Ellen Bender Transcript

Jayne Guberman: This is Jayne Guberman. Today is Sunday, February 8th, 2015. I'm here with Ellen Bender at the Meet Me at Sinai Day of Learning at B'nai Jeshurun in New York City. We're going to conduct an interview for the Jewish Women's Archive. Ellen, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Ellen Bender: Yes.

JG: So, let's begin by your telling me when and where you were born and where you grew up.

EB: I was born on July 8th, 1960, in New York, New York Hospital. I guess now Weill Cornell Medical Center. I grew up in the Rockaways - Belle Harbor, Neponsit – peninsula of land that connects Long Island and Queens.

JG: Can you describe your family a little bit and tell me also what their attitude was towards Judaism and Jewish life and their involvement?

EB: That's an interesting question. I have my parents and a brother. In Rockaway, when I was growing up, there were three main synagogues, Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative. My father had grown up in Rockaway in the Orthodox synagogue, but when he married my mother, and when they decided to raise their family, they didn't want to be in a synagogue that had a mechitza. So I'm not sure why they went from Orthodox to Reform; they skipped the step of Conservative. So I grew up in a Reform synagogue, where it was a male rabbi. I'm trying to think. Did I ever see women on the bema? I don't think there were any presidents of the synagogue when I was growing up. I think I may have been the first bat mitzvah in that synagogue. If not the first, the second. There was a confirmation class; all girls went through confirmation, but girls did not become bat

mitzvah in that synagogue. It was a very sort of old – what's the word? I don't know. It's a very traditional, traditional Reform.

JG: Classical.

EB: Classical Reform. So no kippah, no tallit, and really not many women. When I was in seventh grade, I went to public school from K through sixth [grade]. Seventh grade, we had a pretty, I'd say, dicey public junior high school. So one option was to go to the city to go to private school or to Brooklyn. Another option was to go to a Conservative day school, a Solomon Schechter School, the Robert Gordis Day School, and so that's what I chose. Interestingly, I think that's sort of – I became much more, I don't know – I guess more educated and more involved in Judaism, and in a way, I think I brought that back. So we then became – we were members of two synagogues. We were members of a Reform synagogue and the Conservative synagogue. But I think I brought back my knowledge of Judaism to the Reform synagogue, and I think that's what propelled me to becoming bat mitzvah. That, and the fact that my mother, who went to Smith College, class of 1956, with Gloria Steinem, was very much a part of that movement and raised me with those values. So from a very early age – I mean, I can remember in sixth or seventh grade, having a day where – when I grew up, girls couldn't wear pants in public school. So it was a day where I said, "The girls were going to wear pants, and the boys were going to wear skirts." So this was back in 1972. Anyway, that was a big part of my education. Then, we did end up switching from our Reform synagogue to the Conservative synagogue, which was still – in those days, girls became bat mitzvah on a Friday night, and boys on Saturday morning. There were no women on the bema for a very long time. Eventually, there was a woman president. When I had to fill out the questionnaire for this day, I told the story of how, I think, either in high school or college, the one time that women were allowed up on the bema – on Yom Kippur, they always let a young woman, a girl, read the English translation of Isaiah, the haftarah for that day. I read it, and I chose to change the pronouns because that's what I did, and people walked

out of my shul. People got up and walked out. But then, other people came up to me and were like, “Good for you.” So it was really in those days. It was in the 1970s that things were happening.

JG: Had you planned to do that in advance?

EB: I think I did. I was like, “I’m going to do this. I’m going to do this.” I think my parents were completely in favor of it. But there were still –

JG: Don’t bang on the table.

EB: Sorry. So there were members of the synagogue for whom that was a big deal. It was a step too far. But eventually, by that point, girls were already having their bat mitzvah on Saturday morning and reading from the Torah.

JG: What did you get to do on a Friday night for bat mitzvah?

EB: So again, I became bat mitzvah in the Reform synagogue. So it was the same. There was no difference, but we read; we didn’t chant. There was no trope in those days. You just read from the Torah. You read the Hebrew; then you read the English. Anyway, I did the same thing that boys would have done. So there was no difference in the Reform service.

JG: What was it like for you when you started going to a Conservative, a Schechter Day school, having come from the background you did?

EB: So, again, because I think I was being raised as a feminist and very much like there was nothing – at least academically in school, there were no boundaries. I think, at Schechter, there were no separate classes; you learned Gemara – all classes were together. I was a smart girl, and I think I ended up graduating – I was the valedictorian, even though I came in in seventh grade and was only there for two years. That was

probably disruptive, more so than just the fact that I came out of nowhere. I have to say I was very supported by everyone in that school, from the sort of men who had grown up in Poland, who came here, post-Holocaust, post-Shoah – everyone was very supportive. In a way, probably as much or maybe more so even than in the secular schools. I don't know. There was something very – what's the word? It was a nurturing environment for me, actually.

