

# Sonia Saltzman Transcript

Shayna Rhodes: Hello. This is Shayna Rhodes and Sonia Saltzman sitting in Sonia's house in Newton on December 21, [2004], to discuss Sonia's adult bat mitzvah.

Sonia Saltzman: Hello.

SR: We can start back with your childhood or even before that.

SS: I'll take what I wrote down so that I remember.

SR: You remember your siblings? So you had two sisters, Rosita and –

SS: Isabel.

SR: Isabel.

SS: Isabel is a year older, and Rosita is six years younger.

SR: And you grew up –?

SS: I grew up in Santiago in Chile. We had our bat mitzvah in – that's what I'm trying to remember –1968. And I say "we," because I had it together with my sister, with my older sister, and two other classmates from school. So there were four of us, and we were the first ones.

SR: To have –?

SS: A bat mitzvah in Chile.

SR: You're kidding.

SS: Yes, yes. It had never been done before.

SR: But bar mitzvahs had been done.

SS: Bar mitzvahs, yes. But not a bat mitzvah.

SR: And so why did you –?

SS: I initiated everything.

SR: Oh, good for you. [laughter]

SS: I was very interested. I went to my parents and proposed this idea. They said, “Well, I really don’t know how this would work, but if you’re really interested, why don’t we invite the rabbi to come over for dinner? Then you can talk to him, and he can tell us whether it’s a possibility or not. But you deal with it. You speak with the rabbi.” So he came over, the one who is there in the picture. I was very nervous. I was only twelve years old. To ask something like this of the rabbi was not easy. I also didn’t have a personal relationship with him. His response was so inappropriate. He said to me, “Why is it that you want to have a bat mitzvah?” Before I had a chance to respond, he said to me, “It must be because of the presents.” It really, really disappointed me. But I persevered. I actually explained to him that, no, I really wanted to learn. I wanted to be up on the bimah in front of the community. So he thought about it some more. He said to me, “Learn? I have no time to do that, but you can be up there. We can figure something out for Friday night.” My sister wasn’t really interested, but when I started talking about it, she said she would do it too. She was thirteen, so it makes sense. Then I went to two classmates of mine in school. The school had very few Jewish students. So really, the only two classmates who were Jewish.

SR: What kind of school was it?

SS: It was a girls school, a private school, all-girls. What percent Jewish? I don't know. There were only a few in each class, maybe two, three out of sixty, at the most, in each class. So these two girls agreed. I can't remember, though, how we prepared. I really can't remember. I think we went to the rabbi's house a few times. I remember that. We did everything in transliteration, so none of us knew any Hebrew.

SR: You couldn't read Hebrew?

SS: No, no. So we had it all in Spanish. I'll show you my [transliteration] –

SR: I'd love to see it.

SS: I have it. I actually have it. We lit the candles. We each did a very short prayer. Then we each gave a very brief sermon. Very brief. I'll show you also; I have it.

SR: Did you write the sermon yourself?

SS: No, my father wrote it, I remember.

SR: And he wrote your sister's, too?

SS: I guess so. I remember so well; I really do. My father was actually dictating to me because I didn't have the context to write anything. It was about being a Jewish woman. It's very, very short. I'll show you. It had nothing to do with the parshah of the week – nothing, nothing – because we didn't have the background to do something like that.

SR: Had you been going to shul every week?

SS: No.

SR: Was there?

SS: No. There was a community, and we belonged to the – the community was divided between the Russian Jews, primarily Russian Jews, although it was Eastern European in general, and the German Jews. Then, there was a tiny Sephardic community. So we belonged to the German Jewish community because my mother was a part of that community. My father was a Russian Jew, and he had grown up – not grown up because he came to Chile when he was in his twenties, but his parents went to the other community, which was more Orthodox, the Russian Jewish. The German Jewish, which makes sense – they were much more assimilated Jews, and it was what probably would be considered here between Conservative and Reformed. So we would go there, but the rabbi was an immigrant from Germany, and the services were in Hebrew and in German. There was no Spanish. So considering we knew neither language, we didn't really participate very much. We had a sense of what was happening, but the prayers were in Hebrew. Then when it was time for the sermon, he gave it in German. So all the young people who were born in Chile, like me, couldn't understand what was happening.

SR: So, did you go every week anyway? How often would you go?

SS: No. No, we didn't go every week. I would say we went for all of the holidays. I mean, I remember going for Simchat Torah, and we went, of course, for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur.

SR: There was no attempt made to reach the young people in the community?

SS: No, no. They spoke very poor Spanish, so I don't think that they could. Later on, my father brought a rabbi from Argentina, who is the father of Claudia Kreiman. So, we started a community where the rabbi came from Argentina. He was a student at the time. Claudia's father, Angel Kreiman, was a student at the seminary in Argentina. He would come to our house early Friday morning. He would take the plane, arrive in Santiago early Friday morning, and do a whole Shabbat service Friday night and Saturday with a new community that was being organized. This community was

organized with the purpose of reaching the young people because the rabbi spoke Spanish. He was born in Argentina. It was a completely different way of conducting the service.

SR: As far as learning Hebrew, did the boys learn? Was there any education?

SS: The boys learned Hebrew. The boys learned how to read Hebrew. I'm not sure they understood because there wasn't really the option of going to an after-school program. At the time, in Santiago, there was a Jewish day school, and many of the – not many, but I don't know what percent of the Jewish families sent their children to the Jewish day school, where the children did learn Hebrew. It was primarily a Zionist school, not a religious school. So when those students did their bar mitzvah, they understood Hebrew. They probably didn't learn trope and how to read Torah in the school, but they knew Hebrew. So for those students who were not in that school, there was nothing for us.

