Sara Meirowitz Transcript

Lynne Himelstein: If you would state your name, the city in which you are currently living, and what you are currently doing?

SM: Okay. My name is Rabbi Sara Meirowitz, and I live in Brookline, Massachusetts. I'm a high school Rabbinics teacher at Gann Academy, a pluralist unaffiliated Jewish High School in the Boston area.

LH: Sounds wonderful. [inaudible] questions to ask you about that. But, before we go forward, let's go back. Could you share with us a favorite special Jewish memory from your youth?

SM: Sure. Well, my father is a Rabbi. This is a special Jewish memory of my youth. My father is a rabbi, and I grew up in a home where Judaism was mine. I don't know how else to say that. My mother is a strongly practicing, traditional observant Jew. Both my parents are in the conservative-ish vein, although we were affiliated with many different denominations over the course of my childhood. I guess the memory I'm thinking about now is going to morning minyan – morning services – with my father when I was just a little child. Maybe I was five, maybe I was eight, and sitting with him in services, being able to participate in the greater community as an adult, even though I was only a little kid, not of course being counted in the minyan but being able to really sit with the grown-ups I guess is the best way to put it. I just always felt like I was able to do anything I wanted in the Jewish world, and that was just a gift my parents gave me.

LH: That's beautiful. Was it a Temple that had a mechitza? [Editor's Note: a mechitza is a separator used in synagogues to demarcate sections for each gender.]

SM: No, I didn't grow up in a synagogue with a mechitza. My father was an ordained Conservative rabbi. So we were in a Conservative synagogue until I was about eight years old, and then he left the Conservative movement for the Reform movement. And after that, my parents got divorced, so my mom remained sort of more affiliated with the Havurah movement, liberal do-it-yourself Judaism. More along the lines of the Conservative movement. At the same time, I was going to Conservative day school and then to Orthodox day school. We were really all over the place Jewishly in a way that was both very enriching and somewhat stressful. That's a lot of little material.

LH: Can you share something about the stressful parts of that?

SM: Sure. When I was thirteen or fourteen, I was graduating [from] the Solomon Schechter Conservative day school that I had been going to; I had graduated after eighth grade. I decided with my family that I wanted to keep learning Jewish text. So, we made the decision together to send me to the local Orthodox day school, which was a co-ed day school where men and women learn together, but there was Orthodox davening, there was mechitza in davening, and even though it was theoretically things were equal between men and women, they were not equal. The teachers were all men and were named rabbi – most of the teachers were men – and I always knew – I could tell when I was …

LH: Why don't we start back about what was stressful?

SM: Sure. Something that was stressful in my childhood. When I was about thirteen, my family made the decision that I was going to go to an Orthodox day school for high school. I had been going to the local Solomon Schechter Conservative day school, which was ending after eighth grade. I loved studying Jewish texts, and I wanted to continue studying and really deeply immerse myself in my Jewish studies, and the only high school in the area was an Orthodox high school. So, although my father was a Reform Rabbi and my family practiced a form of Judaism that was much more close to

the Conservative or Reform movements than to the Orthodox movement, we made the decision that I would go to this Orthodox high school. It was a co-ed school. Girls and boys learned together, but there was a mechitza in the davening space, and it was clear that even though things were technically equal in the classroom, they were not equal in the classroom. The learning that the boys did was expected to take them somewhere that the learning the girls did never could. I loved studying there. I loved studying Talmud, and I worked really hard. And I worked hard to overcome – I don't know if it was external or internal prejudice that I felt about not being Orthodox, not coming from the right families, or knowing the right people or the right songs. It was four years of becoming someone else, I think is the best way to put it, while I was there, of hiding parts of myself, hiding some of my feminist tendencies. When I would show them, they would sort of explode. Wanting to light Chanukah candles for the whole school, even though that wasn't one of the roles that was given to girls in school, or wanting to start a women's tefillah group in school. This is right at the time when women's tefillah groups were just beginning to develop in the country; this was in the early '90s. I really wanted to fit in, and at the same time, I wanted to really express my feminism as much as possible. So it was a great experience being there, but it was intensely difficult.

LH: Were there times in Talmud study that you went to a teacher and wanted to go deeper? What would happen when you would express those desires?

