Cherie Koller-Fox Transcript

Lynne Himelstein: Let's start with having you state your name, the city where you live, and where you're currently working.

CKF: My name is Cherie Koller-Fox. I live in Newton, Massachusetts, and currently, I'm doing a number of things. I'm the president of NewCAJE, (a national organization that provides professional development and networking for Jewish educators of all denominations and settings,) and I'm also working as a chaplain in hospitals and nursing homes in the Boston area.

LH: Before we go forward, let's go back a little bit. I would love for you to share with us a favorite Jewish memory from your youth.

CKF: Oh my goodness, a famous Jewish memory – a favorite Jewish memory from my youth! I have very strong memories of my mother and my grandmother lighting Sabbath candles. My grandmother lit them when the sun went down, but my mother lit candles on the table before we ate. It was a very long and drawn-out thing moment where she said the blessing and then prayed for everybody that she could think of. She wanted candlesticks on her gravestone! So that was a favorite memory that I had.

LH: Tell us a little bit about your Jewish upbringing. Maybe some important moments that infused your thinking, "Maybe one day I'll be a rabbi."

CKF: I was born in Akron, Ohio. Small Jewish communities are amazing places to grow up because everyone knows you, everyone knows your family, and there's a real sense of belonging there. My Hebrew name is Chaya Yehudit, and that means the "life of a Jew." I think from a very early age, I was very interested in Jewish things. My grandfather was actually a rabbi, not a working rabbi, but he had studied at the Slobodka

Yeshivah in Kovno, Lithuania. He was very infused with Judaism and text study. But in kindergarten, I wanted to take Jewish things into school for show and tell. My mom grew up in Scranton, Pennsylvania, which, when she grew up, was a very antisemitic place. She worried because I was taking Jewish things to public school. So she would follow me to school and look in the windows to make sure that I was okay. I wasn't worried at all. From the very beginning, Judaism was important to me. My grandfather would always say to me, "There's only ten more years until your bat mitzvah. There's only eight more years until your bat mitzvah." Actually, when I became bat mitzvah, I had no idea what came after that. For me, that was the thing that I had been looking forward to my whole life. Beyond that, my life mostly centered around Judaism. Friday night was always Shabbos dinner and often schul. We always went to shul on Shabbos morning. But Shabbos afternoon, that was it. As far as I knew, Shabbos ended somewhere mid-day. My mother kept kosher sort of. She had two sets of dishes but one set of silverware. Except for chicken, the meat wasn't kosher. Our home was very Jewish, and yet not in a way that I would recognize today. Hebrew school, youth groups, and the Jewish Center were my main activities through high school.

LH: When did you know that you wanted to become a rabbi? Was there a calling? How did this happen?

CKF: I have a really funny story about wanting to be a rabbi. When I was a teenager, I was very involved in BBYO. I was taking leadership roles, and I was the Jewish heritage chairperson for a while. I went to Israel when I was sixteen with BBYO, and that was a huge turning point in my life. But when I was seventeen, I thought about it and decided, "I want to be a rabbi." So I went to talk to my rabbi, and he just burst into laughter. Literally, he was on the floor. I said, "What did I say?" He said, "Well, don't you know that women can't be rabbis?" I said, "Well, how would I know that? I know you. I know the rabbi before you, but I had no idea that women couldn't be rabbis." So that was the end of it for a while because – this is how old I am – women couldn't be rabbis in those

