# Michele Lenke Transcript

Ronda Spinak: Could you state your name and tell us a little bit about what you're doing in your rabbinate?

Rabbi Michele Lenke: Sure. My name is Michele Lenke, and I've been a rabbi since 1996. I currently work at Temple Beth Shalom in Needham, where my primary portfolio has to do with doing everything b'nai mitzvah orientated – helping our future achieve a goal that sometimes seems a little daunting and enabling them to have fun while doing so. That's one of the things that I do. I'm also very involved in our sisterhood. We have a really special sisterhood where we have annual retreats, and I get to be their rabbi. We have women – from their twenties to eighties – come together, spend Shabbat together, study and pray, and sing and laugh. I laugh a lot in my rabbinate. I think it's really important. I don't laugh at it; I laugh with, or I laugh – certainly, I laugh at myself. I'm also enhancing my rabbinate. I've gone back to school, and I'm going for a doctorate right now in Pastoral Counseling. The longer I'm in the rabbinate, I realize that I'm not – I never became a rabbi for the politics. I became a rabbi for the people and the souls that are contained in each of the people that I meet and learning their stories, and I want to spend more time doing that.

RS: Perfect. Can you share with me a very special Jewish memory from your youth?

ML: So, I think in terms of my youth, the best experience was going to Israel. I went to Israel as a sixteen-year-old on a NFTY program. I had never been; my mother had never been. It was always a dream. It was something that I had spent the first sixteen years of my life really learning about and dreaming about. It became possible – that moment, that experience being away, being in our land – in our home away from home –and was really transformative for me. I've certainly gone back many times since, and it's always a

returning home.

RS: Can you tell us a story about a transformative moment you may have had in Israel?

ML: I would say during that trip, I think a transformative moment for me would've been – and it's purely cultural, but it was going to a concert. It was going to hear Yehudit Ravitz sing in Jerusalem, and being exposed to Israeli society of all ages, and to hear the Hebrew being sung, but not in a religious context, but with the same passion. And it was real. I was really lucky. I was recently there in December, and I got to see her again in a more intimate concert. But I go back to that moment of being sixteen and really feeling part of something larger than myself.

RS: Can you share with us your Jewish upbringing, the connective tissues that helped you become Rabbi?

ML: I would say that growing up – first of all, my parents divorced when I was real young. As part of that sort of transitional process, my mom really turned to our synagogue. So, synagogue life became my life. Not necessarily in the typical "kid way," however. I was less involved with the youth group and a more regular participant at Shabbat services and Torah study. It was there that I got to know my rabbis. I was part of a congregation with many, many rabbis. I grew up at Stephen Wise [Temple] in LA, and it was fascinating to me to see what they did and how they did it. I had the opportunity, even as a kid, to have a woman rabbi as my teacher. That was Karen Fox, who, to this day, we're still friendly. That was the '70s. She was a newly ordained rabbi, one of the first women rabbis. And how fortunate I was to – I don't want to say to be exposed to that but to have had that blessing. So that was really transformative for me, and synagogue life has always been very important. So, becoming a rabbi was – in many ways, it was a natural step.

RS:  Did you have an “a-ha” moment, where you realized you were going to become a rabbi?

ML:  So, I think that for me, it wasn’t an “a-ha” moment, but it was a call.  And I think that for me when I experience calls, they aren’t the loud “a-ha’s.”  They’re that still, small voice.  So, I can’t pinpoint it to a specific moment or a specific time.  I certainly knew before I became bat mitzvah that this was something I was considering doing, and before my bat mitzvah – the night before – I was so scared.  I said I wasn’t going to do it.  But I think then, at twelve years old, I understood the magnitude, I understood what it meant.  Because of that, there was awe and no regrets.  I certainly did become bat mitzvah the next day.

RS: It’s interesting … [inaudible]

ML: Well, it certainly helped.  It helps a lot. I can say to my students who are a bit scared, “Look, you better watch out because I said I wasn’t going to do it, and look what happened to me. You might become a rabbi.”

RS:  I forget, which [inaudible] did you go to in 1996?

ML:  HUC [Hebrew Union College].

RS: Which campus?  LA.?

ML:  I did everything [inaudible], Cincinnati.  I started in Jerusalem, went to Los Angeles for the next two years, and did my last two years in New York.

RS:  Could you name some of the challenges that you had to overcome to become a rabbi?  Or tell us a story around that?

