

Eliana Jacobowitz Transcript

Lynne Himmelstein: Would you please tell us your name, the city where you live, and what you're doing in your rabbinate?

Rabbi Eliana Jacobowitz: My name is Eliana Jacobowitz, and I live right now in Somerville. I'm originally from Tel Aviv if you couldn't tell [laughter], and I am the Rabbi at Temple B'nai B'rith, which is an unaffiliated trans-denominational – if you will – synagogue in Somerville, Massachusetts.

LH: Wonderful. Before we go forward, I would like to go back. Would you share with us your Jewish upbringing?

EJ: I grew up as a secular Israeli. My parents are secular. Children of Holocaust survivors. All of my grandparents were from Lodz in Poland, and they all were Holocaust survivors. I believe that, as a result, they raised my parents that nothing good comes from religion. So, I was raised by two professed atheists. But in Israel, there were many Jewish Holidays and learning Torah and about the prophets and celebrating everything. Only God was missing. But I've always been very interested. I was always a very spiritual kid. Not that my family necessarily knew what to make of it, but I always asked, "Why can't we light Shabbat candles? Why can't we do this or do that?" They would try to accommodate, sometimes more happily than others.

LH: Your path to the rabbinate was not a straight and narrow path. Would you share with us some of the interesting directions that you were going before you chose the rabbinate?

EJ: I would say that my path to the rabbinate has definitely been a serpentine path, at best. I myself am a bit surprised that I even became a Rabbi. Not only because I was

brought up secular, so the idea of having religion in my life seemed kind of like a very weird possibility growing up, but mostly because, as someone who was, I guess, a seeker, and someone who yearned for spirituality, I believed for a very long time, that I could only find it in other religions or in other places. So, for a very long time, I was one of those teenagers who were into meditation and all kinds of Eastern philosophy, and then later on, I got interested in all kinds of Earth-based religions. I really was looking for something; I just didn't know what it was. And I assumed wrongly that whatever it was, there was one place I knew that it wasn't, which was in Judaism because the only Judaism I knew was very orthodox and reserved pretty much for men. So, I looked elsewhere, but none of it was really satisfying. I got through that, looking everywhere else. Eventually, I realized that a lot of those other traditions I looked at were referring to or referencing things that came from Jewish mysticism. So, I came back to Judaism through Jewish mysticism that I arrived at by looking elsewhere. And that was, at first, my way back into getting in touch with Judaism. But even then, I didn't plan to be a rabbi; it was my hobby or my interest outside of what I was doing in my life. At university, I studied fashion design, and I went to law school. So, I had my day job or my daytime life, and then I had my other pursuits. When eventually I realized that this is something that I actually want to dedicate my life to, I still didn't realize that I'm going to be a rabbi. So, I tried to get a Ph.D. in Jewish mysticism so I can teach college, which is not that unique for Israeli women. I think the belief is that if women are very interested in mysticism or in Judaism, our way into pursuing that has to be the way of the minds, the academic way, because the ritual was restricted. In other ways, women are still today discouraged from learning certain things. When they're encouraged, if they're still encouraged to learn very particular things in a particular way. So, I believed for a very long time that I can be very involved with Judaism but not necessarily be a rabbi.

LH: So, when did you figure out –? How did that happen, that yes, "I do want to be a rabbi," and were you in Israel when that happened?

