Merle Feld Transcript

JUDITH ROSENBAUM: Today is July 19th. I am sitting with Merle Feld in her house in Northampton, Massachusetts, and this interview is being conducted by Judith Rosenbaum. Great.

MERLE FELD: That's a good mic!

JR: Yeah, it's really great, and it's also nice -- it's on this long cord, so even if I have to plug the tape recorder in away somewhere else it works pretty well. OK. So I guess the best place to begin is if you would just tell me a little bit about your childhood and your family. I mean, you can begin with easy things like where and when you were born, those kinds of specific questions if that's too broad.

MF: I was born in 1947 in Brooklyn, where I grew up. We lived in Crown Heights, which, I don't know if it was a less famous neighborhood when I was growing up or... I think it was truly. I mean, I think the Lubavitcher Rebbe was there soon after the war, but I don't think, (laughter) I don't think anybody much knew about him! Certainly he wasn't hanging on people's walls as a portrait of who knows what. I was the youngest of three children, the only girl. I have to say, it's funny having written essentially a spiritual memoir, A Spiritual Life [SUNY Press 1999; revised 2007], that I often joke with friends now that total strangers know more about me - (laughter), so it's like I'm almost tempted to say, "Well, I don't know, on page six there's an answer to that question!"

JR: Right, well, it's also -- having read your book, it's funny to ask you questions that I sort of know the answer to, but you know...

MF: Right. We were a really assimilated not Jewishly observant family without institutional associations, Jewish institutional associations, so that aspect of my identity

came in college.

JR: Were your parents born here?

MF: My parents were both born here, both born in New York. All four of my grandparents were not born here, and actually two summers ago I had the opportunity to go back to Slovakia and visit the town where my mother's ancestors came from, and to discover, unbelievably to me, we looked at archival records and had no, no idea that we would find as much as we found, and we found an absolutely intact and well-kept cemetery with the graves of my great-grandparents and my great-great-grandparents, and discovered that my great-great-grandfather was a mohel, which, like, I mean, if you knew my family you would know how utterly bizarre that was [that an ancestor of ours was learned, observant]! I mean, when I wound up being engaged to a rabbi... I think people in the family at large already had a sense that I'd become involved Jewishly, and saw me, I think, as different, as a kind of maverick, but it was such a different thing to do, coming from my family, so to discover that my great-great-grandfather was, you know, a mohel, and my great-grandfather was apparently a real pillar of the community -- just amazing to me.

JR: So had your parents grown up in strongly Jewish-identified households, or --

MF: My mother, not... My mother, I mean, my mother started lighting Shabbos candles soon after I started lighting Shabbos candles in college.

JR: Why do you think?

MF: Well, the point I was making was that she had never lit them before. Why did she start then? She was an unusual person, and her life really hadn't given her an opportunity to experience much of anything beyond her very small world, but she was open to things that she didn't know about. She started keeping kosher at that point, (we'd never had a kosher home), I think first of all because it was important to me, and

she did it of her own accord, it wasn't that I had asked her to do that. I mean, my parents were in their sixties before they ever belonged to a synagogue, so...

JR: Did your family celebrate any holidays at home? Shabbat?

MF: We celebrated Shabbat purely in terms of the menu of Friday night dinner. We had challah, although it was sliced in the bakery, and certainly nobody ever made a blessing over it, until, as I say, I was in college. We didn't make kiddush and we didn't light candles. So there was challah, there was chopped liver, there was chicken, and my father (laughter) used to say almost every week, 'cause he really hated chicken, "Why do we have chicken every Friday night?" And I don't think my mother knew. I mean, it was like, "Why do I make chicken Friday night? I mean, well, of course I make chicken Friday night!" We also, I guess, not infrequently had ham for Sunday lunch, you know, so... I guess most years, some of the years when we were growing up, we would light Hanukkah candles. My brothers did go to Hebrew school, and they both were bar mitzvahed, but that was the extent of it. And I think because I didn't go, and... It was something of a financial sacrifice for my parents to send my brothers, even in a limited kind of way, for bar mitzvah training, but, I mean, I had friends who were girls who went to Hebrew school, and so I knew that, and I would ask. I really wanted to go. I mean, it's the typical kind of thing. My brothers who were essentially forced to go hated it, really had minimally anything to do with Jewish life subsequently. I, who didn't have the opportunity to go, I was hooked! (laughter) I couldn't have entrée. I was intrigued. "What goes on there?" …We had a Seder every year. We would use... I remember using the Barton's or Baracini (those were two chocolate companies that were popular in the '50s and '60s in New York) haggadahs, so I remember using those haggadahs for the seder, everything really in English. Nobody in the family understood Hebrew or... I think even, I don't think anyone in the family even understood why were we reading what we were reading! (laughter) I mean, it's a rather bizarre document if you, you know, if you think of it really from the outside, but again, I remember just being very curious, with a sense that

there were answers to the questions I had about the haggadah and the seder. There was a sense that besides the reading of this text and going round robin, and the meal itself, there was a sense that somehow the evening should include singing, but really nobody knew any of the Hebrew songs. Certainly no one knew Hallel. Maybe there was a little transliterated at the back of the haggadah, I don't know, but mostly when the seder was over we would sing, and then I guess basically the table sort of thinned out and just my mother and I would sing. So we would sing the songs we knew, and we would begin with what were then called "Negro spirituals," which seemed appropriate for the evening, and then we would move to folk songs, "If I Had a Hammer," whatever, and then we moved to Broadway showtunes, 'cause that was what my mother and I sang and that was what we knew. In those years, our drinking glasses were --

JR: (inaudible, laughter)!

