

Margie Klein Ronkin Transcript

Lynne Himelstein: Would you, just to get started, state your name, the city you live in, and what you're currently working on in your rabbinate?

Margie Klein Ronkin: Sure, my name is Margie Klein Ronkin. I live in Boston, in Brighton, Massachusetts, and I'm currently bi-vocational. I have a wonderful congregation in Ashland, Massachusetts, that is very small but very active. Then I am the director of clergy and leadership development for a community-based, faith-based organizing group. So I work with churches and synagogues and, hopefully someday, mosques to organize them around raising the minimum wage.

LH: I guess you've gotten President Obama's ear.

MKR: I did. I got to go to the White House, actually.

LH: That's exciting.

LH: Before we move forward, we're going to go back. I want you to share with us a favorite memory of your Jewish youth.

MKR: One memory I've been thinking about a lot lately since Nelson Mandela's death is that I grew up at the Abraham Joshua Heschel School, which is a Jewish day school in New York City that my parents and their '60s activist friends founded together when Reagan got elected. They kind of felt like, "Okay, our activism didn't exactly – it's not going so well right now, so we need to train the next generation." They set out to create a school that would train people to be really engaged in the world and engaged in community. So in 1990, when Nelson Mandela was freed from prison, my school was invited to be the Jewish representative at the Nelson Mandela parade, and so I got to

participate in this ticker tape parade and walked down Fifth Avenue with everyone throwing stuff and cheering us on. I felt so proud to be Jewish because, for me, what it meant to be Jewish was to stand with other people that were working for justice.

Actually, a funny story is that I had this sign that said "Jews against Apartheid," and that had of been somewhat controversial because Nelson Mandela was aligned in many ways with Palestinian activists, and many in the Jewish community felt uncomfortable with that, but we were marching – I had no idea that that was an issue at age nine or whatever. So I wound up getting interviewed by CBS national news, and they said to me – they put the microphone in my face, and they said, "Why are you here? Why do you have this sign that says, 'Jews against Apartheid?'" I said, "Oh, because I was a slave in the land of Egypt, and now I have to work in every generation to make sure that no one has to be a slave." My grandmother shows everybody; she's so proud of me. Everyone was so proud. "Margie's on the news." But afterward, my parents were like, "Honey, you're from the Upper West Side. You're actually really privileged. You've never been a slave at all." But I grew up feeling so connected with that story as being very deeply about what it means to be a Jewish person is to just be marching and part of that movement.

LH: It's exciting. What a great answer. Can you share with us something about your Jewish upbringing, your Upper West Side family?

MKR: Sure. I grew up in this little apartment on the Upper West Side. We had this big living room, and my bed was a futon mattress behind the couch, and my parents would have all kinds of meetings because they were starting this Jewish day school, and they were very active in our Havurah minyan. So there would just be people at our house all the time, scheming about the future and planning things. I don't know what they were doing. I would just go to sleep listening to this. I just remember it being really warm and really close, both literally and figuratively. I have memories of just standing with all my friends, and my friends' big sisters and brothers, and our parents and our friends' parents were friends with each other, and we were friends and everyone standing around

Hanukiot. Everyone had made their own out of weird garbage and stuff like that because everyone was into recycling and making things. So it was just all these kids and their parents, who are lifelong activists and ex-hippies that were sort of still in community together and still maintaining this Jewish religious identity that was ancient but also kind of new. Like, I was in the first congregation that was egalitarian in the country. It was a lot of people who were Conservative. So there were a lot of people in the Conservative movement who were the feminist leaders of the Conservative movement, like Judith Plaskow was in our minyan. I didn't even think that was a big deal. It was just all these people debating all the time. The kids would be running around and writing novels and creating their own midrashim, and making art projects about their interpretation of world peace and how it's related to Bible stories. It was a very creative, very communal, very close space.

LH: Sounds wonderful. When did you – [Recording paused.] – a Rabbi? Was there a calling?