SR: What do you think made you want to have a bat mitzvah as a child? What was motivating you? Where did it come from?

SS: I don't know. I think about it. It's not as if I had gone to so many bar mitzvahs of boys that – I really don't know. I really don't know. I have a very religious, observant grandfather. I was very close to him, my father's father. I don't know whether it was the proximity to him. I don't remember that he ever said something like that to me, that it would be a wonderful idea. I really don't know. I was thinking about it. Where did that come from? I don't know.

SR: So you had your father's parents with you in Chile? And your mother's parents also?

SS: Yes, also. Very, very assimilated Jews, German Jews, my mother's parents. They had ham in the house.

SR: Very assimilated.

SS: Very assimilated. Yes. My father's [parents] were typical Eastern European and very observant, very religious. So their marriage was considered a mixed marriage by many people in the community.

SR: And your father? How observant was he?

SS: Not very observant. Not very observant. My grandparents on my father's side had a very bad marriage. Mostly because my grandfather was so committed to the Jewish community in China and spent his time and his financial resources, which were very limited, in this community, I think that it created tremendous friction with my grandmother, who felt that there wasn't even enough for the family and my grandfather was committed to the outside and to the community without providing for her family. She only had one son, and she didn't have luxurious needs. So I can imagine that that was a huge source of friction. My father tended to side with my grandmother. So there was, on the one hand, I think, an appreciation for Judaism, for observance, but on the other hand, a resentment for what it means to be too committed.

SR: That's very interesting.

SS: Yes. They got divorced.

SR: In China?

SS: In Chile. I would say that this was the principal issue. So, I don't know. I don't know where it came from.

SR: They ended up in China because they were –?

SS: Because they had left. They had left Russia. Like many Russians during the revolution in Russia, they ended up in China.

SR: Interesting. How old were you when you left Chile?

SS: I was sixteen.

SR: Sixteen. Did your whole family leave?

SS: My whole family left.

SR: And came to?

SS: My father came to New Jersey, where he found work in a pharmaceutical company at Merck Sharp and Dohme.

SR: Did your education change when you came here? Did you have more Jewish education?

SS: No, because I came to Tufts University. At Tufts University at that time, there was no Hillel rabbi. I think there were student rabbis, but there was no one there. I remember I took a class in Judaism.

SR: At Tufts?

SS: At Tufts. The professor was not Jewish, though. It was in the Department of Religion, and he was – I don't think he was a priest, but he was an academic, and he was Christian. Really, there wasn't a way to get involved Jewishly, or at least I didn't see a way since there wasn't a Hillel director at Tufts.

SR: So right from Chile, you left, and you came to college.

SS: I did one year in high school in New Jersey and then came to college. Yes.

SR: So how much of a culture shock was it coming to America from Chile?

SS: Huge, huge, especially at that age. Especially at that age because – two things. I had never thought that I would leave my parents' home to go to university. In Chile, you stay, and you go to university. You live with your parents until you get married. So to come and immediately leave the home without ever thinking that that was part of where I was headed was really, really hard. I did go with my sister, though. We both went to Tufts.

SR: How did you pick Tufts?

SS: We picked Tufts only because we had Chilean friends who were there. There were three guys studying engineering. The engineering school is apparently a very good school, and they were in the School of Engineering. They told us, "This is a very nice place. Boston is a nice city, so come here." Since we didn't know anything, and my parents didn't know anything – I was actually interested in going to Brandeis because I had heard that Brandeis was the Jewish university, and my father dissuaded me. He had heard that Brandeis was such a radical place and that only radical people went there. So he didn't even let me apply. So, I went to Tufts.

SR: It seems like all along, you had this interest in Judaism.

SS: I did. I did. Even when we left Chile, we sat down as a family to decide what we were going to do. During those times, it was very difficult politically, and my father wanted to have a sense for what we were thinking. Not that we would really have the last say, but he did want to have a sense. He was thinking that the United States would be a good option because he could find work with Merck Sharp and Dohme. I only was interested in going to Israel. My father had been offered a position teaching at the university – I don't know where now – teaching medicine in Israel because he used to teach at the university in Chile. So he could teach in English to South African students who were studying medicine in Israel. But he didn't think that he could really earn a living with the salary that was being offered. So he thought that we should come to the States.



But I was very much against it. I thought that we should go to Israel. The only exposure that I had in Chile was to a Zionist youth organization called Barcai, B-A-R-C-A-I. This is a Zionist youth organization. I don't know whether it's in other countries as well. It wasn't religious; it was a political movement. It was really a Socialist movement that attracted Jewish young people interested in Israel. We met every Sunday.

SR: Did your sisters go, too?

SS: No, I was the one who went. We met every Sunday, and it was a very social place. We sang songs in Hebrew, and we had discussion groups. It was fun. I really enjoyed it.

SR: How old were you then?

SS: I started going, I think, when I was like twelve. It was for teenagers. Maybe it was for younger kids, too. Maybe they had younger children, but I never knew about it until I was older.

SR: Did your younger sister, then, ever have a bat mitzvah?

SS: She did. She had a bat mitzvah in the States.

SR: She's much younger.

SS: She's much younger. So she had a bat mitzvah in the States.

SR: What did she do for her bat mitzvah?

SS: My parents belonged to a Reformed temple, and she read from the Torah. But she actually did not read exactly from the Torah. At the time, she had bad dyslexia, and they thought that teaching her Hebrew was not a good idea. So she read transliterated text.

SR: Saturday morning?

SS: Saturday morning. So, not from the Torah. I don't know how they did it, whether they put a piece of paper – I have to ask her. But she never learned how to read Hebrew because of dyslexia. They thought it would be really too difficult. She has a very good ear, so I know she chanted.

SR: That's interesting. Did she give a d'var Torah?

