

Sally Finestone Transcript

Ronda Spinak: If you could state your name and tell us a little about what you're doing in your rabbinate?

Sally Finestone: My name is Sally Finestone. I've been a rabbi for a long time, almost thirty years. I'm one of the old gals, I guess we call ourselves. I am currently the rabbi at a small conservative congregation in a suburb in Boston, and I've been there now for sixteen and half years. Before that, I spent almost twenty years at different campuses in the Hillel movement.

RS: I'm going to take you back initially to your youth. I would like you to share with us a favorite Jewish memory from your youth.

SF: I have many favorite Jewish memories from my youth. It's hard to pick one. I have the memory, of course, of going with my grandparents to a traditional shul and not understanding what was going on but just loving being with them and the community that embraced them there. We lived in a very small town in the mountains of Virginia, and the nearest synagogue was an hour and a half away each way. So my parents took it upon themselves to be our teachers. I have very fond memories of studying history and Jewish ethics with my parents. I also loved the way my mother would research at Passover. She would find all the Jews in the area, and it took some research, but we would always be thrilled when we could find twelve Jews or thirteen Jews and get us all together at the table. But I think my fondest memory is the fact that I was the only Jew in – fill in the blank – the school, the Girl Scouts, the choir club, whatever it was. I was often asked questions about Judaism or Israel, and I would always go home and ask my parents. If they didn't know the answer, we'd figure out a way to look it up. It was with books back then. It was a very strong sense that I needed to bring back the right answer

because I was the shaliach; I was the ambassador of the Jewish people for my little, teeny town. I think that's part of what started me on the journey I ended up taking.

RS: That's very lovely. So '82 was in the early days; you were ordained. You were in rabbinical school in the late '70s. You grew up with really no role models, but for your parents, it sounds like, and some grandparents, and a few Jews all over. When did you first realize you wanted to be a rabbi? Can you share with us that –?

SF: Sure. You're correct that when I went to rabbinical school, we were the first class of a large group of women, and by large, I mean that there were five of us or six of us in the class, as opposed to one and two. We had professors that were still adjusting to that new reality, and mostly we had classmates that were still adjusting to that new reality. But that's another topic. You asked me about who my role models were and why I decided to do this. It was actually an academic decision. I was planning to get a doctorate degree from my undergraduate studies, and my mentor at the time was a man who had a degree from JTS [Jewish Theological Seminary], and then he went to get his doctoral degree. I wanted to model my path after his. So at the very last minute, second semester senior year, I started interviewing local rabbis, and I started thinking about rabbinical school and postponing doctoral work even, though I had already been accepted into a program. I came to the conclusion that going to rabbinical school would be a good stepping stone for my doctorate. It would really shore up a lot of the gaps I had in my Hebrew. I knew Biblical Hebrew, but I didn't know Rabbinic Hebrew. It would be a good way to give back to the community a little bit because there [were] all these social action requirements when you were a rabbinical school student. And I thought it would be a nice transition into basically what I imagined was living in a library for five years while I was working on my doctorate. So I went to rabbinical school as a stepping stone for my academic path. I didn't realize that it was a really radical thing to do at the time. It wasn't actually until I got to rabbinical school that I realized that this was a very unusual step to take. But that's how I started out. So I looked at the rabbinical schools;

there was only one option at the time. I looked at JTS. I even got as far as the interview process when they discovered that “S” stood for Sally and not for Sam because my inclination was in that movement. But it was really the Reform movement that welcomed me, and they had such a fabulous group of scholars on the Cincinnati campus and an incredible library that I thought, “Okay, I’ll go to Cincinnati. I’ll study with these great minds, and then I’ll go on and get my doctorate.” That’s how I ended up initially going to rabbinical school. I still haven’t finished that doctorate; I’m ABD [all but dissertation], but that’s for retirement if I ever retire.

RS: Here you are at rabbinical school. You’ve decided that this would be a stepping-stone to get your Ph.D., but you never got it. Why? What happened?