MKR: When did I know that I would want to be a rabbi? I would say there were steps towards my thinking that that was something I might want to do. I would say when did I really know that I wanted to be a rabbi was probably a couple of months ago after I already was. [laughter] I spent a lot of rabbinical school not sure. It depends on what you mean by "being a rabbi," because for me, part of what it means to be a rabbi is to be a person who lives out a vision of being a religious leader, and that I feel pretty comfortable with. I think for me, a single turning point was in 2003. I started rabbinical school in the fall of 2005. So, in 2003, I had been working for an environmental organization and was very active in my Jewish community. I helped organize this thing called JERICO, Jews for Equal Rights for Immigrant Communities. So we participated in the Immigrant Worker Freedom Rides, which was this huge caravan of twenty-two buses from eleven cities celebrating the anniversary of the Freedom Rides in 1963. We had a bunch of Jews go on the different rides, and I got to go on one of the rides that followed

the path of the original Freedom Rides, through Selma and all the major Civil Rights Movement sites. It was over Rosh Hashanah, so I got off the bus for a few days and then came back on. It was a really amazing experience for me because I was with all of these people who were actually Civil Rights leaders from the 1960s who had gotten beaten and gone through amazingly hard situations. Then I was with all of these undocumented immigrants, who were risking their status and literally risking that they might not be able to ever go back to their families because they so believed that they should have more rights for their community. In that situation, I personally was really struggling with trying to figure out whether I should quit my job because my friends and I were trying to start a national youth voting organization. That was a question in my heart. I had this dream, dream-slash-vision, I guess, where I was walking along, and I got to a border that was the border of the Promised Land, and there was an angel standing there. So I went up to the angel, and I was like, "Excuse me, I need to go into the Promised Land. I need to go meet God in the Promised Land." The angel said, "Do you have any papers? Do you have ID [identification]?" I looked around; I said, "No, I don't. I'm Undocumented." The angel said, "I'm sorry. You can't come in," which is like so much what I was feeling these other people were experiencing. So then I went back to the angel; I was like, "Listen, I really have to go talk to God, so can you please just let me in?" The angel's like, "Okay, I'll let you through. Just go quickly." I'm like, "Okay. Wait. I don't know where I'm supposed to find God." So the angel says, "Okay. God will find you. Just hold up a sign." I said, "Okay. Well, what's the sign supposed to say? Like, 'God?' or I don't know...." The angel said, "The sign should say justice, or compassion, or beauty," which are different manifestations in Kabbalah of God's presence that I feel connected with. I said to the angel, "Okay, those are beautiful. What language should I write the sign in? What language will God understand?" The angel said, "Write it in the language of human action." And then I woke up. For me, that was like, "Okay, my life's purpose is to help figure out how to manifest God's presence in the world in the language of human action, by organizing and mobilizing people to be holy by making the world

more holy.” That’s what I see my calling as a rabbi to be. At the time, it meant that I needed to quit my job and become the head of this youth voting organization, which I did. I traveled all around the country working with young people. We wound up mobilizing ninety-seven thousand students to vote, which was really – I’m so proud of it, and yet, the election in 2004 didn’t go the way that we wanted. It was deeply disappointing. But what I’d found was that almost everywhere I went, particularly in swing states in the Midwest and the South, the Religious Right was so effective and so powerful. I kept complaining about this and saying, “Why aren’t we doing this?” Other people are saying, “Isn’t it terrible that they’re combining religion and politics?” I said, “Well, that’s what people do. We shouldn’t force people to be religious, but why don’t we speak on our faith? We talk in synagogue about these beliefs we have. Why aren’t we practicing what we preach?” Then, in the liberal world, people were just talking [in] these pragmatic terms that didn’t make sense to me and didn’t seem compelling or prophetic. I just felt like somebody needs to stand up and speak from this prophetic place – I don’t mean I’m a prophet like God is directly talking to me, although honestly, from my dream, I kind of felt like everybody has access to prophesy, including me. I think what it means to act and speak prophetically is to do everything you can to step into the breach and live into the world that you hope this world will become, like *olam ha-ba*, the emerging world, the world that is coming. I decided to become a rabbi basically because I didn’t see anybody else doing what I thought somebody else should be doing. It was with a lot of discomfort that I decided to come to rabbinical school because I really felt like I should be out there in the world. The whole time I was here – I mean, I love studying, I’ve always been a nerd, but I’ve always felt like there’s so much happening out there, and how is this Talmud passage really relevant to all this stuff that’s happening with people really, really struggling to put food on the table? So the way I made peace with that is that I found ways during rabbinical school to be really engaged in the world and to mobilize people here at the school and in the wider community to get more involved in things.

LH: Thank you. It has been successful, but what challenges have you had to incorporate your organizing life into your rabbinic life, your advocacy, I guess?

