Lisa Mednick-Owen Transcript

Jayne Guberman: I'm going to start with just a very brief introduction. This is Jayne Guberman. Today is Sunday, February 8th, 2015. I'm here with Lisa Mednick Owen 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. Lisa, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Lisa Mednick-Owen: Certainly.

JG: Great. So as we said a few minutes ago, JWA is interested in learning about the ways that feminism has changed the Jewish community and both the public and private lives of Jewish women and men over the last several centuries. So I want to just ask you if you can begin by telling us when and where you were born and where you grew up.

LMO: So I was born in Los Angeles, California, and I grew up in the San Fernando Valley. That was, so I was born in 1958. So I left Los Angeles essentially to go off to college in 1977 and then never returned. Came East after that.

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

LMO: It's very interesting because I was just listening to these panelists, a couple of whom are from the West Coast, and thinking about what my Jewish life is like and how that seems to have been different from many people who were raised on the East Coast. So my family, neither of my parents had any religious training. They were both raised in Reform, non-observant, almost dismissive homes, but had decided – so they had no Jewish training whatsoever and had decided together, though, that their children should have a different experience. And so they joined – notwithstanding the fact that when I

was young, we celebrated Christmas in a very light way. They joined a synagogue, I guess right around the time I was ready to start Hebrew school. I was the oldest of three children. And the synagogue that they joined was a spinoff from another synagogue. It was a start-up synagogue; it was a Conservative synagogue, but similarly to BJ, actually, they rented space in a church as they tried to pull together the money to build a building. And it was a very sort of casual, West Coast, warm and friendly place. And my parents actually were very involved in that synagogue. But because they had no religious training, they took all the lay leadership roles. So over the years, my mother was the president of the sisterhood. My father was the president of the brotherhood. They, you know, chaired a lot of committees. They did a lot of things to help the synagogue grow, but nothing that involved religion because neither one of them spoke Hebrew, never had any training, didn't do any sight-reading. That was not part of their experience. I was raised in a three-day-a-week, Conservative Hebrew school environment. I went to Camp Ramah as a teenager; I kind of went to it late. And then did a little bit of Hebrew High, actually, afterward. But because I really embraced that community, it was really a source, for me, of home and some social things. And I really enjoyed being a part of that community, but what's interesting about that community as compared to what was going on here – this is the sixties, right? So the mid to late ’60, early ’70, this was a Conservative synagogue, and the women were full participants early on. I had a bat mitzvah. Or I became a bat mitzvah. I read Torah. I said all the prayers. I think I wore a tallis that day; I can't remember. But in a lot of ways, a lot of the rituals were treated in a very egalitarian manner, which, as compared to what was going on here in the Conservative movement, is different. I think that's because it was this West Coast casual sort of environment. And then I went to Camp Ramah and was a counselor there for a number of years, five or six years. That also was a very egalitarian - the Camp Ramah in California was also a very egalitarian environment. I was a little out of my element there because most of the – a lot of the people that were at Camp Ramah were from Jewish day school. They had a little more depth in their Jewish education than I did, but I was a

pretty enthusiastic participant at that time.

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

LMO: I became aware very early on that gender mattered to me, from the time I was in high school through college and even in terms of choosing a profession but didn't necessarily layer it through Judaism. I felt that I was definitely a part of sort of this wave of individuals that expected that there would not be boundaries for me as a woman. I was expected to take advantage of that, as opposed to what my mother's experience had been. I very much wanted to be a leader in that area. At the time that I was in college, I was thinking, I don't want to be a teacher or a social worker; those things are too femme-y. I want to be a lawyer. I wanted to do something more powerful and to affect change. So I felt that I was an early feminist, but I didn't necessarily see it through the lens of Judaism.

JG: Right. Where did you go to college?