EJ: No, I was not in Israel when I realized I wanted to become a rabbi. I was actually in Boston, and I was studying for my master's degree at Boston University. I was studying with Elie Wiesel. He has been encouraging me to go to rabbinical school. At some point, he said to me, "You know you have to sometimes" – how did he say? "In life, we sometimes have to just get up and get going. And if we don't, God has to give us a little push, and it can be rather painful when God gives a little push." So, with such words of wisdom from Elie Wiesel, I called Hebrew College and inquired about rabbinical school and then called home to break the news to my parents that I'm going to rabbinical school. And throughout this whole process, I still thought that I will go to rabbinical school, but I will still only be a teacher, not necessarily a rabbi. My realization that I am a congregational rabbi happened on the day that I was admitted into rabbinical school. It was an epiphany; I don't know a better way of saying it. I came out of my interview with Arthur Green, [who] was at the time the Dean of [the] rabbinical school. I'd just got out. I was on this grassy hill. I just knew that I was going to be a rabbi, and everything in the world sort of aligned. I called my parents in Israel on my cell phone, and I said, "Mom, Dad, I'm going to be a rabbi," and they said, "Does it mean that you're not going to become Orthodox?" I said, "No." They said, "Well, that's good." [laughter].

LH: That was the extent of the [conversation]? They just wanted to make sure you're not going to become Orthodox.

EJ: They've been very supportive and very proud of me, but it has been a process for them too. And at the time, I did not think they understood at all what being a rabbi meant, what being a woman rabbi meant, and definitely not what being a woman rabbi in the context of Pluralist Judaism in the United States means, and what it would for me. What they did know was that their biggest fear of me becoming a ba'alat teshuva, me becoming Orthodox, that that wasn't going to happen, so there was relief at first. But then there was also a lot of support and other comments.

LH: Did they come here for your smicha?

EJ: Yes, they came here for my ordination. My parents and my brother and my sister all came here for my ordination, and they say that it was the most moving moment in their lives.

LH: That's beautiful. I'm just so fascinated by this congregation that you are the rabbi of. Was it formed in 1985 or prior to that? Was that when Dr. Weiss joined the congregation?

EJ: The congregation was formed in 1907, or even before – 1904. They started building the building in 1907. It has been continually the same congregation since then. But what happened was that Somerville has been a place where there was a lively Jewish community, and everyone dreamt about making money and moving to the suburbs. So then they made money and moved to the suburbs. Somerville was becoming less and less a Jewish community, and it wasn't always such a very good place to live. In the '80s, the only people who remained at this congregation were very old. The next generation was not there; they already lived elsewhere. And Phil Weiss and a couple of other young college graduates moved to Somerville because, for a variety of political reasons and others, they wanted to live in a more working-class area. They came to the synagogue, and the older folk who were there, who were at this point in their seventies and eighties, basically gave them the keys to the building and said, "Please keep it alive." So, this new generation of younger folk – pretty hippy, pretty progressive – kept the congregation alive. But the last rabbi that they had, which was Rabbi Leo Shubow, retired forty-some years ago. I was the first rabbi that they hired since then. Phil Weiss is a professor of philosophy at Wheelock College, and he's been our religious leader, part-time, all these years – aside from his day job. So there hasn't been a full-time person taking care of the needs of the community since then until they hired me, which was five years ago.

LH: Why did they now decide they want a rabbi?

EJ: I am not sure whether the decision was so much that they wanted a rabbi or whether the decision was that I came on board as a part-time education director when I was still in rabbinical school [and they didn't want me to leave]. I fell in love with this community, and they fell in love with me, I'd like to think. There wasn't talk about wanting to help the community prosper – the potential in Somerville is great. It's a growing Jewish community, which is a real blessing. From my perspective, there are many younger folk moving in, and there are many Jewish families moving in. So there's great potential there. But the congregation wasn't necessarily known – wasn't necessarily in possession of the tools to move on to that next phase or to figure out how to be a community to this new generation of Jews who are moving into Somerville. So, they were doing some strategic planning and otherwise. But I don't know that they were ready yet to hire a rabbi, and definitely not a full-time rabbi. It just felt that it was too good of an opportunity for us to give up on. I didn't really want to go anywhere else, and I think they didn't want me to go anywhere else, so we made it happen. And then I became the first woman rabbi in Somerville. [laughter]

LH: It just seems like a match made in Heaven for you and for them, given your earlier experiences with seeking, Eastern religion, and their having a spiritual seeker as their leader before you came.