SM: In the classroom, nothing because in the classroom, I was allowed to say anything I wanted. But as soon as things became practical or real world, that was when the divide came up. I remember a teacher saying to me once, "You're the top of the class now, but when you graduate, the boys are going to go off to Yeshiva in Israel, and they will far surpass you in just a couple of months. And that's just what's going to happen because there are no deeper options for you. There's nowhere for you to go." I think he was doing me a favor because he didn't want me to think that this was how it was going to be. I had reached the height of my potential in the Orthodox world at age eighteen, [which]

was how it felt to me at that point. That being in this co-ed learning environment, you couldn't find that at the college level, you couldn't find that at the Yeshiva, and there was, of course, at that point no advanced degree for women in the Orthodox world, which was comparable to rabbi. And at that point, I wanted to be in the Orthodox world, even though I grew up in a liberal Jewish home. It was very hard for me to come to terms with the fact that I was not going to be able to be a full adult participant. It took me a number of years after that to actually leave the Orthodox world. But I think that realizing that this bubble of high school was just that was one of the things that led me to eventually step outside the Orthodox world.

LH: Now, if it were today and you were going through this experience knowing of Sara Hurwitz, do you think things might have been different? [Editor's note: Rabbi Sara Hurwitz, founder of Yeshivat Maharat, an Orthodox Yeshiva in New York which ordains women as Rabbis.]

SM: I would imagine yes, although I think the Orthodox world has also – let me start again because I didn't answer your question. Whether it would've been different for me going to Orthodox high school now knowing of Sarah Hurwitz? I would imagine yes, it would be different because she's such a role model, and all the women who are graduating from Yeshivat Maharat are becoming Orthodox ritual leaders. At the same time, the Orthodox world is sort of battening down its hatches, so A, I don't think I would have gone to that school now because now there are pluralist high schools like the one I teach in. So that's A. And B, I don't think that the school I went to would recognize Sarah Hurwitz as a leader. She's too far to the left, even though everyone is staking their territory to liberal and no more. The school I went to was very liberal because it had mixed classes, but that's as far as they would go. That's the sense I get. But as a fifteen-year-old, even knowing that there was an Orthodox woman Rabba or Maharat out there in the world, I think it would've been transformative. I can sort of see little me being very excited about that.

LH: So, you left high school –

SM: Yes.

LH: – but you remained in the movement for a while. Then what happened, and how did the idea of becoming a rabbi come to you?

SM: Sure. It's a long trip. How did the idea of becoming a Rabbi come to me coming out of this Orthodox high school? Well, I went to college. I went to Yale University, and I was fortunate enough to be a student there, and Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld was the Associate Hillel Director. I have basically followed her from place to place over the course of my professional career. But she was a wonderful mentor to me who was able to help me come to terms with the different paradoxes of what it means to be authentically Jewish and be a Jewish woman leader. I loved the Orthodox community in college; it was warm and welcoming and small and friendly, and it was what I needed coming from a very small high school. I went to a class of twenty-nine kids to a university where there are sixteen hundred kids in a grade. I needed something small to take care of me and to keep me safe. At the same time, college is when I really started learning about feminism in an academic way, and I worked in feminist communities at Yale and planned two national conferences on women in Judaism when I was an undergraduate with Rabbi Sharon and many other student leaders. I think being able to say, "I am a feminist, and that is an intrinsic part of my Jewish identity, and it doesn't have to conflict with my Judaism, but it can enhance my Judaism," was only something I was able to say in college. In high school, being a feminist felt like it was irreconcilable with my Judaism. In college, it felt like I could reconcile those first as an Orthodox feminist and then just as an observant Jew who had moved outside of Orthodoxy. At a certain point, I no longer felt like the mechitza was what God wanted of me. I don't know how else to say that, but it felt to me like I needed to be a full ritual participant in order to really be using my God-given gifts in the world. When I did that paradigm shift, then I was able to start thinking

about myself as a ritual leader. I didn't go to rabbinical school for another eleven years from graduating college. I had a career as an editor, and I lived in Israel for a number of years. The idea of becoming a rabbi – I almost said woman rabbi – the idea of becoming a rabbi, even though at that point – I think by the time I graduated college, I felt comfortable in the egalitarian community. The idea of being a Rabbi took me many, many, many more years to come to terms with.

