Toby Reifman Transcript

Judith Rosenbaum: It is October 30, 2005. Again, Judith Rosenbaum and Toby Reifman are here at Barnard at the Barnard Conference on Jewish Women Changing America and recording an oral history for the Jewish Women's Archive pilot feminism oral history project. Why don't we start, Toby, if you could just start by talking a little bit about where and when you grew up and what your family was like?

Toby Reifman: Okay. I was born in 1943 and grew up in Providence, Rhode Island. My family was like the families of most of my friends. We were all the children of parents who had been born in this country [and] grandparents who had immigrated from Europe. Like most of my friends, we belonged to a Conservative synagogue. I went to Hebrew school. There was no thought of any more intensive Jewish education. That was it. And actually, by the standards of the time, we were a moderately observant family. We kept kosher. We went to synagogue at least once a week, usually Friday nights. We drove there. We ate non-kosher out in varying degrees, but just the fact that we had a kosher home and went to synagogue on a regular basis put us in a “relatively observant” category. I learned this from a study that was done on the Providence Jewish community, I think, at some point during the late 1950’s. My Jewish identity was always important to me in some way but was just kind of there. What else should I tell you about my family?

JR: Siblings?

TR: Siblings. I have two siblings. I have an older half-brother who I didn't grow up with, and I have a younger brother. So, basically, the family that I grew up in was my parents, myself, and my younger brother.

JR: What was your sense, both Jewishly and non-Jewishly, of your awareness of yourself as a girl growing up?

TR: That's a good question. There were certainly lots of things that I thought of as being not within the realm of possibility because I was a girl. I have to say they weren't, for the most part, things that I terribly much wanted to do. So I didn't really want to be a doctor. The fact that it was kind of outside of what I thought of as possible didn't really bother me. But I have to say that the emphasis was always – the notion was always that I would grow up and get married and have children, and any career that I might have was supposed to be one that was compatible with getting married. So for years, my parents would sort of push those careers that were portable, like, “Be a teacher because you can be a teacher anywhere.” The idea was that I should be able to follow my husband to the ends of the earth if that were necessary. I really never had to follow him any further than across the river from Manhattan to New Jersey. [laughter] But that was the idea, as was the notion that certain professions were just unfeminine. So, at one point, when I graduated college, I wasn't particularly happy with what I was doing. I thought about law school. I even took the law boards, but the fact that it was unfeminine somehow bothered me. This was in 1966.

JR: What year did you graduate from Barnard?

TR: I graduated in '65. I went to Brandeis, and I did a masters in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies.

JR: In terms of your Jewish education, was there any distinction between your education and your brothers?

TR: No. No.

JR: Or what your experiences were Jewishly?

TR: Not that much. His bar mitzvah was extremely low-key. It was on a Thursday morning. Mine was a group bat mitzvah in a Conservative synagogue. The biggest difference was he had a party for his friends, and I didn’t. I suppose if I had wanted one,

I could have had one, but I didn't want one. Nobody had them. We all went to the boy's parties. That was good enough. Now I look back and think, “Well, why not?” But then I didn't have any issues about what women couldn't do. I don't know. [laughter]

JR: It just was what it was.

TR: It just was what it was. As I say, I look back on it, and I say, "Toby , what was wrong with you?"

JR: So what was the turning point when you started to see things differently?

TR: Well, there were a couple. This was a sort of pre-turning point. I was a counselor at [Camp] Ramah one summer. This would have been '66 when this was happening. By that time, some of the girls had had Friday night bat mitzvahs in Conservative synagogues where they had read the haftarah. They wanted to read the haftarah at Ramah. The camp didn't really want to let them do this, but they did kind of buy into the rationale that if they had learned how to do it and they knew how to do it how could they object – so what they came up with was they allowed the girls to read the haftarah, but a boy had to make the blessings. I thought that was – [laughter] I thought that was appalling. I personally didn't want to read a haftarah, but it seemed to me that if she was going to read the haftarah, she should be able to make the blessings. There was one counselor there who already really had a feminist agenda. I didn't, but I was sort of curious, and it was clear to me she was in a different place, but as I say, this thing with the blessings really bothered me.

JR: What was her name? Do you remember?

