Judith Ehrlich Transcript

M: Testing, testing. One, two, one, two. Testing, testing. One, two, one, two. [break in audio]. Go ahead and test the sound.

RABBI JUDITH EHRLICH: Okay, my name is Judi Ehrlich.

W: Look at Lynne while you do it.

JE: Okay, my name is Judi Ehrlich. I'm originally from South Africa and — [break in audio].

M: Rolling.

LYNNE HIMELSTEIN: Would you please state your name, city where you work and live, and tell us a little bit about what you're doing now?

JE: My name is Judi Ehrlich. I live in Newton, Massachusetts, and I work in Dedham, Massachusetts. I am a rabbi and chaplain at NewBridge on the Charles, which is a continuing care retirement community that belongs to Hebrew SeniorLife. I work both in a rabbinic and a chaplaincy role there.

LH: Do you have a favorite Jewish memory from when you were growing up?

JE: I have many favorite Jewish memories from when I was growing up. I'm trying to select what would be the favorite. So many choices. I guess Shabbat in my parents' home is one that was constant from my earliest memories and ongoing throughout my life. Just the constancy of Shabbat, the feeling that it was very special, and we were at the table together. Although, in those days, people ate dinner together every night, in my family anyway. Nonetheless, Shabbat had a special feeling, and the rituals and the

atmosphere was something that were very positive and constant part of my childhood.

LH: Your upbringing was Orthodox —

JE: Go ahead. Sorry, can you ask the question?

LH: Yes, would you please share with us how growing up Orthodox was for you in South Africa?

JE: I grew up in an Orthodox home in South Africa at a time where Orthodoxy was probably more like Orthodoxy and Conservative combined, in some ways. There was no Conservative movement in South Africa, but there also wasn't a strong ultra-Orthodox component in the community. It was a kind of laid-back 60s sort of Orthodoxy, and the Orthodox shul had a large parking lot attached to it, which was used not only for weddings that were held on a Sunday but was also used on Shabbat. In the world that I grew up in, it seemed like the only way to be. My parents were very active. They were founding members of the synagogue that we belong to, the Oxford Synagogue in Johannesburg. I really grew up in that shul and felt very comfortable there. I went to a Jewish day school, which was not uncommon for children in South Africa – the goal of the country was that every child in public school would undergo religious instruction with a view towards accepting Jesus as their Messiah. So, naturally, Jewish families put their kids in Jewish day schools. Probably about 80%, although that's not a — I haven't checked that fact, but that's definitely my sense of it.

I went to a Jewish day school which was run by the Orthodox, but it wasn't like an Orthodox school in the sense that they were kids from all denominations. Basically, Orthodox and Reform and probably some who were unaffiliated. We had davening [Editor's Note: prayer] every day in high school, and it was separate, boys and girls. But it wasn't — didn't feel like it was — halacha [Editor's Note: Jewish law based on the Talmud] wasn't a prominent role. There weren't a lot of rabbis in the school; I'm not even

sure if there was a rabbi in the school. The Hebrew teachers who taught me Tanakh were not Orthodox women, and, in fact, I remember one of my teachers who used to say, "If you're a believer. Otherwise, this is how we explain —" and she would explain a miracle, which is not typical for an Orthodox school. It was a kind of mixed Orthodoxy.

In my own family, we, in the early days, used to drive to shul on Shabbat, but Shabbat was very central in our lives. Later on, it was the kids who frummed up [Editor's Note: became more observant] and who moved towards not driving on Shabbat. My mother was very pleased with that, and my father didn't object but didn't get onboard fully himself until later. It was Orthodox in many ways but not restrictively and not in a way that felt exclusionary to people who were not Orthodox.

LH: When did you leave South Africa, and what were the circumstances surrounding that?

