Claudia Kreiman Transcript

Ronda Spinak: – name and tell us a little bit about what you're doing in your rabbinate.

Claudia Kreiman: My name is Claudia Kreiman. I am a Rabbi at Temple Beth Zion [TBZ] in Brookline, Massachusetts, where I'm one of two rabbis of a wonderful congregation.

RS: Fantastic. I want to take you back to your childhood before we come up to date. I want you to think about a special Jewish memory from your youth and if you could share a story about that.

CK: I grew up in Chile, Santiago, Chile. I'm the daughter of a rabbi who was actually the first graduate of the rabbinical school in Argentina of the Seminary Rabbinical in Argentina. So I grew up very much with a [inaudible] being the daughter of who was then the only rabbi in the community. A very important memory that I have as a teenager is during summer camp, which I think – Jewish summer camp – really marked me and marked my journey in my life, which is that every Shabbat, we would all dress in white for Shabbat, and it was magical, and it was beautiful, and I was a teenager. Probably the experience was even more magical and more beautiful than it really was. But I remember a Friday night with all our friends singing the Shabbat songs and just feeling that God was there in the air, which for a teenager, was a very strange thing to say. It wasn't really popular to talk about God, but I really remember feeling so strongly about that experience and thinking that this is so meaningful, that this is so meaningful to me. In general, the experience of summer camp and being a whole summer immersion in Jewish life was one of the things that most marked me as a kid and as a teenager.

RS: Being the daughter of a rabbi –? Conservative?

CK: Yeah.

RS: Conservative, right? What was your Jewish upbringing like? Did you rebel? Did you conform? Tell me a little bit about your Jewish upbringing.

CK: Being the daughter of a Rabbi, from my experience, I thought I rebelled, but I actually didn't. When I look at my life now, it's pretty clear that I did not rebel. I was always very excited about everything Jewish in my life. As a teenager, there were a lot of things about my home life, my father, and my parents that I didn't like, and I wasn't excited, but I was always there with my father, following him everywhere. There were very few things that I didn't like about the Jewish part of my upbringing. My life and my rabbinate looked very different from my childhood, where my father was a Conservative rabbi, both in the Conservative movement but also in his style. Even though I am trained in the Conservative movement, I am perhaps more liberal than my father, not just Jewishly but also in a stylistic way. So my rebellion – probably only my father and me can notice it; not everybody can. As a kid and as a teenager, I was always very excited about everything that was connected to Judaism. I did not know there were women rabbis. I did want to be a woman rabbi, but, but more like a fantasy like when you say, when you're a kid, "I want to be an astronaut," or something that you're not really going to be. Because I didn't know. I didn't know that really there were women rabbis. At some point, I heard there were women Rabbis in the United States, but the United States was really far. This was before [the] internet or anything. So when I would say that I wanted to be a rabbi, it was much more about living the life that my father was living and about summer camp. The truth is that I thought that if I was going to be a rabbi, then I could always be at camp. That's the connection I made. Eventually, when I went to Israel, I met for the first time rabbinical women, rabbinical students, and rabbis, and I realized that it was possible the first time it clicked that actually, this could be life and my career.

RS: Can you share with us how old you were when you went to Israel, and you met these women and who they might be?

CK: So I went to Israel when I finish – I'll start again. I went to Israel when I was twenty, twenty-one, first for a one-year program in Haifa University after living for four years in Argentina. I knew by then that there were rabbis and rabbinical students. I had met but not personally – I didn't have friends who were rabbinical students or rabbis. When I arrived to Machon Schechter, where eventually I went to my rabbinical school to do a master's program in Jerusalem, the seminar in Jerusalem of the Conservative movement, I started to meet a lot of rabbinical students my age. They looked like me. Their lives looked very similar [to] mine – and rabbis. People thought I was a rabbinical student. I was a master's student in the Jewish studies program. A lot of people thought that I was a rabbinical student. It was very clear at that moment. It wasn't like a process. It was really clear that I should be in the rabbinical school. The dean of the rabbinical school then asked me why I wasn't in the rabbinical school program. My first answer was connected to making Aliyah because the rabbinical student program in Israel was for Israelis, and I was [a] visa student. I'm like, "I will need to become an Israeli citizen." So he looked at me, and he said, "So, become an Israeli citizen." And I did. So, I became an Israeli citizen. When I did that, I thought I would live in Israel. And I did live in Israel for ten years, and I worked as a rabbi in Israel, too.

