Elana Sztokman Transcript

Jayne Guberman: This is Jayne Guberman. Today is Sunday, February 8, 2015. I'm here with Elana Sztokman 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. Elana, do I have your permission to conduct this interview?

Elana Sztokman: Yes.

JG: Great. So, let's just begin with – can you tell us when and where you were born and where you grew up?

ES: I was born in Brooklyn, New York, in Flatbush, in 1969. That's where I grew up [inaudible] childhood. I went to the Yeshiva Flatbush for thirteen years. Then I went to Barnard College.

JG: You went to Barnard?

ES: Barnard. Then got married right after Barnard [and] lived in Flatbush for another year or so. Then made aliyah, and I've been living in Israel since then.

JG: What year did you make aliyah?

ES: 1993. I got married in '91, graduated college in June '91, got married December '91, had a baby in February '93, made Aliyah in June '93 with a four-month-old baby. Then we lived in Israel ever since then, except for three years. We had a three-year stint in Australia from 2002 to 2005. I was working there. I was the educational director of JNF, the Jewish National Fund, and I was also teaching gender stuff. I was teaching—

JG: Where?

ES: – at the Melton school, the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School there. They have branches –

JG: In which city?

ES: In Melbourne.

JG: In Melbourne.

ES: That's it.

JG: That's it?

ES: That's it. Yeah. [laughter]

JG: All in one breath. Okay. Can you tell us briefly about your family and their attitudes towards and involvement in Jewish life when you were growing up?

ES: Oh, sure. I grew up in a modern Orthodox household. My father was super active in everything. He was on every committee, president of a gazillion organizations. Every modern Orthodox organization around, he was either on the board of or the president of. He was the president of my school when I was graduating. He was the president of the shul for a zillion years. Also, in the New York Jewish area, he was often the token orthodox person; he liked to think of himself that way. In UJA [United Jewish Appeal], he was the treasurer of UJA. He was also Baal [inaudible] and a Baal Tefillah. So, being super involved in shul was the most important thing in the world, except for the fact that we were all girls.

JG: The kids in your family were all girls?

ES: Yes, I grew up in a family of all girls. So, we got very much mixed messages about this. On the one hand, Judaism is everything, family is everything, leadership is

everything, involvement is everything, but you're girls. You can't really do that. So it's more like – makes you marry somebody who's like that. We got these mixed messages about women's leadership. Sometimes, my father would be a little bit proud of his daughters being important, but more, he wanted his daughters to be dating and marrying somebody who was important in the community. Really, the message was the most important thing for a girl to do is be a good mother and be a good wife.

JG: What about your mother?

ES: My mother never worked. Her only real public involvement was she was on the board of Brooklyn College Hillel for many years. But for most of my growing up, she said women don't speak in public. She never spoke in public. The woman's job was to support the man, never contradict your husband, always serve the husband. My father doesn't know how to boil water. He doesn't know how to change a diaper. He doesn't get up – Shabbat lunch is, my father sits; my mother serves like that.

JG: How many kids? How many siblings do you have?

ES: There were four of us. I'm number three of four girls. Women, I guess? [laughter]

JG: How would you say you identify as a Jew today, just given that background?

ES: It's a really loaded question because I've been Orthodox pretty much my whole life. But I became a feminist somewhere in my mid-twenties, to the great chagrin of my family. So, my relationship with my family of origin is very strained, except for actually my father. My father is the only one who I sort of have a relationship with. It's also been really hard for me to find a place where I belong in the Orthodox community, even though I've been involved. When we went to Australia, I was involved in starting the partnership minyan there, but it was only a three-year stint, so we left. It was a great time there, but Melbourne wasn't really home. So, we moved to Modi'in, and we got involved in starting a partnership minyan there. But there, too, I never quite found a home for lots of different

reasons. I participate sometimes in the conservative shul, which I find much more satisfying in terms of gender issues, but it's not my community in the sense that my husband doesn't daven there. He doesn't like going to a synagogue where there's no mechitza. He doesn't feel comfortable. He's very supportive of me in every way, except for this issue that we haven't found a synagogue that we both go to. So, I sort of stopped going to synagogue altogether, maybe five years ago. Even Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, I don't go to shul. So, I'm feeling very much like I don't really have a place right now. I don't know what my place is. It's so funny to be here at BJ today because I keep thinking to myself, "If I had a place like BJ, I probably would be engaged, and I would be involved. Had I grown up in a place like BJ, I might not even be such a stalwart feminist. It wouldn't even necessarily have to be such an important part of my life the way it is now." I made a career out of Jewish feminism, basically, because it was such a powerful emotional pull. I mean, I did my doctorate on it. I've written three books on this. This has been my career. Not because I woke up one day and said I want a career as a Jewish feminist but because I felt like I had to. I'm sorry to interrupt. Go ahead.