ML:  I think that some of the challenges were subtle.  Challenges in becoming a rabbi – not in becoming a rabbi, but perhaps in establishing myself as a rabbi once I became

ordained. And many of us – you've probably heard some of these stories. But I can remember my first High Holidays and, at the time, we had a receiving line after services, and usually, it was middle-aged men who would make certain comments. "Oh, I've never kissed a rabbi, and I've never done this with a rabbi." What was that about? You weren't about to kiss a rabbi, essentially. I think there was a lot of proving. There was a lot of proof that many of us, certainly in the first thirty years of women in the rabbinate. I think it was different certainly than it is now, by far. I mean, there was a time when I knew every other woman rabbi. I can't say that anymore. So, with any kind of changes and growth, there are challenges to that.

RS: What would you say is the single biggest difference between being a rabbi when you were ordained compared to being a rabbi today? What was the biggest change, would you say?

ML: That's a hard one. I think that the biggest difference of being a rabbi then and being a rabbi now is that then, it was newsworthy. Then, it was about being the first – the first in the community, the first in the synagogue, the first in the state, the first in that position. With that first-ness, I think, comes responsibility. I would also say that then I think we had a clear sense of the women who came before us. So, I've been very lucky. I've been very fortunate. My first job out of college – out of undergrad – was working with Rabbi Laura Geller. We affectionately call her "Number Three." With Laura, I got to learn so much and more about being – what does it mean to be a rabbi? What does it mean to be a female rabbi? What does it mean to be a woman rabbi – whatever we end up calling it – in a very male community? She became a rabbi before there was anything such as gender-neutral language. We didn't have the language. I've been part of the transforming of language, not just to fit God, but to fit us. That, to me, is probably one of the biggest differences.

RS: Do you have a goal for your rabbinate or mission?

ML:  I would say my biggest goal is to practice what I preach, and that is to keep learning.  That as a rabbi, if I just was comfortable in the status quo, if I just thought being a rabbi was enough – I knew what I needed to know…

RS: What is the mission of your rabbinate?

ML:  My mission as a rabbi in my rabbinate is to keep things fresh, to practice what I preach, and to be a lifelong learner, to continue learning, to continue growing.  If my rabbinate stayed the same year after year after year, and I didn't grow with that, I think it would be boring.  But I don't think it would serve – it wouldn't serve the community I was hoping to serve.  It's like our relationship with Torah.  We read the same text year after year.  The text is the same, but we've changed hopefully.  God willing, we've changed.  I feel like I want to continue to push and to grow and to take risks, and to see what will be.

RS:  Do you recall telling people you were going to become a rabbi, and do you recall anybody's particular reaction to that?

ML:  So, I knew from at least bat mitzvah age that I wanted to become a rabbi.  In high school, I knew it, but it was kind of on the down low.  I knew where I wanted to go to college before most of my friends did, and I didn't say that either because of sort of the social pressures that were around.  In college, I went to Brandeis University.  Some call it the of the minor leagues of the rabbinate because Brandeis has produced a lot of rabbis.  Some of those rabbis went to Brandeis knowing they wanted to become rabbis.  Others were inspired by both the professors and classmates and certainly Rabbi Al Axelrad, who – he's groomed many, many rabbis over the years.  I remember, to a certain extent, talking about it.  Probably the hardest place for me to talk about was – I was on the basketball team.  And so there was some negotiation of Shabbat observance and away games especially.  But at Brandeis, we were taught to follow our dreams. Mine was wanting to become a rabbi. In the circles I kept, it was not that unusual.

RS: What about your parents? Did you tell your parents you wanted to be a rabbi? Did they want you to be a rabbi?

ML: They knew. Yeah. They have been supportive, really, all the way through. My dad used to do something where, each year when he would –each year of rabbinical school when he would send me a letter – my first year, he addressed to R. Michele Lenke. The second year R.A., and by the time I was ordained and became a rabbi, he was-- I mean, he was so proud, and he would call me his rabbi. I think that if times were different, my mom probably would've wanted to pursue either rabbinic studies or something similar. I mean to this day – I know she's very active in her synagogue, and she's taken biblical Hebrew online, and she's doing all of these things. So it's not that, "Where did Michele get this idea from?" It was more organic than that.

RS: I've read that you oversee many conversions. Why are conversions important, and do you have a story around that?