SS: I don't remember. I don't remember if she did.

SR: I was wondering if your father wrote it or not. [laughter]

SS: Maybe. [laughter] I have to ask her. I have to ask her.

SR: I bet she'll remember.

SS: Yes. It was really special. I really, really remember that moment. I also remember I was crying. I was crying throughout the whole thing. My mother-in-law was there, and she asked me – she was annoyed that I was crying throughout this whole thing.

SR: You were already married?

SS: I was married. Yes. Maybe I was engaged.

SR: Why were you crying?

SS: So, she was very annoyed that I was crying throughout the whole thing. I was crying. I was just so full of emotion and so proud of my sister that she was able to stand in front of the community and do this. It was so meaningful. I think just as an expression of how meaningful it was to me – just full of emotion.

SR: Did it occur to you then to have a bat mitzvah again for yourself?

SS: No, I don't think so. I don't think so.

SR: So when did that idea first occur to you?

SS: Much, much later. So I had the – I figured out the dates. I had my bat mitzvah in Chile in '68, and then I had my second bat mitzvah in '98, thirty years later. How old was I? Forty-three. Right? We're the same?

SR: We're the same age.

SS: Forty-three. So I started studying when I was forty because it took two and a half years. The program was about two and a half years. I don't think it was until much, much later.

SR: Let's go back then. You were engaged.

SS: Yes.

SR: When you got married and set up a home, how much Judaism did you have in the home at first? Did it change?

SS: Well, Ned was much, much more observant. One of the topics of discussions we had when we got married was that he very much wanted to have a kosher home. He had grown up with a kosher home. So that was something that he definitely wanted to retain.

SR: You hadn't that before at any point.

SS: No, never. But I said yes. I said that I'll learn and I'll do it. On the other hand, Ned had gone to Yeshiva for eight years.

SR: As a high school student?

SS: No.

SR: After?

SS: No, no. For the first eight years of schooling.

SR: Where was this?

SS: In Long Beach, the Jewish Academy. Do you know it?

SR: Yes.

SS: You do?

SR: Is it the Hebrew Academy of Long Beach?

SS: Yes. You know people who went there?

SR: I do. In fact, I looked at it for my children. We lived in Belle Harbor very briefly, which is on the beach, but down the road. We were going to maybe send them to Hebrew Academy of Long Beach instead of [inaudible] Belle Harbor.

SS: Oh, how amazing.

SR: I can't remember the name of the rabbi who was the principal – very nice man.

SS: Yes. With an F. Friedman?

SR: Friedman. Yes, I think so. He was old by the time we got there, so it's probably the same man.

SS: Right.

SR: He struck me as very – he had a lot of integrity – a very nice man.

SS: Right. But Ned had a horrible experience there. Hated the school. Hated the fact that they were told what to think without being given the liberty to explore issues and that it was very authoritative in terms of how you behave – not only what you should think, but

how you should behave. So he had a violent reaction to that. He also was forced to go to services every Shabbat. Then, when he finished the Hebrew Academy of Long Beach, he was forced to go to the JTS [Jewish Theological Seminary], to the Prozdor. Is it called Prozdor?

SR: Yup. My husband went there.

SS: Really?

SR: Yes. He came down from Riverdale to the JTS for Prozdor.

SS: I'm sure they were there at the same time.

SR: How old is Ned?

SS: Ned will be fifty-two in July.

SR: Jonathan is a year younger than I am.

SS: Okay. So they probably didn't coincide. But for Ned, I think it was an hour-long train ride from Long Beach to the JTS. They did this every Sunday, and I think during the week as well.

SR: Now, I know it's both. My nephew goes now to Prozdor.

SS: Yes. So, he really resented that. I was attracted to the fact that he had this Jewish background and was knowledgeable. He was attracted to the fact that I wasn't contaminated by all of this Jewish education. [laughter] Isn't that funny, right? But that's the way things –

SR: But he wanted you to keep kosher?

SS: Yes. There were certain things that I think were necessary for him, but other things that seemed to be a source just of conflict – for example, going to Shabbat services. He didn't want to do that. He felt he had been saturated with that and didn't want to do it.

SR: Friday night or Saturday morning?

SS: Right. Friday night or Saturday morning. But, for example, lighting candles on Shabbat? Yes, of course. And having a meal on Shabbat – he wouldn't think of not doing that. I guess I'd have to think what aspects were so difficult for him to continue with and what was it about those aspects that he really wanted to maintain?

SR: Seems like the home almost –

SS: More the home – right, right. The home, the candles, the kashrut. Of course, all of the home celebrations. It's true. But the synagogue is, I think, what really was hard for him.

SR: That may have been more like school – communal davening.

SS: Yes.

SR: Maybe from Hebrew Academy.

SS: Yes, because I think that everything – I think you're right, Shayna. I think that he is very close to his parents, and I think that the Judaism in the home was something very, very positive. It was the Judaism outside the home, in the school, and in the synagogue that seemed to him to be so authoritative and closed-minded.

SR: Now, he has a twin brother.

SS: A twin brother.

SR: Any other siblings?

SS: And an older brother who went through the same schooling and was marked entirely different because he became a rabbi.

SR: You're kidding. So his oldest brother's a rabbi.

SS: Yes. He went to the JTS.

SR: Where's he living now?

SS: He lives in Toronto, and he's the rabbi there of a very large community, which is Conservadox – in Toronto.

SR: And his –?

SS: And the sister –

SR: He has a sister, too?

SS: He has a sister, a younger sister, who sent her children to Jewish day schools. She also is, I think, more observant than Ned. So it was only Ned and Brian, the twins, who had this experience.

SR: They were together at Hebrew Academy?