EJ: It does seem very much like a match made in Heaven. The similarities between my interests and the interests of the community are pretty striking, and I hope this is why we work together well. The other thing that is very unique about this community is [that] I have [a] background in arts, and I'm very interested in arts. This community has a very large number of members who are artists. There is an artist colony in Somerville called Brickbottom, and many of our congregants live there. I think there's the connection – the spiritual connection, the Eastern philosophy connection, the Jewish mysticism

connection, the art connection, the Progressive Judaism connection. All of those things are things that I was bringing with me to the rabbinate, but this congregation already had as a big part of who they were. And together, I do think that it makes a very strong bond that we have.

LH: I'm imagining the services integrate a lot of very wonderful music.

EJ: Yes, I strongly believe that music is a huge part of what makes the spiritual-religious experience, especially for people who don't have Hebrew as their first language. It's the way that our soul makes a connection. So I'm trying to bring a lot of music to services.

We sing a lot. I am trying to bring music from different traditions and different eras. I believe the beauty of being in an unaffiliated setting is that we're not tied into a particular dogma, and we're not committed to following one very particular set of melodies. We're able to bring together melodies from different aspects and different parts of Judaism. So basically, my guidelines are anything that feels spiritual and good and like it is uplifting or connecting to a very particular sentiment or feeling. That is the kind of music that we want at our services.

LH: How many people attend?

EJ: Our Kabbalat Shabbat services, which are not generally the bigger services at my synagogue, usually get somewhere between thirty or forty people. Our bigger services are on Shabbat morning, so we have more people then. And once a month, we do a Kehillat Shabbat service, which I started – Kehillat Shabbat, the community of Shabbat or Shabbat community, is a service that is fully transliterated and is, therefore, more accessible to people who do not speak Hebrew. It is followed by a nice lunch, and it starts much later so people can have the feeling – have the secular Israeli experience of Shabbat, which for me, the experience of Shabbat has been not having to wake up too early in the morning. So, we have Kehillat Shabbat once a month, and then all of the other family services and services are geared towards bringing in people who otherwise

will not have too much of a prayer experience in their lives. And recently, we have started something that is called "Song of the Heart," which is a singing group. It's not a choir; it's a singing group for non-musicians and non-singers. It's based on the Midrashic idea – the Midrash pirkey shira says that the entirety of creation praises God in song.

This Midrash goes and lists all the different beings in creation. Actually, all the different things in creation and how they praise God in song. So, it says – what is the song? – "The dirt praises God with song. The Earth does. The sky does. The ant does. The donkeys do." Basically, they go through everything in creation and how everything praises God in song. So based on this idea that if every part of creation praised God through a song, then it must mean that even if we believe we can't sing, we still should be capable of praising God with song. So, the hope of "Song of the Heart" is to create a setting where people who don't feel comfortable in prayer or at a services setting, or people who don't feel comfortable singing because they might think they don't have a nice enough voice, [they] will be able to come and sing together and learn the melodies that have been the melodies of our people, and through that have an enriched spiritual experience.

LH: That's beautiful. When people ask you, "You're a rabbi. What [denomination]?" and you tell them, how do you explain what it is?

EJ: When people ask me what denomination I belong to – actually, people very rarely ask me what denomination I belong to. They ask me whether my synagogue where I work is a Conservative synagogue or a Reform synagogue as if those are the only two options. I tell them that the synagogue is independent, that it's not affiliated, and that I myself am a trans-denominational rabbi, that I trained in a trans-denominational setting.