ML: So, as a rabbi, there are – most people think of it in terms of the blessings that we give. But there are many blessings that we receive, and I would say that working with people around conversion is such a gift. Because in some ways, it's – first of all, every story is different. To accompany someone on their sacred journey and to watch them fall in love with a people and a religion that is already so dear to my own heart is – it's sacred, and it's intimate, and it's often really fun, and you can't fully describe it. I had a situation many, many years ago in a former congregation where a teenager came to me. He was from the community and interested in exploring Judaism. "Rabbi, can I meet with you? Can I study? I want to know more." So, of course, of course. And we met a few times, and he would come to synagogue, and his mom would come with him. But as a teenager – first of all, I think unless – except for the rare exception, I don't want anyone to be converting to anything as a teenager. You're too young. So, he and I met, and we got to know each other, and then we fell out of touch. Fast forward several years. I'm at

Whole Foods, and they just opened a new store in town. I was looking for an eggplant, and I asked the produce guy where the eggplant was, and he said, “It’s right over here, Rabbi.” I looked up, and it was this boy, who’s now a young man. We picked up right where we left off. Week after week, during my shopping, I would teach Torah in the aisles of Whole Foods. And it was as – he directed it. He asked me the questions because I don’t think that anyone should push another to convert at all. So, we reignited this relationship in Whole Foods, and then we started to move the conversation into my office when I knew that he was really serious. The curiosity that he had as a young boy remained in him as a young twenty-something. And to witness and to really – I mean, it was one of the most incredible experiences to be with him and his family at the mikveh. To see the acceptance of his family. I think that we don’t always talk about the acceptance of the family of origin. I must admit that I wouldn’t be that understanding if my own child converted to another faith. I think that would be really hard. So, when parents are able to see their children for who they are and who they’re becoming, and to see that they’re making thoughtful choices and are so accepted in the Jewish community, it’s an incredible gift.

RS: Nice story. Is he still involved?

ML: Yeah.

RS: Does he go to your shul?

ML: He doesn’t, and I encouraged him actually not to. He’s a man of color, and so we’re a little too homogenous, unfortunately.

RS: That’s too bad. What’s the craziest thing somebody’s asked you to do in your role as a rabbi?

ML: Well, the most unusual, I would say, occurred when I was a rabbinic student. I was [in] my second year at HUC. But my first year stateside, in LA. We had just been given

our new pulpit assignments for student pulpits. I hadn't even been there yet, and I got a call from the president of the congregation saying that someone wanted me to do their dog's funeral. Don't get me wrong. I love dogs. And now I have one. But I didn't know – that's not what I anticipated. I didn't know how to respond. I didn't know if this was something that I had to do. We hadn't even been told yet what the rules were for student rabbis and our relationships, and I hadn't met my adviser yet, and it was all so new. Let's just say the dog hadn't even died yet. So, this was in anticipation of a dead dog. I asked every rabbi I knew, "What do I do?" I was trying to get a modern response of, "What do I do?" To this day, I had some of my classmates bark at me! That was one of our class experiences that we will not forget. As it turned out, I didn't have to do the funeral, but I did have to take the dog's name off the Kaddish list at Yom Kippur because it was an obvious name that would have transformed the tenor and tone of High Holidays.

RS: Tell me how you balance private life and your role as a rabbi. Is there any conflict or tension? How do you resolve it if there is?

ML: Well, I think for women rabbis in particular, the balancing of personal life and our public lives is that much harder. Often for our male colleagues, when they go home for dinner, they're praised, and it's harder for us. It's more of that we have an issue of we're not so able to balance things, or our priorities perhaps are being questioned. That's been a challenge. In my own life, I have made certain choices, some that I certainly stand behind and others that I do regret. But I do carve out time that's sacred for my family. While there are emergencies that come up, I've also created the position I'm in so that I have more flexibility. So, I think there are more conscious choices that women rabbis have to make in order to have both. I don't think there's a sense of having it all. I don't think any of us has it all. But to be able to live in both worlds, it's finding the right balance of – just because I'm a public person doesn't mean that my family needs to be so public. That we need to respect our own comforts and boundaries. At the same time, I know they have a lot of love from the community. To have experienced family life cycle events

with our congregation has been really, really important. Most recently, my father died a year ago, and I decided that, as part of shiva, I mean, I invited – the shiva was certainly open to members of the congregation, and many, many people came. I was a mourner, and I let them see me [as] a mourner. I did do some teaching, but that helped me. But it was important. It was important for me, and it was important for them to see one of their rabbis mourn and to be the one being taken care of for a change.