JG: I just want to go back a little bit and ask when and how did you first become aware that gender matters to you as a Jew? Or several instances, if there were moments that you can point to?

ES: Right. So, there's one instance. A key instance was really stumbling upon the agunah issue. I was this young mother in Jerusalem. I was covering my hair and wearing long skirts and doing – I was a little yeshiva girl. I mean, I got married when I was twenty-one, for God's sake. I was this little girl trying to do – I wanted to be good. I so badly wanted to be good. After I had my first child and my second child, I got involved with this group of women. We used to do charity. It was really direct charity. We used to give our diapers and formula to poor women. One of the women who approached us – suddenly, I'm sitting around the table with these women, and we're hearing this story about this woman who's an agunah. I had heard about agunot because I grew up in

Flatbush, and Flatbush – we had protests. So, I remember growing up, and we had protests in front of stores of a man who – so, it wasn't that the issue was not familiar to me. But I had never seen it close up, the dynamics of how a woman becomes an agunah and what abuse looks like that way. That started me on a path. With a bunch of other women, we started this organization for agunot. That really started my path. Around then was when I also decided to stop covering my hair. I think of that moment when I stopped covering my hair as the moment when I woke up. It was the first time that I allowed myself to talk back to my culture, to talk back and say, "What do I want?" I was so used to doing what I was told. I was so used to doing what was right. I was so used to only asking the questions about my life in that framework of, "What am I supposed to do? What does the world want from me? How am I going to fulfill expectations?" It was the first time that I really allowed myself the luxury of saying, "What do I want, Ilana? What does Ilana want?" And so, taking off my hat was this moment of tremendous awakening and awareness and understanding that women need to be freed. [laughter] It sounds so trite when I say it, but the idea of women's liberation is exactly what it was about for me. It was the idea of just freeing women to just feel for ourselves, to think for ourselves, to do what we want, to live our lives according to the dictates of our hearts and minds.

JG: When did this incident that you're describing take place in relation to your experience with this particular –?

ES: The agunah? Around the same time. This would have been around –

JG: How old were you then? What year?

ES: I would've been about twenty-five, twenty-six. Something like that. It would have been in the late '90s, around '96.

JG: Do you feel like there's a direct correlation between the two?

ES: Yeah, I do. I think it was. Yeah, it was the –

JG: Did your awareness, sparked by this relationship you then had with this agunot, did it open your eyes to other things that were happening around you?

ES: Yes.

JG: What else were you seeing?

ES: Yes.

JG: Noticing? Feeling?

ES: Well, it was interesting because, like I said, in Flatbush, there wasn't awareness of the agunah issue. But also, Flatbush was also a place where there was a burgeoning Orthodox Jewish feminist movement. Rivka Haut was in Flatbush. There was a Flatbush women's tefilla group, which was one of the first women's tefilla groups. But for us, in our house, we were not allowed to go there. I mean, that was all weird. We were taught that those were really strange women and that feminists are destroying the community and destroying families, and women who want careers are the bane of the community's existence. Look at the children of women who have careers; they're all messed up. This is the kind of language that I grew up with. So, even though feminism was literally around the corner from my house, it might as well have been a different world. Could you remind me of the question again?

JG: Sorry. I got distracted by that, too.

ES: Yeah.

JG: We were talking about whether there was a direct correlation between your awareness and what else had happened. Yeah.