SF: Life happens, right? As the expression goes. Why am I still chasing that elusive doctoral degree? Life has a way of sidetracking you in wonderful ways. I met my husband while I was in rabbinical school, and when I was a senior, I found I was pregnant with our first child. Matter of fact, I was eight months pregnant when I was ordained. So I don’t have the distinction of being the first woman rabbi. I think I’m eleven or twelve or something, but I am the first woman who was pregnant to be ordained. My classmates had to help me up the stairs because at the Plum Street Temple in Cincinnati, it’s very – it’s one of those bimahs in the sky kind of things. Anyway, I didn’t want to go to doctoral school and work part-time and stay home and take care of my child; it was just too much. I didn’t want to have to be a first-time mother and have to work and be [in] a doctoral program. I had already been accepted to another doctoral program in the same field, which was medieval Jewish philosophy. I told them I’d wait a year, and I decided to take a year off to be able to be home with my little girl, but I still had to work part-time. So I took a job as the rabbinic adviser at the University of Cincinnati Hillel, and I fell in love with Hillel work. I was also a little intellectually exhausted from my rabbinic thesis and could use a break from academia. So I decided to stay in the Hillel world for a few more years, stay close to the academic life that I love

but really work one on one in a much closer way with students on the campus. So from Cincinnati, I went to Houston, where I was in charge of five different programs for five different campuses. And then, from Houston, I came to Harvard, where I had the blessing of working with Rabbi Ben-Zion Gold, who's one of the greats of the Hillel movement. And then with Bernie Steinberg when he was there. Off and on, sometimes I was the director; sometimes I was the associate director, and then finally, after almost twenty years in Hillel, I made the jump to the congregational rabbinate, which I never thought I was ever going to do. I never thought I'd ever be interested in doing it, and yet the situation presented itself. I was interviewing for a teaching position, in fact, and the interviewer was a friend. He said, "A friend of mine has a small congregation. They need a rabbi and someone to run their school. Would you be interested since you've decided to try something else other than Hillel?" I said, "No, I'm not really ..." He kept pushing me and pushing me, so I agreed just to meet with just the search committee. It was a lovely interaction, and I've been now in the congregational world, as I mentioned earlier, for close to seventeen years. It has its blessings too. I still miss some of the intellectual challenges of being on campus, which is lovely. But it's really quite a lovely position also to find myself in, being able to be with different generations through all the different challenges and happy occasions of life. I'm really finding that I'm enjoying it tremendously. But if you had asked me, when I first went to rabbinical school, if this is where I would be? No way, I'd say.

RS: I want to go back to a particular challenge that had to be overcome by you personally – a story about that.

SF: In rabbinical school, I'd say there were three challenges. One was there were certain professors that pushed the women harder academically. We had to prove ourselves in a way that the men in our class did not have to. Then there [was] resentment on the part of our male students, fellow students, that we would take the jobs. They were still getting used to the idea of having women as – I guess I'd call it – friendly

competitors when we would be ordained. Some of the professors would say inappropriate comments in class. Some of our classmates, a couple of them, were a little hostile in their interactions with us. The third challenge you had to overcome is, back then, you were the only women rabbi that most people had ever met. It took a while for them to become used to you. You would be in your student rabbinic position. For example, I served as the rabbi for the old age home in Cincinnati for the Jewish [inaudible] Cincinnati. And I had no difficulties forming relationships with the elderly residents of the facility. They said, "When you're our age, we know what's important." It didn't matter to them. But their families had a lot of difficulty with me. Sometimes they wouldn't want me to do the funeral because they said I wasn't a real rabbi. So you would run into things like that very often. There was also a lot of, I imagine, self-imposed pressure that you had to be the best; you couldn't make a mistake because you were the first and only woman rabbi that these people would meet. Now, it's so much nicer to have so many women rabbis. When I was ordained, I knew every woman rabbi in the world personally. Now I don't even know all the women rabbis in Boston, which is sad on the one hand, but it's also great on the other. So that pressure is gone. You still run into people every now and then who are uncomfortable with you. The goal is – what I would tell everyone [is], "Let's wait a year. Right now, I'm a woman who happens to be a rabbi. Let's work together for a year, and then hopefully, I'll become the rabbi who happens to be a woman." That's the line I would always take with the more Conservative and Orthodox students on the campus, and it worked. It worked. I never found myself pushing to be the halachic authority for any of the Orthodox students, but we did become friends and study partners. So you were able to develop a relationship with everyone when they were ready to develop that relationship with you. You just have to have the patience to wait it out and let it grow.

