I'm out. That's when

Around 11:30, that's when (Pat Sufis?) is calling me.

RAP: Okay, at 3:00 maybe, or something like that.

HP: Alright.

SR: Drive carefully.

HP: Thank you.

SR: So I was asking about the holidays. Do you celebrate the holidays?

RAP: Yes.

SR: Do you celebrate them more since your bat mitzvah?

RAP: No, we celebrate them more since my son's bar mitzvah. That's the tipping point in our life. We always tried to get people – I mean before all that – invited for seder.

Now, we do our own seder, of course. We always did Hanukkah. That was it. When Sam started studying for his bar mitzvah, we found out about Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Started going to them.

SR: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, do those have an impact on your year? Are they holidays you celebrate in synagogue, or do you think about them out of synagogue?

RAP: Both.

SR: Does Harvard Hillel celebrate the holidays? They have a minyan at the holidays also?

RAP: Oh, yes, much bigger. The conservative, non-student minyan on the High Holidays is many times the size of our minyan. But we are the ones who, as we say, put on the high holidays for the conservative Jews of Harvard.

SR: And there's a separate student minyan.

RAP: There is a separate student minyan. There has been for a long time. Because this goes back to when Rabbi Gold was still director for Hillel. The students didn't like being with their professors on Shabbat when they were with their professors all week long, and especially since we have these Torah discussions, it was like being back in class. So they said they wanted their own. They're also somewhat more – well, now, we do almost everything in Hebrew, but at that time, we were still doing a lot of English, and they were doing all the prayers in Hebrew. They read the whole parashah; we do this [inaudible] cycle. So they are a little more formal. But I think the deep reason is that they didn't want the professors on Shabbat.

SR: That's interesting. So where you daven now, the Harvard Worship and Study, that's separate from the Harvard Hillel for students?

RAP: Yes. They are downstairs; we are upstairs.

SR: Do you have any activities together or nothing like that?

RAP: There is, several times a year, an inter-minyan kiddush. Which I think people hope will mingle people. But it's too big; it doesn't really mingle people. Sometimes one of them comes up and gives us a d'var Torah. People keep trying. But I think there is much resistance on their part to be amalgamated. Some of our kids, after they had their bar, bat mitzvah, have gone down to them. Probably the same sort of needing to assert the independence.

SR: Do they have their own rabbi, or do you share the rabbi?

RAP: No, they have their own rabbi, rabbinical advisor. I don't know. Ours is called rabbinical advisor. There is some deep distinction that I don't fathom.

SR: What do you mean?

RAP: No, I mean, there are people for whom this distinction is great –

SR: It's important.

RAP: It's important. But I am not one of them.

SR: We've talked once or twice about the Harvard Hillel. My husband was in the medical school, so we lived in the Longwood area.

RAP: Did you daven in the Orthodox minyan?

SR: I used to daven at Young Israel in Brookline. We lived in Brookline.

RAP: No, I mean when you came to Hillel.

SR: We just went once or twice. I wouldn't drive. So we slept in Cambridge. There was usually a reason because they were incorporating the medical school, so probably at the Orthodox – this was a while ago. What I remember, it was just students. I don't remember seeing –

RAP: The Orthodox minyan has lots of students and some professors. Some grown-ups. But they don't have a discussion, so the professors aren't so visibly/audibly present.

SR: Do you feel like maybe you're missing a certain population, though?

RAP: Well, yes. I mean, that's why we keep making these overtures and [inaudible], and we keep hoping that there might be some kids that would feel more comfortable with us. We do every so often get graduate students or medical students, people like that. But then they move away.

SR: I'm very interested in your davening at home. That really makes an impression because I like to daven in synagogue. We have two mornings so we could daven in school. But I never davened at home. Now, even though I don't have classes, I will go to my beth midrash and daven there because my children will think that I flipped out if I start davening. Davening at home, I think, has a different feel to it than davening in synagogue.

RAP: Yes.

SR: Do you think so? For yourself, as well?

RAP: Yes, yes. I think that's right.

SR: My children, they like that I'm in rabbinical school, but they don't really change.

RAP: [laughter] But only your youngest is still at home?

SR: I have two at home. I have a seventeen-year-old, who's a senior in high school, and a twelve-year-old, and actually, my oldest son just finished college. He went to the (Weizmann?) for four months, and now he's back home. He'll be home for about a month or two, I think, and then he'll be on his way again. So right now, at the moment, I have three home.