ES: What else was I becoming aware of? Right. The agunah issue – we started this organization for agunot. When we started agunot – I remember even one of my sisters saying to me once, “You don't have to be a feminist to care about the agunah issue. The agunah issue isn't a feminist issue. Everybody cares about the agunah issue. It's like low-hanging fruit in the world of Judaism and women. Everybody cares about the agunah issue. But just because you care about the agunah issue doesn't mean that you want women to – I don't know – put on tallit or something like that. Let's not be extreme.” You know what I mean? [laughter] Right? So, I grew up very much in that framework. So, to make the leap from understanding that agunah is a feminist issue and that the problem isn't just – oh, there are just some rabbis who are not courageous enough to interpret the Halakha the correct way. That's not the issue. The problem was actually within Halakha. The problem is that Halakha is sexist. It was that leap that took a while to be able to say, “Hang on a second. Dig deeper. This is your culture. This is your heritage. This is your tradition. What is it saying about women?” I remember around that same time, I borrowed a book from a friend of mine, Susanna Herschel's *On Being a Jewish Feminist*. That was my first Jewish feminist book that I ever read. It was this tsunami. The idea that there's this world of Jewish feminism – I just related to all of it. So, while I was working for this agunah organization, we had these empowerment workshops. One time, we got a grant for an empowerment workshop for the board. So, the board was [inaudible] – because we were used to doing empowerment workshops for agunot, to help them with their lives. But this was for us. Now, ironically, there were no agunot on the board, which was problematic.

JG: No other women?

ES: There were other women there, but none of the women on the board were agunot. So, it's like we’re treating agunot as the other. Anyway, this woman comes to facilitate an empowerment workshop for the board. She says to us – first of all, she says to us, like this, “Why are you here?” We were like, “What do you mean, ‘why are you here?’” She's

like, “Why do you care about the agunah issue?” So we all had good answers. It was like, “Well, it's a travesty of justice. We have to fix Halakha. We have to save these women's lives.” She goes, “But why? Why davka the agunah issue? There are a zillion issues that you could care about. You could care about abused children. You could care about poverty in India. You could care about homelessness. Why is this issue of agunot triggering something in you that is making you spend dozens of hours a week volunteering?” We were all volunteers. “Why are you doing it?” We were like, “Well, didn't we just explain that to you?” She said, “No.” She said, “Why is it that you relate so much to agunot?” Where is the agunah in you?” I was like, “What? What? No, I’m not agunah. My husband is lovely. He's such a nice guy. He's the nicest guy in the world. I'm not an agunah. I don't experience abuse. I'm not an abused woman.” It took me another ten years of trying to answer that question until I started to really understand why I relate to agunot. Because at the end of the day, all Orthodox women are on some level agunot. All Orthodox women are trapped within a really sexist Halakha system. Even if you don't plan on getting divorced, your marriage – if you're married in an Orthodox way, you're living a patriarchal life, and you're living out a set of rules in which you really are a bought object. To get married in Orthodoxy means that you are purchased by your husband. No matter how wonderful and amazing that spouse is, you're living this life, which, one day, you could turn around, and you could be an agunah. You are. You’re living it out. So, it took me a really, really long time. I'm not exaggerating that it took me ten years to start to be able to answer that question properly, but it's stuck with me. Why do you relate to agunot?

JG: There are other things that happened that sort of helped you along the way to come to grips with what that question meant?

ES: It was all a process. So, I decided to do my – while I was getting involved with this agunot organization, I was having my babies, and I was uncovering my hair and learning all this. So, I did my master's degree in Jewish education. That took about six years

because I was doing it while having kids, and I was doing it in a foreign language. So, when I started my master's degree with my hat and my skirt, I was there. I was this idealist. "Oh, I'm going to teach everybody about how beautiful Judaism is." But by the time I finished six years later, I was already heavy into the agunah issue. I was wearing jeans and a t-shirt. My thinking was totally different. So, I decided to start my doctorate. I decided to do a doctorate that would combine all my interests. I would do it in education and sociology and gender. What I did is I did my doctorate on the subject of adolescent religious girls in school. I spent three years in a religious high school, interviewing these teenage girls and doing that doctorate. Again, that also took me like six or seven years. [laughter] Seriously, I was in university in Israel for thirteen years.

JG: This was in Jerusalem?