LMO: I went to college at Berkeley. Then I was there from '77 to '81. It was a relatively quiet time in terms of activism compared to what it had been previously. But I really did feel this sense of responsibility now that the doors had been opened to me to step in in a way that hadn't been done before me. And so I felt that I was part of that wave of feminine – when I went to – I went straight from undergraduate to law school, and at the time, my law school class was still almost fifty percent women. I went to law school at George Washington Law School. So that's when I came East. And I guess, in retrospect, my class was maybe thirty-five percent women. I thought it was much higher.

JG: Which years were these?

LMO: So, I started law school in 1981, and I graduated in 1984. And then, from there, I went to a big firm to practice law. That's when a lot of issues about being a woman came – the limitations on being a woman; I became even more aware of those.

JG: Such as what? Can you talk about that for a while?

LMO: It's very interesting; when I started practicing law in a large firm, they had a women's associate group that they had just formed where they would talk about issues that were particular to women. And at that time, maybe there was one woman partner at my big traditional law firm, maybe one, and I think she had come laterally. So she hadn't even grown up through the ranks. I was extremely conscious about appearing as an authority figure. There were a lot of issues about how women were perceived. There were a lot of issues still at that time about how women were perceived. You had to be very conscious of appearing like a professional instead of one of the staff.

JG: Yeah.

LMO: We weren't allowed to wear pants. I mean, that kind of thing that. I went in-house from big firm practice; I didn't start wearing pants as an attorney until like 1995, 1996 because that was not considered appropriate attire for a woman attorney. I mean, things that now me and my kids would go, "What? What are you talking about? Why was that even an issue?" And I think, well, well, clothing is just one indicia of what was going on. It was a very not so subtle indicia of how women were perceived and the need at that time to establish yourself as an authority. It wasn't assumed that you were an authority. You had to prove that you were worthy of respect.

JG: Yeah.

LMO: And then I had a lot of different experiences in the corporate world, which, I think, in retrospect, were part – my experience was reflective of the differences in how men and women were treated and things like that.

JG: So when you do think about your life Jewishly, were there any experiences or moments when you realized the importance of gender, or you sort of had any a-ha moments, or was it more of a sort of gradual process for you?

LMO: In terms of Judaism and gender, it was more of a gradual process for me. Again, I think part of that is because the environment I grew up in was really very open to women, but it wasn't until I came East that I realized that that was the exception and not the rule.

JG: So what happened when you came East, in your Jewish worlds?

LMO: Well, you know, when I came East, I began to realize that it was – I mean, a lot of my peers had not been able to have – had not been able to read from the Torah, had not been able to participate in life as fully and actively within the Conservative movement as I had, which I had really had taken for granted growing up, and which made me realize it wasn't always this way and where do we need to go? Now I see a lot of things through the lens of feminism, including Judaism. And I have a lot more contact with people who are in the Orthodox community here, and their issues with respect to Judaism is very different.

JG: So how would you say that Jewish feminism has shaped your view of Jewish life, and how has that evolved over time?

LMO: I was always encouraged to be a full participant. I was raised with the understanding that there was nothing I couldn't do just because I was a woman. In fact, it was just the opposite. I was told that as one of the – as part of this generation of women for whom the doors were open – I had a responsibility to take advantage of that. And that included in my Jewish world. There was nothing in my Jewish world that was conflicting with that, and that was telling me that “Oh, no, you can't do that because you're a woman.” I was not raised in that environment whatsoever. So it became part of the fabric of my life that I thought that women and men would, in fact, be treated equally

and perceived equally all the way through. I mean, it wasn't until I entered the [00:11:00] professional world that I realized that that, in fact, was not the case. Right? And so, honestly, I didn't connect to a Jewish community again until I was in my thirties and had children. And that's when I came back to a Jewish community, and the community I walked into was BJ. And part of the reason I liked BJ was that it was totally egalitarian. That's what I was comfortable with. But it wasn't until later that I realized that that was not the norm in Conservative Judaism for most people. It wasn't until I came East that I perceived those limitations that were put on women.

JG: So, did BJ feel completely familiar to you in terms of the ways in which women and men were treated and participated in public worship?