JG: Did you encounter any rituals or ways of observing that you found problematic from a gender point of view?

EB: Again, the fact that – because I was a bit of a path breaker in that, again, [as] the first girl, or I think the first girl to become bat mitzvah. But it wasn't like I had to fight that much for it. It was like, "Here, I'm a person who knows as much Hebrew as any boy in my Hebrew school class." I don't know what was involved, but there was not much pushback about that. Growing up in that time, again, there were no women rabbis, at least where we were, and no women in positions of leadership in the congregation. So it did feel a little bit like trying on shoes that didn't fit me or wearing shoes that didn't quite fit me. I think later on, in college, when I was at Wesleyan and involved in trying to get the first women's studies department there off the ground, as a student – I think coming back to that shul and seeing only men up on the bema, and having the prayer book that was using only masculine pronouns, that bothered me. Again, I think there was a tension between – again, there was support for – it's great that you know Hebrew. It's great that you're doing this. It's great that you're doing that. But then there was another image that wasn't necessarily so welcoming.

JG: Right. So when and how did you first become aware that gender mattered to you as a Jew?

EB: I think it was then. I think it was in high school. Again, I was aware of what was going on in the feminist movement. These were in the days of – Gloria Steinem was a

big role model. Those were those times.

JG: This is the early to mid-'70s you're talking about.

EB: Yes. I was born in 1960, so I was a teenager in the '70s. My mother went back to school to go to law school around that time, which was a big deal. I went to law school; it was nothing. But then, it was a big deal. So things were going on on the outside, and they weren't happening really in the synagogue. The synagogue was the same prayer book. It was the same language, and it was the same people. There was no discussion of this at all.

JG: So can you point to any specific moments or experiences when you realized the importance of gender to you or that it really jumped out at you in any way?

EB: Again, for me, the moment of choosing to use gender-neutral pronouns in shul and having people walk out because it was so upsetting to them. That was a moment where I was like, "Okay, this is something that I have to push." But I don't know other than – I can't really think of it because in my home life – again, yes, my mother was in charge of the rituals, the cooking Shabbat dinner rituals. But she was also, at the same time, going to law school and out on the streets, registering voters for the League of Women Voters. So I didn't perceive that kind of difference in my own home, even though, again – then, when she went to law school, we had a caregiver who was a woman. So I perceived my parents as equally – I didn't see it there. I don't know.

JG: So, looking back on that period and further, how would you say that Jewish feminism has helped shape your life and your worldview?

EB: Well, I guess, looking back – it's interesting because I think during my childhood, I feel like the world outside was more – there was more gender equality in the world outside. Again, at that time, the Jewish institutions that I was affiliated with, there wasn't very much. But having, in the past – now, however many years, fifty-five years later, I'm

raising my children in a synagogue, where really, I don't think they've ever perceived any difference at all. They grew up in the synagogue, and there's no difference in any ritual involving men, girls, or boys. They see a woman on the bema. They see women in leadership roles. There's no perception of it at all. But in their other world, there's huge differences still, and they're not necessarily – because we all obviously – they go to a co-ed school. My daughter is in eleventh grade and in her AP [advanced placement] Chem [chemistry] class, there's three girls and twenty boys. In her honors math class, there's five girls and twenty boys, and that's the way it is. She takes a class at Columbia, a science class on Saturdays. Again, the whole program is very much dominated by boys. So I think in weird ways, the glass ceilings have – for their generation, my perception is that the glass ceilings have shattered in Judaism in ways that they haven't in the other parts of their lives. In a way, that's amazing to me. There was a point in my – I guess I was in my early twenties or mid-twenties when I became aware of the work of Yitz and Blu Greenberg. I think I went to some of the inaugural conferences on Judaism and feminism. Just last year, I went to the Ma'yan seder, and there was Blu Greenberg, and there was Sara Hurwitz, who was the first Rabba. I was just like, "Wow, that's amazing that in my lifetime – I wouldn't have thought that that would be possible." What I thought was that girls would be running like all these organizations. I thought that there would be much more gender equity in the rest of the world and not so much in Judaism. It's proven to be the other way around, at least in my little circle of the world.

JG: So what do you consider to be the most important accomplishments so far of feminism and Jewish feminism?

EB: Let's see. I guess, women in the rabbinate, to me, is a huge [accomplishment] – that's a huge thing that's happened in my lifetime. Women in positions of leadership within the synagogues is a huge thing. I know that in the wider-ranging world of nonprofits, that's still an issue. There's still glass ceilings there. I think it's kind of incredible, in some respects, to me – the fact that gender-neutral language –

[Tape paused.]