ES: In Jerusalem at Hebrew University. I made aliyah in '93. By the time I finished my doctorate, it was 2006, and I had been in school the entire time. That was a lot of my transitioning. Transitioning maybe has a lot of different meanings today. But let's say a lot of my changes happened via this work that I was doing interviewing girls. I had this experience when I finally finished my doctorate. I had, right when we were graduating – a week or two before graduation, the education department wanted to put on display their new doctorates. So, they invited a few of us to go and give talks to the whole department. On the day that I was going to give my talk to the entire education department and sociology department about my six years of doctoral research [laughter], I had a pain in my shoulder. Right before I was going to Jerusalem, I went to this chiropractor woman. She's much more than a chiropractor. They call her the Witch of (Catamount?). She's this healer, this energy spiritual healer type. I go to her a lot. She's a person who doesn't just shift you. She says, "Your body is talking to me. What is your body telling me? All of our memories are stored in our body." So, I'm lying there in this half-conscious state, and she's saying, "Oh, that shoulder. That shoulder is talking to me." Suddenly she says to me, and my eyes are closed, "What were you like when you

were fourteen?" Without hesitating, I said, "I was depressed." I never said those words out loud ever. It didn't even occur to me that that was true. But it was like, of course, I was depressed. I was trapped. I was trapped. Then I realized that I spent my entire dissertation trying to tell the story of these adolescent religious girls about what kind of messages they're getting from the educational system from their society. I realized that what I was really trying to do was tell my own story, and that's what this whole process was about. This whole process was about trying to uncover myself, and it was like, "Oh, you could go to therapy, or you could spend six years doing a dissertation." And apparently, I chose the latter. [laughter] It's all a process. It's just an unraveling. I mean, I did therapy, too. So, it's not either/or. I did therapy, and I did healing, and I did Reiki, and I did acupuncture, and I did all kinds of things.

JG: So, how would you say that Jewish feminism, beyond when you got into this whole world that you were looking at and examining and thinking beyond the issue of agunot – how was that shaping your sense of self and your experiences?

ES: Well, it's become sort of everything. I mean, being a feminist has become almost more important than being Jewish. I know that sounds awful. But I relate more to feminism than I do to Judaism today. Feminism has become my identity. Judaism is slipping away from me because I'm finding it harder and harder to maintain my hold on Judaism. The more I dig in, and the more I try, the deeper I discover that the patriarchy is, and the sexism is. It's so deep, and it's so painful, and it's so everywhere. I haven't figured out how to stay here. But it's my entire identity. Jewish feminism is my entire identity.

JG: What would you say are the most important accomplishments of Jewish feminism today?

ES: The most important accomplishments of Jewish feminism? Women rabbis. Women's ritual. Women's liturgy – rewriting the liturgy.

JG: Have you experienced rewritten liturgy?

ES: Oh, I did this morning. I went to this priestess's prayer. It was fabulous.

JG: Tell me about it.

ES: It was absolutely fabulous. Instead of "(Haluhu?), they did "(Haluha?)," for example. I just love that – and other things. It was beautiful. It was really beautiful.

JG: How do you deal with the patriarchal language of Jewish prayer and liturgy at this point?

ES: I pray my own way. I don't often follow the siddur. I pray all the time. I'm a big prayer. I like praying. But I very rarely follow the siddur. That's why this morning was really good because it's sort of following the siddur with bits and pieces of the siddur. So, you're still sort of connected, but doing it in a way that feels better for you. It feels more right. It was right in so many other ways. It also cut out so much of the excess verbiage because the Jewish davening is very often way too many words, way too repetitive. It's a lot of rote repetition. This morning was much more really trying to feel it. Much better to stay on one word and experience that word and experience the depth of that word than rush through two hundred pages of text.

JG: How did you get interested in partnership minyans?

ES: [laughter] The first partnership minyan – one of the first partnership minyans was Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem. A very, very close friend of mine was involved in starting it. Her name is Haviva Ner-David. She's a rabbi and anything. So, she was very involved. Their first Shabbat, she called me up. She goes, "We need somebody to do Pesukei dezimra." She said, "I can't find a woman to do it." I didn't live in Jerusalem at the time, but it happened to be that I was going to be in Jerusalem that Shabbat for a family bat mitzvah. I said, "Well, I've never done Pesukei dezimra before." She goes,

“Look, you got to learn how to do it.” [laughter] She goes, “Because if you don't do it, then we're going to have to ask a man to do it. And if we ask a man to do it, that's going to defeat the whole purpose.” So, I said, “Okay.” So, I did it. [laughter] It was my first time wearing my tallit in public, too. I had a tallit made for myself, but I'd never worn it in public. That same Shabbat, my daughter did Yigdal. She was eight. Now she's twenty-two. So, we were very involved in that first Shabba even though we didn't even live in Jerusalem. Once you do that, there's no turning back.