JE: I left South Africa when I was seventeen years old, immediately after finishing high school. The circumstances around it were that, as I mentioned previously, I went to a Jewish day school, and in 10th grade, there was an ulpan to Israel as an option. [Editor's Note: an ulpan is an intensive Hebrew language course]. It was a ten-week ulpan, and I went on it. My sister had been on it before me. It was something that was kind of clear I would do, and when I came to Israel, I absolutely fell in love with Israel. I loved the ways in which people of different colors could all be together, which was not the case in South Africa. I felt just totally at home. I wasn't an Israeli by any means, but I just felt this is where I needed to be.

I wrote my parents a letter from Israel when I was fifteen, and I told them, "I made my decision that I'm making aliyah as soon as I finish high school. So, I just want to let you know before I come home, there are two more years, and I'm out of here." I didn't say it in a rebellious way, but more in a passionate way, and I had no idea how that might feel to my parents because I was fifteen. But that was really very clear to me. I never applied

for a university in South Africa when my peers did. I even refused to go on a tour of the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg because I knew I wasn't going there.

My parents did not object to my leaving home and going to Israel because they themselves were ardent Zionist, and also, the shadow of political unrest was always lurking in the background. I'm talking about 1972. When I finished high school, I went to Israel in the beginning of '73. Things were then calm in South Africa, but everybody knew they were sitting on a keg of dynamite that was going to explode at some point. I went to Israel with B'nei Akiva, which was my youth group, on a one-year program to a kibbutz.

JE: My parents' condition for my going to Israel was that I should be accepted to a university in Israel, that they were not willing to just let me go unfocused. So I applied for and got accepted to the University of Tel Aviv. Those were the terms under which I left.

LH: Thank you. When did you know, how did it happen, that you wanted to become a rabbi? Did you have a calling?

JE: Did I have calling to become a rabbi? Absolutely not. My trajectory in life certainly indicated that that would be a possibility when looked at in hindsight. But where I was coming from as an Orthodox girl, the idea of becoming a rabbi didn't even come up. It wasn't anywhere on my radar screen. After I went to kibbutz for nine months, or rather while on kibbutz, I discovered deeper Jewish learning and wanted to do intensive Jewish study. I managed to persuade my parents that I needed one more year. I went to a wonderful institution called Machon Gold which is a teacher's seminary for overseas girls, and I spent a really wonderful year there, deepening my religious studies. Then, at the end of that year, I wasn't done yet, and I managed to persuade my parents to give me one more year. Then, I went to a really Orthodox place called Michlalah l'bnot Yerushalim, which is an Israeli school for very Orthodox girls. I immersed myself in intensive Jewish studies, all of it in Hebrew. It was a four-year program, but I married

after a year and didn't go back, but my love of Jewish studies was really deeply rooted in that period. Then, I did many other things.

I lived in Israel for twelve years and married and had children there. Then we came to America. In America, I got a master's degree in counseling psychology and worked for fourteen years in a marvelous job that I would probably still be in had the world not changed. I worked for the Jewish Community Centers of Greater Boston, running a Jewish dating service called New Possibilities: Boston's Personal Jewish Introduction Service. I was a full-time matchmaker for fourteen years, and I loved it. It used all of the psychology I had learnt in my master's degree in psychology. I met interesting, wonderful people, and I was able to be helpful, either in an encouraging, supportive role or actually to introduce them to their life partners or to meaningful relationships in their life. I could've gone on doing that forever. But, as things turned out, the internet came along, and with it came JDate.

As time rolled on, men were going to JDate, and women were still very hesitant to meet online, so they came to me. It was really a torturous decision that I must close down the dating service because my first principal was do no harm. When someone came to me, they were never coming from a joyful place to a matchmaker; they were coming because it was difficult to meet people, and then if I were to be knowingly taking them in when the pool was so small for women, I just couldn't live with that. I closed down the dating service and felt, okay, there goes my last really exciting, loving, wonderful job.