TR: I have no idea. She wasn't somebody I stayed in touch with afterward. So, I really don't know. This was during the time I was trying to figure out how to be a Jew In the United States. I had spent a year in Israel. I spent my junior year in Israel, and when I came back, I hadn't particularly been interested in being more observant Jewishly, but I

knew that I didn't want to make Aliyah. The idea was to find a way to be identifiably Jewish here. I got more interested in Jewish observance. I'd be shomer Shabbos off and on. I was back and forth with a lot of things. I came back to New York to go to social work school. That was '68 to '70. And there was already a havurah in New York, but I wasn't involved in it. I lived near Lincoln Square Synagogue, which was Orthodox. I used to go there occasionally, but, again, I was sort of back and forth and off and on with everything. Then, in the fall of '71, I met my husband, who was raised Orthodox. When we got married, my issues about Orthodoxy had nothing to do with the synagogue. It had to do with what happens if the time clock that controls the lights doesn't go on or off when it is supposed to. What happens if we're running late for Shabbos? Those kinds of issues. But there were a couple of things that started to bother me. The first Hanukkah that we were married, we got married in June, and so I guess I had a menorah, I don't remember, but we took that one menorah, we put the candles in it, and he said the blessings. He didn't even say them the nice way that I had learned in Hebrew school. He just said them sort of matter-of-factly, the way people do when they make blessings all the time, and it's not a big production. I thought, "Wait a minute." It was like, "What about me?" [laughter] Somehow, the notion that – I felt somehow like some of my identity had been taken away, that I didn't really have a part in this, that I wasn't an equal partner in this, that I had sort of left it to him, and I wasn't so happy with that. It wasn't a major thing. It was just a little something.

JR: In terms of ritual practice or in terms of what level of observance your house was going to be, or both?

TR: Well, what level of observance our house was going to be – those were major issues, and we argued over those endlessly. In those, I had a lot to say. Eventually, over time, we worked things out, but it wasn't about who was going to make Kiddush or who was going to make Motzi, or where I was going to sit in the synagogue. It was just more about the house [and] what butcher I was going to get the meat from. Because the

butcher that I had used when I was single didn't have a good enough Hashgacha. It was stuff like that. But the ritual stuff, we didn't argue about it. I said, "I want to make the blessings too." So we took out another menorah, and I made the blessings, or some years, we'd take turns. That was just not a big deal, and it's like, "You want to make Kiddush, fine, make Kiddush? You want to cut the hallah this week, fine." He didn't have any issues with any of that. We were still living in the city. We went to an Orthodox synagogue. I was okay with it. It wasn't an issue. Then, February of '73 was when the first Jewish feminist conference was held, and a friend of mine had told me about it. He said, "I think you'd find it interesting." I kind of shrugged my shoulders and said, "Eh, I don't know. I'd have to be away for Shabbos." But something happened. Actually, I was home with a flu for a couple of days and had a lot of time to think. I thought, "I think I'm going to go to this." It was late. I called up, and I said, "Can I still come?" They said, "Yes." So, Friday night and Shabbat day of that conference – I don't remember about Saturday night, but Friday night and Shabbat day were women only. There were no men speakers; there were no men there. It was all women. They had a couple of different Friday evening services. I went to one that was creative or innovative. I forget what they called it. I remember they said blessings in the form of "B'rucha at ha'schina." I was so upset; I couldn't wait to get out of there. I thought, "Oh, no, no. This is not for me." [laughter] The next morning, I went to the traditional women's service. I have to say, if you're thinking about transformative moments, that was a transformative moment because it was the first time I had heard women lead the davening. It was the first time I'd heard women read Torah. Maybe not quite the first time. I had actually gone to a non-Orthodox service at Harvard Hillel. In fact, Paula was there – Paula Hyman. I don't remember who read Torah. I remember they offered me an Aliyah, and I couldn't do it. I was just too uncomfortable. That would have been '66, '67, maybe. But this was really the first time that women just did everything. I thought, "Oh my goodness. Well, why not?" I have to say that experience, and in fact, the whole conference really changed the way I thought about myself as a Jewish woman. So the notion that women should just

sort of sit and observe suddenly seemed like, “Huh?” It was like, “Why? Why shouldn't it be that women do everything?” Actually, in that service, women did not constitute themselves as a minyan. It was done as a women's tefillah. I think there had been some issue about it, and I certainly was aware of that, but the fact that there was this huge – I mean, there must've been a few hundred women there, so it was substantial. It felt like a serious davening. It was spectacular. It was just unbelievable.

JR: When you left that conference, what was your experience like of how to deal with those changes that you had felt?

TR: That was the problem. I mean, that was the problem because there weren't a lot of places at that time, even outside of the Orthodox community, where women could do very much at all. So, when we looked around, when we looked to leave the city, and we were looking at communities in New Jersey, there were no Conservative synagogues at that time where women could do very much of anything. I don't consider opening the Ark or having a Friday night bat mitzvah very much of anything. So we ended up in a community that had a Modern Orthodox synagogue. As a community, Englewood is very open and not judgmental. It had an Orthodox synagogue. It had a Conservative synagogue that would have been quite a far walk but was not an appealing place to go anyhow as a woman. We went there once, and I talked to the rabbi, and he said, "Oh, we have little girls open the ark." I said, "Okay." [laughter]

JR: Not what you had in mind.