JG: Can you remember what you felt like standing there doing that?

ES: Liberated. One hundred percent liberated. It was like a whole piece of you just bursting open. Just bursting open. Pieces of you that were dormant, that were half dead, suddenly come to life, like lights turning on inside your soul that you didn't know were there. It's like [what] you see in the science fiction movies; you see a robot that's just lying there dead, and suddenly, you see *woosh*, those lights come on, and suddenly the robot is alive. That's how I felt. [laughter]

JG: I'm very conscious of the time here because we don't have very much more time.

ES: I told you that I talk a lot. [laughter]

JG: No. It's wonderful. What do you see as the most important next steps in advancing gender equality in Judaism and Jewish life? How do you see partnership minyans, for instance, fitting into that?

ES: I'm going to speak to Orthodoxy for a second. I believe that the most important issue in Orthodoxy is counting women for minyan. Because at the end of the day, the partnership minyan doesn't mean anything if women don't count. It just doesn't mean that much. I’m sort of over partnership minyan at this point in my life.

JG: Why is that?

ES: I'll give you an example of what happened on a partnership minyan in Modi'in. There was a time – the first two years of the partnership in Modi'in, I gave it my entire heart and soul. I was doing everything. I was on every committee. I was running the education committee, and I was creating sederim for the kids. I was leyning. I was teaching my kids to leyn, and I was trying to show up on time, even though that was really difficult with four little kids. We lived really far. We lived a forty-minute walk. So, to get there on Friday night, we had to drive, which meant that I had to coordinate candle lighting and driving. My husband and I are partners on Friday. We both are busy in the kitchen. There were a couple of men who like to be in charge because the patriarchy is still everywhere, so you still have this masculine domination thing. This one guy who, to this day, loves getting up in shul there and criticizing people for coming late and criticizing women for coming late and saying, "Oh, why should we all come on time if the women aren't going to come on time. We're doing this for you, and look at all the sacrifices these men are doing for you, and how come women aren't showing up on time?" So, one Friday, I'm rushing, rushing, rushing to get to shul on time. My husband was still washing the floors, like five minutes before Shabbat, and it was clear that we weren't all going to make it to shul, so I said, "Look, you finish washing the floors, and you light candles. I'm going to drive all the kids to shul, and we'll get there on time." I got to shul on time. I'm rushing in and just in time for tefilla to start. This guy, the co-chair or whatever, who likes to reprimand women, looks at me, and he goes, "Where's your husband? We need him for minyan." Right. So, when I think about the story, it's this real sense of – you don't really count no matter what. It's easy to reprimand you. You have to be religious. You have to be just as religious and just as everything and just as perfect as men are expected to be, even though, of course, you're still expected to cut the vegetables and prepare lunch and wash the floors and do all those things. You have to do all those things and come to shul on time. You have to do that, but we're not really going to count you. So, I feel like, without that, Orthodoxy is like a big waste of time. Partnership minyan itself is a little bit of a waste of time. There's too much embedded Orthodoxy in

there. It's very painful.

JG: Have you ever explored non-Orthodox –?

ES: Yeah, I sometimes go to the – but again, I haven't really found my home there either. Just because my husband doesn't come with me and my kids aren't interested – we've lost the family shul-going Shabbat experience. So, I haven't really replaced it with anything. My Shabbat has sort of become yoga, meditation, Reiki, and all those things. Also, it's a forty-minute walk away. We happen to live very far because these shuls didn't exist when we moved to Modi'in. We moved to Modi'in in 2005; there was no partnership minyan there. I might still, but I don't know what my future is in terms of shul and in terms of Shabbat. I don't know what my future is.

JG: So, my last question that I have time for. What do you think your children [are] feelings about all of this?

ES: They're all different. I've got four kids. Each one is in a totally different place.

JG: Boys or girls?

ES: One boy, three girls. They're all [in] their own place, which actually, I think, is a good thing. I want my children to be free. My children are free. It's what I was missing as an Orthodox girl. I was missing the opportunity to just be. To just be wherever my heart takes me, to be exactly how I want to be, whether that means dancing or singing or not. I just want my kids to be free to be wherever their heart takes them, whatever that is. So, that's it.

JG: Sounds like a good place to end. Thank you so much.

ES: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]