The hope of the [Rabbinical] school I went to is to train rabbis who are ready to serve [inaudible], any person who feels Jewish in whatever way they feel Jewish. But when I'm asked what is my denomination or how do I define myself, I sometimes say that I'm a trans-denominational rabbi. Sometimes I say that I'm a conservative rabbi, even though I

am not a member of the conservative movement. I believe that conservative Judaism is the closest to how I see the Judaism that resonates with me. When I say Conservative Judaism, what it means to me is finding a balance between the tradition and the Halakha and the evolution of Jewish tradition through the generations. I definitely see myself as another link in this evolution of tradition through the generations. I definitely feel committed to previous generations and how they view Judaism, and I also feel committed to the values that are important to our day and life today. So, I also see my commitment as being a worthy link in that tradition and not a place where Judaism is stagnant but a place in which Judaism is moving forward and becoming more accommodating, whether it be being more open and accommodating to LGBTQ Jews, whether it means being more accommodating to interfaith families. Whether it means acknowledging the children of interfaith marriages can be Jewish individuals with very strong Jewish identities and who are part of the continuity of the Jewish people. There are many ways in which I feel we can continue the evolution of Judaism in a way that feels respectful and part of what Judaism has been so far, and yet move it in a direction that doesn't feel like it stands in contradiction with everything that is right for us today.

LH: Would you share with us a pivotal moment in your life or personal crisis and how your Judaism helped you navigate through that?

EJ: I imagine that one of the most difficult parts, or one of the most difficult elements in my life, has to do with my ongoing decision that I make every morning to live in the United States, even though I am Israeli and my entire family is in Israel. I say that I have to make this decision every day because I think I daily feel the pull to be in Israel and then also the meaningful work that I am doing here. I think Judaism is the reason that I am here. For good or bad, being a Jewish woman in Israel is very different than being a Jewish woman in the United States. Once I chose the rabbinate, I chose a path in my life that is nearly impossible to pursue in Israel today. Not that there are no women rabbis in Israel today, but I believe women rabbis in Israel are still fighting every day to prove that

they have the right to be women rabbis. And they spend so much time proving that they have the right to be who they are that there isn't much time left to actually do all the good work that needs to be done. So, once I chose this path, I also realized that part of it means that I chose to do the work that I'm doing here in the United States. That was a very hard choice between the part of my identity and the part of my heart that longs to be in Israel and the part of my identity that feels the responsibility and the blessing of being able to really affect the people around me in my community and my congregation, and in some tiny measure maybe be part of this movement where women are even able to be rabbis, which I think is completely amazing. I think about my grandmother, who passed away long before I became a rabbi, and how amazingly proud she would've been to realize that her granddaughter is a rabbi.

LH: It would have been special and remarkable. Were your grandparents traditional when they were in Poland?

EJ: My grandparents on the one side were Ger Hassidim, so they came from a very religious Hasidic family. On the other side, they were Litvaks, so completely the opposite of Hassidim but still very, very religious. I guess the brand of Judaism that my grandparents practiced in Israel was the kind in which you're so upset at God for allowing your entire family to die that you just don't talk to God, so they had this big broygez with God. No talking to God, which, as I tell my parents, they may have interpreted as atheism, but I actually think it's one of the most committed Jewish relationships that a person can have, a relationship in which one is not talking to God because there is such level of anger and feelings involved. So therefore, I think that my grandparents, if they were alive when I decided to go to rabbinical school, probably would've said some very unpleasant things. They probably would've wept like babies when I was ordained and been completely proud.

LH: I think you're right. Wow. So what is your understanding of God?

EJ: My understanding of God comes mostly from a sense of wonder and from a sense of amazement at the world around me and at the very miracle of life, the miracle of being.