TR: Over the years, I just got more and more unhappy with the synagogue. The other thing that happened after that conference was that I joined – the following year, I joined Ezrat Nashim. So I had a peer group. I didn't feel alone in terms of people to talk to or share experiences with. Ezrat Nashim had requests for speakers, and we all shared that. We all took turns doing that. So I started to speak to both Conservative and Orthodox groups about – aliyot for women was a big issue, Jewish education – in the

Orthodox community – I mean, now it's much more common for girls to get the same kind of education that boys do, but certainly, my generation growing up, the people that were Orthodox, often – in my husband's family, the boys went to yeshiva. The older girls went to public school. His younger sister went to day school. I mean, families just didn't make the same kind of commitment for their daughters as they did for their sons. That had been an issue in the Orthodox community.

JR: What was it like to go out and speak on these issues?

TR: Most of the time, it was kind of fun because, particularly in the non-Orthodox community, there was so much ferment, there was so much going on. People were interested. People were curious. For the most part, the people that came to hear me, and I assume many of the other speakers as well, weren't people who were terribly hostile. They were people who were interested in change. The only speaking experiences that I really did not enjoy were the ones that were set up as a debate. I hated those. I didn't enjoy those. The Orthodox groups were much harder to speak to because there was much more hostility. I remember talking once about having equal Jewish learning tracks for boys and for girls, which in some of the high schools, they didn't use to do. I mean, boys would learn Talmud; girls would learn something else. I remember one woman saying to me, "Well, what do they need it for?" Meaning Talmud. I said, "What do they need it for?" I said, "It's like saying a girl shouldn't take calculus because she may not be an engineer." That's not the point. So there was, with Orthodox groups, there was much more hostility, even if you weren't advocating for any particular change. But it was wonderful for me because I really got to think about things and do a little research and become familiar with at least what the *halakha* issues were. So you could explain that counting women in a minyan was a very different issue from giving a woman an Aliyah.

JR: How had you gotten involved in Ezrat Nashim? Did you know the women before? Did you meet people at the conference?

TR: No, I knew a few people. I knew Liz Koltun because we'd been at camp together. I knew Paula Hyman slightly. I knew who she was. I knew Judy Hauptman because we had been at Barnard together. Who else did I know? I can't remember if Beth Friedman was a member or not. Maybe not. I think I knew somebody else. And then they had – I don't know. There were quite a few people who wanted to be members. I think they had a lottery or something. [laughter] I don't know how it was. Anyhow, I ended up joining.

JR: So one of the other things that you had marked as something you were interested in talking about is the issue of successes and challenges.

TR: Yeah. That's a little more complicated. On a personal level, I've been involved for about the past six years in a very small Conservative congregation. Before that, when our kids were little, we also belonged to a havurah in another town. I wanted them to have some experience that was more egalitarian. That got harder. Participating with them got harder as the kids got older and got more attached to their own community. But in addition to our Orthodox synagogue, we always had some other involvement. Then, I became very involved in this Conservative synagogue. So it was really the first time that I read Torah on a regular basis. Actually, I'm very proud of that. It feels like a huge accomplishment because I'm not particularly musical. It was very hard for me to learn the notes. A couple of women in this congregation have said to me, "Oh, you're an inspiration to me." I said, "You should have heard me in the beginning." I said, "Many people thought I was hopeless."

JR: That's part of the inspiration aspect

TR: [laughter] It was my husband who taught me, who I have to say has been supportive in every way possible. Certainly, my wanting something more egalitarian probably

pushed him past his comfort zone in davening places that were egalitarian.

JR: Does he come with you to this shul?

TR: He actually comes only very rarely, but that's primarily because it's a long walk, and it's uphill on the way home, and he's not into –

JR: Exercise [inaudible]. Yeah.

TR: No. No. But he comes for – if it were closer, he would come more often. He comes for special occasions, but he's really been very, very supportive, and he came to the – when we belonged to the havurah, he came to the havurah. I know in the beginning it was very hard for him to daven there. But he made some adjustments to it or peace with it. I don't know. I stopped asking. I used to ask him about it all the time. I'd say, "Well, how did it feel to you? Did it feel like a real davening?" And then I just stopped. I just could see that was not productive. The point of all this is that our kids always had a foot in both communities, a community that was Modern Orthodox and a community that was more egalitarian. They all went to camp Ramah. When my oldest son went to Israel and came back more observant, I was initially very upset. I felt in some ways that I had failed to transmit my values. That's not a good feeling as a parent, whether it's about religious issues or other issues. You like to feel that you transmitted the values that are really important to you. However, in the context of his world, he's very much a feminist. He teaches at Drisha. [Editor's Note: The Drisha Institute for Jewish Education is a center for advanced Jewish learning located in the Bronx]. He's very supportive of women in all kinds of ways. He wouldn't daven in the places that I daven, but he's not critical of them. He certainly acts in his life – I mean, he's a feminist in his own life, and what he believes about women and women's equality – all kinds of ways. So, I really do feel that I have transmitted my values. It didn't come out exactly the way I lived my life, but on the other hand, it's not supposed to because that's not my life. [laughter] My daughter and my younger son both identify more with the Conservative movement; they assume

egalitarian is a given. I was having a conversation with my younger son; we were talking about the process by which a particular Conservative synagogue in the neighboring town became egalitarian. And he said, "You mean Conservative synagogues weren't always egalitarian?" [laughter] So I said, “No, no,” And on some level, I'm sure he knows that.