LMO: BJ felt like home to me. BJ felt like camp to me. When I walked into BJ – I had gone to Camp Ramah for a number of years. That was really what sort of solidified to me my Jewish identity was participating in Camp Ramah, where we davened every day, where Judaism was sort of woven into the fabric of life. But again, it was a very egalitarian community there. I don't even know if Camp Ramah everywhere else was like that, but in California, it was an egalitarian community, and it was casual. And when I walked into BJ, it was a Friday night service, and people were not necessarily dressed in their best, and it was community-participated prayer, not led from the bimah down, which I had always hated. My synagogue had been like that too, where the rabbi did the praying for you, and maybe you did a little responsive reading. [At] BJ, people participate in the prayer. Everybody participates in the prayer, and that felt very comfortable to me because that's what I had experienced at Camp Ramah. So the minute I walked into BJ, I'm like, “This is it.” This is where we're staying. And my husband, who was brought up in what I considered to be sort of an antisemitic home, Jewish home, on Long Island, was happy to do whatever I wanted to do. So was very blessed to be able to raise my children in this wonderful egalitarian, social-justice-minded community. It’s a gift to have been able to be a part of this community; it's a gift to be able to raise my children in it.

I've been very lucky in that respect.

JG: So, what do you consider to be the most important accomplishments of Jewish feminism as you look back over the last several decades?

LMO: I mean, it's hard for me to say what's the most important. I think there's a lot of – there is definitely a way to go. Certainly in the Orthodox community [and] in other communities besides mine. But that being said, I think that Judaism is wonderful in the sense that it's exemplified – it can exemplify the best of an egalitarian world. We have, at least within the Conservative movement, the Reform movement, and my synagogue, strong women leaders, strong women, community leaders, pulpit leaders, thought leaders, that women are out there making a difference. I think that what Judaism can do is it's sort of the vanguard in some ways, and it's an illustration of what can be done. Of course, as Judaism teaches us, it's our responsibility to seek social justice and other venues. I don't think it's accidental that so many of the leaders of the feminist movement, from the first generation, the second wave of feminism, and what I hope will be the third wave, comes out of that Jewish tradition. I'm really proud to be a part of it.

JG: So, what do you see as the most sort of pressing challenges right now? The sort of unfinished business of Jewish feminism today?

LMO: Within the context of Judaism, I think these issues of the traditional Jewish communities is where there needs to be a lot – I mean, I worry about women in these very traditional environments who do not have a voice, particularly in the ultra-Orthodox, the ultra-traditional communities, the ones that are married young and have lots of children young. I worry about those communities being so directed that people can't direct their own lives, that decisions are made for them. But I also think that Jewish feminists have a responsibility as we look at other issues. I mean, these issues about campus rape. I mean, there are, there are other issues of feminism that I think are definitely occurring that Judaism has a lot to say about leadership on those issues and

can offer examples and methodology for raising people's voices in that context.

JG: Can you give me some examples or sort of flesh out a little bit of what you're thinking about there? I mean, take the example that you just said of the issue of campus rape.

LMO: Right. Okay. I think this issue is – my son actually has been an activist in this issue, and I'm very proud of him for doing it. The way that he has gotten involved is men talking to men about this issue, which I think is a really wonderful way to approach part of this issue about changing the culture. I mean, I personally believe that this issue about campus rape is about really changing deeply rooted cultures about how people respect each other and how people interact with each other and about sexuality and power. I think Judaism has a lot to say on this topic. It's sex and power, but also respect. I think that some of the leadership on these topics, I wouldn't be surprised if they come out – Jewishly trained leaders and speakers and individuals to speak on these issues, you know. I'm being a little vague, sorry.

JG: Given the patriarchal nature of traditional Judaism, what is it that you think Judaism has to say on these kinds of issues?