RS: Okay. Can you –? [Recording paused.] – in your class.

CK: In my class? In my class in Israel, we were the first four graduates from my class of the rabbinical school of Schechter Institute, three women and one man. You want the names of the –?

RS: No, I'm just curious.

CK: So Rabbi Gesa Ederberg, who's a rabbi in Berlin now. I don't know if you might know her. And Rabbi Moriah SimonHazani, who now lives in Jerusalem, but she was in Philadelphia for the last ten years. Rabbi Paul Arberman lives in Israel. I was the fourth of my class that graduated together. But during all my years in the Schechter Institute, I

met all the rabbinical students who were coming from the United States. So one of my first Havruta, my first rabbinic learning partner, was Rabbi Sharon Brous from Los Angeles, and we were both rabbinical students together. So that's the generation I was – yeah.

RS: You chose to stay in Israel. What community did you serve? Did you meet your husband in Israel? Maybe you can talk about that and then how you ended up here in the States?

CK: When I arrived in Israel, first I lived in Haifa, in a program of the University of Haifa, for a year. Right away, and it's something I did in every country I lived in, I connected to the local conservative Masorti community. So in Haifa, I was already connected to the Masorti community. When I moved to Jerusalem and studied at the Schechter institute, I also became very involved in the Masorti movement. During my rabbinical studies, I worked for the Masorti movement, especially with a NOAM [No'ar Masorti] youth group, which is a Conservative youth movement of the Conservative movement there. I started as one of the directors of one of the branches of the youth movement, and I became very involved. As I was nearing the end of my rabbinical studies, I entered a fellowship led by Rabbi David Lazar. It's called [inaudible] fellowship, which is a fellowship in Israel for rabbinical students to figure out what they want to do when they grow up. That's how I saw it. What is my dream job, and how can I become influential in the rabbinical work in Israel? In that way, that dream when I was a little kid that I wanted to be a rabbi at camp forever became true. My teacher Rabbi David Lazar – when he asked me what would be your dream work, I said I want to be the rabbi of [a] camp. I was very involved [in] the youth movement and at the camp there, Camp Ramah Noam, and there was no full-time rabbi on staff then. There were rabbis-in-residence. I was doing a lot of the rabbinic work there and together and with a fellowship through [Temple] B'nai Jeshurun in New York that I was involved [with] and I've known the rabbis since childhood. We figured out this new role as rabbi of NOAM. So for three years after I graduated, I was the Rabbi of

NOAM, the youth movement of the Masorti movement in Israel, which included being the rabbi of camp. So those summers were like, “Oh I’m doing my dream job,” which was amazing. I never imagined I would end up in the United States. I am embarrassed to say I had no idea where Boston was. I knew it was an important city in the United States, but no more than that. I met my spouse – even though he was born in the United States, he was raised and grew up in Israel. I’ve known him from Israel for many years. He and his family lead a known minyan in Jerusalem, the Leader Minyan. He is one of the Leader family. I used to *daven* there, and I was very excited about the minyan, but I never met him personally. In one of my trips to New York through this fellowship [at] BJ, we met in a celebration for a common friend [inaudible]. Yes, actually, we were both there and were introduced for the first time officially. I was living still in Jerusalem, and he was living in Boston. For a year, we were in a long-distance relationship. I was at the end of my three years in this fellowship with BJ and in this job at *NOAM*, and I was excited to look for different opportunities. At that moment, even though I had thought that I would stay in Israel, my personal life was becoming a priority, and I decided to move to Boston, where professionally, it couldn't be better than here. So it’s not that I was making such a – it wasn’t that challenging to find a job and work here. So that’s what brought me here.

RS: Great. [Recording paused.] – in Israel. We were also in Berlin and interviewed Gesa. One of the things that struck me in Israel was that being a woman rabbi is a political statement. It sounds like you had your dream job. You were fulfilling this vision that you had of yourselves. How did that vision and what you were doing smack up against the political-ness in Israel? How did that feel to you? Can you share a story around that?