RS: What would you say is the number one sacrifice you've had to make as a rabbi?

ML: Well, as I mentioned to you, I'm originally from LA. My entire rabbinate has been here in New England, so the distance. I mean, I've loved being in New England. I also love California. I just got back the other night. And thank God I'm part of a family that we can pick up right where we left off. But I miss the day-to-day. I miss the day-to-day, especially as relatives get older. And that I'm often able to – I'm able to be there for other people in a way that I'm not always able to be there for my own family of origin, which is a sacrifice. It's understood. It's an understood agreement. And there are moments when that becomes pretty (hard?). But at the same time, as my father was dying, I was there. I was at his bedside, and I know that my congregation understood that. They understood why, and they knew that's where I needed to be.

RS: Do you have a favorite piece of text, something you go back to over and over, and if so, why?

ML: I have a number of favorite texts depending on the moment. I love the name of God in El Shaddai, which, typically in the text, in Exodus, is more of this war-like image of God. But Shaddai – and Shaddai means "breast" –and that's my go-to God name every year at the mammogram. I think my favorite texts involve the Exodus. Really, that's part, I think, of my personal theology, is that movement as a people. The coming out journey from slavery to freedom, even if you don't get there. I know that certainly in recent years, there's been lots of debates of, "Did the Exodus actually happen?" It doesn't matter to me

if it actually happened. There's a reason we're taught this story, there's a reason we continue to tell this story, and we each need to find our own narrow places and figure out how to emerge and be stronger.

RS: What's your personal understanding of God?

ML: I would say God lives with me pretty actively. First of all, God is. [laughter] I'll start there. My favorite of favorite names for God is ahiye-asher-ahiye. "I will be what I will be." I like more of the "I will become who I will become." Or "I will become who I'm meant to become." And that God, for me, is both transformative and transforming. God is often part of my decision-making. God is part of my vocabulary and my heart. Just recently being at the cemetery for my father's yahrzeit, God was with me on my journey. God was with me on the airplane and in the airport, and then, of course, at the cemetery itself. I think we have a pretty good relationship. I can question. I can get angry. The God I believe in can take that. I've heard people say, "Oh, Rabbi, you can say that because you and God are closer." I don't believe that I'm closer to God than anyone is. I think I just call more often. So, I'm following the call that I hear – have been responding to most recently by my going to school and by really focusing on other people's journeys and really to help at any turn. And I guess to continue to challenge myself.

RS: [Can you share a holy moment?]

ML: A holy moment I can share. I would say that one holy moment – this one in particular happened last year. And I was at the deathbed of someone I loved very much, and she had lived a very full life. She was in her late eighties, really a matriarch in our family. Her closest relatives were surrounding her and giving her permission. I took her hand and sang the Shema, and she squeezed my hand, and we all started crying. That's certainly a holy moment.

RS: Beautiful. Do you have a personal crisis you can share with us and how Judaism helped you get through it?

ML: A personal crisis. In some ways, this is a little inorganic because a rabbi's personal crises are so internalized, and while we're going through crises, which of course, happen to us, we don't really have the liberty to share those crises. So, I would say that the biggest crisis, the biggest challenge, was when I came out to myself and realized that the congregation that I was in was not ready, and it wasn't what I needed. That's not to say – I mean, they were lovely people, but I needed to leave. So, my Judaism, my faith, [and] my relationship with God taught me to trust that which I knew to be so. The first person I called was my childhood rabbi, actually, and so I needed Judaism to respond to me. I was ordained in 1996, and it was the first year that gays and lesbians were allowed to be ordained, even though some had been previously. But it was a different world. It was a different world, and I can say that because I'm at the same school now. I see who's walking in the halls, and I hear the language that's being used both in the hall and in Tefillah, and there's an openness there that is astounding. But it was a hard time. It was before people uttered "gay marriage" [or] "same-sex marriage." Living here in Massachusetts and being part of the movement, yet again, another first in my story. But I absolutely turned to Judaism. I think that I continue to do so, and I'm able to model for other people that they can too.

RS: Can you talk about the transition of leaving one synagogue after you came out to yourself and finding a place that maybe felt better, or more accepted, or whatever that transition led you to? Can you talk about the process [and] the time?