SS: Yes. All of the siblings went to the Hebrew Academy of Long Beach. Only goes to show that it's also what you come in with, right? It's not just the environment. The environment was the same.

SR: Not necessarily. A different teacher can make a big difference.

SS: Maybe.

SR: Speaking as someone who went through –

SS: Right, right.

SR: It can seem the same. I think even parents also change along the way. So even if you say you have the same parents, it should be the same – it's not necessarily the same childhood.

SS: Right. That's true. That's true.

SR: Where does his sister live, did you say?

SS: She lives in Greensboro, North Carolina.

SR: Oh, [inaudible] Duke.

SS: Yes?

SR: And his brother lives here?

SS: And the twin brother lives here. Yes.

SR: He's married to –?

SS: To my sister.

SR: The older one or, the younger one?

SS: The older sister. Yes. The way we met is relevant for this interview. As I mentioned to you, there was no rabbi at Hillel at Tufts. So they hired my brother-in-law, Brian, who's married to my sister, to lead services for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. He was a student at Tufts. So my sister and I went to services the first year that I was there. We went to services for Rosh Hashanah, and my sister kept looking at the student who was leading services. He kept looking at her, losing his place, couldn't really find the pages, tell the community which page to go to because – it was really like in the movies.



Their eyes were just locked. Then, at the end of the service, they approached each other, introduced each other, and that's how the whole thing started.

SR: That's a riot.

SS: Yes. Isn't that amazing?

SR: That is. That is really amazing. And they're living –?

SS: They live a block away. So then Brian immediately called his twin brother who was at Brandeis – this Ned was at Brandeis – and said to him, "I met the most amazing, amazing person. I am totally in love. She happens to have a sister. So come over, and I'll introduce you to her." The first time we went out was later to celebrate Simchat Torah, and it was my first experience going out. We went to the Somerville (Havurah?), and we were dancing outside with the Torah in the streets – my first experience. I thought that was so exciting. How exciting, also, to meet someone who would want to do something like that.

SR: Simchat Torah in Chile was not celebrated that way?

SS: No, no. We would never go out in the streets. Also, it was a Judaism that was much more personal. I think that the mentality of the people there, who had fled from all over, was a very cautious one. I just can't imagine. We would dance with the Torah inside the synagogue. I remember doing that, but the idea of going out into the streets with the Torah was very exciting. To make it so public was very exciting.

SR: So, then you started going out with Ned.

SS: After a year. It took me a while. It took me a while. I was going out with someone else. But it's interesting that the first encounter that my sister had with Brian was Rosh Hashanah services. The first date I had with Ned was going out to celebrate Simchat

Torah.

SR: Then, your sister got married?

SS: My sister got married four years later, and I did too. We got married a year apart.

SR: And you moved to Newton right away?

SS: No, no. I was in graduate school at Columbia, and Ned was in medical school.

SR: At Columbia?

SS: He was at NYU [New York University], and then he did his residency at Mount Sinai. So, we stayed in New York.

SR: When you first married, you lit candles and had a kosher home.

SS: Right.

SR: And you attended services or not really?

SS: I don't know. I don't think I attended services, not on Shabbat, no. Just for the holidays, I would go to synagogue, but not during the week.

SR: Did you [inaudible]? Did you feel like you had one particular synagogue that was your synagogue?

SS: No. No, we didn't.

SR: So what did that –?

SS: So we joined when we came to Newton.

SR: Did you have children yet?

SS: And we joined Temple Emanuel. Yes, Benjamin was a year old. Before then, we were going to Hillel. We used to go to Harvard Hillel for services, but not on a regular basis.

SR: The students?

SS: The students. Yes.

SR: Student services.

SS: Yes, but not on a regular basis. Then we joined when Benjamin – when we moved to Newton. This is the first house we bought. So we bought the house, and we felt that this is really where we were going to stay. So, it made sense that we would join the community here. When we were in Brookline, we were renting. We didn't know where we were going. We knew it was temporary. Ned was training, doing his residency. It made sense that we joined when we knew that this was the place where we were going to stay.

SR: Did you discuss the education of your children when they were young? Did that issue come up at all?

SS: It came up. I wanted very much for the children to go to Jewish day school. Ned had had such a bad experience that it was not at all what he had in mind. So I tried to convince him that, of course, a place like Solomon Schechter is not like the Hebrew Academy of Long Beach. That it's a conservative school and not an Orthodox place, and that there is much more freedom to express your ideas. "Besides," I said, "Let's try it. If you're so dissatisfied, then I'm open to change, but it would be a pity not to start out." So we did, and Benjamin went there until the fifth grade. Then, at the time – he was happy there, except that the science and the math was really, really poor. It just wasn't the least bit challenging, and not only for him – he's not gifted in math and science. There were many kids who really were bored in those classes, and they were revamping the

curriculum and trying to figure things out. So we worked with the school for about a year, and it wasn't working out. I was very willing to accept that deficiency and live with it, knowing that the Judaic studies and other secular studies were very positive. But for Ned, it seemed like he was ready for any excuse and jumped at the opportunity that I saw that there was a deficiency. So, that's when Benjamin, in the fifth grade, went to Park School. He was very happy at Park School, and he felt that he was really challenged academically at the school. Ned thinks that it was the right decision. I still think it was the wrong decision. I'm sad. I'm sad that I allowed it to happen.

SR: Do you think it made a difference in his outlook about Judaism?