CK: Perhaps one of the reasons that I feel regret or I feel the most sad [about] not being in Israel right now and working as a Rabbi in Israel is because of the political statement that being a rabbi is. On one hand, living here, I’m in a community where being a woman

rabbi is easy. I work really hard, but being a woman rabbi is easy. I can do the job without being in fights all the time about what it means to be a women rabbi or what my role represents. So, on one hand, I do not miss being always in this political fight of who I am. On the other hand, the political part of being a rabbi and what it means in Israel and what it could mean, or the hopes that it could become something much more mainstream, is very dear to me, and I miss not being part of that fight. I always felt in Israel that I lived in different layers. On one hand, it was a dream job. I was the rabbi of these youngsters, teenagers. I love spending time with teenagers. For them, there was no question; they gave me hope that there was a generation that we were raising and that we were bringing them within liberal Jewish tradition that was excited about what we had to give and the values that we were talking about. But then I would leave my office, or I would leave the activities of the youth movement, and I would encounter the real world in Israel. It was always very sad and very hard, but it was very important to me to find that. So there is the story everybody tells about the cab driver that asks you, “What do you do in Israel?” You spend time [to] figure out, “Do you say the truth? Do you say, ‘I’m a Rabbi?’ or you just say, ‘I’m a Jewish educator.’” Do you want to fight with a cab driver about liberal Judaism in Israel, or do you just want to get to the place where you have to get? I remember that being a daily feeling that is like, “Do I just want to get the work done, or do I want to be raising my voice every time there's an opportunity, so people know about this?” Some days, I choose one thing; some days, I choose other things based on what it was that I was trying to do. I became very involved through the Masorti movement in anything that was connected to women's issues and women's rights and not just women but also pluralism in general and liberal movements having a voice in Israel. I also became involved and volunteered through [inaudible], an organization for women that cannot receive their get, that are [inaudible]. So I was trying to become as involved as possible in all these fights. And every time I visit Israel, and I visit Israel every year at least once, I have this kind of jealousy with my colleagues, which they laugh [about] because they are jealous of me because I am not all the time fighting about

being who I am, but I have this sense of, “I want to continue this fight.” It’s for me, for my children, and for the next generation. So I long [for] that, but I also am happy here. I live with [those] two feelings together.

RS: Excellent. Thank you. Gesa has other challenges. Do you stay in contact with her?

CK: Yes, we do.

RS: Isn’t she running the head of the Masorti in Europe now, right?

CK: Yes.

RS: That’s pretty amazing.

CK: Yes, she’s amazing.

RS: Other challenges there. Do you want to speak at all about –? Have you visited Europe? I’m trying to think of a question I can ask you about Gesa. I’ll come back to that. I guess you didn’t have really an “aha” moment, that was an obvious thing. The head of Schechter asked you why aren’t you in rabbinical school. Did you have an “aha” moment?

CK: Yes.

RS: Can you share that “aha” moment?

CK: Yes. As I shared earlier, I grew up in a life full of Jewish life and perhaps knowing that I will be involved in Jewish life always. I don’t think I knew what that meant. I don’t know if I was able to frame it, [that] it will be professionally or not. The story of my life that changed my life totally on every level was my mother’s death. My mother was killed in the bombing of the Jewish community in Argentina in 1994. This was just a month before my twentieth birthday. Of course, that experience changed my life forever [on]

every level. But I think it was also very powerful in what it did to me around how I wanted to live my life and what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. The experience was terrible. After spending a long time, first of all, waiting to find my mother, and then after shiva and the traumatic experience, I remember very clearly knowing that I have to do something in my life. My mother was one of the founders of the nursery school that eventually became the Jewish day school that Rabbi Marshall Meyer, who started the conservative movement in Argentina, and then my father was his first student and the first graduate of the seminary. So the Bet El community, which is the first liberal community in Argentina – and its school that now is a large Jewish day school was founded by starting this kindergarten, this preschool, and my mother was one of the founders. She was very involved in starting the Jewish education piece there. At the time of her death, I was one of the teachers of the bar and bat mitzvah program at the same synagogue, the same place. I remember the director of the b'nei mitzvah program called me after shiva, and she said to me, “Just take the time you need. You don’t have to get to work.” I got that phone call from my professors at the University, from every place where I was studying or working. I remember saying, “I don’t think I can get back to everything, but the first place I’m going to go back is to teach there.” I went back, and that first class was a disaster. I [was] teaching twelve, thirteen-year-old [students], and I spent the whole hour, hour and a half of class just crying. The kids knew what was going on. But at least the way I remember it right now is that it was so clear to me that if there is something I could do to bring justice to my mother’s death, [it] was to continue in her path of Jewish education. I don’t think I knew then that it would look like being a rabbi in the synagogue in Boston, but I knew that it meant that this was going to be the path that I was going to take. In the years after that – year after that. I only stayed for one more year in Argentina, I became somewhat involved with Memoria Activa, which is one of the groups that was crying for justice around the bombings, both in the AMIA [Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina] building, where my mother was killed and in the embassy of Israel. One of the things that Memoria Activa would do is go every Monday morning in