MKR: Sure. I come to this with two different identities: I'm a Jew, and I'm an organizer.

So there's always a question of how to combine those two identities? How will they fit together? How can I still be my organizer activist self and still be a rabbi? How can I be a rabbi and still do this other stuff? I think, in some ways, everybody has a unique combination of things that they bring to the table or that they love, and often, the specific and the most unique thing they have to bring is [a way] that those things come together.

I think the biggest challenge is being a social justice rabbi from an organizing perspective, which means somebody that works to build movements and is out there and is public and engaging with people and doing public speaking, as opposed to sitting in an office, is that there just aren't jobs. There's no pathway. If you want to become a congregational rabbi, you can get a small congregation and be a solo rabbi, or you can become an assistant rabbi. Those are pretty standard paths to become that kind of rabbi. If you want to be a Hillel Rabbi, you just get a job at a Hillel, and then you work your way up. But when you look at the people who have been successful social justice rabbis, we're all entrepreneurs. There's a lot of people who are social justice rabbis who work in an office. But a lot of them are doing more educational work, which is super important, but for me, part of what attracts me to the rabbinate is the very social aspect of it. Being in an office is not where I want to be. So that's the challenging part, and so I've had to figure out how to put that together, and the way I've done it, I first started with this little congregation as a way of getting money so that I could figure out how to just do social justice work with my free time, and then I got my dream job and have this amazing job working with PICO [now Faith in Action], which is a national faith-based community organizing group, that's sort of the leading group doing this work around the country.

They work quite closely with a number of major groups that are really visionary around issues of race and gender and thinking about what it would mean to build a poor people's movement in this country and the kind of racial healing that would need to happen to get

poor White people and African Americans and immigrants to feel like they're enough in the same boat and not all getting pitted against each other. I love what I get to do.

During Rabbinical school, I definitely felt this tension of wanting to be in both worlds. So what I did is wound up founding Moishe Kavod House, which is now this thriving community of Jews in their twenties and thirties dedicated to social justice. I mean, it always was that, but now there's six hundred people involved, and I'm not really even leading it anymore; I very regularly meet with the key leaders, and I'm their grandma mentor, but I spent a lot of time trying to make sure it could evolve to have new leadership. So what I did is [I] spent my time finding people that shared my sense that there weren't really clear avenues to combine Judaism and social justice in both an effective organizing way and also in a spiritual way. I think sometimes the organizing is really good in certain secular contexts, and then the spirituality is really good in more religious contexts that are just not as engaged in social justice work. I tried to create a pluralistic space where both things could happen.

[Recording paused.]

LH: – very involved with working with young adults who survived sexual assaults. Can you share with us how that came to be?

MKR: So, at Moishe Kavod House, we held a women's Rosh Chodesh group, which is a new moon group every month. As we got closer with each other, something that I found that I was really upset by was people started sharing stories with each other of really uncomfortable sexual situations that they were in. A number of the women had been raped or sexually abused by members of the Jewish community, who were in our community, up-and-coming great young Jewish guys, and it just didn't make sense to me. I was like, "That guy? Those people? How is this happening?" Each of the women,

as we talked about it, all of us had experienced some kind of not-great thing. Each of us had held it privately. It was really heartbreaking and really liberating to share with each other, “Oh, wait, this is not just me, this is not just that person.” We were doing it in this Jewish context in this Jewish community, which felt kind of edgy and exciting and also like, “Oh my God, I can’t believe that this is happening with our people.” I always thought that it would happen with some bubble gum-chewing sorority girl or something like that. Obviously that’s my stereotype. I don’t think that bubble gum-chewing sorority girls deserve to have anything happen to them either, but my own prejudices expected that that would happen to those women; I didn’t expect that it would happen to us. Like, we are these were empowered women with really good careers who’d gone to Ivy League schools and who are not ditzy at all. So I was very upset to realize this stuff was happening to my actual people, potentially by my own guy friends! So started talking to guys in our community. I was like, “Hey, I’m starting to hear all this stuff. How do you feel about the sexual experiences that you’re having?” I was kind of feeling angry talking to the guys, like, “What are they going to say?” They were like, “We are so scared. We have no idea. We think we’re doing the wrong things. We don’t know what we’re supposed to be doing. We’re getting all this pressure. We’re told we’re supposed to get some.” They had been getting all of these messages, too, and they were really heartbroken about it, too. Not to say that that makes anybody innocent, but in some way, I realized we were all stuck in this toxic culture and not really talking about it. They were like, “I’m in a power position. I’m pretty sure I’m messing up. I’m getting all this pressure. I don’t know what I’m supposed to be doing.” That was the beginning of a conversation about what would it mean to change a culture around sex and sexuality in our community, in the wider Jewish community, and the wider world. So we started this whole sex ed program that brought together rabbinical students studying – we picked like eleven topics that are related to a religious curriculum on sex and sexuality developed by the Unitarian Universalists, and we made it Jewish by adding all this Jewish stuff, and then sex educators came in and trained us how to become sex educators, and we did