RS: It's an interesting perspective. It's good you answered that question. You found your husband in rabbinical school. He's also a rabbi.

SF: Now he is.

RS: Now he is.

SF: Yes. My husband did not begin his professional career as a rabbi; he was a concert pianist. In fact, he was my piano teacher. He was at the conservatory in Cincinnati, which is across the street from the rabbinical school. I needed a teacher because I had been playing for a while. I went up to him one Friday night dinner and asked him if he could recommend a teacher, and he said, "Well, I need some students. If you're good enough, I'll take you on." So I auditioned for him, and that's how we met. He became a rabbi when our children were in middle school. He had always taught Jewish studies and Hebrew as a way of making money when he was trying to make it as a pianist, and music was my hobby. So my profession was his hobby, and his hobby was my profession.

Anyway, he decided to go to rabbinical school when our kids were in middle school, and he went to the New York campus. Because of his background, he did it in three years, but for those three years, I was a single mom Sunday night through Thursday night, and it was a good experience. I developed a lot of sympathy for single moms.

RS: Maybe you can speak to the balance between your career and your family, especially being a rabbi. I don't know if that makes a difference – you were a Hillel rabbi at that time.

SF: Right. One of the reasons I decided to go into Hillel as a young mother was because it is an easier environment to be a young mother than what my understanding was of the congregation world from some of my friends and colleagues. At Hillel, you can bring the child to the campus. You've got a hundred babysitters. Everybody pays lots of attention to the little toddlers. My daughter took her first step at a Hillel Shabbat dinner. My son said his first word at a Hillel event, and the hours work because you can be home for dinner and give your kids a bath and put them to bed, and it's 9:30 at night. Then you go to the campus, and things are just starting to happen. It was a really nice

environment for my children. You're also much more in command of your schedule when you're on the campus than a lot of congregational positions, for example. I had less crises of hospitals and sudden deaths. I mean, you do have, unfortunately, crises with hospitals with the students, but it's not as often as when you're in a congregation that has people who are older. So that's one reason, a very important reason, that I chose to become a Hillel rabbi. I could not be the kind of mother I wanted to be and be a full-time congregational rabbi the way I am now. My kids are older. They're grown. They're out of the house. They were in high school when I took the position I did. If they were younger, I would've ended up neglecting them or my congregation or both ... If I were a congregational rabbi and had young children at home, I don't see how it would be possible to avoid either neglecting them or neglecting my congregation or both.

RS: What's the craziest thing anybody asked you to do as a rabbi?

SF: [laughter] A secret burial for a beloved pet in a town that didn't allow pets to be buried on your property is the oddest thing that anyone has asked me to do as a rabbi.

RS: That's great. Were you scared?

SF: No, it turned out to be a lovely ceremony. We wrote it together, and we did it late at night. There was a sense of adventure about it. But I saw how much comfort it gave the family. Now I have a whole file of pet funeral services that I've used more than once. But that was the oddest thing I think I've ever been asked to do.

RS: That's great. I'm sure in Hillel, and I'm sure in your congregation, you've always had people coming to you, particularly I would imagine young people asking you questions about faith and God and struggling with those kinds of issues. We all do at whatever age. Somebody comes to you in a crisis of faith. What do you say to them? "Rabbi, I'm angry. I can't do this anymore. I wasn't even sure if I could be Jewish, but now I know I can't be Jewish." What do you say to somebody with a crisis of faith?