[Recording paused]

LH: – of the idea, but then you –

SM: I always grew up knowing that women could be rabbis, and I grew up with parents who lived in a world where women could be rabbis. But I had taken myself out of that world, and then the question was, how do I get back into it? The decision I made to go to an Orthodox high school removed the idea of being a woman rabbi from that world of possibility, and then I crawled back into it. I also spent a number of years not wanting to live in the provincial Jewish world. I worked as an editor. I was an editor of history of science books for a number of years. It really took me a while to realize that I wanted to be a professional in the Jewish world and not merely a lay leader and participant.

LH: I'm assuming when you told your parents and your father, your father probably had one idea of how you should pursue it. I'm assuming you had this love affair with Rabbi Sharon. How did you decide on which rabbinic school you wanted to attend? What was your father's advice?

SM: How did I decide what rabbinic school I want to attend? What was my father's advice? My father [was], at this point, a quite liberal Reform rabbi, who himself was educated in the Conservative movement. Well, my family lives in Boston, and I grew up in Boston. When Hebrew College was being founded as a rabbinical school – it had been founded years earlier, of course – when the rabbinical school was being founded, it

felt pretty clear to me that if I was going to go to rabbinical school, this was where I was going to go. That I was going to be in a pluralist school where all these complications – am I Conservative? Am I Reform? Am I Orthodox? Where do these different pieces of my traditional leanings and my liberal theology and my desire for Hebrew prayer and my desire and my desire to learn texts in Hebrew at a high level but also be fully ritually participant – where do all these things meet? They're going to meet in a school that doesn't have a denomination. It was a no-brainer for me that I would go to Hebrew College if I were to go anywhere at all. At the time when I made the decision to come to rabbinical school, I was actually living in Israel. I'd been living in Jerusalem for four years; I'd made aliyah [Hebrew, meaning to immigrate to Israel]. I didn't really have a plan to come back to America, and then as way leads on to way, I fell in love with an American man who was planning to come back to America to go to rabbinical school. And over the course of talking to him about his plans, it became clear to me that I was actually quite jealous of his ability to say, "I want to do this." So, he and I stealthily pursued the path of coming to rabbinical school together. If I was going to move back from Israel, I couldn't imagine moving anywhere other than where my family lived. It was very appealing to me to move back to Boston and to be somewhere that felt comfortable and to be with Rabbi Sharon, who had been my mentor. So it was a bit of a no-brainer. My father – it took me a while to come out to my father about wanting to become a rabbi. My father and I are very close, but I think I just didn't want to be doing the same thing that my father did. I wanted to be my own person, and it took a long time before I could say, "I'm going to be a rabbi, and I'm going to be this Rabbi Meirowitz. I'm not going to be that Rabbi Meirowitz." I don't know. I guess many children have to do this when they separate and individuate. But it was surprising to me, I guess, that I had trouble telling my father. Then, once I told him, he, of course, was very, very supportive.

LH: What advice did he give you?

SM: What advice did my father give me? My father's one of the best rabbis I know. What I mean by that is that he is an excellent listener. When one asks him for advice or when one presents him with a problem, he listens, and then he tells you what you need to hear for you. In my head, I had internalized advice that I imagined he would give about himself. The things that were difficult for him about being at JTS [Jewish Theological Seminary]. The things that were difficult for him about his rabbinate. But he and I are actually different people. So he didn't give me any of the pieces of advice that I think I expected. His one main piece of advice is, "Don't become a rabbi because you love learning Torah or because you love God or you love prayer. Become a rabbi because you love the Jews because it's a people job. It's not a book job, and it's not an idea job; it's a people job. You have to love talking to Jews about Judaism and Jewish texts. If you love that, then everything else is fine." I think that that is something that – I hope it's serving me well. It's my first year at a high school teaching, but it's certainly something I'm going to take into my rabbinate.

LH: Is this what you –? [Recording paused.] – with your rabbinate?

SM: Did I imagine that I would be a high school teacher? Not necessarily. When I interviewed for jobs after rabbinical school – and I'm just one year out of school. When I interviewed for jobs after school, I interviewed at pulpits. I interviewed at non-profits. This was the job that was the best fit. I loved going to day school, so getting to work in a day school is just delightful. I understand how it works, and I understand the ways in which it's exciting and inspires passion. I love seeing kids who are really good kids grow and develop and learn and become different. I love working with adults too, so I'm hopeful that over the course of my career, I'll be able to do lots of different kinds of rabbi jobs. But I think that it is better suited for me to be a teacher at this point in my career than to go immediately into a pulpit. I didn't feel experienced enough to manage a congregation. So, I'll do that later.