front of the palace of justice at the same time of the bombing, which was at 9:53 AM on Monday morning, and yell, scream in front of the Palace of Justice, [inaudible], “Justice, justice you should pursue.” We were a bunch of people, and we would go, and some families and some friends, and there will be speakers and important political speakers. I just remember one day standing there and feeling hopeless, feeling like, “This is not going to do anything," and knowing the political world in Argentina and how things work in Argentina and how things take years to bring to justice. I just stood there, and I felt like I’m wasting my time just standing here and just screaming, yelling, “Justice, justice you should pursue.” I really admire the people who kept doing this for many, many years, but I felt that this wasn’t really the way that I was going to pursue what I had to pursue. So, it developed. I didn’t have a plan. I didn’t create a plan, but it developed to think about in which way the work I will do in the world will be meaningful, and it was about Jewish education. It started by going to Israel to continue my learning. It was then continuing this master’s program and then evolving to rabbinical studies. The details of which studies I was doing and what kind of job I was going to take happened. It was very clear to me, and it is clear to me every day that the work I’m doing is about doing something, probably very little – hopefully, not so little – to change the world we live in, so things like my mother’s killing wouldn’t happen again to anybody.

RS: Thank you for sharing that. [Recording paused.] After your mom’s death, in such a horrific fashion, did you question? Did you have any crisis of faith or change of heart in any way in terms of your own practice or beliefs? Can you tell us a story around that?

CK: After my mother died, I felt that Jewish practice and Jewish tradition actually had so much to offer to me. I did not have a crisis of faith toward God the divine. I had a crisis of faith toward humanity. I never thought to ask the question, “Why did God do this to me, or why did God let these things happen?” I never believed, and I don’t believe in that kind of God – that’s not my theology. The question that I’ve always asked is, “Why do people do these horrible things? What is wrong with us, with human beings?” Jewish life

and Jewish tradition have always given me a framework [for] the values I believe in. So, yes, I get angry, and sometimes, I *daven* more, or I *daven* less, or my practice is not so good, etc. But it's not connected to a crisis of faith because of what happened to me. The more I look at my life personally and at the world as it is, I know that the more we need to engage in trying to live a sacred life. I believe that Jewish tradition gives me the tools for that.

RS: Great. Could you share with us a little bit about your theology? What is your understanding of God?

CK: I'm a woman of faith. I live a life where I feel that God is in it. I find that living a life – being in a relationship with the divine is about being in a relationship with the world and with human beings. I can't describe how I see God or how I think about God, but it is knowing that I have to create and live a life of meaning. My interaction with God and with the divine is through my interaction with the world and with human beings. I am a person that – I don't know the word – believes in prayer. No, it's not [believing] in prayer. That prayer is pretty much part of – prayer is very much part of my life as a practice to become more mindful of everything in my life, of the gifts that I have in my life, of the challenges that I have in my life. In that sense, I am a student in almost every sense. I'm a student of Marshall Meyer, who was a student of Abraham Joshua Heschel. My Jewish upbringing was so much about living a life that has meaning, and that is about being out in the world [and] making the world a better place. My father, as a rabbi in Chile, fought for human rights during the dictator [inaudible] Chile. As a kid, for me, I was Jewish. That was the Jewish thing to do, even though the Jewish community in Chile didn't very much support [it]. He learned and got that from his teacher Marshall Meyer, who did that in Argentina during the dictatorship in Argentina, and Marshall, of course, learned that from his teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel. For me, it is about living in the world, trying to make our best from it, not just for ourselves but for everybody, of course.

RS: This might be a redundant question. You can answer around it a bit. I would like to ask if you've ever had a personal crisis and how Judaism has helped you get through it, specifically a story around that.

CK: Something different from my mother's –?