SF: You asked me what I respond to somebody who's having a crisis in faith, and the first thing we do is talk about what's the root of the crisis. Then we begin to examine their views about God, and if that's part of the crisis they're having. Sometimes it's an alienation from the Jewish people, and it's not necessarily an alienation from what they think they should believe in God. So we begin to examine what kind of a God have you believed in, and we begin to do the hard work of trying to formulate and reshape what I would call an adult theology, which is the hard work that every adult Jew has to do, leaving behind the old man in the heavens and coming up with a more sophisticated understanding and a more nuanced understanding of how God's presence is evidenced in the world. So we'll begin to have a conversation about that and to try to guide them to a new understanding of how God's presence might be felt in their world and in their lives, that perhaps God is not the force behind the tragedy, but the force behind the response to that tragedy, that perhaps God is not the reason why this horrible thing is happening, but the source they can draw on that gets them through that horrible thing. Just being able to revisit and relook at the way they see God and giving them permission to let go of a lot of the theological harmful stereotypes that they have dragged with them through their childhood is very liberating for a lot of people. I have found that even when the conversation has no resolution, even when the person is still unable to come to any kind of comforting image of God or how God will work in their lives, just being able to talk to someone about it is helpful. We'll just keep continuing the conversation over a period of weeks and months. We may not come to a conclusion, but as long as we're talking about it, that's okay. There's a wonderful prayer that is sometimes used in High Holiday liturgies, and it says, "You can curse at me," says God, "And you can sing to me, and you can bless me, and you can shake your fist at the heaven's toward me, but you just can't forget me." So as long as there's a dialogue, as long as we're still talking about God, that's really all I want to have happen for that person.

RS: That's great. Can you share with us your understanding of God? Your own personal understanding of God.

SF: My understanding of God has evolved through the years. I think I had a fairly unsophisticated view of God when I was young and when I was in college. Then I took a yearlong course that was entitled “The Theological Implications of the Holocaust.”

Completely turned my theological world upside down. It led me, in fact, to my interest in medieval Jewish philosophy, because I felt that they were the group of thinkers that had most honestly begun to deal with questions of evil and human nature. I went through, I think, a pretty turbulent couple of years with a lot of arguing and fighting with God. When I became a parent, I had a greater sense of God’s presence in my own life personally. It has affected my own theological ideas. I would say that my current understanding of God, and I expect it to continue to evolve and change as it should, is that God is the force that makes for goodness in the universe. It’s part of the makeup of the structure of the universe itself, and it’s the force, the energy, that makes good happen when good doesn’t necessarily have to happen. But it happens, nevertheless – the reason behind [having] elements such as compassion and courage and patience and empathy when we don’t really need it from an evolutionary standpoint. That’s the definition that gives me, at this point, the most guidance and the most comfort.

[Recording paused.]

RS: Have your rituals changed since he’s become a rabbi?

SF: Our children complain that my husband and I talk too much, have too much shop talk at home. We’ll argue over Midrash. We’ll argue over the interpretation of the Parsha. We do have differences in theology, and we also have differences in observance. But the compromise we’ve made is that the level of observance in our home is more toward the Conservative side just because of my rule that I learned in Hillel, which is that I never want a Jew to be uncomfortable in my home. Right? When you’re in Hillel, you want to be able to invite any student to your house. So you make sure your kitchen is strictly kosher, and you make sure things in your house are proper so

that you can always invite any student in, and that just became our habit. But theologically, we are sometimes apart, and we do talk about text and interpretation all the time. Our children used to complain about it when we would all have dinner together – “Enough shop talk already.” The one thing we don’t do is before the High Holidays when we’re each involved in writing our sermons for the year’s observances, we never share ideas or what we’re writing about until afterward. And nine times out of ten, we’ve ended up writing about identical issues. Completely different takes and we have completely different writing styles, but we don’t share that because we don’t want to unduly influence the other. But other than that, we often discuss textual interpretations in theology and who’s right and whose interpretation is wrong. As a Reform Rabbi, he will engage in certain ritual customs that I’m not comfortable with, and he thinks I’m too strict, and I think he’s too lenient, but we manage to work it out.

RS: Is he a pulpit rabbi?

SF: He is a pulpit rabbi as well. His congregation is a Reform congregation that’s three miles from mine. It has its advantage. When I meet people who are searching for a community, and I feel that they would be more comfortable in a reform community, I can refer them with a full heart to my husband’s community because I know they’re getting a great rabbi. It works vice versa as well, he says. So it does have its advantage.

RS: Do you have a favorite piece of text? If so, why?