MF: No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no! There wasn't -- wasn't that kind of family! My mother didn't recycle Yahrzeit glasses.

JR: My grandmother did! (laughter)

MF: But we had these large drinking glasses, each one had printed on it a different American song, like "I've Been Workin' on the Railroad," and I don't even remember what else. So we would also sing what was on the glasses! (laughter) One seder, many years later, I remember saying to the assembled guests at my seder table that, you know, when I was a kid, we used to have this custom, and a friend of mine insisted that I do a solo of "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" (laughter) Anyway... I think... Oh, well -- no, I said we sometimes lit Hanukkah candles. Hanukkah often was mysteriously around Christmas. I mean, I think it was more about little presents than it was a sense of what was this holiday. Oh, and Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, but I've written about that in the book -- that [we didn't belong to a synagogue so] we used to get dressed up and sit in the living room and fast, and that was Yom Kippur. I mean, Rosh Hashanah was different in

that we got dressed up, sat in the living room, but we didn't fast! (laughter), that was like the key difference.

JR: Were there other relatives who lived nearby that you celebrated --

MF: We had... Basically, my mother's family lived in the neighborhood, so for seder my grandmother always came - she was really a part of our household; I mean, she had a separate apartment, but she stayed in our apartment during the day every day, and then she'd go back to her apartment to go to sleep at night, and really, when my mother was working, it was my grandmother who was raising us in that way. And my mother had a sister, and she and her family lived in the neighborhood -- and my mother's brother's family, he died very young -- I was a toddler when he died -- but his wife and their kids also lived in the neighborhood. So during the year, there was, like, Saturday was a kind of shopping day, was a cleaning day, was a day you go to the movies, right, that's what you did on Saturday, but Sunday was for family visiting, and we would, you know, we would visit. I don't, I really didn't have... I knew that we were Jewish, and my husband used to say about my parents that they were remarkably positive about their Jewish identity for people who were not at all observant. Like it wasn't as if they were reacting against their Jewish identity or their upbringing.

JR: So how did that positiveness manifest itself?

MF: Well, I mean, I think he meant it -- I mean, actually what he said was that they really weren't self-hating Jews… It's hard to answer that. I mean, they were, I want to say they were open, but in some ways they were also rather closed and had all sorts of prejudices that were, you know, I think pretty typical in middle class Jewish homes in that period.

JR: Like what kind of thing?

MF: I think they were kind of, I think they were somewhat schizophrenic about their relationship to Blacks. I mean, on the one hand, my mother was an elementary school

teacher and in her classroom Abraham Lincoln was a hero. They were sort of strongly patriotic. You know, that meant voting for FDR, and certainly they were solid Democrats in all the years I was growing up… but I think they were concerned about Blacks encroaching our neighborhood. I think that as that happened in the '60s, they associated it with a rise in crime, fears of violence. Like many northerners in general, and many northern Jews in particular, they believed in civil rights and equality for Blacks in the South, but what they felt about Blacks in Brooklyn was I think more ambivalent. And I mean, I suppose it's also relevant when you think about class and race. The more lower class you are economically, the less comfortable and graceful I think often people are able to be about the groups that they see as being, one or two steps lower on the ladder than they are.

JR: Right, and there's so much more interaction that had to happen. Did your family have any sort of relationship to Israel or Zionism?

MF: Zero. Zero. There's nothing more to say than zero! (laughter) I mean, you know, I've sometimes commented to friends... One close friend of mine in elementary school -- when I think back on it now I realize that I had several friends whose parents were refugees, survivors, but this one family in particular was clear to me then that they were refugees -- and my parents used to comment about her parents, who they were not friends with but they sort of knew of each other, they would say in a kind of, you know, undertone, "they were in the camps", and for me, until I was well into my teens, I was clueless about what that meant. And I thought to myself, (laughter) "They're adults! They went to summer camp?" Like I was just really... I didn't know anything about Jewish history. I mean, not immediately and not further back.

JR: Now, can you tell me a little bit about how you came to become more involved with the Jewish community?

MF: Well, one piece of it was that I was very curious, like what went on there when my peers were in Hebrew school? What were they learning?

JR: Did you have a lot of friends growing up whose families were more observant than yours?

MF: One that I knew of in the following way: I have a distinct memory, and it must have been in fifth or sixth grade, going to visit some classmates after school who were twins, and I guess it was on a Friday, and it must have been in the winter, and as we were playing, at some point I remember their mother lit candles, and I was clueless. What was she doing? Why was she doing it. I only reconstruct after the fact that it must've been a Friday. If I think about it, maybe she covered her head when she did it. You know, she probably put her hands over her eyes when she did it, and it was like, "What is that?" Just like total mystery, what is that?

JR: Did you ask about those kinds of things, or did you have a sense that they were like not open for conversation?