RS: Yes, unless you want to – that fits it, but if you have something maybe more recent and specifically how Judaism – it sounds like Judaism is such a central part of your life and the framework of how you live. It's not separate. So if it doesn't feel like that applies, if you can think of something.

CK: [inaudible] is something. Perhaps, I can share that, in general – because I do not separate my Jewish life from the rest of myself. Whenever I have any crisis, the way I live that is through my life. My life is a Jewish life. I like to think about Judaism as being the language of my life. I have a hard time separating my Jewish part and my non-Jewish part. Everything is Jewish in the way I live my life. So every time that I have experienced any crisis, from health issues to losing my parents, [and] relationships, it's always been framed Jewishly. I'm thinking about two possible stories. One is around an ectopic pregnancy I had, where thank God, I was living here in Boston in one of the best places with healthcare. We found out very early, so there was no danger in it. But I did not know what an ectopic pregnancy was before I found that that was what was going on. In the era of the internet, you do your research, and you learn more than you should really know. I remember sitting in the hospital with my spouse after the disappointment and the sadness that this pregnancy was not viable and after feeling like I was going to be okay and everything was going to be okay, learning how this was so dangerous – could have been so dangerous if I have lived anywhere else and how this ectopic pregnancy is one of the main reasons women die in third world countries because they bleed to death, and they never knew that they were actually pregnant. It was this kind of information – how I didn't know about this. I felt so guilty, and I felt so blessed to be

where I was. It's the best hospitals in the world. People fly to be here. **The** first thing that came to mind, and this is usually how I experience this, was a Jewish text around that, which is the text from the Mishnah in the tractate of Berakhot, where the rabbis talk about blessings for the good and for the bad. I have never understood. I always get very angry at this notion that we have to bless for the bad things. "What does it mean to bless for the bad?" At that moment, it made sense to me. At that moment, it meant I was so blessed to be experiencing this bad thing in a way I was experiencing. I was able to see the blessing in that moment. This is an example of whenever I'm struggling with something – good things and bad things – the first thing that comes to mind is, as I call it, a Jewish language. Just to put this in a different perspective, when my daughter was born, a couple of pregnancies later – when my daughter was born, she didn't want to get out, so I had a very, very long labor that ended up being a C-section, a very disappointing experience until she was born because then I didn't care. Thirty-five, thirty-six hours of labor was for nothing, or that's how it feels. So after I dealt again with the disappointment that it was not going to be the birth that I imagined or I fantasized and I hoped [for], we went to the OR [operating room], and after she was born – and I was exhausted – and they brought her to me, the first thing that came to mind to me was to say, "*Berakhah.*" I remember saying, [inaudible], and then getting very frustrated because I wanted to say another *"Berakhah,"* and I didn't know what else to say. I looked at my spouse and said, "What other blessing I can say?" So we came up with several blessings. I can't remember. I was out. But I remember just this sense that I needed blessings in Hebrew, [a] Jewish framework to bless for that moment, and not planned, not arranged, not ritualized. Just that was what I was feeling at that moment.

RS: That's great. Dovetailing on that story – and maybe that is the story. But do you have a holy moment that you might be able to share with us? Something that felt even more holy than other moments.

CK: Giving birth is the holiest moment that I can think about. I still can't even put it into words. I started earlier talking about that experience of a teenager thinking, feeling that God was in the air. I'm sure that then it was also very hormonal, very [inaudible]. It felt so intense. I was fifteen, and I was thirty-five. So, it was twenty years later where perhaps, I, for the first time, realized what it meant that God was in there. I think I lived my whole life being in the presence of the divine and that [inaudible] tried to do every moment. There was a glimpse of that when my daughter was born. All the rest is preparation. So, I'm hoping that I'll have a few other glimpses during the rest of my life.

RS: Your husband is a rabbi. You're a rabbi. You're a pulpit rabbi, and he's an academic.

CK: He works here.

RS: You have one daughter?

CK: I have one daughter.

RS: How do you balance being a wife, a mother, a rabbi, a thinker, feeler? Share a story around that.