days. I thought about what I was going to do. I went to college. I spent my junior year abroad in Jerusalem. I came back, and I was gonna be a social worker. One day, when I was graduating college, I was having difficulty filling out the social worker applications because they say, “What early childhood experiences make you want to help people?” I had not had anywhere near enough therapy to answer that question at that time! So I didn’t know what I was going to do. So, I said, “I don’t know. What should I do?” I got a call from my home synagogue in Akron. When I’d been in high school, I’d been a teacher’s aide. One of my little students' father was now the education chairman, and they were looking for a teacher. She said, “What about Cherie? She was such a good teacher.” He said, “Oh, well, I heard she’s just been to Israel.” So they called me up and said, “Would you like to come back home after college and teach Hebrew school?” I said, “Absolutely not! Why would I want to do that?” It was the ’60s, you know. Going home after college wasn’t the dream. But I didn’t really have anything else to do, so I ended up going back to Akron and teaching Hebrew school in the same classrooms that I was taught. That was a very important turning point for me because I had just come back from Israel the year before. I had a very clear idea of what Jewish life was about, and here I was in the same classrooms in which I had learned, teaching the younger brothers and sisters of my friends, and I suddenly realized there was a disconnect between what I was teaching and the Judaism that I knew. I really thought a lot about that, and I began to think seriously about Jewish education and how Jewish education could be exciting and real and important and relevant to my students’ lives. So this percolated in my head. Then, in the years to come, I began to become very innovative in terms of Jewish education. That’s really where my road began. I don’t want to get too far ahead of you because you’re talking about when I first thought about being a rabbi. Once women could become rabbis, by then, I was well into my life and doing a lot of innovative things in Jewish education. And so the idea went on the back burner for a year or so. Then I got a job in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at the Harvard Hillel Children’s School, which was a school for Harvard professors' children basically and

other people who lived in Cambridge. This school was not affiliated with a synagogue. Within a year, there was a bar mitzvah class, and they asked me, "Well, why can't we do the services instead of doing them at Harvard Hillel?" In a matter of a year, I was acting as the rabbi of that congregation. So I actually was a rabbi for a number of years before I decided that it was time to go to school because I had been studying all along. I just needed a degree at that point.

LH: When you decided you wanted to pursue the path of becoming a rabbi, would you share with us the seminary that you chose for yourself and why?

CKF: [At] that point, I'd been acting as the rabbi at the school-congregation for fifteen years. I had a congregation of about hundred and fifty families. I can tell you the story of why I made the decision to go to Rabbinical school. I took my congregation to hear Rabbi Art Green speak. There was a woman rabbi there. I heard my congregants say, "Is she a real rabbi, or is she like Cherie?" At that point, I thought, "Well, maybe it's time to really get Smicha. It got very complicated being in the role of rabbi without Smicha. At that point, I was very well known. Professionally, I knew everybody in the rabbinical schools. So I called all of them, and they all encouraged me to apply. But in the conversations with them, they explained to me that I would have to do four years of rabbinical school. I said, "I didn't mind the four years of rabbinical school, but I wanted to start where I was at." (I had spent years learning independently by then.) They said they weren't able to be that flexible about that. So I looked around, and I found the Academy for Jewish Religion, which is a non-denominational seminary in New York City. So I went to speak to Rabbi Shohama Wiener, who was the AJR. I decided that their program would work best for me because I had young children. It involved taking an airplane on Sunday afternoon after Hebrew School on Wednesday, and then going home. I did that for a couple of years, and then my husband, Professor Everett Fox, had a sabbatical, and we went to Israel for the year. At that point, basically, I'd written a thesis, finished most of my requirements, taken my exams, and I just completed the coursework when I was in

Israel. I spent the year studying Gemorrah in the Beit Midrash at the Hartman Institute and at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. When I came back from Israel, I was ordained by the Academy for Jewish Religion. Then, some years later, I actually became the president of the Academy for Jewish Religion for a short time.

LH: I'd like you to share with us about the Jewish education piece that you've become so involved with.

CKF: When I realized that I couldn't become a rabbi, I started thinking seriously about Jewish education. I'd been working in the field for a couple of years, and I realized I was doing a lot of innovative work, and there really was no way to share that work. I'd been invited to some conferences of the American Jewish Congress, who put on some programs about innovations in Jewish education. But there really wasn't a way for most people to share what they'd learned in their classrooms. I decided to do a doctorate at Harvard in Jewish education, so that was my alternative to being a rabbi. I knew I needed an advanced degree of some kind. I went to the ed. school at Harvard, and it turned out that Professor Scheffler, was there. He was a philosophy professor, but he was very interested in this group that had gathered at Harvard to study Jewish education. There were six or seven of us, at that time at Harvard in a department called Learning Environments. Learning Environments included members of ethnic groups who were studying how to be educators in their ethnic groups. So there were Puerto Ricans and Native Americans and Blacks and Jews, and we all learned together. The thing that we had in common was how to transmit culture to our own communities. Professor Scheffler was the advisor to the Jewish Educators. I began writing a thesis about the open classroom work that I started doing at Bet El Temple Center in Belmont, Massachusetts, and continued at Harvard Hillel Children's School. Family education was an idea that really began at HHCs because the parents there were so highly educated. I think there were several Nobel Prize winners when I came there in my twenties, but I said to them, "I know you know everything about everything but not enough about Judaism. So let's