MF: That's a good question. Yeah, I think, I think it was probably in the category of things that you're really not supposed to ask about. In part, I think -- there were a lot of questions I didn't ask as a child, either because I thought my parents wouldn't know and that would embarrass them, or that my asking the question would embarrass them, and thinking back on that as an adult, I think that's a common experience of children. I think it's more unusual to grow up in a home where it's really OK to ask questions. So that all was a factor in my getting involved Jewishly. I remember the first time I went to Hillel, I was a student at Brooklyn College. It was my first year, and I say to people it was kind of by accident because it was a freshman reception, and I remember that I hadn't gotten an invitation or a postcard or something, and I ran into a friend who was invited and so I went along. I guess in part I thought at first... It's funny, I haven't thought about these things in a long time. It's complicated why I went, why I began to go to Hillel. I think one

reason was probably Brooklyn College was a huge school and it was a way of finding a group, to have more of a college social life, you know, an extracurricular life. It wasn't so apparent to me how to do that, and the other options I think were not so appealing. There was a "house plan system" that was like fraternities and sororities for poor people, and I did join a house plan, but it was so uninteresting to me. So that's a second thing, that there were interesting things that went on at Hillel. I think I also had a sense that, oh, here's a place where I could have answers to some of these questions, the stored up questions from my childhood. And I was impressed by the people, just by the way they related to each other. I liked the quality of interaction there, and it was really foreign to me, and I had hoped in college to have experiences that were foreign to me, and this was really interesting and very foreign! All of it was, you know, I remember the first time... So for Sukkot, you know, they had a big Sukkah, and everyone ate in the Sukkah, and I thought, "This is unbelievable! They're young adults, and they're sitting in a playhouse having lunch!" (laughter) Talk about the suspension of disbelief. It was such an imaginative leap for me. And they decorated it! (laughter) This is incredible! I mean, it really... I don't think I've lost that feeling about Sukkot in whatever it is, 35 years. I think I've got it, and that was an advantage to being such an alien, to being such an outsider is that I didn't have the prejudices of, "Eww, it's so Jewish," (laughter) that that sense of real disgust or revulsion that I think a lot of Jews feel about Jews who are more observant, and people will associate me with them and oh God, it would be unbearable! I'm an American, you know! (laughter) I didn't have any of that, I just... It was really a different world, and I was ready to explore a different world, and fairly pissed to be going to Brooklyn College.

JR: In an academic sense or because you were close to home, or...?

MF: I was at home. It was a commuter school! (laughter) Because to me it was a glorified high school, and in fact I'd gone to a very good high school and had really been challenged there, and lots of courses I had from high school were more sophisticated and

challenging than the courses I had at Brooklyn College. So yeah, I was pissed academically. I was pissed because I wanted a college experience. I wanted to enter a different world, and it felt to me like I had been cheated.

JR: Did your brothers have more of a college experience?

MF: No, they went to Brooklyn College, which is part of how it was very hard for me to justify my desire for something more, like Brooklyn College was good enough for them, they were older, they were boys, how could it not be good enough for me? And I remember talking to my mother beforehand about that, and certainly I think the primary reason was financial -- she said, even with scholarship money, surely it would cost us something and we wouldn't have it. And I think also she was ambivalent about my entering another world, a larger world. I don't know if she thought I would stay in Brooklyn. It was clear to me I would not... Anyway...

JR: At one point did this sort of Jewish world that seemed foreign start to feel not foreign, like your world more?

MF: Fabulous question! Very soon, I mean, maybe almost simultaneous. It felt like -- and I shudder to say this because it's such a cliché, but it did feel like coming home, in the way that we talked earlier about, the feeling of being in Israel. It just felt like... It felt like a world that was the right size for me, you know. The bed wasn't too big, it wasn't too small, the porridge wasn't too hot, it wasn't too cold! Yeah, it felt... I mean, I guess there were almost two stages to every part of this exploration. There was a stage of "My God, we're adults and we're sitting in this playhouse!" And then it was like, "What a wonderful idea!" And I think with each new discovery there was that kind of layered experience... Like discovering davening, discovering Jewish prayer. I mean, I'm thinking about the choreography of it, the bowing and the bending and the bouncing, (laughter) and the swaying and the shuckling and the... I remember the first time I was at a weekday service, and I saw men in tefillin, and it was like... I could not have been more

embarrassed than if I had blundered into the bathroom. You know, it was like they were doing something so intimate and so particular. I felt I should be watching this, but the notion that, there was a framework, there was a structure, for this aspect of human experience, it was profound for me.

JR: Well, let me shift gears a tiny bit here. You talked a tiny bit about your family's politics in terms of their community and being Democrats that kind of stuff. Did you see your --

MF: Of...? I'm sorry.

JR: Being Democrats and sort of being committed to some of those kinds of values. Did you see your parents as being political people?

MF: Not at all. Well... Not at all with a couple of exceptions. I mean, I think the answers are different with regard to my mother and my father. I think my mother really had no time and no energy for anything beyond her family, her work, keeping a house - she worked so hard at all of that- so I think she had no time and energy for politics. She had a certain sense of humor about it; I mean, she had a sense of humor about everything. We lived in a three room apartment, five people, and my oldest brother slept on the couch. I mean, that was his permanent bed. Because we lived within a couple of blocks of Ebbets Field -- oh, what's the religious group that used to have their annual convention there? I can't think of it. Not Seventh Day Adventists, not Mormons...

JR: Jehovah's Witnesses?