LH: What is faith? How can we teach it?

SM: What is faith, and how can we teach it? Faith is hard for me. I would say that I am not someone who thinks very much about faith or belief or God. I struggle with thinking about faith. But I think that Judaism has a big supply, a huge, huge library of inspiring rituals and practices and songs and texts and ways that we are together in community. I would say one learns faith through human connection and through connecting to texts and practices in our tradition. When have I felt faith? I'm assuming the word "faith" here to mean "faith in God." We could use it to mean other things. But when I have felt faith has probably been in times of prayer, when the community is singing together, when I'm able to step outside of myself and feel the energy of the community moving, being directed towards a source. I think the best way to teach faith or to teach Jewish passion is through doing Jewish things. For me, often it's about song, and it also comes in times of crisis and life cycle events. You know, times of illness are a time when people often reach out for their faith, but again it's mediated through community, is generally my experience.

LH: As a follow-up, because you've touched on it, would you share with us a personal crisis that you have lived through and how your faith, your Judaism, helped you navigate?

SM: A personal crisis that I lived through that my Judaism helped me navigate. I think rather than 'crisis' specifically, I think about when I trained to be a chaplain. I worked as a chaplain in a nursing home, mostly with patients with advanced dementia. These were people who had really lost much of what makes them themselves. I was terrified before I started this placement. When I saw on the placement roster what ward I was being placed in, what unit, what floor, I was terrified to be working with patients whose illness would make me question whether God existed; I think is the way that I thought about it. I was afraid that either these patients or their families would call me on it. They would say,

"Rabbi, why is this happening to my mother? She was such a good person. She was such a good Jew. She was so honest. She raised her children. Why is she suffering like this?" Then I wouldn't have an answer because I don't have an answer. That never happened. No one ever said to me, "Why?" They didn't force me to answer. What I saw was that in working with these people with dementia, when their memories and their personalities were stripped so bare, I was really able to see the light of their souls shining brighter almost when they were unencumbered by all of the trappings of their long lives. I think that that was what enabled me to find meaning in this work, that I said, "The light of the divine, the divine spark in these people, is shining through even though they don't know one day from the next. But they are still holy." For me, I guess that I don't have an answer for why this happens to them. How could I have an answer? But I still saw God in them. That's what I can say.

LH: That's beautiful. Would you share with us a story of a person that you just think about a lot that you met through this time of your life?

SM: Sure. I'm thinking of a story of a person that I met when I was doing chaplaincy. This is someone who – I only met her at the very, very end of her life. There was a woman who was brought into our unit really on hospice. She was dying. She was, as we said, 'actively dying.' She had advanced dementia, and her kids came, and they were – she was a woman in her eighties or nineties, so her children were in their sixties. And they came, and they did rotation. There was always someone there. She lived longer than they expected, so they were getting exhausted. They all flew in from wherever they lived. It was very draining, and I was watching the family slowly exhausted by this vigil. I would go in and check on them. I was there two or three days a week. Whenever I was there, I'd just check in and see how they were. Mostly, I was talking to the family. The dying woman was unconscious. I was speaking to the daughter one day. Over the course of talking to her, I realized she was, in fact, not grieving for her mother. She had grieved for her mother years ago. She's grieving for her own daughter, who had died two

years earlier of a drug overdose. A daughter who was in her twenties or thirties. And at one point, she leaned over to her mother, who was in the bed, and she said, “Mom, it's okay. When you get there, you’ll see (Carrie?).” Or maybe she said, “(Carrie’s?) there waiting for you.” I don’t know what this woman’s theology was. I don’t know how she thought of heaven. We didn’t talk about it, but it was so clear the idea that her daughter was going to have company, that her demented mother, who maybe hadn’t spoken in ten years, was somehow going to be reunited with her granddaughter. Maybe she would be able to speak. Maybe she wouldn’t be demented in the world to come. It just brought home to me how important having these belief systems is to people. And I saw it. I had this vision of this woman, this elderly dying woman getting out of her bed, however that works after she passes, and being with her granddaughter who’s passed, and that memory that knowledge is a comfort to this woman in her sixties who’s about to lose her mother.

LH: What is your understanding of God?