But, with the help of my husband, we were brainstorming, what am I going to do with the rest of my life? He helped me to see the things I love most with this work. The one thing is, working with people one-on-one about an important and vulnerable issue in their life. The other part was, it was a Jewish dating service, and I would ask people to tell me where they were coming from Jewishly and what they could tolerate in another person. For many people, this provided an opportunity to think about what being Jewish meant to

them. I loved that engagement with people. I worked with mostly unaffiliated Jews. Sometimes with Jews who were affiliated and a few people who were very affiliated and committed. The conversations around their spiritual quest, their Jewish identity were very rich and meaningful for me. Putting together the psychological component and the religious component, out came rabbi.

My husband had been saying to me for years, "You really should become a rabbi." I thought, Oh, please. With your ultra-Orthodox family and with my Orthodox family, it's not even a question. It wasn't even that I wanted to do it, and I thought that I couldn't because of them. It just was not anything I would ever want to do. But probably because I was a matchmaker and I was really happy doing what I did, it was wonderful rich work. When we got to this point where the idea of — the intersection between religious life, spiritual quest, and psychology kind of came together for me, I realized that, well, maybe I could be the kind of rabbi that works with people around those sort of issues, rather than being a rabbi on the bima. I came to it very tentatively, really unsure if this what I wanted to do. I considered going for a Ph.D. in psychology, which would've been a good four-year program, and I thought, well, that sounds too much. The rabbinate offered me the opportunity to immerse myself once again in Jewish learning, which I love. Through that avenue, to get to the human interaction and using my psychology training to put together a sort of chaplaincy-oriented rabbinate. That's how I came to it. But it wasn't at all clear to me that I could do it, that I should do it. I was just testing the water. I made sure that my courses would give me a master's degree in Jewish education after two years so that if this rabbinate idea was a bad one, then I would have something to fall back on, and I wouldn't have wasted my time. There was no calling; there was no clarity about it. It just slowly settled in with me.

LH: I'm going to get back to [break in audio] Intrigued by sitting across from a real yenta. I'm going to ask a question, and the first thing that pops into your head, I'd like you to share with us. Would you please share with us a story of a couple that you put together

and it just comes to your head?

JE: A couple that I put together. Which to choose, there were many. I don't identify people because everything I did was done in complete anonymity, and I don't know who's going to watch this interview someday, but — I can think of several, but I really — I'm trying to think of how to convey who they are without making them identifiable to them if they ever watch this.

LH: If this is uncomfortable, then you don't have to answer it; I just —

JE: I'd be happy to answer off-screen, but I don't know who will watch this someday, and I wouldn't want to —

LH: Okay, I will respect that. Going back to your decision to become a rabbi, how did you share this with your Orthodox family, your husband's Orthodox family, and what was their reaction?

JE: How did I share this with my family, who are Orthodox, and my husband's family, who are ultra-Orthodox? That was the most difficult and troubling piece. I didn't want to hurt them; I wasn't going into the rabbinate for political reasons or to change the world. I was just going in as second career person who wanted to find work that would be meaningful, a way that I could feel like I was helping the world, helping the Jewish community, without upsetting everybody else around me. In other words, in my family circle.

My parents had moved from South Africa to Australia. I spoke with them on the phone frequently, but this was not really the kind of thing I wanted to tell them on the phone. I went to Australia on a special trip, obviously, to see them, but my goal was to tell them. I needed to tell them separately because my father had Alzheimer's and, at that point, he was in the early stages, and I wanted to tell it to him in a way that felt different than I would tell it to my mom. My mom is an Orthodox woman and had always been that way.

The idea of me doing something feminist, radical, unhalachic just never occurred to them. She saw me as someone who loved yiddishkeit [Editor's Note: Jewish way of life], who was religious, so it was a sort of surprising thing, I thought.

I took her on a walk, and I reviewed the fact that the dating service had been closed down, that I had closed it down, and that I needed to figure out what I wanted to do, and that I wanted to become a rabbi, and that I thought I could help people by being a support to them in difficult times and helping them to draw on the strengths of their faith and tradition and community and prayer to get through crises and that's why I wanted to become a rabbi. I was really — had my heart in my mouth, and my mother said to me, these were her words, "Zol zein mit mazel aun glick." That's wonderful. I just couldn't believe it. It was really one of the most remarkable surprises, and I'm so grateful to her.