MF: Jehovah's Witnesses, thank you. They used to come ringing doorbells and knocking on doors all over the neighborhood, looking for places where people would be willing to put up Jehovah's Witnesses who were coming for their annual convention at Ebbets Field. (laughter) They would knock on the door, my mother would answer the door, and I mean... She would just be polite and straightforward to them and just say no,

it wasn't possible, (laughter) then she would close the door and she would say, "If they could find another bed in here, they're welcome to it!" (laughter) That's really got nothing to do with politics, but in a sense it expresses a certain situation she was in, that she had enough to do at home without looking for other people who needed help... My father was active in a fraternal organization that actually still exists. It was, you know, the landtsmen, from that particular region of Europe, when they came to the States formed a fraternal group, and purchased some land, with their dues, and so there developed a cemetery (inaudible). You had access to a cemetery through them, and they had monthly meetings. And now it's called the Mutual Benevolent Society of 1865, which I guess is when it was founded. Then it was called maybe the Hungarian Society, although they weren't Hungarian. I mean, it was from my mother's family. They were Slovakian, but whatever. That was the society. Women were not permitted to join. Women are still not permitted to join! It's unbelievable! So this was my mother's father's family, but of course my mother wasn't a member. My father became a member. My brothers became members. No doubt someday they'll recruit my son! (laughter) So my father was very active in that, although it was my mother's family, and there used to be a really large organization, and a rather wealthy organization. He was for a number of years President. In '56, in the Hungarian revolution, they supplied a lot of money to help get Jews out, to help resettle them here, so my father was involved in that because he was, I think, President in those years, as well, but other than that, no.

JR: You wrote in your book that -- I wrote it down -- that you used to describe yourself as "the most apolitical person I know." How and why did that change?

MF: Well, I have to say, I never experienced my early involvement in feminism as being political.

JR: Why not, do you think?

MF: I...think I believe “politics” (break in tape) ...had to do with national politics, international politics. I don’t think I was so subtle as to think you could also be political in social movements, so...

JR: That was sort of the chiddish of feminism?

MF: Right, right! (laughter) Chiddish feminism! I was on a panel with Alicia Ostriker, who was talking about being at the MacDowell Colony, and she said she was potchkeing with a piece she was working on! (laughter) I started teasing her and saying, “How would you spell that?” Then I said to her, “You’re probably the first person ever at MacDowell who was potchkeing!” (laughter) So yes, that was the chiddush of feminism. So, I mean, I really, from, I don’t know, from 1969 I was centrally involved in Jewish feminism, but never thought of that as being political. So when I said I always thought of myself as being the most apolitical person I knew, in part I think that was because I didn’t count some of the things I did as being political; therefore, I was still apolitical. What changed and where and when it changed was 11 years ago, (in 1989) going to Israel for a sabbatical year. I really didn’t want to go.

JR: Had you been before?

MF: I had been before. I’d lived there a summer in ’71, and I’d been back in ’75, ’76, and then not again ‘til ’89. You know, I found the stance toward Palestinians unconscionable. I was repulsed by the sort of religious invisibility of women. I didn’t want to be there. My husband and I had made a kind of pact when our kids wound up not going to day school; his solution or compensation for that was that we would spend sabbatical time in Israel, so in 1989 his sabbatical came due, and literally I felt like I’d made a pact with the Devil! (laughter) I thought, he really is going to hold me to this, I can’t believe it! And I was also scared, because it was the height of the Intifada, and I thought, I don’t know that this is a safe thing to do with two young kids. I need to stop for a second.

JR: Sure.

(break in tape)

JR: OK, we're back again here. Where were we?

MF: How and when and where and why I became political.

JR: Right.

MF: So I really didn't want to go to Israel. We got there, immediately were received by old friends who had been very close to us when we lived in Champaign-Urbana in the late '60s, early '70s. They had made aliyah. Late '70s? Mid '70s? I don't know. They made aliyah. And she especially, Veronika Cohen, was very involved in many different peace activities in Israel. She came from Hungary originally. Her parents left in '56. They were also Holocaust survivors. She was a very unusual person, very unusual person. Her full-time work was and is as a faculty member in the Music Academy, the Ruben Academy, that's associated with Hebrew University, but as, I don't know, as full-time as that was, she was equally full-time if not more full-time doing organizing. She organized with another person, Hillel Bardin -- demonstrations, dialogues, all sorts of activities all over the West Bank, in Israel, in refugee camps… She was just constantly making trips to the West Bank to work with people, and I don't know, maybe in a sense it was like the process I described to you of discovering Judaism: I was very curious about what she was doing. I was very curious to meet people. I mean, I really... It's almost hard to think back before that, but literally with Golda Meir saying, you know, there are no Palestinian people. And then I guess the next line of the defense was "there's no one to talk to," right, like there's no one -- they have no equivalents on their side to the people on our side who want a dialogue, who want to make peace. I just said to her from the first week we were there, "Wherever you're going, I'm interested to come."

JR: Had you been involved in any sort of Israeli political issues at all?

MF: No. I think being there, seeing it, meeting people was a way of my understanding and learning about the really numerous communities that she visited and the people she worked with. We went all over the place. I mean, she had friends in Dehaisha -- that was a refugee camp; we went to visit them. We went to Nablus, we went to Hebron. There was a trial going on when I came, the Beita trial, that I write about in Reading Ruth and in A Spiritual Life. So we went a number of times to the Beita trial. There was a girls' school that was tear-gassed in Halhul; we went to visit the girls. The community she was most involved with, though, besides people in the Old City, was in a town on the West Bank, Beit Sahor, which is maybe like a 20 minute ride from Jerusalem. It's a sort of suburb of Bethlehem. People in that town had organized a tax strike, literally based on the American Revolution, "no taxation without representation," and Israeli soldiers came to confiscate their property in lieu of the taxes that they weren't paying, and they weren't paying taxes because they were getting no services. And the whole area was closed off for the first few months I was there, you couldn't travel there. Veronika and Hillel would travel there, but it was illegal to travel there. So for the first couple of months, I kept hearing about these people and couldn't go. I was smiling a minute ago, sort of remembering something when... When the Army confiscated their property, they put it in bunkers for storage at the airport, Ben-Gurion airport, and there was then an auction that Israelis could come and buy all this stuff. And in fact, lots of settlers came and bought stuff. So at one point, Veronika and I went to the airport and snuck into the bunkers to see what materials had been confiscated, and I have no idea where they are, but I took some photographs. It was very sad and very troubling...