CK: This is the sentence that my spouse would say, "You shouldn't have said this," but I will say [it], which is I couldn't do this without him. I don't know. I am in awe and admiration of dear friends [and] colleagues of mine that are pulpit rabbis and single mothers. I have no clue how they do it. I'm sure you have interviewed many of them, and I'm full of admiration [for] them. It is very hard to balance all the parts of our life. My spouse, Ebn Leader, works here at the Hebrew College Rabbinical School. He's very devoted to his work, students, and colleagues. He is incredibly supportive of my path and my journey. I have never met someone who is truly a feminist like he is. He is much more of a feminist than I am, and I'm saying this jokingly, but what I mean with that is that he really wants this model to work. He thinks that this is what I ought to be doing in the

world, and he will support this in any way he can. We have a wonderful daughter who's going to be five next month. She's a very energetic and wonderful girl that takes a lot of our time and our energy. We work, juggling. I feel we both live our life juggling time between our work and our daughter. We do not have any immediate family – we don't have any family living in the area, which makes it harder, but we feel very blessed to have close friends that have really taken [the] role of family and help us in any way that [they] can. The weekends, which are busy for me or the busiest for me, Ebn, my spouse, is with my daughter, and he takes her to the children's services. He takes her to any children's programming in the temple. He stays with her when I am on duty at this synagogue and evenings – I'm four or five evenings a week out of the house. He is with her, and we work really hard to figure out how to make it work. I struggle with the sense of – am I being a good mother? Am I being enough present [with] my daughter? As a daughter of a rabbi, I can complain a lot about – it's a different model of rabbinate than my father had. My mother was the one raising us. She worked, but she was mainly responsible for raising the children, and my father was out working. I really struggle with the model, and I don't want that to be my case. So, I very often feel like, "Oh, I'm not being enough present [with] my daughter. I'm not being the mother I should be. I'm much more present for others than for my own family." So, I am constantly evaluating that. I try to work with boundaries. They don't work all the time, but I try. They're, at least, on my radar. I take Tuesday off, and I spend the day with my daughter. I can still do that because she's not yet in school. I will need to change the model after she goes to school. I tried to create sacred times with her, and I'm pretty good at doing that. Perhaps what pays the biggest price is the time with Ebn, with my spouse. I'm trying to think that this is part of the time in our life. Not just rabbis but everybody raising little children is going through [this], and I'm hopeful that in a few years, we will be able to spend more time together. We do spend time together. It's just I feel that from everything in our life, it takes a side, but that's little kids.

RS: Do you have a favorite –? [Recording paused.] Do you bring text into your world? Prayer into your world? But is there a particular passage that you've gone back to over and over again in your life, and why?

CK: My congregants at the shul always laugh at almost every sentence that I start to teach about, something I say, "So, this is my favorite text." They laugh because I say that three times a weekend. So, I say, "Okay, that one even more than …" So, it's hard for me to talk about one. But I'll just say what comes to mind right now. What is my favorite text? In this moment, I'm thinking about two. First one is from the book of Bereshit/ Genesis when Jacob wakes up from the dream of the ladder with angels going up and down, and he says, [speaks Hebrew]. "There is God in this place, and I didn't know that." For me, it's an "aha" moment. It's that moment where Jacob looks around and is like, "Wow." The place didn't change. Nothing changed physically before he had his dream and then after he woke up. He just wakes up and realizes that God is in that place. For me, that is life, to hopefully wake up as much as possible and find the divine in that place. So that's one. The other text that has been very meaningful to me, and it's very much connected to how my life changed after my mother died, is a story told about Beruryah, the wife of Rabbi Meir in the Talmud, where Rabbi Meir is very troubled because there are these robbers in his neighborhood, and he prays for them to die. Beruryah corrects him, and she says to him, "Why are you praying for them to die?" The first thing I love about this text is that she is correcting him – just that. I could end there the story. But she quotes a verse from the psalms where she says that scripture says, [Speaks in Hebrew], which means, "The sins should end in the world and Earth and not the sinners." In Hebrew, it's just one dot of difference. If you're reading the Hebrew without the nikud, without the vowels, it could be both [Speaks in Hebrew]. The difference is between a prayer for bad people to die and for evil to disappear from the world. For me, that's the basic way to look at the world since Mother was killed in this horrible tragedy, which is that I believe, or I want to believe, that there's no bad people in the world, that we live in a world where human beings make choices. People make

choices based on upbringings and complicated political situations that are terrible and horrible and make them do the worst things in the world. But our prayers and our work in the world is not about just erasing them, but it's about changing something in the system so that evil choices don't exist anymore. For me, that's what it is all about. What killed my mother wasn't a person that woke up that morning and was a bad person that decided that he needed to do this horrible thing. What killed my mother is a world of terrible and complicated – I don't know what's the word. I'll ask you, and then I'll start the sentence. What's the word when there are – I can't even explain it – countries that are –

RS: Domination?