RAP: I see. Their opinion matters.

SR: Yes, it does, although it's getting less and less so. I'm getting more independent.

RAP: Yes.

SR: But I think, if you say you're going to daven in synagogue – well, my husband became a mourner when his father passed away. He went to services every day; that was fine. Because davening in synagogue is more of a social –

RAP: Well, also because you two must have known that's what you do for a year.

SR: But even after the year was over.

RAP: Oh, he kept on doing it?

SR: He kept on doing it. First of all, you make friends who are also [inaudible] and then they need you for the minyan. Then it sort of never ends. But davening at home is not social.

RAP: No.

SR: It's more spiritual.

RAP: Yes. At least sometimes.

SR: So it's a different feel to it that the children pick up on. So they want to know why I'm davening at home. It makes them wonder. Can you describe why you decided to start davening at home, what it feels like?

RAP: It just felt right, somehow. Now, of course, it's like a habit.

SR: You say the same prayers every time, or do you vary?

RAP: No, I don't vary. When I wake up, I say Modah Ani – Modah ani lefanekha. And then when I get up, I daven. Once in a while, I don't because I have a 7:30 AM meeting or something. But normally, I do. I'm much better about that than Birkat Hamazon, which I tend to forget even exists unless somebody reminds me.

SR: You're saying routinely or not really?

RAP: No, I can't say that we say that routinely, no.

SR: But you have a Friday night dinner and light candles?

RAP: Oh, yes. We usually have guests.

SR: How many years have you done that? When did that start? Can you remember?

RAP: No.

SR: So a long time, then.

RAP: Yes, a long time. Then when my granddaughter got a little older, maybe four or five, she started insisting that there would be another child, so every other week when she is with us, we are limited to who we can invite because – [inaudible]

HP: The key won't lock. It will unlock, but it won't lock again. I'm going to give it ten minutes with the heat on to see if that does it.

RAP: Your car door.

HP: Yes.

RAP: Don't we have deicer in the broom closet?

HP: I'll look.

RAP: Would you want me to look?

HP: Yes, I'll look.

RAP: Since you have shoes on.

HP: I hate winter. [inaudible]

SR: By the end of the week, you'll be in Israel, and you won't have this problem.
[laughter]

HP: Right. Well, not the end of the week. After the twenty-ninth.

SR: Oh. Well, that's not so far away.

HP: We leave on the twenty-ninth.

SR: Not so far away.

HP: We'll be in Israel on New Years' Eve.

SR: I have places I could recommend you visit, but I'm sure you don't need any people to stay with, or –

HP: No.

SR: I'm sure you have plenty.

HP: Yes ...

RAP: I used to carry that in my purse in the winter.

SR: Did you find it?

RAP: Yes.

SR: Okay.

RAP: When I was teaching at Wellesley, I would come out to my car at the end of the day and couldn't open the door. So I used to carry the deicer in my purse.

SR: I probably should, but I don't. When you need it, you need it.

RAP: No, I don't do it anymore either, now.

SR: So you can't remember when you started lighting candles. Is that what you were saying?

RAP: No.

SR: It was a long time ago?

RAP: When did we start lighting candles on Friday nights?

HP: Probably when we joined the minyan.

RAP: Way back in '79? I doubt it.

HP: I think so.

RAP: Not right away, no, sweetie.

HP: I think, at least when we had company for Shabbat, which we usually did, on an average Shabbat. I think lighting candles on every Shabbat was one of the first things we did. Treating Shabbat in our own interpretation as a day of rest is one of the first things I remember very vividly. [inaudible] twenty-five years ago.

RAP: Not that long ago. I don't believe you. Okay. [laughter]

HP: [inaudible]

SR: Can you think of a progression? So you started lighting candles, and then —?

RAP: I probably started doing seders at that time.

SR: Was there a period in your life when you did not go to a seder, or you sort of always — once you were an adult?

RAP: Once we were married, I think we usually either went to Hilary's cousin in Connecticut, or we went to some colleagues of Hilary's. I remember going.

SR: And the other holidays, Sukkot and—?

RAP: Oh, that came much later.

SR: Do you celebrate Sukkot now?

RAP: Yes. We have a nice sukkah, although this year we didn't put it up because he wasn't here, and so he wouldn't have been here to take it down, and I couldn't take it down by myself.