SS: I think so. I'm not sure, certainly in his education. Outlook is so much more difficult to measure, but education for sure. I wish that he had much stronger skills. He went to Prozdor, and he was very committed to Prozdor – truly a serious student there. But it's not the same. Even if you're a wonderfully serious student at Prozdor, there is a limit to how much you can learn because it's after school. He was going Tuesday night and Sunday morning. But still, you're never going to learn as much as you would learn if you went to a day school. So I still believe that even if there is a deficiency in the curriculum, that it's so difficult to make up the Jewish studies, unless you are in a day school, that, at least for me, I'm willing to live with those deficiencies. I don't know how you feel. I think what has happened also is that because there have been so few choices for parents, the schools have not been as aggressive about correcting deficiencies. Because for many parents, the thinking is like mine; since there is nothing else and Jewish studies is so important, I'll live with it.

SR: I think, for me, it's nice that there's the pluralist aspect, so the kids don't come out – since I went through a similar experience to your husband. You come out really resenting a lot, having it forced – “This is the way you have to think.” For me, the big difference is that we have, in this community, pluralistic schools from kindergarten

through twelfth grade. That's where my kids are now, both of those options. Because I think it's just so wonderful that they don't insist on anything being the one way.

SS: Right, right.

SR: Yet they give them a lot.

SS: Right.

SR: So I'm really happy. That was what really bothered me. I mean, I had issues. My children were at the Orthodox day school here, and it didn't work for a variety of reasons.

SS: What about Schechter?

SR: Schechter, I had issues with my girls, as far as the social environment of the upper grades at Schechter. I made the mistake of putting my oldest daughter into the seventh grade at Schechter.

SS: As the first year?

SR: As the first year. I went to a Bais Yaakov, where seventh grade was the grade between sixth and eighth. It didn't have any significance. We didn't start dating – no one dated in Bais Yaakov. There were no boys. It was a very religious, Orthodox school. We didn't have a social – and I was totally ignorant of what it would mean to a very sweet, shy girl to be thrown into a very sophisticated clique-ish seventh-grade environment.

SS: Right, right.

SR: She had a good friend who was in that school. Looking back on it, the friend was telling us, "Don't do this," and I wasn't paying attention. But her friend would not talk to her in school – only out of school. She'd say to me, "I don't know why they won't talk to

me. They don't even know my name yet. They won't talk to me." She suffered for two years, seventh grade and eighth grade. It was a mistake I made. I should have kept her at Maimonides and then moved her to the Jewish high school.

SS: Right, right.

SR: So, it didn't work for that reason.

SS: Yes.

SR: I tried to work with the school, but the whole environment was very difficult for her.

SS: I've heard that. I've heard that, especially for girls, not for boys.

SR: For girls, yes. That's probably true. And [inaudible] as well. She started in fifth grade, but she also had difficulties. It's funny. The same girls that were so unfriendly and nasty to her in fifth grade through eighth grade in high school wanted to know why she won't be friends with them. Because when she went to [inaudible] she made very nice friends; none of them went to Schechter in Newton. They'd say, "Why?" She just has a hard time getting past what they did.

SS: Right, right.

SR: So I put her in Jewish Community Day School for that reason. I found the education at Schechter was fine. They were trying. I mean, the davening had problems, but they were trying to make it work better. But mostly for the social.

SS: Yes.

SR: I think you can make changes in the social environment of the school, even as the teachers and the faculty and administration. It isn't like, "Oh, that's the way kids are."

SS: Right. I agree. I agree. You can set a certain tone.

SR: Some things aren't [inaudible] acceptable. You can make it clear. Or you can say, "Well, kids will be kids," and let it go. There were other issues, mostly along elitist lines, like some students weren't working with other students, which came, I think, from the faculty and the parents to the children, which I didn't like those values.

SS: Yes.

SR: So, it's hard. It's hard to counter that. So, let's go back. What made you first think of having an adult bat mitzvah? You're at Emanuel, and you're living in Newton, and you have now two sons. So, what got you started on that?

SS: I had been going to Temple Emanuel for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur services, probably Simchat Torah, and other holidays, not Shabbat. I didn't know how to read Hebrew. I didn't know really how the service worked. I never understood why we had two books and couldn't figure out why people were taking one at one time and a different one at another time. [laughter] No one had ever bothered to tell me. Perhaps they had said something, but when you have no context, then it doesn't register, and you don't understand.

SR: By two books, you mean the siddur and the chumash?

SS: Right.

SR: You didn't know what —?

SS: No.

SR: So interesting.

SS: No. Can you imagine?

SR: Look how far you've come. It's amazing. Now you read Talmud.

SS: [laughter] But I didn't know that. You might ask – it's a simple question. Why didn't you ask? Probably, I did ask, but I didn't understand the answer because I just didn't have the background to understand the answer. So, you have to remember; I had Benjamin at Solomon Schechter. So I was very aware also of my lack of knowledge and very eager to learn. When he was in school, his first-grade teacher offered to teach parents how to read Hebrew – (Alan Cohen?). Do you know (Alan Cohen)?

SR: Yes.

SS: So, I went to his class. He's a wonderful teacher, and I learned how to read Hebrew with him. There were several of us, several parents, who were at the very beginner level. I mean, he was able to do it because he didn't do anything different from what he did with the first-grade class. [laughter] I'm sure he used exactly the same thing, except a different way of relating to us, but the materials were the same. It was so exciting. I remember doing the berakha. I think it was, "Ha-motzi lehem min ha-aretz." To read it was just a thrill of a lifetime. So, that's what started me. I said, "I really want to learn how to read and how to be part of this community." I always felt so much part of the community spiritually, emotionally, but not in terms of skills. I was always an outsider in terms of skills. I could never pray together with a community. When there was time for prayer, I did my own prayer. When it was time for the Torah reading, I took out something and read for myself. I very much wanted to be part of the community. Knowing also that Benjamin was going to have his bar mitzvah and being an outsider for his bar mitzvah, I think that's what really, really motivated me. I had been an outsider for so many years. But thinking that that was going to be my position still when he was called up to read from the Torah was unacceptable to me. So I actually ended up having my bat mitzvah – his was in November, and mine was in April. So we had a few months apart. We were studying.