CK: Domination. Yeah. You'll do the editing. What killed my mother was a world of domination and of war and a terrible political situation around. It makes people make the choices that they make. I'm not going to solve that, but the teaching – and prayer is not what's going to solve it so easily. But the teaching from the text of Beruryah quotes is that what we need to work on is to build a world that we can take evil from it so there are no more terrible things in the way we see them.

RS: That's great. Thank you for sharing that. I'm going to contemplate that in my own life right now. So that was a real gift to me at the end of the day.

CK: Thank you.

RS: That little [inaudible]. Do you have a particular mission, vision, or goal for your rabbinate? You've touched on lots of things. I wonder if there's some mission or vision for your own rabbinate.

CK: I don't think that I have a mission or vision for my whole rabbinate. I think that right now at this moment in my work in the temple where I work, I'm focusing on two main things, which are my vision for this time. I truly believe that I need to be looking at what is needed out there, and that will become my vision in every place where I am. I'm

working very hard with very talented people in creating a model of Jewish education for families and children that is exciting and lively and that it's meaningful. I encounter so many people that talk about their childhood experiences at temple being so boring and so terrible. It saddens me so much. I had such a wonderful experience, and it's a combination of where I grew up and my father being involved and who I was, etcetera, but I just so believe that Jewish life can be wonderful and that we have to – I want to give that experience to children the way I had it. So I'm very invested in creating that in my community, and my community was a community that had very, very few families with young children, and now that's our biggest growth. It's a vision of making it fun and meaningful, joyful, and lively. So that's really very much part of what I'm doing, which is – perhaps I do have a vision that is bigger, which is connected to [living] a joyful life and that Judaism is very much about being joyful. I'm very blessed to be in a synagogue where that is the mantra. It's all about [being] joyful. The rabbi I work with, a wonderful friend, colleague, and teacher, Rabbi Moshe Waldoks, is one of the editors of the *Big Book of Jewish Humor*. He's a very funny guy. I've learned so much about the role of joy and fun in the way we live our Jewish life. I laugh a lot because he's always making jokes, but it changes the way – there's something that I learned from him that I carry with me all the time. Moshe Waldoks usually starts his Kol Nidre sermon with a joke. He spends months thinking about a joke for Yom Kippur and then spends less time thinking about the rest of the message. The joke is the main part of the sermon, and the congregation waits for months just for that joke. What is going to be the joke this year? So I asked him at the beginning when we started to work together, "Why?" And he said that when people laugh – when we all laugh – it just opens up something in our soul that nothing else can open up. In that way, we can enter a twenty-five hour period of time of [inaudible] and repentance, of prayer. We just need to be able to open up our heart to be able to do that, and he does that through joy. I love that moment at TBZ where you have a shul full of people just laughing to tears, and that's the opening and the beginning for the next twenty-five hours of joyful singing. When we end with "(Neila?)," with everybody

dressed in white all dancing and singing, and it's so joyful and so wonderful. People say, "Yom Kippur's about being very solemn." It's a different kind of solemn. It's so powerful. That's perhaps one part. The other part that I'm working hard or trying to in our community is to strengthen and remind ourselves that we have a voice in the public sphere, that we have to be Jews not just in the shul and in our lives but out there in the world and be involved politically and socially in every way that we can. On Friday night, every Friday night at TBZ, when we sing Lekhah Dodi, traditional people turn either to the west or the door of the Temple to welcome the Shabbat bride. We actually walk out the stairs of the Temple. So we all – whoever is there – no matter if it's a small crowd or a big crowd, we all walk out no matter if it's freezing, storm, [or] a hundred degrees. We always walk out to the stairs outside of the building. The teaching usually is that we walk out (based?) traditionally on walking in the fields of Tzfat to welcome the Shabbat bride. We say this every weekend – every Friday, we say, "We walk out not just to welcome Shabbat in, but to bring Shabbat out to the world." If what we are building and experiencing inside of the shul just stays in there, it's meaningless. We have to be able to bring that out to the world, and the world needs Shabbat.