ML: Timing is a little hard because it took me a while to make the decision too. I would say that as Massachusetts was struggling with the civil rights issue of same-sex marriage, I felt that I would be doing a disservice to me, my community, [and] the rabbinate if I stayed quiet. So, it was something I did get involved in. I wasn't

necessarily a big speaker here or whatever. But I showed up at things, and I put my name on things when it wasn't so easy to put my name on things. I remember the first weddings that I did. One that I did – beautiful wedding with two women who were already raising a son, and they had been together many, many years. And the atmosphere in the room was different than any other wedding I had done before because truly, the community was – the community breathed a sigh of relief and joy and approval, and all of the – this couple was surrounded by their closest family and friends, all who had been supporting them these many years but didn't necessarily have the language and the structure to do that. And for me to do that wedding was huge. Shortly after that, I married two other women, young women who are real movers and shakers in their own communities and super successful. And they didn't care – they were sort of – they'd been out their entire lives. It was a different journey, and the first time I officiated for their wedding, it was a kosher Jewish wedding but an illegal state wedding. Because it was in New Hampshire at the time, and that was before actually – it was before Massachusetts had same-sex marriage. Several years later, after marriage was legal here, I married them again. So, they had a legal civil marriage. I'm in touch with them to this day. I think that, as a rabbi and certainly from the rabbis that I grew up with, who took risks and stood on social issues and were willing to take a stand even when it wasn't popular, is something that I have a great passion for. It's a little harder to do in New England. In some ways, it's easier to be outspoken in California because a lot of people are out there in whatever regard, and you know who they are, and that's great. Here, things are done differently. It is obviously a much older community. There's more history in New England. We still have blue laws in the book, so changes come a little more slowly. And yet, we were the first to have gay marriage. I think we've proven to certainly many in the country that the sky hasn't fallen and that we have a lot of people in our communities who need to be seen and heard, and their love needs to be blessed not just by God, not just by their communities, but by the state as well.

RS: Can you tell me what you're most proud of in terms of your rabbinate? Or as a Jew?

ML: I think I'm most proud of being authentically me and not apologizing for that. And that comes across, I think, in a lot of what I do.

RS: This is our last question. What do you hope Jews of the future will remember about you?

ML: Well, first of all, I think this is really an interesting project, and I think that the timing, especially now as Gail is looking at her own career and next steps, really is a beautiful tribute to that. I think what's most important, and I have to imagine it's going to be very clear in what people see and read –we're not all alike. Just because I'm a woman rabbi doesn't really mean anything. So please don't assume that because I'm a woman rabbi, or because she's a woman rabbi, or she's a woman rabbi, that you know how to finish the next sentence. To encourage people to get to know us and not to be intimidated, not to be afraid to ask a question, even if it's a question we've heard many, many times before. But when women rabbis get together – and over the years, I've been very involved with the Women's Rabbinic Network, and I'm a past president of that organization – one of the most beautiful things, when we pray together, is the multi-color tapestry that happens, not just by our dress but the talitot or the kippot that we wear. I think that women rabbis have added color, in the most beautiful of ways, to Jewish life.

RS: Thank you for sharing. Thank you for giving so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Addendum: Ten years later, here is my update:

I completed my doctorate at the Hebrew Union College in New York. It is a Doctor of Ministry with a specialty in the discipline of interfaith pastoral care. A year after the United States Supreme Court ruled in the Obergefell decision in 2015 that same-sex marriage was indeed legal nationwide, my wife and I married with our sons surrounding us at the chuppah. It was a joyous day, and everyone commented on what a happy occasion it

was and that it was worth the wait! A couple of years after that, we followed our hearts and moved to California, which was something we had been talking about and planning for several years. I became trained as a chaplain, doing my residency at Children's Hospital Los Angeles and then as a Staff Chaplain at Providence Cedars-Sinai Tarzana Medical Center. I loved my work at the hospital, being with patients and families at their most critical moments, but then one day, I received a call that I knew I needed to pay close attention to, even though I was very happy at the hospital. I listened to that still, small voice once again; and followed that call back to the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles, where I am currently using my doctorate both as an instructor of pastoral care and counseling and as the National Rabbinic Fieldwork Coordinator for the College. I have come full circle. I am helping to train future rabbis of all genders and identities, and I have great faith in the future, knowing who will lead the way.