JR: They're still not all egalitarian.

TR: Right. But in his experience, the Conservative synagogues that he's been to have always been egalitarian. So, the things that he takes for granted are very different.

JR: Does that make you glad that he's able to take those things for granted? Or does it feel like there's a piece of your own history of making those things happen that's been forgotten, that's sort of trouble or something? Or both? I mean, it doesn't have to be [inaudible].

TR: It’s both. I’m certainly glad that he can take it for granted. But on the other hand, I think there's a danger in taking anything too much for granted.

JR: I want to wrap up just so we're not late to the next panel. I'm sorry we didn't get a chance to talk about your involvement in women's tefillah groups because I'm interested in hearing about that also, but we'll have to leave that for another time. But I want to just take a couple of minutes just to do some sort of wrap-up reflections. There are two kinds of questions. One is just if you have any thoughts on how you identify as a feminist and whether your sense of what that means or how you've identified has changed over time.

TR: There were two periods of time when I didn't work outside the home at all. And during one of them, I said to Judy Hauptman, "I'm not really a feminist because I'm not working." I really felt terrible about not working. I said, "I can't call myself a feminist." [laughter] She said, "Being a feminist is a state of mind, and it's not dependent on whether or not you work outside your home." So, now, let me try to get back to your question. Has it changed over time? I'm sure it has, but in some ways, I don't even quite

realize how. As I say, I now look back on the notion that there were things that women couldn't do, shouldn't do, or were unfeminine. I say, "Oh my God, that's absurd. How could anybody have thought that?" So, I don't know.

JR: I know you have four granddaughters. So as you think about the world that they will inherit or what role you hope they will inherit, what's your vision of what legacy you hope to pass on or what changes you hope will happen for future generations?

TR: Yeah. That's a little complicated. I certainly hope and assume that in terms of their lives, outside of a religious context, they will feel like the world is open to them. I have no reason to think that that won't be the case. It's clear that they will grow up in a more Orthodox community than I live in or than their parents grew up in because their parents both became more observant. But I certainly assume that within the framework of their community, they will be encouraged to do as much as possible in whatever ways they go beyond that. I don't know. My granddaughter already told me, probably when she was age four, that women couldn't be rabbis. I said, "Well, not in the synagogue that you go to, but in other synagogues, women can be rabbis." So she'll learn that women can be rabbis. [laughter]

JR: Are there particular kinds of things you want to communicate to the – not even to necessarily your own grandchildren or your own children, but the kinds of things you wish you could say or leave as a sort of message?

TR: I guess the main one, and I don't really think I talked about this in the interview at all, is that you are responsible for your own identity and for your own decisions, whether you're married or single or in a relationship or not. To really be a person and have a strong sense of yourself, you need to think those things through without assuming that the community that you live in will do it for you or who you marry will do it for you. I think that's the main thing.

JR: One other question that I forgot to ask earlier is, before you had encountered feminism in a Jewish context, had you encountered it in a secular context? I know you went to college probably before feminism was really out and about, but I don't know if, in your early years out of college or in graduate school, it was already in the classroom or around campuses.

TR: Not that much, in my experience. I do remember – I'm trying to remember when this was, but I think it was already late '60s, being at some sort of Jewish gathering and somebody saying to me that I had been oppressed all my life and I just hadn't realized it. I thought, "Oh, leave me alone." [laughter] So if it was out there – again, I don't quite remember when this was. If it was out there, it wasn't being conveyed in a way that I could latch on to. It was more – for me, it came more when I got what I wanted and found that it wasn't enough, which is to say, I got married, I was in a good relationship, but it wasn't enough. It didn't settle things. It didn't satisfy. I had assumed that being in a relationship and getting married would somehow complete me. And it didn't. Or, if it would have, it would have been in a way that I didn't want.

JR: Well, thank you. Is there anything else that we haven't touched on that you wanted to speak about?

TR: No. Not compellingly. I could probably go on and on.

JR: Yeah. There are a lot of things I would love to ask you. I don't want to take you from the panel. Well, thank you very much. This was really interesting.

[END OF INTERVIEW]