That's such a tough question. We have this commentary about the first blessing that we're supposed to say when we wake up in the morning –“Modeh ani lefanecha melech chai vekayam.” “I am grateful to you. Grateful before you, God, Guide, Life, and existence or presence.” Literally, the ever-living God. “I’m grateful before you, the ever-living God.” The Rabbis are saying, “Why does this first thing that a Jew says when they open their eyes –? Why does it start with modeh, with grateful, and not with I, with ani? Which is the right order of the words in Hebrew. Why are they reversing “I” and “grateful.” And they say that before you even have this awareness of self, when you wake up in the morning, before you even have your awareness of self, you’re supposed to have an awareness of the gratefulness that you’re experiencing. I really love that because I do believe that the first thing when I wake up in the morning is this amazing sense of gratefulness. So gratefulness is something that has to transcend the sense of “I,” the sense of self. And that, to me, is God. This awareness that there is something there more than me. More than other people--I want to say, this sense of creativeness, not to be confused with the fact that I do believe in the Big Bang theory, but there is a sense of appreciation of creating this, of being part of creation and being part of the world and all the other beings in the world. And that is part, for me, of what gives me this miraculous, this wondrous sense of God.

LH: Will you describe a sacred or holy moment in your life?

EJ: A sacred or holy moment in my life? When I was in fifth grade, my secular school took us all to the Western Wall. It was a very sunny day in Jerusalem, and the light was really golden. There was just this great quality to the light itself. I remember it was very blinding – the stones were shiny and the pavement by the Western Wall. They gave us little pieces of paper so we can write notes and put them in the wall. They sent us out there to try and stick our little notes in the wall. They didn’t tell us that there will be so

many notes in the Western Wall that it's very hard to find a place to put the note. So, there I am, a young kid with all the other kids, and I write my note, and I am trying to find a place to put it in the wall, and it's very hard because there's so many notes. All of a sudden, I see this very elderly Yemenite guy and he had a very crooked back, and he's walking with a broom, and he's sweeping the floor right by the wall. I realize that he's sweeping all the notes that are falling – the notes the previous people's request from God that fell on the floor, and he's putting them in this big bag. So, I cannot concentrate on the putting-the-note-in-the-wall because I'm really distraught by the idea that he's sweeping away the notes and what's going to happen here. So eventually, I build up the courage to ask him what he's doing with the notes, and he said to me, "I am taking them to the office upstairs." So, I was like, "Okay, he's taking them to the office upstairs," and I was very happy. And then when I was on the bus back, I still had the note because I couldn't find a place to put the note in the wall. The teacher said, "Why are you still having the note?" And I said, "Well, I didn't find a place to put it in the wall, there were too many notes there, and this guy was taking them away, and he was taking them to the office upstairs." And she looks at me, and she says, "What office upstairs?" And I said, "I don't know, the office upstairs on the wall." She said to me, "There are no offices upstairs on the wall." And I remember that was almost a miraculous Elijah moment for me when I realized that I saw this old guy, and he was taking the notes to the office upstairs, and what does it mean? So that, to me, was a moment that felt like a very meaningful, a spiritual experience as a child. Something that I would obviously not be able to explain to my secular family, but it's stayed with me, this kind of wondrous moment. I still don't know what happened with those notes, but I still have my note. [laughter] I kept it.

LH: Can you share –?

EJ: What the note said? Yes. I was very single-minded back then. I actually talked about this note in one of my sermons on the High Holy Days. I felt that it had to be a big

request because it was a note for God, so I asked God to make my grandparents not die.

LH: That's a big request.

EJ: That is a big request.

LH: And they still live in you?

EJ: They still live in me.

LH: Would you share with us your most meaningful text and why it's the most meaningful?

EJ: A text that I find very meaningful comes from the Hallel service from the Psalms of Gratefulness that we recite on the Holidays and on the new month. "Even ma'asu habonim hayta lerosh pina," which is "The stone that the builders discarded became the headstone or the cornerstone." It's a text that I find very meaningful because I see my rabbinate as my life, but also, my rabbinate is talking to people who feel for a variety of reasons that they are this discarded stone. That the marks that life has left in them make them somehow unworthy, or no longer fresh, or new as they wish they could be, and they feel that these marks of life mean that there are so many things that they are no longer able to do or be. So, [I like] this idea that [the] flawed discarded stone is the stone [that] becomes the cornerstone. In this sentence, it becomes the cornerstone of the next Temple, the cornerstone from which the Third Temple will be built. This idea to me is proof that I can bring to people that King David or the sages of our tradition believed and recognized, that the most flawed and discarded stone could be significant, could be the cornerstone, the heart stone, of a new building of something great and wonderful.