SF: Oh, you want me to choose just one favorite text?

RS: What an impossible question.

RS: What do you go back to over and over again?

SF: Referring back to my question about theology, one of my favorite shortest pieces of text is a quote that says, “Pray as if everything depends on God. Act as if everything

depends on you.” That’s one of my favorite quotes. I have it, in fact, inscribed on a little plate on my desk. One favorite piece of text. I love the little paragraph in [Abraham Joshua] Heschel’s book *The Sabbath*, where he talks about the Sabbath being a sanctuary of time and his take on how we look at time. My rabbinic thesis was about the beginning of time in creation. So those kinds of texts have always interested me, things about time. So I love that passage in his book. I love to study the nineteenth chapter of Leviticus, because its image of what it means to be a holy person is not isolation from the community but intense involvement with the community, even with the part of community you don’t like very much. I love to teach from that text. There’s a Midrash from Leviticus, from *Vayikra Rabbah*, which is the great Midrash on Leviticus that talks about how a priest has to handle the gift of the poor person. I love to teach from that text because it really speaks to Judaism’s and God’s emphasis on the absolute equality of every single person regardless of their background. So those are some of my favorites.

RS: Can you share with us a personal crisis and how Judaism got you through it?

SF: A few years ago, my mother became very sick unexpectedly, and I was with her at the moment the crisis happened. There were a couple of days there where it was very touch-and-go, and I was continually fighting to get her moved to another facility. I ended up finally fighting to get her life-flighted to a better hospital. Once we were there, there was also a lot of uncertainty whether she would survive the treatment that was being administered, as well as experimental treatments. I did, of course, a lot of praying, which my rational side would tell me, “God is this force in the universe. God isn’t this personal being that is hearing your prayer.” And yet, there’s a side of me that says, “Yes, but God is also this personal being that hears my prayer and sends me comfort, and that’s why God is God because God can be both.” Those contradictions are one of the most beautiful things actually about Jewish thought and belief. I found prayer to be very helpful. I also found the support of my family and my community to be very, very helpful. While we were spending those long, long hours waiting to see whether or not my mother

would recover, I spent a lot of time just delving into text and distracting myself with study. In the end, my mother did recover; she's doing quite well. Every day, I would be sure to find a little hospital chapel. It's always strange as a Jew praying in these hospital chapels. They're never really set up for Jews. But that was a part of my day. Studying was a part of my day. Checking in with my congregation was a part of my day. So Judaism gave me a structure that helped me get through each of those days. That structure gave me a lot of sources of strength. [Recording paused.]

There's so many holy moments to choose from. During a bat mitzvah at my congregation, the young woman was being bat mitzvahed – becoming a bat mitzvah, I should say. Her grandmother, who was a Holocaust survivor, came up to read from the Torah for the first time, and I was able to teach her how to do that. So here we were with the child and the parents who had also read from the Torah and the grandmother, all standing together on the bimah. All I could think about was the grandmother and what life was like for her and how she never could have ever envisioned that moment happening for her family, and there they were on the bimah, having that holy moment together as a family. It really hit me very, very powerfully at that time. One of the things that's lovely about being a congregational rabbi is that you get a lot of holy moments like that, at life cycle events where you would expect them, at bar and bat mitzvah observances, at funerals, at weddings, at baby namings. Sometimes you can have a week full of holy moments, but they also occur in the most unexpected times. Little conversations in the hallway. Something a child will tell you in Hebrew school. Witnessing an act of kindness among your congregants. It's full of those moments, and that's one of the things that I love about the congregational rabbinate.

Q: Can you think about thirty years ago when you were just becoming a rabbi and think about what it is today? Could you tell us what is the most different thing about being a woman rabbi today versus back then, if there is anything that's really different?