LMO: I think that the issue of respect for the human being is a really integral part of Judaism. I think that that's something that from which Judaism can have a lot to say about, to provide some guidance about how people interact with each other and respect each other. I think part of the issue with campus rape is not just a patriarchal one. I think that there's a lot of pressure on women in society now to be very sexual, and that's something that I'm seeing across the board. And then you get men that – I think the issue about women as sexual objects is something that's very pervasive. It's not just coming from men. I mean, I think there's a lot of media buzz about that. A lot of women are sort of putting themselves in that position too. Whether that derives itself from patriarchy or not, I think it's a bad thing in general. And I'm not talking about the woman who was speaking in the other room about the Yiddish word for vagina. That's not what

I'm talking about. I'm talking about this issue about women as purely sexual objects. I think that there's a place for Judaism to start talking about this in terms of respect for yourself, respect for others, about treating people with kindness and compassion and being protective of one another. I think there's something in Judaism that can be said about it.

JG: And would you say that that's as well developed as you'd like to see it within the Jewish community at this point?

LMO: No, I mean, this is a relatively new topic. Listen, I really admire these young women that are standing up now on college campuses and saying, “I was raped, I did this, I did this.” I mean, this is new. I don't know that all this sexual aggression – sexual assault is not new, but the fact that these women are coming up and speaking about them, I think, is amazing.

JG: Yeah.

LMO: I don't think it's accidental that a lot of these women are Jewish that are standing up and speaking out. I do think that there's a sense that Judaism does a good job of teaching people to speak out against injustice, to themselves and for others. And I'm very proud of that.

JG: What role, if any, do you see sort of Jewish organizations, such as the Jewish Women's Archive, other organizations that you've been involved in or know of in sort of pushing this agenda that you're talking about?

LMO: Are you talking just about sexual assault, or are you talking about in general?

JG: No, I mean, in general, the whole sort of egalitarian sort of worldview and life.

LMO: Well, one of the speakers in the panel that I just left was actually talking about that. To the extent that we work with egalitarian issues within Judaism, you provide a model for expanding beyond that. I mean, she was talking about it probably in the gay community, but I think that has repercussions. She was talking about the fact that as we open ourselves up, as we define a new marriage ceremony, for example, but as we redefine what that looks like, so it's not with these defined roles about men and women and how they're supposed to interact with each other because now it opens themselves for relationships across the board. It's the same thing. As we open that up to society, we're talking about gay relationships. We're talking about multicultural relationships. We're talking about interfaith relationships. Feminism is only a piece of equality. And I think that there's still a lot that Judaism has to say about that in terms of feminism, but as a starting point for that discussion about equality as a whole.

JG: Right. So, what do you think are the most important next steps in advancing gender equality in Judaism and Jewish life?

LMO: It's very hard for me to say that from my current – from where I personally sit because I'm very comfortable in this moment, in my synagogue, in this place. But I think that the role of women – again, I think we need to really look at what's happening in the Orthodox communities and to make sure that people have the voice that they want. One of the most powerful feminist experiences that I had was when I went to the Wailing Wall, and I really saw – and the women were on one side crouched around the wall. And if they wanted to – and on the other side, there were b'nai mitzvah going on. And if the women wanted to participate, they had to tiptoe up and stick their little noses over the wall and look over it to what was happening there. And it was a very – for me, that was an extremely visceral experience, the sense of being the other and the sense of not being a full participant and looking in. Now, I'm very blessed that that was not part of my personal experience. It was not the – and I'm able to access whatever. I don't feel that I'm denied a lot of things because of the community I put myself into. But I had a choice

in that decision, and I hope that other people have the ability to make those choices as well.

JG: Yeah. How would you define the relationship between Jewish feminism and the broader feminist movement, particularly as it's impacted you personally?

LMO: It's very interesting. So, my mother was part of that first wave of feminists. So she was married at eighteen because that's what nice Jewish girls in Washington, DC did in those days. I don't really understand that, but that's what happened.

JG: What year was she married?