LH: I hope you don't think this is an unfair question. In your opinion, if you care to share it, what do you feel is the greatest obstacle today for Israel's survival? [laughter] That's another hour, huh?

EJ: I think one of the greatest obstacles that Israel faces today is its lack of ability to really communicate or really bridge the gap between the Israeli experience of life in Israel and what life in Israel is seen like from the outside. I am putting aside – and now I'm saying it on tape – I'm putting aside the bad decisions that recent Israeli governments have been making, and I do believe that the recent Israeli government has been making very bad political decisions. But that is not as heartbreaking to me as the realization that the perspective people have about Israel here is not informed by any ability to actually see what Israel looks and feels like through Israeli eyes. I believe that until we're able to experience what the other is experiencing, we're not really able to relate. And as long as we can't relate, we can't really feel invested in the future of this other that we are not connected to. The thing that I find very troubling is that I think people in the United States today, and probably all over the world, no longer have the ability to identify with the experience of being an Israeli. And that's a real shame.

LH: It makes me think and wonder, is that Israeli experience so different than what we in America envision, and can you put into words what that is? What would you like to say to Americans, American Jews, and the rest of the world?

EJ: I spent a big chunk of my rabbinate trying to talk to people about the heartbreak of being an Israeli today, the heartbreak of being a child of Holocaust survivors, of being a child of people who, since they were very young, actively had to fight to defend the place that they believed is the last place that they can be in. As I tell my congregation, "My grandparents didn't come to Israel because they were great Zionists; they came to Israel because nobody wanted them, including the United States, who weren't willing to accept them." So, they became defenders of the State of Israel because that was their home, and it was the only home, the last home that they were going to have. Therefore, it was very precious to them. Understanding the heartbreak of being a child of all of this and being in a place where someone has kind of pulled the carpet from under our beliefs that we are justified in what we are doing, that we have the right to be here, that Israel was a

small country defending itself against stronger armies – once all of that is removed, what we're left with is that thing that our parents and grandparents sacrificed their lives for was all falsehood, and everything that we were raised to believe is taken away from us. But our love for the place, and the fact that this is the only place that we know and is our home, there is nothing to replace that void; there is nothing to fill it with new meaning.

So, I believe there's a little black hole in the heart of most Israelis today. I'm not talking about radical people on the ends of the spectrum who just, I think, are feeling very sure in their beliefs and are not required to self-examine. But everyone else, I think, is feeling like there's this void. There's this void in their hearts where what they believed about themselves, they know that to no longer be true. But there is nothing else to replace that.

I think this is an experience of Israeliness that American Jews don't get to experience so much because American Jews found something to replace this with. Either we replace our love for Israel with discomfort about Israel, or we replace our part of our identity that was the pursuit of peace for Israel and support for Israel with our pursuit for other worthy goals – of Tikkun Olam, of environmental [justice] pursuit, of Occupy Wall Street. We found other battles to fight, where we can feel good about ourselves from standing on the side of what is right. But for Israelis, it is not an option to find another interest because it is still home.

LH: Why is there still the existential threat?

EJ: I think there is an existential threat to Israel.

LH: There is, or there is not?

EJ: I think there is an existential threat to Israel. I think that we have become that boy who cries wolf. I think Israel is much stronger than it has been before, and I think Israel has been a little bit of a bully, and nobody likes a bully. I don't. But that doesn't mean that there isn't a threat to Israel's safety, and so they're two separate things. The questions of are we justified in crying all the time and saying that we're under attack and

whether we are under threat. Probably both are true.

LH: Okay, I think that's a good place to end.

EJ: Thank you.

LH: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]