JR: What kind of stuff was it?

MF: It was everything. The display cases from the local grocery store that had been confiscated, to people's sofas, you know, furniture, dining room stuff, to TVs, VCRs, anything that you would look around and think was of some value. At one point, we had a demonstration protesting the confiscation of this property, and we had it outside the

airport, so, actually, when I was just back now -- I mean, I've been back several times since that year-- but when I was just recently back I was looking to remember where was this grassy triangle outside Ben Gurion airport where we stood with protest signs… It was fascinating to me to meet these people.

JR: What was most compelling?

MF: (extended silence) How much the occupation disrupted and dominated their lives. I guess to me that was the ultimate expression of not being free -- is that you couldn't just have your normal life. There were just so many encounters that year, so many stories that were essentially in two different categories: There was the category of the one time visit to a particular place, the one time conversation or encounter with a particular person; and the second category was the ongoing dialogues, in Beit Sahor, in Abu Tor, and most especially the women's dialogues in Beit Sahor because those were people we got to know more closely.

JR: How often did that group meet?

MF: It was every other week for maybe seven months.

JR: And how was it organized? Did you talk about specific political questions, or was it sort of based on a more personal model?

MF: Both, and the intersection of both. Apparently, at that time -- I mean, this was intentionally a grassroots group -- I think there was kind of a feeling that formal representatives on both sides had ample opportunity to meet with each other, but that ordinary people didn't, and that it was important to affect the grassroots understandings and prejudices that people had, that that could eventually help to create a different kind of climate, you know, to sort of push out bit by bit the sense of the narrow, constricted ways that people thought about each other. When I think back, that was what went on.

JR: Was it important to you that it was an all women's group?

MF: That was funny. I mean, Veronika was organizing mixed men's and women's dialogue groups in Beit Sahor, in several other places on the West Bank, and also for a while we [Eddie and I] were in a mixed dialogue group in Abu Tor, which is a Jewish & Arab neighborhood in Jerusalem. (I just saw the couple that organized and hosted that, and was asking follow-up questions ten years later about different people in the neighborhood) So, Veronika's and Hillel's dialogue groups in Beit Sahor were mixed, they were men and women. There were groups every week that were mixed and what I saw somewhat in Beit Sahor but also in Abu Tor was it was very hard for Palestinian wives to get a word in edgewise. People came either as couples, or they came as individual men. There weren't Palestinian women who came to those mixed groups as individuals, as single women, so they came with husbands, and as happens in any gathering, a husband will want to say something, a wife will want to say something. They talk over each other a bit and, you know, one of them wins out maybe half the time, maybe more than half the time, maybe all the time, and... But it was clear in these groups that when that happened, the husband would win out, and the wife would sit there being kind of pissed. What I saw of Palestinian society that year reminded me of what I knew about American society in the '50s, sociologically. That was a good way to get a handle on it. And at some point the women in Beit Sahor said "We would like a group for women," and I think Veronika felt like "I just... I have so much to do. I mean... I can't take on yet another responsibility." And she said to me, "Oh, you're an old hand at this kind of thing. Would you take charge of organizing a women's group?" I had a lot of hesitations about it. I mean, I really felt like I don't know if that's at all appropriate. Like I'm a visiting American, you know, I don't have at stake here what either side of participants have at stake here -– I'll be going back to America. And I think also behind that I probably didn't want the responsibility. It just was clear though that it wasn't going to happen otherwise, so I went looking for people who would participate. I mean, from the Palestinian side they had people who wanted to participate, but... finding the Israelis became my job. So

my kids were in an Israeli school - I talked to other mothers in the class. I was taking a workshop that year in midrash and theater - I talked to the people in that class. I was studying with a potter that year, and I talked to people in that class, and I talked to people at synagogue.

JR: Where did you go to synagogue?

MF: We went to Yedidyah, which was a good place then, was very interesting. I don't know if it's the only time this has ever happened to me, but it was the most powerful, consistent experience of it happening, that the davenning on the women's side was more focused, more intense, and it's funny, I was there two weeks ago and there's a similar feel. [Though it was a shul with a mechitza and normally I wouldn't make a home at such a shul, this was a powerful place for me as a woman.] And I was saying kaddish that year and didn't really want to go shul-hopping. I wanted a steady place to go, and that was where Veronika davenned. They were a really very nice community. And I was really nervous, I mean, I thought people would react to me with hostility [when I invited them to join an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue group taking place on the West Bank], like "Why are you doing this and who are you to do this?", but I got a completely different reaction from that. The reaction that I got was people were very moved and impressed, literally. "You're on sabbatical, you could just be here sitting in a coffeehouse. Why are you...? You must care a lot to be giving this time and energy." And I think people also felt a little bit -- I'm sure many people, most people who came to dialogue were scared. I mean, I don't know how many Israelis to date have sat in a Palestinian home, so I think they also felt in part like, "Well, if you have the courage to do this, (laughter) you know, how can I not?"

JR: What was the makeup of the group?