SM: My understanding of God? I see God in human connection. The one-sentence line that I would tell my high school students about Martin Buber is “All life is meeting,” and connecting to people is where we see God. I also see God in the artistic impulse. The fact that we, as a society, as a world, have created so many amazing works of literature and art and music and the fact that we have our texts that we have preserved, the thing that we do that is most Godly in the world is create art and ideas. The other thing we do that’s Godly is create more people, and in the passage of the generations, I see God. These are not visions of God, which are particularly Jewish-specific, but I don’t think God is only Jewish-specific. I think we use our own Jewish language to talk about God and to talk to God. But I don’t see God as an embodied singular presence. I don’t have a vision of a personal God. God is very much among us and within us and is the power that enables us to really be our best selves.

LH: What is your most meaningful piece of text? Explain why it resonates with you.

SM: A meaningful piece of text? For many years, a piece of text that I wanted to have embroidered on the neck piece of my tallit [a ritual fringed shawl], on the Atarah [Hebrew, meaning 'crown,' refers to the neckpiece] of my tallit was I believe from Pirkei Avot [Editor's Note: Ethics of the Fathers]: "Lo Alecha HaMelacha Ligmor VeLo Atah Ben Horin LeHibatel Mimenah." "It is not on you to finish the work, but it is also not permitted that you desist from it." And I began thinking about that – that's a piece of text I've known for many years. I began thinking about it personally when I began thinking about wearing a tallit. I grew up in a time when not many women were wearing tallitot [plural of 'tallit'] in any of the religious denominations. Certainly, there were no women in my Orthodox day school who were wearing tallitot. At my bat mitzvah, although I had a bat mitzvah in a conservative synagogue, girls didn't wear tallitot. So I didn't wear one. My mom didn't wear one. Women didn't wear them. When I was about twenty-two, twenty-three, I started to feel this itch to put on a tallit. Maybe it came from hearing the words of the Sh'ma [Three paragraphs from different books of the Torah that together are recited regularly in liturgy], the third paragraph where we talk about the tzitzit that we see in our garment and realizing I would look down and I wouldn't have anything to see when it says you're supposed to see the tzitzit. Maybe it was just about getting ready to take this thing on, and I'd always been taught: Don't take on a new mitzvah [Hebrew, meaning 'commandment,' referring to the Jewish laws] unless you're perfect at doing all the other mitzvot." That was what they told us in high school, and I wasn't perfect. At a certain point, I said, "No, that's okay. Just because I can't finish the job doesn't mean that I should not take upon myself new things I'm ready for. If I am ready to wear a tallit, then I should take it upon myself." I could keep working on the other things I'm not as good at. I can keep trying to make my Kashrut [a conjugation of the word 'kosher'] practice better or be a better friend. But it doesn't mean that I should do this new mitzvah. So for me, although that is not embroidered on the neck of my Atarah on my tallit, it is something I think about whenever I am feeling constrained by my religious practice. To say, "I can

open it up. I can do the things that I need to do, and however growth comes, it is positive."

LH: What about Tefillin?

SM: I started wearing Tefillin when I lived in Israel. When I was twenty-nine, I moved to Israel. I had been working as an editor for a number of years in America, and I was ready to start my life again. So, I moved to Jerusalem, and I was going to services at a daily minyan affiliated with the Conservative Yeshiva. It was a Conservative movement place, and most of the women there are wearing Tefillin. I started to feel like I was not dressed properly. I started to feel embarrassed that I didn't have tefillin on, and I actually asked my father to bring me a pair from America when he came to visit because I was afraid to buy a pair in Jerusalem. So the Tefillin I wear were actually bought at the Israel Book Shop in Brookline, Massachusetts, even though I started wearing them in Jerusalem. But it was really for me about being part of a community where this practice was normalized. And because I became part of that community, that enabled me to feel comfortable wearing Tefillin in communities where it is less normal. That said, it is rare that I'm in a daily minyan now where I'm the only woman wearing Tefillin. I feel like the pendulum has shifted in the traditional egalitarian world, and more and more women are wearing Tefillin. I don't think I'd wear them if I went to an Orthodox Minyan, although I don't know. It would depend.

LH: It would be a Modern Orthodox Minyan?