SR: His was first?



SS: His was first, and then came mine. It was wonderful. I mean, it was wonderful to be studying together and to feel, when he had his bar mitzvah, that I was knowledgeable. I truly felt part of the service, and that's what I wanted to achieve. I wanted to learn for myself. I was motivated to learn, to learn the skills, to learn about the service. The rabbis also, during this period of two years, taught theology and history. It was really beyond just the synagogue skills. It was like a class in basic Judaism but taught at a sophisticated level. It was wonderful. It was wonderful. We met on Tuesdays. I think it was Tuesday evenings. It was during the week, and it was an evening. At times, I had to plan – because I was traveling so much, I had to plan my trips around this Tuesday evening class. It was so important. I remember many times I came straight from the airport to this class without eating, without sleeping. It meant so much to me. I wasn't going to miss it. I would plan everything around the class. It was wonderful. It was truly –

SR: How many people were there?

SS: There were seven of us. Let me see. I'm going to count. I forget. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven of us.

SR: Were all these teachers that took turns teaching the different things?

SS: Yes. Yes. They took turns teaching. They took it very seriously. Emanuel took it very, very seriously. The classes were excellent. The environment was open. It was wonderful.

SR: Were all of them at about the same level as you, as far as background?

SS: No. I'll tell you a funny story. There is one woman, Bessie, and she converted. She was raised Irish Catholic, and she went to Catholic schools. She went to Catholic college, and then she is a nurse at Beth Israel hospital. She was always working around Jewish people and was so interested in Judaism, began studying in her late thirties, and

converted. She was in this class. She had converted two years earlier. She didn't marry a Jew. She was just really interested in Judaism. She came to this class. She told me the story afterward. She came to this class, saying to herself, "I am so new to all of this. There is no way I'm going to stay in this class if I'm at the bottom." And we went around, and we had to, I think, read and say – and they asked us whether we knew the Torah and haftarah blessings. Of course, I didn't know a thing. I think Bessie had studied them, so she knew a little bit. She came up to me afterward when we had finished the bat mitzvah two years later, and we had become good friends. She said, "It's thanks to you that I was able to go through this because you were at the bottom of the bottom. If I had been in that situation, I wouldn't have continued with the program. But I'm so grateful that you knew less than I did and were willing to stay. Had it not been for you, I would have never stayed because I wasn't willing to be at the bottom." [laughter]

SR: So interesting. So the rest knew more?

SS: They did. They did. They all knew how to read Hebrew. They all knew the blessings. They had all gone through Hebrew school, all of them, except for Bessie, who wasn't Jewish.

SR: Right. I see. So did they separate you two in any way, give you extra?

SS: No. No, they didn't.

SR: Interesting.

SS: So, I just had to learn faster.

SR: It doesn't sound – women's issues – doesn't sound like it was much in the picture.

SS: No, I don't think so. I really don't think so. Of making a statement? No, it was really much more about being an insider. I didn't see that as having to do with women but

having to do with lack of education.

SR: That also was because you were a woman.

SS: Yes.

SR: You would have had more.

SS: But I saw my cousin – my age – who went to the Jewish school in Santiago. She read Hebrew. She spoke Hebrew. She wouldn't have been an outsider in a service. Despite the fact that it wasn't a religious school, she had the skills, and she would have been able to feel at home in that environment. And I wasn't. So I didn't really see it as something that had to do with being a woman.

SR: When you lit candles at home, were there roles? Like you lit the candles, and did Ned do anything for the Friday night dinner, like kiddush or anything?

SS: Yes.

SR: Those were always – you did the candles, and he did the kiddush?

SS: Yes. Yes.

SR: And Emanuel at that time was completely egalitarian or not egalitarian?

SS: Yes, completely egalitarian. Absolutely no difference in roles. Absolutely none.

SR: So, you went to this class for about two years, all these classes.

SS: Right.

SR: Then you had the group bat mitzvah.

SS: Right.

SR: Tell me, what were you studying for the bat mitzvah itself? Haftarah, the Torah, or both?

SS: We each had to do a Torah reading. Then together, we did the haftarah. As a group, we chanted the haftarah because there were seven of us. So there was no way to divide that. So, we did the entire haftarah as a group. Then each one chanted Torah. Then, each one of us also gave a d'var.

SR: This is all Saturday morning in the service?

SS: No, this was the second day of Pesach, during the day.

SR: That's so interesting.

SS: Ye. They have at Emanuel, the adult bar mitzvah cycle. The bar and bat mitzvah cycle is such that you have the date either for Pesach or for Sukkot. They have a –

SR: Rotation?

SS: Right. You never have Shabbat because the kids are –

SR: So busy.

SS: – busy with that.

SR: That's interesting.

SS: It was nice. I thought it was very nice because it allowed me to learn haftarah trope, to learn Torah trope. So, I felt like I gained all of the skills. The fact that I did it together with my classmates was fine, also, because we each had to learn individually. That worked out well. Now they've changed it; I think that the groups are much larger, so they can't have everyone doing a d'var, for example.

SR: Interesting. They didn't help you [inaudible] for Pesach because your bat mitzvah was coming up [inaudible] Seders. You did that anyway?

SS: What?

SR: For Pesach.

SS: Yes.

SR: You had to do the Seders, and you had the bat mitzvah.

SS: Right.

SR: That's a lot to do.