LMO: 1956? '55, '56, in what was considered to be a pretty middle-class neighborhood in DC. I'm still sort of a little mystified by why that group of women, instead of going off to college, all got married. And she had me by the time she was twenty. When she wanted to go to college, her father said, “Oh, you don't need to go to college, you're a girl.” And notwithstanding that, she moved to California and had her children, and she went to school part-time for many, many years, such that when I, the year I graduated from high school, my mother graduated from college with a BA. And she went back and got her master’s while I was at college. I was the oldest of three. And she actually became a real community leader. She was an urban planner, and she was involved in planning the initial phases of the LA subway. And she's a much more interesting person to interview for this topic. But what she said is that the thing that gave her confidence in public speaking – and she would be interviewed, and she'd speak – was the role that she took in our synagogue when she would be the sisterhood president. Every week she would stand on the bimah and have to do a presentation to the child that was bar mitzvah, and she had to talk. And that was really her first experience with public speaking. And that was really her first experience with leadership was the role she was able to take in our little West Coast casual Conservative synagogue. That's an amazing thing, and because of that, because of her experience – and maybe that's why they chose that particular

community to raise me in – I was raised in the sense that there were no boundaries. It wasn't until I came to New York and started dealing with the big-time corporate world that I realized there were definitely boundaries in the structure of those worlds. But the community that I grew up in was incredibly encouraging to me, but again – and I was very lucky to be a participant in that.

JG: When you look at your children's generations, what do you see as the big challenges for them?

LMO: So, I think they have a lot of challenges.

JG: How old are your kids?

LMO: So, my kids are 21 and 24. My son is an Avodah Corps alum, and he currently lives in New Orleans. My youngest son is graduating from college this year. So when I talk about these stories about how women were treated, it's very interesting because they don't perceive of them as – now, part of it's because they're boys. Like I said, my older son was really an activist in this area, in sexual safety on campus as an undergraduate, and he's been involved in some work internationally in this. So he's very well versed in it. So, in terms of their challenges – the next wave? I mean, within Judaism – I think, I think I've mentioned that before – within Judaism, the issue is about self-determination within the Orthodox community, but I think that's where the challenges are. I think that the challenge for them is equality across the board, inside and outside of Judaism. Maybe not necessarily with feminism, but in some of these other topics. I think the interfaith issue is a huge issue. And I think that presents – and I think the next – I personally think one of the big challenges for Judaism going forward is going to be sort of the multicultural, inter-nature of Judaism and how Judaism is going to respond to that. And the fact that the next generation of Jews will not look like the generation before and what that will mean.

JG: Did you learn anything, in your experience in the corporate world of the legal profession these days, that feels like it has any applicability or lessons that you sort of would take into the Jewish world?

LMO: That's an interesting question because, in some ways, I think it needs to be the reverse.

JG: Tell me why.

LMO: This notion of being conscious of where you are and where your relationships are and the structure of power is something that you certainly see in a corporate world. I think that Judaism should just be mindful of that. That's something that we need to watch. But I don't –

JG: How the other way around?

LMO: As I mentioned, I think Judaism – because Judaism at some levels has done a good job of changing the relationships, but there's still work to do. This notion of equality and respect and of respecting the individual and making sure that people have a voice, I think, is something that certainly the corporate world can learn from.

JG: Yeah. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish?

LMO: I mean, I can't really – I wish you would interview my mother.

JG: Your mother sounds like she lived through a very amazing time, and you were the beneficiary, in many ways, of what that first-generation went through and her personal experience.

LMO: I really feel that her life exemplified what was happening to women at that time, during the ’60s and the ‘70s. I am very much the beneficiary of that, but I think that sometimes I took on – that brought with it a certain level of responsibility. It wasn't

necessarily right. I mean, when I look back on my career, I'm not sure, maybe I should've been a social worker. Maybe I should've been a teacher, but I didn't because I was told that women shouldn't want that anymore.

JG: Right.

LMO: We have to be at a place where we can accept that there's infinite varieties of people in their voice and that that's a good thing.

JG: Yeah. Well, thank you very much. I think this was a very interesting interview, and it's very important to hear a whole range of experiences, so no story is not important. So thank you so much. Let me find the right button here.

[END OF INTERVIEW]