EB: What was I saying? What I got in trouble for when I was changing pronouns now is done all the time. Again, the fact that we're still praying with a prayer book that doesn't have all the right pronouns, that's a problem. That's something that there's clearly more work to be done, but again, I just think the way that change has happened in my lifetime and in this sphere is pretty remarkable. I guess, again – the fact that I think my kids don't have any perception of the differences and the fact that they are closed to them the way that I did is pretty remarkable.

JG: What do you think is the unfinished business of Jewish feminism today?

EB: Well, it's interesting. There are certain things that – again, there's a question of choice and a question of ritual and a question of what you grew up with. But the number of women I know who don't wear tallitot and are like, "Well, that's not what I do" – it's interesting because I recently had this revelation because when I daven here, I always wear a tallit. When I go to another Conservative synagogue, usually I wear it because the women are wearing them. Fine. But I find in Reform synagogues, there's some where men wear them, women don't. I always am like, "Should I wear one? Should I not wear one?" Then, recently, I was like, "This is what I do." I'm not going to change it just because I change the place that I'm davening. So that was a thing for me that I decided, "Okay, that's where I am." So the fact that, again, it is still a question. Again, in my own family, it's not, but I think even in other circles, it's a question. The fact that, again, at our seder – and now we do – Miriam's cup is there, and it's been there for a few years, and it's totally okay. I think, the first year or two, there was a certain amount of eye-rolling among certain people. There's an orange; there's been an orange for the last two years. Those sorts of things, where it doesn't get to be a – there's not a raised eyebrow, where it's just part of the deal, part of the norm. I guess that's work that we have to do. I felt this morning, [at] one of the panels that it was – Ayelet Cohen and the woman who's the

professor at [New York University] Stern – and just sort of talking about – that feminism has opened up Judaism for people to participate, who had never been able to participate, but there are other people who don't feel fully participatory. This idea of a Judaism that is welcoming and inclusive to people, transgender, lesbian, gay, bisexual, everything. I don't know. That's work to be done. Then Israel, there's a whole other – we were in Israel last December, and I have to say, that was very uncomfortable for me. The wall was very uncomfortable for me. The rest of Israel, I wasn't uncomfortable, but I –

JG: The barrier or the Western Wall?

EB: The barrier. The fact that there's a men's section and a women's section. We did the thing underneath the tunnel or whatever, and there were these women praying – I felt like they're underground because they can't be above ground. It felt very uncomfortable to me. I felt that wasn't something that I could at all relate to. So I feel like that's something that has to – that maybe I hope will change in our lifetime.

JG: What do you think are the next steps in advancing gender equality in Judaism and in Jewish life generally?

EB: It's a really good question. I feel like more delving into the text in the way that I felt like Dr. [Judith] Plaskow did yesterday in her d'var Torah, and some people alluded to today, not making assumptions. There is a certain degree in which it's gendered. Some of it you accept or gloss over, but I think addressing it, really grappling with it, would be very helpful. I think that would open up dialogues in a way and maybe sort of include and incorporate people who haven't felt included. So I feel like that's one way. As I said, leadership positions, I think, are really important. I just think it's just as symbolically important. So I feel like, again, having women represented in the leadership, both in the laity and in rabbinical, cantorial leadership. I wonder whether my kids growing up in this shul with a woman, with one of the rabbis as a woman, is different from even being in a Conservative egalitarian shul, where your rabbi and your cantor are both men. I think

that's part of their worldview of possibility and what's possible, and I think that's important. So, again, without going affirmative action – but I think making more of that. It's interesting because I feel like Orthodox Judaism in a way – what's going on there these days – and again, I'm not there, but I see what's going on there, and I find it very interesting and compelling – just the recent discussion about women wearing tefillin. Again, what was really cool to me when my younger daughter became bat mitzvah last month, the week before she read Torah, in the minyan here two days and had to learn how to wrap tefillin; it was like nothing for her. She didn't feel weird about it. She felt totally okay because when she came in here, there were some men, some women, some not, and I feel like, "Whatever. That's an option for her." Obviously, it's different here, where it's totally allowed, but I feel like those women who are pushing for that in that community, I see that as a path-breaking thing that's going on. Even though I'm not necessarily in that community, I want to cheer them on because I think it's important.

JG: Do you think that having female leadership and female rabbis has any impact beyond the symbolic?

EB: Well, I do, obviously. I think that there's a voice in our rabbis – I love all of our rabbis. (Felicia?) has a way of seeing things, and talking about things, and addressing things that haven't been addressed by her male colleagues. I think those things are things that probably would never have been discussed. So the fact that she's up there as one of our rabbis talking about them. There was a recent – I'm trying to think if it was a Friday night or a Saturday morning, where she talked very personally also about becoming a mother as a single parent, as a single woman. That was one of those opening moments, where all of a sudden, I was like, "We've been thinking about this, and it really should be this." For me, even though I am in a traditional [marriage], I felt like that's such an important voice and such an important way of looking at, culturally, what we're doing here.