MF: The makeup of the group was much, it was a much wider spectrum on the Palestinian side than on the Israeli side. On the Israeli side, women were in their 30s,

their 40s. I don't think anybody was younger or older. I guess they were all college educated. Well, there was a bit of a range. Some were single and some were married, and some didn't have kids and some had babies and some had kids in the Army.

JR: How many people were there?

MF: There were maybe a dozen Israelis and a larger number and a larger pool of Palestinian women. Palestinian women were both Christian and Muslim, they were from university student age to grandmothers... We would go there (to Beit Sahor on the West Bank) because it was much easier for us to get out there than it was for them to get permits to come to Jerusalem, although we did that maybe like two or three times, but mostly we went there.

JR: Did you speak in English?

MF: We spoke in English, and then there would be some people translating for some of the Palestinian women who didn't know English, but I think that was both logistically easier and also less confrontational to speak in a third language. But you could see from the different homes that we went to the tremendous differences in these women. I mean, some of them wore traditional dress and some of them wore Western dress. Some of them clearly had not had higher education; I don't know what education they had had. Others, you know, were like a teacher, a nurse, a therapist. One Palestinian matriarch was a grandmother Her family dynasty ran the pharmacy in town, and she was clearly educated, but there was a range of women in every possible way... And I think most of all what struck me was the economic range. It was also clear that they had all sorts of social networks and subgroups within the people who came, so there were people who were cousins or whatever, but as a whole they clearly did not socialize, didn't know each other, really lived in different worlds, even though it was -- I don't know how big a town it was, but... I'm always bad at that. Maybe it was like 10,000, something like that? So I felt, in part, one of the fascinating byproducts was how they came to know each other

better [through the dialogue with Israelis].

JR: So that kind of diversity wasn't as true in the Israeli group?

MF: No.

JR: Did the Israeli women know each other many times beforehand?

MF: No, not especially, no. No, not especially.

JR: Did the Israeli women -- how did they feel about it being an all women's group? Was it appealing to the Israeli women, or was it just kind of it happened to be that way?

MF: No, I think it was appealing to them, and in part it was a self-selecting group, because the people who didn't want to be in an all-women's group had lots of opportunity in Beit Sahor to be still in mixed groups. The fact that we were doing an all women's group didn't turn the other group into an all men's group, you know, so maybe that also accounts a little bit for the more limited range of Israelis who came, because maybe other groups, for instance... I mean, that's interesting. I never really thought about it before, but Israeli university students continued going to the mixed groups, and I guess for whatever reasons didn't want to come to a women's group, or didn't, so...

JR: Do you think different kinds of issues came up because it was a group of all women?

MF: Absolutely.

JR: In what kinds of ways?

MF: People talked a lot about their children, in every way. I remember one Palestinian woman who said at the first session -- she was very eloquent always -- she said at one point, "The stones are raising our children, the streets are raising our children, the soldiers are raising our children, we are not raising our children." A lot of my encounters

that year with Palestinians were with regard to their children, and that was also true in the group at Abu Tor, but it was more so in the women's group at Beit Sahor than in the mixed group. Just in so many ways, they were disturbed by the possible effects of the kind of violence that their kids grew up with and just sort of lived with on a daily basis. Lots of bedwetting, lots of bad dreams. Kids who were acting out and throwing stones and kids who were afraid to go out in the street to run an errand to get a loaf of bread when they weren't in school they were at home, but not just to hang out, and the problems of that, the inability to just easily socialize with peers because gatherings were illegal. The feeling of... So sort of living under a kind of daily threat of violence, who knows what kind of trouble my kid is going to get himself into? And also, just constant closing of the schools and curfews and, you know, what are they learning?... There were lots of times when a Palestinian woman would say something and an Israeli woman would sit there looking startled, like "That's what I would say," like "Our kids don't have hopes for the future. They don't think about the future. They don't plan for it, they don't, you know... It's like..." With a sense of hope cut off or suspended or... And then Israeli mothers would say, "Well, our kids don't think or talk about the future 'til they're out of the Army."… One mother, one Israeli mother describing her son coming home for his first leave after however many weeks of basic training and beginning duty. "I just sat up all night crying with him," she said, and the Palestinian women sitting there and like, "But he's a soldier," like the hatred was so intense of soldiers that they really couldn't hold in their heads at the same time this person you're talking about is a soldier, he's your son, he was so upset about what he was doing that he was crying. How can all those things be true? Then there was a terrorist attack, there were a couple of terrorist incidents altogether in the spring of that year, and one of them was when Palestinian terrorists attacked -- came ashore and attacked the beach at Nitzanim.

JR: Oh yeah, I remember that.

MF: And they sat -- we had a dialogue group after that, and there had also been a bombing in Mahaneh Yehudah. And I had been -- I used to shop every week in Mahaneh Yehudah, and I had been there, like literally I got there maybe two minutes after the bomb had gone off, and it was, in fact, centered in the restaurant that I used to take my kids -- I would shop with them for a while and then deposit them at the restaurant, and they would have their falafel and schwarma, and I'd continue shopping.