RS: That's great. Take a little bit of a different tact. [Recording paused.] Very generous with your time. I don't even know what time it is. But I know that we've been going for a while.

CK: What time is it? Sorry.

M: It's 6:15.

CK: I have a shiva meeting at 6:30. Not far. So I'll do five minutes.

RS: We're good. Five minutes. So think about keeping and questions and answers a little bit shorter because I'd like to ask you [inaudible] questions. Terrible loss – your father. I'm sorry. Did he give you any advice when you became a rabbi? Can you share

with us what [inaudible]?

CK: My father died six weeks ago at the age of sixty-eight. This last summer, we had a very powerful conversation that is right now very dear to me, of course. We were a little bit distant. We were walking different paths ideologically. He, in his last years of his life, was living a more orthodox life, and I was upset because he had raised me so much in what I thought he thought were these wonderful liberal values. So in the summer, we talked about that, and I asked him why was he living in this more Orthodox community and this more Orthodox life, and he said to me that he felt frustrated and sad to be part of communities that did not live a life of [inaudible], of all of God. He found that much more in the Orthodox communities that he was part of right now. I told him, "That's not the case of my life," and he said, "I know. It's not that you can't, but that the communities that he was surrounded [by] did not have that sense of [inaudible], of really living a life where God is part of everything you do, and that was very much a gift that he gave me my whole life. We probably saw how that looked differently, but I do try to live my life with that sense.

RS: I wanted to talk a little bit about Mayyim Hayyim because you're on the faculty there. Maybe you could just share with us a story about the importance of mikveh in your own life.

CK: Sure. I feel incredibly blessed to be in a community that has a community mikveh here, and having Mayyim Hayyim here is just amazing. It's fantastic. Mikveh, in general, is very important and meaningful in my life. I practice. I have the practice to go to the mikveh monthly after my period, and I find this practice to be very meaningful and important to my life. Mayyim Hayyim adds to it something that I didn't know was possible, I went to the mikveh before I knew of Mayyim Hayyim, and I think Mayyim Hayyim has been amazing to just remind us that the practice of going to the mikveh can be and is meaningful, and not just something we do because we have to do. So

personally, the experience of mikveh is important to my life. But I also have found that bringing people to the mikveh for different reasons is very powerful. A conversion is the one that we most know of, and every time I participate in a conversion, I'm just so moved by these stories and about how this is life-changing for people. But also to see people that are going through challenges or celebrations. This last year, I accompanied a congregant of our temple, who fought breast cancer, and she's okay now. She's cancer free. We went to the mikveh at the beginning, just before she started chemotherapy, with a group of friends. And then we went again to mikveh with the same group of friends and some more that were added to the circle at the end of her chemotherapy and after her last surgery. We did a wonderful, beautiful ritual of singing and of blessing. Just to see her – just to see her in both experiences coming in from the waters, it's just so powerful. So, I think mikveh and water is very powerful. I think Mayyim Hayyim is amazing, and I'm blessed to be in a community that is such a wonderful organization.

RS: That's great. Someday, this footage will live in some archive somewhere, and Jews of the future will see it. Stories will be cut and put up on the internet. But somebody, fifty or a hundred years from now, will look at this. What do you hope that they remember about you being a rabbi and a Jew?

CK: So when you ask, "What do I hope they remember about me being a Rabbi and being a Jew," I thought you were going to ask, "What do I hope they will think or say?" So, if I can answer the question I thought you were going to ask, [do] I hope they don't even realize that there is a difference between women rabbis. That this is like, "Why do we have an archive about this?" Meaning that my hope is that in a hundred, five hundred, whatever years from now, the way we think about the rabbis and the Talmud, having different rabbis from different generations talking, there is no difference quoting women rabbis, male rabbis, transgender rabbis. We are all rabbis, and this is part of the mainstream. This is not something new, something different, something special. So, that's one thing that I just hope that we stop seeing this as unique and special. What do I

hope they will remember about me and my rabbinate? I don't know. I want people to remember me and my rabbinate. I don't want this to be about me in any way. I'm just serving God and the Jewish people. I'm doing my best. Not always the best, but I'm doing my best. That's what I've been teaching my daughter lately. We try to do our best. Sometimes we fail. Most of the time, hopefully, we'll do our best.

RS: That's great. Thank you so much.

CK: Thank you so much.

RS: Such a privilege.

[END OF INTERVIEW]