SM: Yes, if I went to a Modern Orthodox Minyan, would I put on my tefillin? I have put on tallit in a Modern Orthodox Minyan before, and usually, it's fine. Tefillin, though, are a little more aggressive, so I don't know if I would do it. I went to Women of the Wall [an organization dedicated to ensuring that women have a place to pray at the Western Wall] at the Kotel [The Western Wall – the retaining wall of the Temple Mount] a few times. This is a couple of years ago already before it became a big thing and everyone started

going. I didn't put on my tallit or tefillin at the wall in 2009. That didn't feel safe. I don't need to be the one who pushes the envelope. I don't need to get the one who gets the stones thrown at her for wearing tefillin. I think some part of me from going to Orthodox high school still wants to fit in enough that when I go to an Orthodox synagogue, I'm not going to put them on. But depending on what mood I'm in, that could change.

LH: Would you tell us about your first visit to Israel and what that was like for you?

SM: Sure. My first visit to Israel was when I was seventeen. Although I grew up in a traditionally observant home, we weren't a home that prioritized travel to Israel. So the first time I went was when I was seventeen. I went on a youth fellowship called the Bronfman Fellowship, which took a cross-section of Jewish seventeen-year-olds from across the U.S., across Jewish denominations and sort of threw them together in a little fishbowl to learn about Judaism and each other's denominations and to learn about Israel. I didn't love Israel after that trip. I liked it just fine, and for me, the experience was much more about being in a pluralist environment and meeting Jews from all different kinds of Judaism and seeing how they saw me. When I went to Israel at twenty-nine to live, it was only the third time I'd ever been, and I'd never been for more than a couple of weeks. So, I did not move to Israel because I knew what I was getting into. I went blind. I talk about it as a Na'aseh VeNishma moment [Hebrew, meaning "we will do and we will listen."], of acting first and figuring out why I'm doing it later. Something called me. I saw a fellowship ad. I applied for it. I got this Dorot Fellowship to go to Israel when I was twenty-nine, I quit my job, and I moved to Israel. I don't even know if I can articulate why I wanted to go. I think a lot of it was about speaking Hebrew and wanting to speak Hebrew all the time. Wanting to be in a Jewish society, I think, was what I really wanted. But even now, it feels almost like a dream, my time when I lived there. Even though when I lived there, it was very workaday. I got up, and I went to work, and I paid taxes, and I swam in the pool and drank in the cafés, and it was just like regular life. But looking back on it now, it seems almost like it's hard to imagine how it happened.

LH: When you first got there, could you share with us [an] frustrating Israeli experience and a joyous Israeli experience?

SM: Sure. A frustrating experience about living in Israel and a joyous experience. They're actually connected for me. This is not an experience I imagine many other people are going to put in their videos. But I worked as a freelancer when I lived in Israel. I worked as a freelance editor, and in order to be a freelance editor, I had to register with the tax authorities. I had this incredible head for bureaucracy, and I went to the offices, and I filled out all the paperwork, and it was almost like – my father described it as a Kafka story. You go to a door, and you're trying to get the right paper stamped, and there's a sign on the door saying go to Room 102, and you go to Room 102, and the person's to lunch, and 103 tells you, "Oh, you should go back to 101," but 101 was the first room really like you don't know how to figure out how the bureaucracy works. Somehow, I figured it out, and I became this expert [on] Americans who need to get their tax paperwork done. So that was a frustrating experience, and then when I figured it out, I was so proud of myself that I thought, I have really succeeded in Klitah; I have succeeded in being absorbed and figuring out the system. I have this memory of walking down the street in this industrial part of Jerusalem where nobody walks; it's all buses and chain stores and stuff by the entrance to the city, on the way to tax authorities. There's all these factories. It's not a pretty part of the city. I was just looking around, and I was smelling the air, and I was seeing all of these different kinds of Jews. Without even knowing what I was saying, I said, "Please don't make me leave." I said that aloud, and I don't know who was going to make me leave. I had no plans to leave at that point. But it was the sense that this world, where everyone is Jewish and where we're just living everyday life, is somehow fragile or transient. And I'm going to have to go at some point too. I live here now, and I'm doing the most rooted thing one can do. I'm going to pay my taxes. Only citizens pay taxes. Tourists don't pay taxes. But someday, I'm going to have to leave, and I don't want to leave, but it's almost too perfect to be able to live here.

LH: This is a big one. What do you think is the greatest obstacle today for Israel's survival?