END OF FILE 1

MF: ...the waiter who used to take care of us was injured in the bombing, and right after this we had a dialogue group, and the women in Beit Sahor were saying about the attack on the beach at Nitzanim, "But they were only going to kill soldiers. They weren't intending to kill people." And an Israeli sitting in the dialogue group said, "My husband's a soldier, I was a soldier, my son is a soldier, my daughter is a soldier." To be able to look at the same time at those facts put together was a tremendous challenge, and when I said to them, "There was this bombing in Mahaneh Yehudah and I would've been there," they were very upset. I mean, they... And that really is at the heart of it, for both sides to see the human face... There was so much hatred of the soldiers that were occupying them that how could you see them as being like you, you know, as being human? You had so much invested in hating them, and it just felt so good and so right to hate them! And I think similarly, on the Israeli side, to think I really am sitting in a Palestinian town, in a Palestinian home, and no one has slit my throat, and these are people like me, there is someone to talk to, it's not that they're all terrorists... You know, it was illegal to be a member of the PLO. One other person in Beit Sahor, one man once commented in a mixed dialogue group; he said, "My grandmother is a member of the PLO! (laughter) Like, you don't get it!" It was most often difficult to be there. I mean, it wasn't an experience like sitting in a women's group in America... (laughter) I mean, some things are so self-evident that you don't think to say it, but it's important. It wasn't anything like sitting in a women's group talking about our mothers, when did you get your

period, you know, should women have aliyot? (laughter) I mean, you know, are men worth bothering with? (laughter) I don't know. It wasn't that, that wasn't the tone at all. It was... I could say it better with my face than I could with words. It was very serious and very intense.

JR: What were the greatest challenges, or the most challenging parts?

MF: It's funny, what comes to mind as an analogy. The need to be as honest and straightforward as you were able to be, as you were capable of being, but also not to so antagonize people by what you said that the conversation would be broken off, and also expressing powerful emotional feelings. One of the themes that we kept circling and coming back to was the question of victim, and the need to hold onto that identity, like "I am the victim here, and that gives me a moral upper hand." I think historical claims were a kind of quicksand or a kind of bottomless pit to get into, like who did what to whom, when, and who was here first and longest and...? It felt like you could permanently get lost in that. It was eye opening to us back then that, well... (inaudible) We (the Israeli's) used to say that, "you know, we're critical of our government, we're critical of our leaders, we don't sort of hold them on a pedestal, but you never criticize Arafat," and it really was only a year or two later that I would really start to hear that from people… It was very important to the Israeli women to talk about the Holocaust, at least two were children of survivors, and Palestinian women were resistant to hearing, to giving credence, and that goes back to some of the power balance of victims... I think that the deepest meeting place was over experiences with children, and it was shocking to see how much in common the two sides had about that, that literally their kids were having nightmares about each other.

JR: What would the most rewarding aspects be?

MF: For me personally? That I had helped to make this happen. It also was just fascinating to me to have entrée into lives that were so different from my experience, and

yet in crucial ways I felt I had a lot in common with them, that sense of young people, their kids coming of age, and not knowing how to build a future, not seeing a way out of a very narrow world. I identified with them. I identified with their kids. I identified with them as mothers vis-à-vis my mother. I mean, I think it was also... I never put this into words. I think it also, it really gave them a sense of empowerment to participate in this kind of a group as independent women, not as part of a marital unit, not, you know, but themselves to find their voice I think was a unique experience for them.

JR: How old were your kids at the time?

MF: 7 and 11.

JR: Did you talk to them at all about the kinds of experiences you were having?

MF: Well, I mean, I'm smiling because my kids have commented on this, that there were times that I would be at a demonstration and be tear-gassed, and they would read about it in the paper the next day, or... One time at a demonstration on International Women's Day -- which (laughter) I had never observed before, never knew about before, but which ever since then is a something for me in March -- I was at a women's demonstration in Beit Sahor, and we were fired on by soldiers, and my kids didn't hear about that 'til we were back in the States and I was being interviewed on a cable news show in Princeton, and it was an hour long interview or something, and I told that story! (laughter) I didn't even quite put it together, so I came home and my daughter was real upset with me [that she had to hear about my being shot at on a TV interview]! And sometimes if I couldn't get a sitter, I remember I would take my son to the dialogues in Abu Tor, so he'd play with other Palestinian kids there, and one time they had a VCR, they had a video of -- oh, what's the musical with the plant that eats people?

JR: Little Shop of Horrors.

MF: (laughter) Little Shop of Horrors! And apparently -- I didn't even know what it was, and at some point one of the mothers I guess whose home it was, went into the room and bawled out her kids that they knew they weren't supposed to watch that tape! (laughter) – she came in and said to me, you know, "I feel sort of morally obligated to tell you, if your son has bad dreams tonight...!" Also, this was not such a significant part of the year, but it was important, actually -- I participated in Women in Black, and when I think about it in terms of my daughter, I was really conscious for that and for other kinds of demonstrations that apart from safety questions, which were somewhat real, I didn't bring her along... I was offended by people using their children in that way. I felt there's something very not kosher about doing that, so I mean, I purposely didn't include her or them in those ways. I should say just a word or two about Women in Black. It was often scary, and not so much the standing there -- I used to joke, you know, it's only Jewish women who could say that they're having a "silent demonstration" (laughter) but talk the whole time! Like, why waste an hour when you could be, you know, doing business, networking, hanging out with your friends? Why punish yourself and stand there silently? I used to joke when I would see it billed as a "silent demonstration," it just meant that people didn't shout out slogans or whatever, but they didn't stand there silently! But the going to it and the coming back afterward were tense. Many women experienced that, I mean, it wasn't unique to me, because there you were on a Friday in Jerusalem, Friday afternoon, and you were dressed in black, so it was clear where you had been, where you stood politically, and you know, it made you something of a target.

JR: Were there counter-demonstrators, Women in Green or whatever? Were they around then?