JG: When we were getting ready for these interviews, you wrote to Judith Rosenbaum about your mother-in-law's piece on the mechitza and what that meant to her.

EB: I'm crying because this is a day that my mother-in-law would have loved so much. So I was raised – very fortunate to be raised by a feminist mother. I was fortunate to meet my husband when I was eighteen years old in college. So his mother became – I'm fifty-five, so his mother was another mother for me for a very big chunk of my life. She was a very committed Jewish feminist, and she did a lot of her intellectual, academic work in this milieu. This is stuff that she was grappling with. It's just so interesting because I have a bookshelf of books that I inherited from her. Those were the books she had. She was a professor, so she had a house full of books, but those were the books that I wanted because she had written about them and had thought so much about them, and we talked about them. That was one of the things – she lived in Indiana, and I lived in New York. We didn't see each other as much, but when my mother-in-law would call, it would usually be an hour and a half to three-hour phone call. So she was a very important voice in my life and in raising my children. A year before my older daughter was born, she gave this talk at Indiana University. I guess it was an endowed lecture on lifting the mechitza and about her own experience, which was a previous generation, where she grew up in an Orthodox shul and had to look down from a women's gallery. But this was one of the books that I had from my mother-in-law. So when that email came, I was like, "Wow," and I pulled out this lecture that I hadn't read probably since she died. It's three or four years now. Anyway, this day and this whole event would have been – she would have been so excited and all over it. It's interesting because they came to services here once. I remember her saying, "Oh, this is what it was like." We would have gone all the time.

JG: I wanted to ask you, speaking of generations, what has been important to you to communicate to your own children about these issues that we've been talking about in Jewish life and in the broader world as well?

EB: So it's really interesting because, again, I talk to them about feminism all the time, like 24/7. My older daughter – I don't want to say I pushed, but I nudged, encouraged her to pursue certain things. She did this research training institute at Ma'yan. You could talk to her about it –and then Moving Traditions and Rosh Chodesh groups, but in terms of – again, I feel like we're very lucky that we are in this community because I feel like the work – a lot of it has been done for them. So they're just growing up in this – I don't think they have it – they do not perceive any difference in gender in this community. In the rest of the world – and maybe I'm overlooking it, and maybe I need to sort of – but I don't think so. I really honestly feel like it's a completely – there's no question. As I said, they put on tefillin; they do this. She reads Torah all the time. That's her thing. [She] reads on the high holidays, reads regularly. But my younger daughter, for her bat mitzvah, her Parshah was Vayishlach, and she read the part of – because we're a triennial, she read the portion that deals with the rape of Dinah, Jacob's daughter. So there was no – I was like, "That's what you're going to talk about. Of course, you're going to talk about it." It was interesting because it was really – that, I think, for her was a little bit of – she's thirteen; it's a lot for her to take on. But at the same time, she lives in a house where we're discussing the crisis [on] college campuses. So she's sort of well aware of those issues and really wasn't a big reach for her to do it. You grow up a lot in that process. Anyway, as I said, I feel in this community, they don't perceive gender differences. Maybe they should, but they don't. I think they perceive that a lot out in the world. I don't know. That's interesting.

JG: Do you think she's concerned –? Well, I'll ask her, but the world beyond BJ [B'nai Jeshurun], the Jewish world beyond BJ and other BJs that exist or BJ-type synagogues – there's a big Jewish world out there.

EB: I'm just trying to think because her experience – last summer, she went to – the Yiddish Book Center had a course on great Jewish books. She went, and there were kids from all over the country, both genders. She's very involved in the teen program

here, which is also co-ed. I just don't think she sees it. Maybe you will hear something from her, but I don't think that's a place that she sees it. I think she sees it a lot in the rest of her life, but I don't feel like she sees it here. But we'll see because maybe she'll say something that I wouldn't have expected.

JG: So this is my last question. What would you say it means to you to be a feminist today?

EB: Just the belief in and the constant pushing for equality. It's interesting because I consider myself to be a huge supporter of marriage equality, and I think that this idea of equality – one of the speakers today spoke about it, and I can't remember who spoke about it, but that idea that Jewish feminism and the push for equality has opened the doors to other forms of equality, whether it's marriage equality, whether it's full inclusion of transgender people – that idea of eventually that that – oh, I know. It was about marriage. Who spoke about it?

JG: I've been here.

EB: Someone spoke about marriage and having a marriage ceremony that is gender-neutral will eventually include everyone, right? Because if it's gender-neutral, it doesn't matter if it's gay, lesbian, transgender, gender fluid, whatever it is, and that feminism has actually pushed for that. So I guess that's what I feel like, again, believing in and pushing for equality.

JG: Well, thank you very much. It was wonderful to talk to you.

EB: You too.

[END OF INTERVIEW]