SM: I think the greatest obstacle for Israel's survival is the current government's inability to see that they've dug themselves into a hole with the settlements. I think that the policies that Israel has been carrying out over the past forty-plus years – it's just walking down the wrong path. It breaks my heart because I don't have a better answer. I don't know what they should've done in '67 or what they should do now. It's like we're in so deep. We're lost on the highway. We don't know how to get back. The dream that we had about where to go is so far in the past. Socialism is gone. We have all of these people who live in Israel who are not citizens, all of these Palestinians who don't vote and don't have economic rights and are stuck. We're in so deep, and I don't know how to dig out. It breaks my heart. I lived in Israel, and my life was very easy because I lived in the right place and I had the right name on my passport. I had two passports; it was even better – I could be Israeli, or I could just be American. I had money in the bank, and I had a job. My life was golden and beautiful, and five minutes away from me were Palestinians with no rights. Five minutes in the other direction were extraordinarily poor Jews, and we were just stuck, but I didn't have to look at it if I didn't want to because I was privileged. I had to force myself to do whatever I could for change, but it is so much easier when you are in a privileged place to not work for change. I'm pretty pessimistic, as much as I am – I don't know. I'm somewhere between being pessimistic and keeping my head in the sand. How's that? I don't think that's an answer you want on your website.

LH: No, but that's your answer. That's your answer. I am wondering – I am thinking, as an American Jew and as a Zionist, how do we support Israel from this side of the pond, as they say? How do we be good Jews? There needs to be an Israel. How does one support Israel?

SM: I think the question of how to support Israel from the U.S. or from outside of Israel is a really hard one. Most people I know who seem to have a really strong, authentic relationship with Israel have invested serious time in going there and spending time in Israel. I think the hardest thing is people who – and most Americans, most people in the world don't have a lot of money to go live somewhere else for an extended period of time. If you go to Israel for two weeks with your synagogue, does that give you enough grounding to be able to really both love Israel and care about it but also be able to really wrestle with the difficulties? The traditional way Americans have supported Israel is by giving them a lot of money, which Lord knows – I mean, less now than in the past, but for many decades Israel really needed. But that feels paternalistic at this point, America supporting Israel with its pocketbooks, American Jews supporting Israel with their pocketbooks. I think just really being aware, for people really to read what's happening in Israel, to visit when they can, to consume Israeli culture, read Israeli books, and watch movies and listen to music and try to be as much a part of the intellectual landscape as possible and mostly to not tune out when things are hard. Not put their heads in the sand, which is really hard to do.

LH: I have two more questions for you. I think you are the youngest and the closest to your ordination, and now you are in high school. What advice would you give young women, in particular, who are looking to become a rabbi?

SM: Advice that I would give young women who are looking to become Rabbis. I believe at this point, there are more women entering most rabbinical schools than men, or if not more, it's pretty even. So, the rabbinate is no longer a profession which is for men. It's a profession which is for men and for women. That is a real change that has happened very fast, meaning not all synagogues see the rabbinate as a profession for women. But it's changing so fast, so I think that's really exciting. I would say to a young woman who's thinking about the rabbinate, "There will be some communities that don't want you because you're a woman, but that is quickly changing. And there are many communities

that will want you because you're a woman or they don't see the rabbi as a gendered job, and that's not an issue." I have classmates who have trouble seeing themselves in Jewish texts because the texts are written by men, and the names in the text are all male; the characters are male. That is not a problem I encountered. For me, I was able to see myself through the text even though my gender was not represented. But that is something that a lot of people have to grapple with when they're in school. I say men have to grapple with it, too; I don't think it's just for women. I guess it's really about authenticity. Whatever you can do to feel your Judaism to be authentic and to feel like you have a real place at the table – because you do – will enable you to have a better time in rabbinical school and to be a better rabbi. Then I will say my father's useful advice again, which never goes old, which is, "If you want to be a rabbi, you have to love working for the Jews." And that's not just women. Men too. If you don't want to spend your time talking about Jewish things with Jewish people, then maybe try a different profession.

LH: Excellent. The last question for you, my young rabbi, is to think about – and I am going to say this in a very inelegant way – but the tombstone of your rabbinic career a hundred years from now, what do you hope it will say?

SM: What will the tombstone of my rabbinic career say? What will it say? What will we sum up about me when I'm done being a Rabbi? Well, I hope it says, "She loved the Jews, she loved teaching text and talking about Torah, and she loved singing and leading tefillah and having Shabbat meals and really being present in people's lives. Judaism was a path for her to use all of the gifts that she was given, and many people were touched by her presence."

LH: Thank you.

SM: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]