

Diane Balser Transcript

JULIE JOHNSON: This is a project of the Jewish Women's Archive, an interview with Diane Balser, interviewed by Julie Johnson on March 8th, 2005, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, International Women's Day.

DIANE BALSER: So I was bat mitzvahed. I went to Hebrew school [for] a period of time. I went for a couple years four days a week. It was Hillcrest Jewish Center, which has a long history, which I can talk about, and I was the first girl in my entire family to ever get bat mitzvahed because Orthodox Jews – it was just really the developing Conservative movement. It was a Friday night, and you did a haftarah. You didn't wear tallit or yarmulke, and didn't read from the Torah, but did a haftarah. Different prayers. But I was very conscious of the fact that I was the first and the beginning. I was also clear afterward that – I didn't know the word sexism, but it was very clear that religion was a dead end for women at that point, but was proud of the – my sister got bat mitzvahed, and we called them bas mitzvahed at the time. My brother was bar mitzvahed. So, there was that awareness. We were definitely Jewishly aware. It's interesting, though, I didn't see myself as a religious Jew. It was just something you did, you did that thing, but it was not like a religious experience in that way, and I'm never sure what it exactly meant to my parents. My mother, it was very important to, and she was clearly very defined and keeping kosher, but when I graduated and went to college, certainly gave up keeping kosher as soon as I hit college, so it wasn't an issue that I searched for Kashrut. And in college, I did Rosh Hashanah, but I didn't do anything else. But the school was, by that time, thirty-three percent Jewish. I certainly was Jewishly conscious. I was also conscious of antisemitism and very conscious of antisemitism throughout.

JJ: How did that manifest growing up?

DB: Well, I can remember a few things. My father would always tell the story on the block, which was mostly a gentile block – a lot of the kids went to parochial school, Catholic parochial school. My father remembered the time that I sat them all down and said listen, “I’ve listened to your Hail Marys; now you have to listen to my prayers.” I took out what I had learned in Hebrew school and made them listen. So there was that. I was feisty that way. I remember also my parents went to a place, Chautauqua in upper New York State, that was a cultural colony, but it started out as a place for Protestant ministers. And the land then – any religion could come in, but you had to be, I think, Protestant to own property. They finally let Catholics, I think, have a church service. I can remember, as Jews, I went with my mother one Friday night to the movie theater, because we were going to have services; they locked us out. So there was some Jewish protest. I remembered somebody didn’t invite me to their birthday party because I was Jewish, and I refused to go back to Chautauqua afterward. I did have a picture, and certainly, I can remember – I don’t remember certainly the – well, I told you about the Rosenbergs. I think I was conscious of the fact that –and I think had an argument with my parents about it, but that a piece of the reason they were electrocuted was because they were Jewish.

JJ: Can you talk about how your activism was affected by Jewish ideas or values, if at all?

DB: Well, it was part of the same thing to be an activist. Obviously, I knew a lot of middle-class Jews that were not activists, and I was in a minority in college. When I went to the University of Chicago, I made African American friends; most were not Jewish. The activists I knew were not only Jews but there was certainly a number of Jews. I don’t know to what extent I thought that way, but in the New Politics convention, I think when the issue of Israel came up, then the issues of being Jewish certainly were there. I went to the New Politics convention, and there was – the first time there was a Black caucus, and they condemned “Zionist imperialism” quote, unquote. So, with this guy Bob

Scheer, who was editor of Ramparts, we tried to pass something condemning imperialism in all the Middle East and not condemning Israel, not singling Israel out. And it was passed. So obviously, I was conscious of the Jewish issues and confused around the '67 War. And then it became, of course, a big issue on the Left. My brother and sister were part of a book called Chutzpah, which was the beginning of Jewish left activism of Jews who had been in the New Left who were trying to look at their Jewish identity. Both my brother and sister had articles in that. But so it was there, but as I grew older, particularly when I left my parent's home, I'd do Rosh Hashanah, but the religion stopped. I've actually gone back to synagogue – eventually.

JJ: Oh, you have? I was going to ask if that's changed.

DB: Yes in the last couple years. That has changed. Do you want some water or tea?

JJ: That would be great, actually.

DB: Yeah, let me get you – so all of the ambivalences that developed around Israel – then, during the height of the New Left in the '60s, that became very pro-Palestinian.