have a deal that there's no bad questions, and let's just study." We did that actually for the next twenty-five years. I was there for twenty-five years! Over the course of that time, the Harvard Hillel Children's School became Congregation Eitz Chayim. Over that time, I became the rabbi of Congregation Eitz Chayim. The doctorate became less important to me once I was able to go to rabbinical school. I did most of the research and maybe one day will write up this thesis, but for the time being, that wasn't really where I was going. So, to combat the issue of there not being a real field of Jewish education, some of us at the Ed. School began talking about what we could do about that. What we did was found an organization called CAJE, which was originally the Conference on Alternatives in Jewish Education. That was a very important pulpit of mine – bringing educators from across the country and the world really together, thousands of them, over the years – two-thousand, twenty-five hundred sometimes in any one year. CAJE made a real major impact on Jewish education. So my rabbinate has evolved; it started out very much centered in Jewish education, and it went on from there to include all the typical jobs of the rabbinate – leading services, teaching children, doing life cycle events, community work, and counseling – and always teaching the adults.

LH: You were one of the founders of CAJE.

CKF: Yes.

LH: Now. You're very involved with NewCAJE.

CKF: Yes.

LH: Could you share with us the evolution?

CKF: What happened to CAJE was that in 2008 there was an economic downturn, and congregations stopped supporting their teachers' professional development, so much so, that CAJE realized it couldn't continue. It went bankrupt. At that point, I said, "Well, we

founded CAJE the first time; we'll found it again!" I called my friend Jerry Benjamin, who was also at the Ed. School in those days and a founder of CAJE, and he said, "Well, let's do it again! So many people love CAJE, and so many people care about it, and so many people know how to do all the jobs. We should be able to do this." And I said, "How long can it take us?" Because when we were twenty-ish, we didn't know anybody, we had no sources of income, we had no idea how to get money for anything, and it took us five or six years. How long could it take us now? Well, it's now been five or six years, and we're just now establishing the organization to the degree that we would like to see it. So it took exactly the same amount of time now as it did before.

LH: I might ask you more generic questions. Do you think the challenges for a Rabbi today are different than the challenges of rabbis, say, fifty years ago?

CKF: The challenges that rabbis faced fifty years ago were quite different than they are now. I remember in school being taught that you shouldn't belong to a health club in the community that your congregation was in because God forbid that your congregants should see you at the health club. Or you shouldn't really come off the bimah so much because they had to respect you and your authority. In fact, when I went to help a family get a get at the Orthodox Beit Din here in town, I was the first woman rabbi that they'd met. At one point, after they got to know me, they cornered me and said, "There's something we want to know." I said, "Well, what is it?" They said, "Do they listen to you?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, if you're a rabbi, do they listen to your authority?" I thought it was a really interesting question because the answer is that they listened when they needed to. Whereas fifty years ago, people basically listened to rabbis. It didn't matter that they were men; they were rabbis, and so they listened to them. They carried an authority with them, similar to doctors at that time. But now, people listen to me when someone dies. They listened to me when they were in trouble. But they didn't listen to me about their day-to-day observance of Judaism. They wanted to what felt right to them, and nor did I expect them to listen to me in those cases. I think