SS: Yes, we did. It's true. It's true. Then we had a party. Some of the women wanted to mark the occasion and celebrate. The funniest thing – I had said to my children – they wanted me to have a party to mark it somehow. I had said, "Really, a party I had when I was twelve. What I didn't have is the learning. Now I want the learning. I can do away with a party." But they felt like they wanted to mark it somehow. So all of us decided that we were going to have a brunch, just bagels and cream cheese, in the synagogue together as a group and that we were going to invite our immediate family and friends to this communal brunch that we were going to have.

SR: But not on Pesach. [laughter]

SS: Well, we had to do it as soon as Pesach was over. We did that.

SR: Matzah and lox. [laughter]

SS: Right. So we had the bagels, and it was very nice. It was very nice to celebrate as a group because we were very close, and still, we meet regularly. We meet every three months. Initially, we met just to study, and then as time went on, it evolved. Now we

meet as a group of friends to socialize and catch up with news. But it's a very tight-knit group –very wonderful.

SR: And your family, it sounds like they were very supportive. Your children and Ned.

SS: They were very supportive. Yes. Yes. Do you know what's really special? My mother started two months ago studying for her bat mitzvah at Emanuel – for adult bat mitzvah. So now the program is not two years; it's three years because they want to make sure that everyone has the Hebrew skills. So for the first year, they learn a lot of Hebrew. Then, they do, I think, the program that I did, so it's now three years. My mother is seventy-four. So we're very excited. I'm really, really excited.

SR: That's a long way from Chile when you asked for a bat mitzvah, and they said, "Why?" And now your mother's having one.

SS: I know.

SR: Was there anyone in particular that you looked up to as a champion? Any woman or man that – you said, "If she can do it, I want to do it?"

SS: No, no. No role models. No.

SR: So, you had the bat mitzvah, and then you had the party after Pesach, right?

SS: Right. A brunch. It was very simple and just wonderful.

SR: Who came to the bat mitzvah itself, besides your immediate family? Did your sister and her husband and your parents –?

SS: My parents. My grandmother came, which was wonderful. I almost convinced her to have an adult bat mitzvah. She was almost a hundred years old. She didn't understand why all this effort, all this running around to get up in front of the community.

But this is the grandmother who had very ambivalent feelings about Judaism. So, she was there, and then all of my colleagues, all the people that I work with at Axion International, who knew very well what commitment I had and that I was always running to go to classes and figuring out how I would travel so that I could continue with the commitment at the synagogue. So they all came, and that was very, very special.

SR: That's great.

SS: Yes. That was really special.

SR: What impact did the bat mitzvah itself have on you? How did it feel, first of all, being up there when you were reading?

SS: The power of reading from the Torah is something that you can't explain. I don't know if you feel the same way, but to have that ability to read and to perhaps communicate your attachment to it in the way that you chant is something very, very special, something that you probably can't foresee until you're there doing it. That was absolutely unique. I've read many times since then – not many, many, but several times since then, and the power is always there. That is really special. It never becomes commonplace. Maybe I haven't read enough that it never becomes commonplace. Maybe it's good not to read so much. Or maybe those who read all the time still feel that, but it's very special.

SR: How about having an Aliyah? How did that feel? Was it the same part of it? The blessing you made before and after?

SS: No, that didn't have the same effect. Maybe because I know that it takes so much skill to learn how to read the trope, when you're reading from the Torah, you don't have the vowels. You really do have to prepare in a way that you don't when you are saying the blessings. For me, truly, the issue was always this outsider/insider. Now I felt I have the skills, and I can be part of this tradition. I can be counted on to continue it. That's

what felt so special. That I have taken on that responsibility, it felt like a responsibility that I had not assumed. Finally, I had educated myself so that I could take on that responsibility.

SR: I want to talk about the power you felt when you were reading the Torah because I had exactly the same experience, by the way.

SS: Yes? What about an Aliyah?

SR: Not the same as the –

SS: And why?

SR: I agree with you completely on both counts.

SS: Why do you think that is?

SR: Reading the Torah – something happens when you read the Torah. It's not there [inaudible] nice.

SS: But also, remember, you have the Aliyah – very often, you have a piece of paper in front of you, unless you know it by heart. But when you are reading from the Torah, you're reading the Torah. You're looking at the parchment. You're looking at the letters that were written by hand. No, it's different. It's different.

SR: Something special about it.

SS: Yes. What else do you feel? Do you also feel that it is unique that you have that ability and that in itself is something that is very special, that you are grateful that you can continue that tradition?

SR: How about reading haftarah? Did you feel the same?



SS: No. Also not. [laughter] Because it's not from the scroll.

SR: Right. I wonder if we ever read from a scroll – because I've never read Megilat Esther. If that would feel – how that would feel. It's is scroll. It's not the Torah. I haven't tried.

SS: Is it vocalized?

SR: The scrolls are not. Does everyone read from the scroll? I don't know. I don't think you have to read from the scroll when you read [inaudible] or Ruth [inaudible].

SS: Yes. But Esther people do read from the scroll, but you –

SR: The scroll, and it's not vocalized.

SS: It's not vocalized.

SR: But it's not the same.

SS: I don't know. Yes.

SR: I'll have to try that and see. The Torah, something about it – it does seem very special.

SS: Because we revere it. We revere it. If you think, what is the object, the concrete manifestation of something that we revere? It's the Torah. There's nothing else. Right? Finally, you are close to it, and you are engaging and being part of it. That's the closest we come in Judaism to really revering an object, right?

SR: Is it the object itself that we're revering?

SS: It's the contents, right? It's the contents, but it's manifested in this scroll. That's why we treat it with special care. We're not really revering the object itself, but we understand

how special it is because of the contents because of how it was made. Haftarah doesn't have the same –

SR: No. I think part of it is that you have the [inaudible] and the notes when you read the haftarah.

SS: So you think that the fact that it's easier, more accessible?