Then during the years of my training, I would speak to her on the phone almost daily because my father was declining, and she could use the support. I would tell her what I'm doing in rabbinical school. I would tell her when I was going to do something that was hard for me, like I'm going to lead davening for the first time tomorrow at the rabbinical school, and I'm so nervous, and she'd say, "Darling, you'll be wonderful!" It was wonderful. I don't know where my mother got this ability to just be so supportive around something that just didn't fit. But she remained supportive through the process, the whole way, and it meant a great deal to me.

When I told my father, I waited for a moment in a day when my mom wasn't there where I'd have him one-on-one and where he was likely to be lucid and able to grasp it. When I told him, he got very emotional, he clapped his hands, he started to cry, and when he finally regrouped, he said to me, "And from this, you can make a living?" And I said, "I think I can." He clapped his hands, and he cried. Then he forgot. Then many times over those years, I would tell him I'm becoming a rabbi, and he would say, "Really?" But he never expressed any objection or any thoughts about it, but clearly, he was also in

decline. He was the one who I was less worried about because he had a more universalistic view of the world, and I just hadn't thought it would be a problem for him.

On the other hand, my in-law family — I didn't tell them at first because I just knew that this would be so devastating and upsetting to them, and the fact that I no longer covered my hair in their home, which was a step I had taken a few years earlier because I just didn't want to do it anymore, was upsetting to them, and I dreaded telling them. I decided, well, why upset them? They are far away; they're in Israel in a world where they don't read secular newspapers or go on the internet — How will they find out? But when my mother-in-law came to Boston for our son's wedding, I could no longer keep this big secret because she was now on my turf. I was really prepared for the worst. She said to me, "I feared that this might be what you were doing, and I will just keep praying that you change your mind, and you don't do it!" It was very hard for her. She asked me to promise her that I wouldn't tell anybody in the family and that I wouldn't shame her. I probably promised that. I'm not sure if I exactly promised that I was just in such a state of anxiety and relief that she didn't say, "There's the door; this is the limit!" Which she — she is genuinely ultra-Orthodox in her worldview and definitely believes that a woman does not belong on the male side of the mechitza [Editor's Note: a partition separating men and women in Orthodox synagogues] and that a woman should never really talk in public in front of men and so on. She could've felt that I had crossed the uncrossable line. Her love for me and our previous period of a loving relationship helped, and she would say, "I love you so much, and you're such a good, wonderful person. I just wish you wouldn't do this thing." The years have gone by. She knows that I'm doing this, and we don't talk about it. If anything, we talk about the chaplaincy dimension of it, and she'll say, "For that, you don't need to be called a rabbi." But it didn't break up the family.

LH: Just fascinating, oh my goodness.

LH: I do want to ask you how you choose to study and become a rabbi here at Hebrew College. What drew you to the philosophy here?

JE: Really, for a very pragmatic reason. I started rabbinical school at the Academy for Jewish Religion in New York, which allows student to take courses at other colleges, Jewish colleges, as long as they approve your curriculum. For the first two years, I did my courses at Hebrew College designed toward a master's in Jewish education, just in case, and I would go to New York for my rabbinic seminars and so on. By the third year, I would've needed to be there on a more full-time basis, at least three days a week. Right at that time, Hebrew College Rabbinical School opened with its first year. I had a choice of continuing and completing in three more years in New York or staying at home in my zip code and doing another five years because there was no advanced class to join. It seemed like a worthwhile arrangement. Anyway, I loved the studying, and so that's why I chose Hebrew College. I clearly choose both AJR in New York and Hebrew College because of their non-denominational focus. Having come from the Orthodox world and found myself where I was, I didn't belong to a Conservative synagogue or a Reform synagogue; I belong to the Newton Centre Minyan, which has no affiliation, so going to a non-denominational school was a very natural fit for me.

LH: I wanted to talk about — have you share with us — about the work that you're doing?

JE: Okay.