SF: There are many differences between now and thirty years ago. The first difference was resources. We were creating and inventing a lot of things on our own – rituals, new languages for prayer, new ways of looking at text, new ways of doing Torah interpretation. There was nothing out there. We were doing a lot of it. We were doing it for the first time, or we would find out, “Oh, there’s someone in California that’s doing this. Let’s get their text and see what it is.” Now there are any number of resources that have beautifully incorporated women's lives and women's perspectives into life cycles, and Jewish rituals, and Jewish text, and Torah interpretation. You can fill libraries with them, and that’s a huge difference. Another huge difference is the way people react when they meet you. There’s no longer the shock and surprise and the derision. It’s almost like it’s ordinary. It’s really wonderful that it’s ordinary. [laughter] The third biggest change, I think, is that it’s not unusual for people to have a woman rabbi growing up and to have a woman rabbi when they’re on the Hillel campus and then to join a congregation in which there’s a rabbi who’s a woman. For the children in my congregation, I’m the only rabbi they’ve ever known, and it’s completely normative for them to have a rabbi who’s a woman. They don’t think twice about it. Whereas thirty years ago, everybody was thinking twice and three times and four times, and that’s a really nice change that it’s normative. It’s not an odd thing anymore.

RS: Right. Some critics say that women have feminized the rabbinate. What would you say to those people?

SF: To those critics who say women have feminized the rabbinate, my first question to them would be, “Well, what do you really mean by the term feminized?” By feminized, if you mean that women have made rabbis more approachable, then I would say yes, and it’s a good thing. If by feminized you mean that women have made rabbis a little more attune and sensitive to what’s happening, I think, among women’s lives and among the lives of women as mothers and the challenges that they face with children and the challenges that older women face, I would say yes, and again for the better. If by

feminized you mean that women have encouraged a much greater level of lay participation in learning, in singing, in worship, a much more circular model of leadership among the congregation as opposed to a ladder-like structure, I would say yes, and again, I would say that's a good thing. I think having rabbis who are women has had a tremendously positive impact on the rabbinate and on the interaction between rabbis and their students or their constituents or their colleagues.

RS: Great. So what accomplishment in the rabbinate are you most proud of?

SF: You've asked me to choose one accomplishment that I'm the most proud of.

RS: Well, you can pick a few.

SF: It's like the question with the text. How does one choose one? After over thirty years, you're proud of a lot. I'm proud of the buildings I built. When I was at Harvard Hillel, we built a new building, and when I first came to my congregation, we didn't even have a building. We were using the library building of the local Unitarian church, and we have since built our own building. They were both beautiful buildings and well-planned, and I was intimately involved in that. So I'm very proud of those two structures, those two buildings, and what they represented. I'm very proud of the friendships that I was able to develop with Jewish students from all walks of life when I was on campus.

Whether they were Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, confused, it didn't matter. Those friendships still are with me. Students who were my shy freshman are now young leaders of the Conservative movement. I'm really proud of the relationships we developed and the relationships that still continue. I'm really proud of the educational opportunities that I've been able to create at my synagogue, both when I used to run the Hebrew school – we now have someone else who does that, but when I started I was running the Hebrew school – and also for the adult education and the variety and depth of serious Jewish learning that we've been able to nurture at our synagogue. Those would be three to start.

RS: That's impressive. Is there anything I haven't asked that you would like me to ask or that you would like to share before I conclude my questions? Obviously, we do some research, but there's always things that we miss.

SF: I think you've been quite thorough. [laughter]

RS: So the last question is, how do you hope to be remembered as a rabbi and as a Jew?

SF: What a deep question. You asked me how I hope to be remembered as a rabbi and as Jew. As a Rabbi, I would hope to be remembered as someone who is able to add joy to people's lives, as someone who was able to give them comfort during dark and very sad times, as someone who helped turn them on to Jewish learning, who helped light that spark of excitement about study and the discovery of the text, as someone who was able to show them the continual relevancy of Jewish text and Jewish wisdom and Jewish learning in this very complex changing world. I would like to be remembered as someone who helped build and sustain communities. I would like to be remembered as someone who wrote and spoke well. I almost see that as indistinguishable from how to be remembered as a Jew because everything I just mentioned aren't things that just a rabbi should do. But they are things that every Jew should do. So I hope that I'm remembered as someone who helped make the world a little better than when I came in, but in all those ways. I think that's the goal of every Jew and not just the rabbi.

RS: Excellent. Beautiful.

SF: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]