MF: They weren't Women in Green there. I think they were Women in White then. Whatever they were, you know, yeah, yeah. I mean, it wasn't... I don't remember ever being upset by them, (laughter) not that they didn't try to be upsetting, but you know, when people would drive by and shout out... I used to joke, I have zero facility for picking

up languages, I'm really... But I used to joke that, you know, I got my biggest Hebrew vocabulary that year by standing with Women in Black, 'cause I learned what the word for 'prostitute' was, and I finally learned the difference between 'right' and 'left'! (laughter) If they were yelling "smolim" at us, I thought, "Oh, you mean leftist!" (laughter) That's left! What is prostitute?

JR: Zonat.

MF: Yeah, (Zonat), right. But like afterwards, you know, coming home on the bus, you weren't standing with a whole group of people from the demonstration, you were by yourself on the bus, and that most of all was a courageous part for me. I found that harder than traveling on the West Bank. Traveling on the West Bank was just something that I did, and it would also be peculiar trying to figure out on those trips who you were afraid of, 'cause if you get stopped by the Army, what were you doing there? You weren't supposed to be there. But still, I think emotionally the hardest thing for me was coming and going back from Women in Black, 'cause you just felt really exposed and you didn't know what people were thinking. There were other people standing on the bus looking at you and just hating you. We don't often have that kind of experience, I had to think about, do I want the people who run my makolet to see that I'm with Women in Black, and I'm in that store every day, and we have a nice rapport, as an example, and what would they think and say about me as an American participating in that, and how violent would be the disapproval?

JR: When you came back after that year, did you stay involved in these kinds of issues?

MF: I tried to do a lot of speaking about it, and, I mean, I did do a fair amount of speaking. I had written, you know, articles and essays and whatever, and wasn't able to get published, [later published in Reading Ruth and in A Spiritual Life] I think not because they were badly written or not interesting but were saying radical things… And then for the next, I don't know, two, three years, I worked on a play that deals with those themes.

I had actually thought during the year, particularly in the dialogue groups, was there a way that I could go with kind of an ear for getting material, writing a play about it, and it just, it wasn't possible to have the hat on of a facilitator and also have the hat on of a fly on the wall [as a playwright gathering material]. I mean... So the play I finally wrote -- did I tell you about the play?

JR: I don't think so. It was mentioned in some of the stuff I read.

MF: It's published in Making a Scene, which is an anthology of Jewish women playwrights, the play is "Across the Jordan."

JR: Let me just put this down

MF: And it directly comes out of that year. It's got two storylines: One is the story of Sarah and Hagar, and the other storyline is also two women, a 20-something Israeli lawyer who is given her first pro bono case to defend a Palestinian student accused of a bombing, so it's the relationship between these two women and those two women that intersects in the play, and my choosing that subject and my giving the kind of time that I gave to working on it was very directly from that year. So that (pointing to a framed poster in MF's study), was a poster for a production, it's had readings in different parts of the country. It's published, but...

JR: (inaudible) Productions?

MF: Yes, this one was in Princeton. It's actually coincidentally there, 'cause we had left already. The background of the poster is a photograph that I took. I mean, the idea was to project slides in the theater to use as backdrops. (mumbles, inaudible)

JR: What a wonderful photograph!

MF: I like the play very much, I feel very good about it, but it was extremely difficult to get a production --

JR: Because of its political...?

MF: Yeah, absolutely. So that was hard for me.

JR: Has it been read in Israel?

MF: I mean, that's funny; I think within the next week or two there's a visiting American group, [Bat Kol?] that I think might be doing a reading of it, but no, very little has happened with it, which has been a major disappointment for me, since I wrote the play to encourage people to think about, talk about, these issues. I felt the play was of a very high quality; when I couldn't get productions, I pretty much stopped playwrighting and turned my attention to other things: poetry, mentoring through spiritual writing practice.

JR: How do you think your involvement in (inaudible) world of Israeli-Palestinian issues, and your work with the dialogue group in particular, affected you?

MF: I think it taught me a lot. I saw that I could do things that I wouldn't have imagined I could do. Since the publication of A Spiritual Life, I've become much more a public person. I'm comfortable with that, and I'm comfortable with doing readings and speaking in ways that I think I would not have been before the dialogue. I think it gave me a much fuller sense of competence and confidence in public kinds of activities. People have commented to me a lot how courageous they find the book (A Spiritual Life). I think insofar as my writing is courageous, it's kind of always been that way, but I think before the year in Israel, I saw myself more... I mean, maybe part of what I mean by "the most apolitical person I knew" was I saw myself as much more a private person than a public person, before that year — it transformed me. The work was important, and demanded such concentration and focus, I forgot to be scared I couldn't do it. In so many ways it was a turning point in my life.

JR: Do you think of yourself as political now?

MF: I do, I do.

JR: This is sort of a huge and vague question; I'm not sure it's really answerable, but it's just sort of something I'm interested in. What do you think is the relationship between spirituality and politics?

MF: I think it's a direct segue to the last question. I think the bottom line of a spiritual journey is to be able to experience yourself as someone of real worth, and I think that's necessary for political expression. I mean, I think the two are... There's so much overlap between those two realms. I don't really understand -- I mean, I'll flip it the other way -- I don't really understand what political activity is about if it's not grounded in some sense of the importance of spirit in people's lives, and I certainly don't understand what spirituality is about that has no connection to or bearing on how we live in the world and what's happening to the people around us.

JR: I think that's a beautiful way to end, unless there's something that we haven't --

MF: No, no, no, that's good!

JR: Great, thank you so much!

MF: Thank you!

JR: I really appreciate...

[END OF INTERVIEW]