that's one of the challenges that's different. My congregation probably was more different than others because it wasn't affiliated, and it reached a very smart, intellectual, unaffiliated, and somewhat intermarried congregation. In fact, I think that is the way that more congregations look today than they did when I started. I think the reason for the emphasis on family education is we were aware that we had to reach the parents as well as the kids. There was no point really teaching just the children. So as this congregation became very participatory, very adult and child-centered, very learning-orientated, it sort of evolved into the kind of congregation that congregations today need to be. The educational model that we used was very experiential, and that's also very much what congregations today are. I think in terms of challenges, the other one that comes to mind is weddings – brides and grooms. If you look at the New York Times, you'll see many more people are being married by their friends than by clergy. So, I think brides and grooms are a huge challenge for rabbis today because they tend to marry older and have an idea of exactly what they want their ceremony to be. They don't know much about Jewish wedding law and the role of the rabbi in a wedding. And, of course, the large number of intermarriage which make all the above more complicated. Today, it is critical to know how to accept and outreach to the families that you have, no matter how their family is configured. I learned how to do in Cambridge.

LH: Will you share with us a story of a wedding that you performed that really sticks in your mind that exemplifies these challenges you're talking about?

CKF: I'm not sure I can do that. Well, I can tell you about one I didn't perform that exemplifies the challenges that you face with a bride and groom. So, this young couple came and sat in my office. They had already decided they were getting married. By the time they come to you, it's a done deal. They already had a date, and the only question was could you do their wedding? So there was no chance of a process there. I asked them if had they talked about the fact that one of them was Jewish and one wasn't, and they said no, they really haven't talked about it. I said, "Well, do you know any other

intermarried couples?" They said, "Oh, yeah, we know Michael and Kitty Dukakis." Michael Dukakis was the governor at the time. I said, "Oh, you know Michael and Kitty?" "No, but we know about them." They were going into marriage without any consideration for the problems that they were going to face. Since I knew so many couples that were intermarried, I knew there were quite a lot of stresses that they were going to face. I wanted to talk to them about it, but they did not want to talk to me about it. They walked off and found someone else who would just marry them, which is what they were asking for. So I think that that's one of those stresses and challenges that rabbis are facing today.

LH: Would you share with us a personal crisis that you experienced and how your Judaism helped you navigate through it?

CKF: For a long time, I did not have personal crises that were involving Judaism. I was very clear in my Jewish life and identity, and I really, in the same way that I breathe, used Judaism to get through all the various events in my life. However, in the past year, our family has gone through a really, really difficult time. We lost six members of our immediate family this year, including my brother. This was very difficult. There was no time to breathe. There was no time to get from one to the other. No time to mourn. Also, I have to say that, as a rabbi, I was very conscientious when someone lost a spouse, a child, or a parent. But I had no idea what the loss of a brother meant, that it was so difficult. It's really like losing a body part. What complicates this story is that in five of these six funerals, I was asked to officiate – my father, stepfather, an elderly relative, a young relative who died in her early fifties, my brother-in-law – and even my father-in-law who was strictly Orthodox. I had done my mother-in-law's funeral in that Orthodox community, and they loved it. It was more personal than what they were used to. I officiated all these funerals. So, on top of being a mourner, I was the officiant, something I don't recommend. At my brother's funeral, I relied on the rabbi there to help our family through this. He wasn't there. He was on a cruise. I had a really, really

difficult time. I found that, first of all, in all these cases, there were strong Shivas, strong families, a strong sense of love, and Judaism. Judaism was the guide for how we were going to get through this, but he was on a cruise. I had a really, really difficult time, but I found that in all these cases, there were strong Shivas, strong families, a strong sense of love, and Judaism. Judaism was the guide for how we were going to get through this. Every time, it was our Jewish traditions that helped us through all of these losses. When the number of losses overwhelmed me, it was beyond Judaism to help. I think Kaddish was extremely important to me this year. It was an anchor. It was everything that I'd always told people that it was. So I was really fortunate to be able to say Kaddish for all these relatives where Jewish law requires and even for those it does not.

LH: Will you share with us your understanding of God?