LH: If you would please tell us about your work as a chaplain at the Senior — Hebrew SeniorLife Continuing Care Retirement Community? What are you doing there for the residents?

JE: Okay, I work at Hebrew SeniorLife, at a campus in Dedham, which has many different sections. I work with the independent residents, so there are people, at the

earliest, at about seventy, and at the oldest, about one hundred. But these are, for the most part, the section of the population that are healthier and are more able-bodied, although not all of them are. I also work as a palliative care chaplain in the rehab center that's on campus. I work there with a specialty in palliative care with one of the palliative care doctors. My work is very varied and rich.

I do have a rabbinic component there. I teach Torah and Talmud, and I lead Friday night services. I do pastoral counseling as opposed to chaplaincy, although they're really the same, except I think of pastoral counseling when I meet someone in the hallway rather than a patient in a bed. Many conversations happen at the cafeteria or walking somewhere down a hallway. They're not all medical-focused chaplaincy visits. Within the rehab center, I visit patients that are residents who are rehabbing from a fall or a heart attack or something like that, as well as people who are coming into rehab who are not part of the Hebrew SeniorLife system and are not necessarily Jewish. I do a lot of end-of-life care. I help individuals who are — patients who are adjusting to the transition from being mobile to being wheelchair bound. I help families when they're realizing that their parent has dementia and is not going to be able to make their own decisions. There are many aging-related and end-of-life-related issues where I support the patient and their family, and that's the summary of what I do.

W: Can I ask one question on this subject?

LH: Yes.

W: I'm going to ask, but you [can?] talk to Lynne. Can you tell us a story around any of those areas — I'm sure you have many — but tell us one or two kind of short-ish stories that are the most meaningful to you. A story around something that you felt was very meaningful.

JE: Give me a moment to think — again, the issue of confidentiality comes up.

W: Don't say a name. Just say, "I experienced this with this patient, and this is what happened." You don't need to [give a name?] to it.

JE: Okay.

W: If you feel comfortable.

JE: Yeah, I just want to try and sort out in my head — are you looking for a chaplaincy-oriented — there's actually a very holistic component to it where I work with people —

W: We're not looking for information; we're looking for a —

JE: For a story. Okay.

W: Right. Something that was meaningful to you, something that you did that you, maybe, went home and told your husband, "This was a very meaningful moment for me."

JE: There're so many.

W: I know.

JE: Which one?

W: Is it okay, Lynn, that I jumped in there?

LH: Yes. [inaudible].

W: [inaudible]. Or the other question that I have, if that one's too hard, is when you're dealing with end-of-life issues, what do you say? What do you say to somebody who there're days or weeks left? How do you comfort them? That's the other thing that I would ask.

LH: Comfort them and also guide them to the next part of their experience.

W: There's a Jewish context [to that?]. Look at Lynne, don't look at me.

JE: Yeah, I'm just trying to think how to pick out one story and/or this —

W: Can you hear that sound?

M: What is it? [inaudible].

LH: There's a technology room next door. I don't know if that's — [crosstalk].

JE: Gives me another minute to think.

LH: Yes.

JE: I'm coming up with — It's just that I feel so conscious of — there are things that identify people.

LH: Yes. Maybe more a general way of yours, when you're sitting with a patient who is still somewhat lucid and is at their end of life. I know you're sitting with them and wanting to guide them, and if people might, I would think, be somewhat anxious. How do you guide them from this space to the next?

JE: The question is, do I? I accompany them rather than guide them. I've never been there before; I don't know the way. Okay, I think I've got one story. In the early days of my work at NewBridge, I met a couple who had moved in together, both of them completely cognitively able, and they had a great love of things Jewish. Had been members for many years at a Conservative temple and were regulars in my Shabbat service on a Friday night. The man had a beautiful voice. I mean, really magnificent, and when we would sing, I would just love to hear his voice. I think it was maybe the first or second Shabbat, I said, "Does anyone want to say the Kiddush for us?" And he said, "I

will!" and he made a Kiddush that was just spectacular, and it became — he became our Kiddush maker. Every week at the end of the service, he would sing the Kiddush. He came to all of my classes with his wife. I would visit them and hear about their experiences in Israel. We built a really lovely relationship based on my appreciation of their religious life and their broader life experience. Unfortunately, as these things happen, his health was failing, and, at some point, he wasn't able to come to shul anymore. He would come in a wheelchair, actually, towards the end because he really wanted to say Kiddush. He would say to me, "This is the most meaningful thing left in my week."