this really wonderful program talking about all these issues. The more we talked, the more it was like, “Oh my God - nobody talks about this stuff.” It was just so amazing how much insecurity and uncertainty people in our demographic felt, and also how much we all felt like we were part of what is called “Rape Culture,” meaning we all felt like we were all being pressured by society to get into really unhealthy situations. So it wasn’t just like one person did a terrible thing and we want to reform them. It was how can we try and change the terms of what's going on so that it stops feeling okay to do any of the things that are leading to this situation being so prevalent. While we were in this situation, which was really amazing and inspiring, but also just really hard to be uncovering so much pain, I was in a class that was on ritual. So I decided that my big ritual project that I would do would be to create a mikveh ritual for survivors – and I say survivors, not victims – of sexual violence, and then it became survivors of sexual or domestic violence. What the ritual was was an invocation of our foremothers, and it had different pieces to it, but a lot of it was about connecting with the pain of our foremothers – Sarah and her barrenness and Rebecca and her sense of confusion of the twins inside of her. I sensed that both of them must have had this sense of internal blockage and conflict, which I think feels true for a lot of survivors - like for a lot of survivors is this sense of wound or dirtiness. How do you deal with that, and how can you make that into fertile soil that can become something productive? And then Leah, this rejected woman, who I feel like has so much self-hatred, and I know that’s something that survivors can really feel. Then, the experience of Rachel, either the experience of her being beautiful or the experience of her being barren and feeling that pain. Then there’s also midrashim about Rachel feeling the pain of her children, which was another thing I identified with, not that my peers are my children, but I was the leader of this community where so much was coming out all at one time, and I kind of felt for all of us. It was like we opened this door, and it was this huge floodgate. So we were identifying these different people in our history, women who had also been in pain. It was like, “You are not the only Jewish women who have gone through pain and survived. There are generations of people with you, holding you.”

There was also a part, where – there's a group of people that who are the supporters. When the person that's in the mikveh is going and taking a shower and doing the preparation, all the people who are supporters go and do their own process of writing about their own experiences and writing letters to the survivor. I got to see what people created as the creator of the ritual, and it was just so powerful how these people who are the supporters found it really transformative to be able to have some role to play in trying to shift this dynamic of shame. Also, they wrote things like, "Thank you so much for allowing me to be part of this because in your admitting that this has happened and recognizing this and saying you're going to change, you've given me strength to work on what's hardened within me and to open to change in my life." The feedback that I heard from everyone is that it felt transformative and really holy – we also talked about the mikveh as God as mikveh because there's a quote from Jeremiah that says, "God is Mikveh of Israel." So people just felt this sense of God as womb water and really felt God's presence in the mikveh as a place of both rebirth but also just holding through whatever we were feeling. I know when I did it with a group of people, I felt afterward – I just still felt so much that the group and everything that was around us was part of this spiritual mikveh that continued on for a long time after I got out of the actual water. So I'm really grateful I got to be part of that, and I've continued to be part of it through getting certified as a Hebrew Priestess Kohenet and really learning more about different Jewish women's traditions of supporting people through healing.

[Recording paused.]

LH: Since you've mentioned the God-word, what is your understanding of God?