CKF: Yeah. I've been doing a lot of thinking about God lately, not only in relation to the deaths of my family members but through the work that I've been doing with elders. When I have the privilege to pray with people who are ninety and one hundred and who are facing death or who are Alzheimer patients and may not even know exactly where they are. Still, these are the questions that are on their minds. I've come to understand that prayers are a guide to understanding God. I believe that the prayer book has been set up in such a way – and parts of the Chumash as well – to help us understand what God is. I'm trying to think of an easy, quick example to give you. For one, the evening prayers; it's that time now as we're talking. The prayers note the miracle of the fact that the sun comes down every day and comes up every morning. We don't have to worry about that. In the same way, we breathe, and we don't worry about that. We can sleep peacefully knowing we're going to breathe and not feel that's our responsibility to make it happen. Light becomes a metaphor for God. That light is something that we believe in. We all know there is light, but it's not something that you can put in a box and save for a rainy day. Light is something that you can't touch with your hands, but you know the effects of it. You know the warmth on your body. You can see the way plants grow. You

understand that sunlight is important for our health. You understand that moonlight helps us to count the days of the year to know where we are in the cycle of our lives. This is a metaphor for God, that God is something we can't see, but we can feel. We have just a sense of the presence of God with us. The same thing for the next group of prayers which are about love. Love is also something you can understand without touching it. One of my favorite passages is Adon Olam because Adon Olam is a prayer which nobody has listened to in about a hundred years because it's the very end of the service, and everyone's folding their tallits, and it has all these great melodies, and no one has listened deeply to the words. Really they should because it ends, "B'yado af'qid ru?i. (In your hand, I place my spirit.) B'et 'iyyshan v'a'ira. (When I'm sleeping and when I'm awake.) V'im ru?i g'viyyati. (When my soul is in my body and when it's not.) Adonai li. (God is with me.) V'lo 'ira. (And I have no reason to be afraid.)" What a beautiful and comforting thought! (My translation, by the way.) So, this is an understanding that I've come to about God, and I thank the elders for it because it became very important to find a simple way to explain to them about miracles, life, fear, sleeping, night, and all the things that's so difficult for them to get through. Even Alzheimer's patients, who may not remember what you said ten minutes later, have had that conversation with me in the moment. I've been very blessed to have had the chance to pray and study with them.

LH: Could you share with us –? [Recording paused.] – if there was a little [inaudible] little touchstone that we could look at and we could see that there's a commonality, a way to have a meaningful –?

CKF: Let me tell a couple of stories and see which one you like. This is one of my favorite stories about an elder that I met. I met her in the hospital, and I asked her if I could tell this story because I knew as soon as I heard it, I would want to tell it. I was called because she was complaining bitterly that she knew what her medicine was and the nurse didn't. I walked in the room, and there is a woman in her nineties, wearing a beautiful smoking jacket. I knew almost immediately that she did know what her

medicine was and that the nurse really just had to explain why they were changing it. So we began to talk. She told me that she had never been married and that she was the friendliest person in the home in which she lived, and that all the new people were brought to sit down with her. Now, if you're not familiar with nursing homes or assisted living places, you should know that they're very much like high school. So, if you remember in high school, which table you sat at with who was a big deal. So her being willing to bring new people to her table was a big deal. One day, a man sat down, and they just hit it off, and they got along very well. They started seeing each other, and they would go to movies together, and they would go to concerts together. She fell in love. This smoking jacket was something that he had brought her the day before. He had come with his aide. I think she was ninety-three or four. He was a younger man in his late eighties. She looked at me, and she said, "Rabbi, who knew that the nineties would be the best decade ever." That's my very favorite story. I tell my mother now, "Mom, it could be that the nineties will be your best decade ever." I'm teaching a Bible study group in an assisted living [facility], and this has been a wonderful experience, both Jews and non-Jews coming together to study. So we actually take a Biblical text, and we read it. I was very struck with their reactions and insight into the texts. I tried to learn to look at the text through the eyes of an elder because most of my career, I looked at the text through the eyes of a thirteen-year-old bar mitzvah student. In this case, I started looking through the eyes of an elder. So I would pick out stories that I thought would appeal to them. One day, I took this story of Abraham arguing with God about destroying Sodom and Gomorrah. We're reading this text and trying to understand it. All of a sudden, one woman stops me and says, "Wait a minute, it said God answered Abraham." I say, "Yeah." They said, "No, no. Did God actually answer Abraham?" I said, "Yes." She said, "You mean when we pray to God, God actually answers us?" I said, "Well, do you feel that you're being answered?" She said, "A lot of times, I do, but I just didn't know." The other residents were nodding in agreement. I said, "Well, here's a text that opens up that possibility for you." There are so many stories that I could tell you about elders.