Then at the end, he was in our rehab, and I would visit him. He was really, really failing, and his wife and I had conversations about what it would be like when he died. She was able to say, "He's been sick many times before, and I've been with him in the hospital many times before, but I know that this time is different. I know he's going to die." We had conversations about how she wished that he were able to really get it, that he was dying so that they could say goodbye to each other. But he wasn't able to do that.

But when he saw me and I communicated with him, he said, "I want to say the Kiddush." It was probably a Wednesday afternoon. He wanted me to help him because he wasn't so able to do it anymore. We sang the Kiddush together, and that was one of the last meaningful, rich experiences that he was able to engage in, and it was very beautiful. He died a few days later. I was with his wife the afternoon before; we spent a long-time processing what it would be like for her to continue now on this journey without him. Who were her resources? How she had prepared herself for this terrible sad day after being married for probably sixty-five years. I buried him, and I was with the family during the shiva [Editor's Note: seven-day period of mourning] that they observed and through the grieving period afterwards. It's very meaningful to me to be able to be a companion on a journey for two people where their paths diverge, and I continue with the one who remains.

W: Excellent, thank you.

JE: Thank you for asking me.

LH: Would you please share your understanding of God?

JE: Oy vey, what a hard question. My understanding of God. My understanding of God is complicated. I grew up knowing from my earliest, earliest memories that God knows who I am. God's watching out for me, and if I'm good, God will take care of me. My earliest memories of God are the bedtime prayer that my mother taught me when I was tiny. Every night I would say, "Dear God, please bless Mommy and Daddy and Eileen and Ian and granny and grandpa and the servants and the dogs. Help me to be a good girl. Thank you for everything, Amen." I said that until I was probably about ten, and then I thought, that's babyish, and I stopped. But when I had a sleepover at a friend's house, and I couldn't fall asleep, I would say that prayer. I always knew that God was there for me. I knew that for many, many, many years. I also knew that God had given Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai and that that's that. I felt very comfortable with God and my relationship with God.

I struggled with some of the things that people struggle with, but really it wasn't until much, much later in life that I could not reconcile the tsunami, the hurricane, and all of the acts of God — that I couldn't say, "Well, that was acts of man like the Holocaust. Human beings were evil." Also, being in rabbinical school at this point and hearing from my teachers about biblical criticism and ways in which the Torah was a collection of mythological stories that had been recorded generation by generation orally and now had come to be the Torah as we know it today. It was a really difficult experience for me and left me floundering and worrying that maybe I was in the wrong profession.

Fortunately, I was able to regroup. Today, I think of God in the miraculous experiences of human communication and love, as well as anger and destruction. I don't have the

same image of an all-powerful God of my childhood. At times, in prayer, I manage to suspend my disbelief and hold onto a semblance of my old God.

LH: Thank you. Do we have time for the —

W: Sure. There's one more.

M: [inaudible]. Let's just take that one.

LH: Alright — If you could share with us, we have only a few minutes left, a personal crisis that you experienced and how your Judaism helped you navigate.

JE: I'd rather not!

LH: Okay, thank you.

W: Great.

LH: Thank you so much.

W: How was that? Was that painless?

JE: It was painless. I hope I wasn't too heavy on the beginning part and too skimpy on the end.

W: You had such an interesting upbringing, and as a female rabbi, your relationship to the Orthodox. It's all very, very interesting stories. And a point of view that we have not heard.

JE: Okay, good.

W: So, absolutely great.

JE: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]