SR: When did you start building a sukkah?

RAP: Well, first, we had a little grape arbor, and we used to make that into a sukkah. It's too small. [laughter] If a third person joined us, they would be sitting outside looking in, or one person would be sitting outside. Then, at some point, some manufacturer made these wonderful sukkahs that you can put together really easily, so I think many people in our minyan bought their own sukkah at that point. We used to have a minyan sukkah, which we had one luncheon in. But then, as I said, suddenly, many people bought a sukkah.

SR: As far as fast days, other than Yom Kippur, do you celebrate Tisha B'av? No? And Yom HaShoah? No? Yom Ha'atzmaut?

RAP: No. It so happens that Tisha B'av was while we were at the Hartman institute, then I would fast. But usually, I forget.

SR: And Shavuot? The Book of Ruth?

RAP: Yes, yes.

SR: You celebrate that at the minyan.

RAP: We celebrate that at the minyan, yes. Well, again, we've been in Jerusalem for that.

SR: Right. This year it's late. Everything's late this year.

RAP: Yes, yes. We're going to Hartman this year, probably will be on Shavuot, but we won't because we will have been there for almost three months. So we won't go back.

SR: So, is there a particular aspect of your bat mitzvah that really stood out that was the most significant to you?

RAP: It was a peculiar day because a good friend of mine's brother was dying of cancer, and she was with him in the hospital. After we came home, I went to the hospital to bring her a piece of my birthday cake. Then, in the evening we had my seventieth birthday party. There was this other theme that went along with my bat mitzvah.

SR: Did you make a mi shebeirach? Do you do that in your synagogue?

RAP: Yes, we do that, but I don't think so. Now, I do that for many people, including that friend, but I don't remember that I did it. Anyhow, there would have been people more closely related to him than I.

SR: It must have been a strange feeling, though, at your bat mitzvah, having this other theme on the same day.

RAP: Well, I think that's what makes it hard to remember exactly. What am I supposed to remember? Yes, I did have two granddaughters because I seem to remember picking them both up.

SR: Do you have any pictures at all of the bat mitzvah?

RAP: Yes, but where? [laughter]

SR: [laughter] I can't help you with that. I'd love to see one.

RAP: Yes. Not from inside the synagogue, of course, inside the [inaudible]. If I find it quickly [inaudible].

HP: I'll try again.

SR: So, are you teaching in Israel again this year, or you have a research grant?

HP: What?

SR: You're doing research in Israel?

HP: Yes, in a way. I've been teaching this year, first at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, and then last year at – I had a three-year agreement with Tel Aviv University. But this middle year is like a research grant because I'll be at the Raymond and Mortimer Sackler Institute for Advanced Studies in Tel Aviv, which means I only have to give one lecture [inaudible] research. When I was teaching at Ben-Gurion, we lived in – as Ruth Anna may have told you, we lived in Jerusalem, and I went up a couple of times a week by bus to Beersheba. I would also spend a week – Ruth Anna and I would spend a week in Beersheba. I still have connected with them.

SR: That's great.

HP: Yes, it's very nice. As long as our health holds up, it's what we want to do.

SR: And you get out of this weather.

HP: Yes, that's a very important part of it, getting out of this weather. We don't want to be here in January, February, or March. I can't think why. [laughter] Where did I put my hat, I wonder? Oh, I see. Can you give me my hat? I carried it into a table. And the deicer, which I will now try. If just heating the car didn't work, I'll try deicing. If that doesn't work, I'll have to take your car.

RAP: What makes you think you can open my car?

HP: There is that. There is that. And if neither works, I don't go.

SR: My car opened without a problem.

RAP: I can't find –

SR: Okay. I think that's about it anyway. Just thinking if I skipped any important questions. Did you have any role models or women when you decided to do a bat mitzvah that you were looking to?

RAP: Yes. There is a woman in our minyan, who maybe was the first one to do it or at least the first one I saw doing it. She's very learned. She's sort of made a second career for herself as a Judaica scholar.

SR: Judith? She's my teacher. She's wonderful.

RAP: Yes.

HP: Sweetie, I think I need a screwdriver.

RAP: What kind?

HP: Any kind. Just going to use it as a lever. It's that little handle that you squeeze that's frozen in position.

RAP: Where's the man gone?

HP: Thank you.