There's one nursing home that I visit just twice a year. There are almost never any Jews there. I do a Passover program or a Hannukah program. They're lovely, lovely people. But the first time I went there, we did this very nice program, and I said to myself, "Well, one of the things that you do when you're a chaplain is that you always bless people." But here I was in a situation where they were all Catholics. So I thought, "Well, I'm not going to do that." What I'm going to say is, "I bless you that you will all have a wonderful New Year." They said, "What? We're not going to pray? You're not going to bless us? I have a problem, and I need your blessing." That actually reminds me of the last story I'll tell you, which is that I went into a hospital room, and I said, "Hello, I'm the rabbi. I've come to see you." And the guy goes, "A rabbi? I have always wanted to ask a rabbi some questions." So, he grilled me. "Why did Abraham take his son Isaac and kill him? What kind of a God would do something like that?" I mean, this went on for almost an hour. And finally, I said, "Well, I guess I should be going now." I asked myself that same question – am I going to ask him to pray with me I said, "No, I better not do that." I said, "Well, I hope you're feeling better." And he said, "What? We're not going to pray?" That's the second version of the same story, but it is interesting that when you go into a hospital room, everybody wants to pray! I think that that's what's been so moving about this work that I've been doing recently – that everybody finds comfort in prayer no matter where they're coming from. Jewish people also find comfort when a Jewish clergy comes into their room and talks to them. I think that also is really important as well – to understand that Jews are part religious community and part family. I wanted to tell you a story about being a rabbi in the early, early days. Can I do that?

LH: I would love it.

CKF: When I was first in the pulpit, people had never seen a woman rabbi before. There were always women sitting in the front row or the second or the third or the fifth row, and they would just stare at me – just stare at you! I remember one time doing a funeral for a mother of one of my congregants. She was a Holocaust survivor. At the end of the

funeral, I was mobbed by this group of – Holocaust survivors, they tend to be very short – forgive me, but they're shorter than most people today. I'm surrounded by all these very short women. They said, "Are you really a rabbi?" I said, "I am." They said, "Well, we just want you to know that you did a wonderful job." I said, "Thank you very much." I understood that, just like the women sitting in the first few rows looking at you, there was something about a woman rabbi early on that changed everything for women who weren't rabbis. Suddenly, they were included somehow in a very profound way. I also learned that, in the end, it didn't matter whether you were a woman rabbi or not. It mattered whether you were a good rabbi. If you were a good rabbi, they forgot that you were a woman. I actually can tell you a very powerful story about that that doesn't include me, which is that we have a relative in Israel. Her name is Rachel Levmore, and she's a To'enet Rabbanit. They are pleaders in rabbinic courts. She was one of the first women who had that position and training. They work on divorce issues. When she took her exams to be a to'enet, they had all of the women in this little, tiny room, freezing room, and the three men took their exam in this giant room that had heat. All the women did better than all the men on the exam because, for women, it was the highest "rabbinical" degree you could get, and for the men, it just wasn't. So you had this incredible group of women and the men – not so incredible. Then there was an oral exam. And Rachel is sitting with this rabbi in a black hat and side curls and the whole bit. The rabbi asked her the first question. She answers it correctly. These are complicated legal questions. This is not what a rabbi like me knows. This is a whole other degree of learning. Then the second question, and she answers it correctly. And the third question, she answers it correctly too. The fourth question, she just doesn't quite know the answer, and the rabbi turned the question around so she would understand it better, so she could answer it. Then she learned that what really matters was not whether you were a woman or not, but if you had the learning to discuss what they were interested in, they would talk to you about it, even the most Orthodox of rabbis. So these are some things I've learned you know about being a woman rabbi in this world.

LH: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]