SR: I think that's part of it. And that it's not the same scroll. If you drop a haftarah, you pick it up, [inaudible] kiss it, put it down. If you drop the Torah, you fast for forty days, which is a huge –

SS: Right.

SR: There's also something to do – there's some, I think, spirituality about the Torah that you don't have in a haftarah. So, did the bat mitzvah make you think about becoming a rabbi, or had you thought about becoming a rabbi before that?

SS: No, I hadn't. I think the bat mitzvah definitely is what made me think about it. I realized that I had enjoyed studying so much. I couldn't give that up. I realized my evenings were even more interesting than my days when I was working, that I just looked forward to studying so much and how meaningful it had been to be part of the service, to read Torah. So I said, "Well, this is just the beginning. A door has been opened, and now I just need to continue." So what I did was try to find something that would allow me to continue studying. I found a program at Hebrew College, the [inaudible] program, which was primarily for college students who were looking to immerse themselves in Jewish studies over the summer. I think it was six weeks. I thought, "What an efficient way of really learning." Of course, I had my work. So I went to my boss and asked him if I could take a leave of absence. He had been at my bat mitzvah, and he knew how much it meant to me. He realized that this is something that I very much wanted to do. So he said to me, "You can have the leave of absence. I will even pay you during the time that

you're gone a salary so that you get this out of your system. I know that it's there inside you. So get it out of your system. Learn as much as you can. Then you come back with renewed energy and focus to do the work." I said, "That sounds like a good plan." I was so grateful. Can you imagine that he gave me this time and my salary to do this? So I went, and I loved it. I was studying Hebrew. I was studying Tanakh. It was fantastic. I knew then that that wouldn't be sufficient either, but I had committed to my work. So, I spent another year. But I found something different to do. I was managing a department, and I said to my boss that I wanted to have something that didn't require so much traveling. So I was writing. We had a department of research, and I was writing a book. I did that for a whole year, which gave me the freedom to study at night. So, I continued studying. After a year, I left, and I went to Brandeis to do the Masters in Near-Eastern and Judaic Studies. I thought, "I don't know where this is going to take me, but I know that I'm so interested, and I just need to continue studying." I loved it, but it was very different from the focus that I had in the synagogue, learning with the rabbis. The questions that were of interest to me were questions that Marc Brettler thought were not appropriate in an academic setting. He's right. But then I realized that there were so many young people who were looking for the types of answers that I was looking for. Because I was older, they assumed I had them. So they would come to me, and we would have wonderful conversations about theology, about what do you do with the documentary hypothesis? How do you reconcile that with your spiritual life? Of course, I had absolutely no background to deal with these issues. But perhaps, I just had the maturity to sit down and realize that we needed to talk about it and felt comfortable doing so, even if I didn't have more answers than the younger people in my class had. When I finished there, it never occurred to me to continue studying in Bible. I realized that that wasn't the path. Dissecting and parsing, which is the correct word, right? Parsing the verbs was not what really motivated me.

SR: It didn't have the spirituality you were looking for.

SS: No, no. So, I knew that I wanted to continue studying within the context of a seminary, but what options did we have here? So I explored the possibility of the Academy for Jewish Religion. But I realized that that also was not something that I could do. I had been traveling so much for work that the idea of being absent again was not a possibility. So I'm grateful that [inaudible] decided.

SR: So you see the bat mitzvah and the continuation of studies as more like a spiritual journey?

SS: As a spiritual journey, yes. Yes.

SR: That you're still on.

SS: Yes.

SR: The bat mitzvah was a stepping stone on the way?

SS: Right.

SR: Did the bat mitzvah itself have an impact as far as on your spiritual journey? How did it affect your relationship to God, your relationship to studies?

SS: I think that being able to participate in a service in a way that is not individualized but truly being part of the communal davening is something very powerful and definitely brings you closer to God. You don't feel anymore that you are in this search by yourself. The power of the community is really something very important and, without a doubt, helps you in feeling that God is closer. I also felt I think that – no, I've always been spiritual, but to have the language, the vocabulary, and the Jewish vocabulary to express it, was also something that I was looking for.

SR: And the bat mitzvah was –

SS: The bat mitzvah gave me that framework and the language. We learned a lot about theology.

SR: Who taught that?

SS: I think it was primarily Andrew Warmflash who taught the theology. We did as well. We came later. So you can have that feeling, but the readings, the education, grounds it. Having a way of articulating it is also something that is important. Just having the feeling doesn't feel sufficient or feels too private because then you don't have the communal language.

SR: So you really see the bat mitzvah as a way of joining the community, in a spiritual way.

SS: Yes. Without a doubt. Yes.

SR: That's very powerful.

SS: Very, very powerful. Very powerful. To come into a place and feel that A, you understand; you understand what's happening. Whether you take out the red book or the blue book, you know. That also, the community can count on you to read. I, for example, read haftarah now, every year for Rosh Hashanah in front of hundreds and hundreds of people, and it is such a joy to feel that "Wow, they educated me, and they can count on me now." If there's someone missing, someone needs something, you are there; you have the skills to do it, to get up and do it. So, that's very special. That is really, really special. I also feel that perhaps – I don't know whether it's unintended or not – but the commitment to study when you're older, and especially studying for my bat mitzvah when my son was studying for his bar mitzvah, sends an amazing message, which is you think that you might be done when you're thirteen, but there is so much to learn, so much to study. Look how I make the time, run around, and organize my life so that I can do this. I treasure this opportunity. This should not be a burden. It should be a

source of joy. It should be something that you regard as a privilege to learn and to acquire these skills. I think that no matter how much you might communicate that verbally to a child when you are doing it, your commitment speaks in a very loud voice. That's really important. I don't think I ever intended for that, but I realized that it was there and what a wonderful side benefit.

[END OF INTERVIEW]