RAP: You're welcome. Why won't it stop snowing?

SR: It will. By this afternoon. So you found Judith Kates as a role model.

RAP: Yes.

SR: She's wonderful.

RAP: Yes. When I became a gabbai, I tried to study with her, but she didn't have time, so gave it up.

SR: I took her class. She gives a class in Newton. There were about twelve of us women. She goes from house to house every Thursday morning. For two years, we did that. We studied Ruth, and we studied Midbar, and Esther, and the Book of Judith. Then I joined rabbinical school, and she became the (Bereshit?) teacher at rabbinical school, so I had her there. She teaches the first-year students (Sefer Bereshit?).

RAP: She and Gail Reimer did this book, Reading Ruth, which I have a paper in.
[Editor's Note: Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story, published in 1996 and edited by Judith Kates and Gail Reimer, is a collection of essays, poetry, fiction, and personal narrative exploring the Book of Ruth.]

SR: I'll have to look at that. I see Gail at work.

RAP: Yes, of course.

SR: Okay. Anything else you want to say?

RAP: No. You should really look at the thing about me.

SR: I definitely will.

RAP: Because (Bernice?) is describing my bat mitzvah because she was there. So you will get another perspective. She might even say what I said. Who knows.

SR: She might. I'd love to hear more about your childhood, but that's really off the topic, I know. I was a history major in college. Can you just say what you were aware of when you were a child in Germany?

RAP: Oh, I think I was very aware of everything. I remember sitting in my backyard with a girlfriend, who also had – I think in her case her father was Jewish, and her mother wasn't – and how afraid we both were.

SR: You were about five years old.

RAP: No, by the time we were so afraid, we were twelve maybe.

SR: Wow. That's definitely old enough to be aware of quite a bit.

RAP: Yes. The dangers didn't start until the 1940s. I do remember Kristallnacht and all my friends going to see the burning synagogue, and I went home.

SR: You were still there with your parents then?

RAP: Oh, no, I was living with my grandparents.

SR: Your parents had left Germany?

RAP: Yes.

SR: Would they have come looking for you, the Germans?

RAP: No. They knew where I was, and I was expelled from school because of my Jewish mother.

SR: When you came to this country, did you come alone?

RAP: Yes. But I came to join my parents.

SR: How old were you then?

RAP: Almost twenty-one. I had to come before I was twenty-one because I got the visa as a minor child of American citizens. I came in a boat with lots of displaced persons, and one American businessman, and one graduate student from India.

SR: So, were you allowed to go to school all those years? You said you were expelled from school.

RAP: Yes, at the beginning of ninth grade. That was the end of school.

SR: And then what did you do?

RAP: Then I worked for a year as a [inaudible] for a dentist's wife, who was nice enough. She got very scared every time there was an air raid. Then I worked in the office of the toy factory with a very nice woman. Every time I came late, she would scream at me, and then after the war was over, she said, "The reason I always screamed was that I thought you weren't coming."

SR: You were in Berlin.

RAP: No, I was in Gotha, which is a little town in Thuringia, made famous by [Karl] Marx, also a center of insurance industry, and the famous book of royalty, the aristocracy, the Almanach de Gotha, listed – this is even before my time – all of the royalty and all of the aristocracy of Europe, I guess.

SR: Which of the Allies arrived?

RAP: The Americans came, but then that part of Germany was given to the Russians.

SR: That's fascinating. Your grandmother stayed in Germany? Your grandparents?

RAP: Which grandparents? My Jewish grandfather died in '34 of cancer. My Jewish grandmother, we all believe, committed suicide when she knew she would be sent to the camps since she was the kind of person who would be sent – were given warning because they were sent to [inaudible]. My gentile grandfather died in '43 of pneumonia, but basically old age. My grandmother died just before I left for America, also of old age.

SR: Fascinating. So you don't have anyone in Germany now?

RAP: No. My father had a sister, but she died a long, long time ago. I'm old enough to die, so that generation is gone.

SR: You didn't have siblings?

RAP: No.

SR: No cousins?

RAP: No, my father had one sister, and she never married. She was also in a concentration camp for many years. My mother was an only child. My father had cousins, some of whom I knew. But I don't know what happened to them. They were all older themselves; they are my father's generation, so of course, they are older.

SR: Okay. It was just wonderful speaking with you, Ruth Anna.

RAP: Well, glad to do it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]