MKR: What's my understanding of God? I spend a lot of time organizing Christians, and they talk about God all the time. In that context, I'm very aware that Jews really don't. I feel like my relationship with God [and] my understanding of God sometimes changes, but the last major vision of God that I experienced was a sense of an interconnected

web, where all people and things are all points in the web, and either God is the web, or God is the points. The way I experienced this was I was in Israel, and I had randomly met up with a Muslim woman at this hippy service. We were supposed to imagine on Tisha B'av – we're remembering the destruction of the First and Second Temples. She said we probably didn't align with the people trying to build a third Temple on the Temple Mount, but invited us to imagine what kind of new Temple we wished to build that reflected what we believed in. So we did this whole service in partnership, where we were walking into the courtyard of our new Temple and then into the Holy of Holies. It was only halfway through it when she said, "Well, what's the Sh'ma?" that I realized she's probably not Jewish, and then when we wound up becoming friends; I realized she's Muslim. She was on her whole own journey, and that was actually really powerful for me. That is the kind of Temple I'd want to go to, where I could be standing with my Muslim sister and entering the Temple. So the rabbi guided us to imagine that we entered the Holy of Holies and take in what we saw there. In my vision, it was like the candles in Yad Vashem that represent all the children that died, where everywhere you look up and everywhere you look down you are surrounded by these lights. So that's what I imagined, but then I imagined that instead of lights, it was faces. Everywhere I looked in every direction, faces. It was almost a Chuck Close painting, where every image is like a face, but the whole thing comes together to create a larger image. Whenever I say the amidah, I imagine the different people's faces, both as individual faces but also as a communication of something larger. So when I say, "God of Abraham," I imagine a moment in Abraham's life that is aligned with a moment that I'm feeling, and then I imagine all the faces feeling that same thing Abraham might be feeling. For example, one time when I said "Elohei Avraham," I imagined the moment when Abraham was walking down the mountain after the binding of Isaac and just what weight he must've felt. Then, in this moment, I imagine all the people ever and all the plants ever experiencing that moment, holding the guilt or shame or confusion that Abraham might have felt. I assume I was also feeling guilty about something, which led that image of

Abraham to come up, and then imagining everyone else, it's like of like, the God of Abraham in general is also the God of Abraham in that moment, and is the God of me and all those other people in our moments of guilt or self-doubt. Or more that the web that held Abraham in that moment is the same web that is holding me and all of us when we go through our hard stuff. When I think about Sarah, maybe I think about the moment of her laughing, and then I just imagine all of humanity and animals and just that moment of laughter. Maybe then there is more space in the web for me laughing, or to feel held in the exact way I am in any moment. For me, God is kind of the all-encompassing vibrancy of all of life and the interconnectedness that I feel that I could be connected with this woman who has nothing to do with me, who's Muslim, except for that [we] happened to be sitting next to each other, or that I can feel really deeply connected with a random person that has the same capacity for emotion as I do in Uganda. So when I pray to God, I sometimes pray to God as the reflection of all the faces I've ever seen, as a whole but also as individual images. Sometimes that's a mother or a grandma, or sometimes it's just raw amazing natural beauty or power, or sometimes it's an old man. But that's because I see God as within and beyond everything.

[Recording paused.]

MKR: I'll just say one thing briefly, and then you can ask me another question if you want to. A lot of what I do is very political. When I started rabbinical school, I spent a lot of time feeling like, "How's this thing I feel called to do related to what it looks like to just be a regular old ritual-leading rabbi? Should I even be here?" But now that I have been a rabbi I actually feel like the regular old ritual leading is teaching me more about what matters and why it is even worth it to organize, but also about how I want to be in the world. I've had the blessing of being part of people meeting each other who have gotten married because I lead this community of Jews in their twenties and thirties, so I've performed a lot of the weddings of the people in the community. One moment that was really amazing – I mean, it's kind of the same moment over and over again, but the

moment of being under the chuppah with people that I love and I respect so much, and I know that they are building a union that is going to make them happy, but that's also gonna build a Jewish community that's engaged in the world, and know that their ability to support each other means that they're more able to go out there and be themselves, which is really important for – everyone needs them to go out and be exactly who they are. That feels like such a holy moment and such a gift. I think what I've learned from rabbinical school and from becoming a rabbi is there's a reason why we're fighting for the things we're fighting for, which is so that we can live really fully and experience the abundance and gratitude that exists in the world. If I'm only in a space of fighting for things, it can just feel really distant. I just feel so blessed to have been able to be in community and to be close with people and to see how helping people to just be their best selves is a really meaningful thing to do and a meaningful piece of activism as well. And if I am going to organize, I also want to do it in a way that not only builds a future world where people can live fully and abundantly, but also try to manifest that joy, gratitude, and spaciousness in my own life and work right now.

LH: Well, I think that is a great way to conclude your interview. It ties up nicely everything that you've been sharing with us. Thank you so much.

MKR: You are welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]