And certainly, anti-Zionism became the policy of the Left. I think for people like myself, it was very conflicted. I remember having discussion groups with leftists about it, and it took me a long time to work out my own understanding of the right of Jews to have our own homeland, and it became a two-state solution, so that led me into groups that were more Jewish, Breira, which was like one of the earliest groups on a two-state solution.

Meanwhile, interestingly enough, I can remember talking to my rabbi. My father died in 1976. My rabbi in 1973 believed in a Palestinian state. He was a Conservative rabbi, and I remember talking to him about it and also having him talk – right after my father died, I remember going to synagogue at Hillcrest, and he had a very right-wing rabbi speak. I went up, and I just said I was really surprised, and so he had me talk to some of the more conservative political people in the synagogue about a Palestinian state. I went to Israel [for] the first time in 1976 and went to the West Bank, went to Gaza.

JJ: How old were you then?

DB: My early thirties. Then belonged to Breira, later New Jewish Agenda – groups that believed within the Jewish community in a two-state solution. There were all these problems with the Left because the Left basically believed in one state and is still mixed about a Jewish state. That's still a conflict, which is a whole thing about being a Jewish peace activist and your relationship to the rest of the antiwar movement, which is a discussion in and of itself. There was a continual understanding. What was interesting was that in terms of my women's politics, I didn't for a long time have an identification with Jewish feminism. Jewish feminism evolved within the Jewish world, and my brother was studying to be a rabbi, and he was in the class of JTS [Jewish Theological Seminary] that voted for women rabbis, and my brother was involved in that, so I clearly was aware of it. But the feminist movement didn't have – those of us who were Jewish did not bring that really strongly. I remember discussion groups about it. In this talk I just gave at the Brit Tzedek conference – you know Letty Pogrebin, who wrote [Deborah, Golda, and Me: Being Female and Jewish in America]?

JJ: Yeah.

DB: In that book, that was an archetypal whatever – pivotal book around Jewish feminism. She talks about the international women's conferences when the whole issue of Zionism as racism was brought into the women's conferences. She wrote an article on antisemitism that was put into Ms. Magazine. It was the first discussion within the larger Women's Movement of antisemitism. I went to Nairobi in 1985 because you have this development of the International Women's Movement, and I was asked by somebody in New Jewish Agenda to facilitate a whole discussion on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. There were large numbers of Jewish women that came because the issue in the past had been so heated. Many Jewish women came from Israel, from Europe, from the United States. The funniest story, which I just told at this conference, which you'd love –

Friday night before the conference, all these Jewish women pour into synagogue, an Orthodox synagogue in Nairobi, Kenya, and we're asked to go upstairs, so we're all upstairs. This is at the international women's – Bella Abzug, Betty Friedan. I don't know if Gloria Steinem was there. All upstairs, and there are like ten men downstairs for a minyan. So, the rabbi looked up at all the – and Bella was wearing one of her big hats.

Then, finally, he looked up and said, “Oh, come on down,” and so all the women poured downstairs. Anyway, I facilitated this discussion with an Israeli and Palestinian woman, but they were [in] the rejectionist camp in the Arab world, the right-wing in the Israeli, all in this meeting, and people yelling and screaming. It was a very difficult meeting to facilitate. But I ended up hanging out with a lot of the Jewish feminist peace leaders.

They had two from Israel, Naomi Chazan, who's been here for a year, and Galia Golan. Both of them were very influential in starting the Israeli Women's Network in Israel and also very active in peace activities. Well, I don't need to go into it. But through them, I got invited to Israel, and I did some training [with] the Israel Women's Network. So there is this other undercurrent in my life around Israel and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and Jewish feminism. That was not as strong as some of the other work but definitely there as a major piece of my life and my identity. Then a few years ago, I don't know how many, two or three years ago, I joined Beth Zion. I had been a member and went back to the religion, went back into – and had an adult bat mitzvah, had a reaffirmation of my bat mitzvah for my sixtieth birthday, so that was a year and a half ago. That was great. I had by then gone to Geneva. I'd already gotten involved in Brit Tzedek because a few years ago, I had gotten involved in Workmen's Circle and the Middle East Task Force and then through that got involved in Brit Tzedek.

JJ: What year did Brit Tzedek –?

DB: Oh, it was three years ago. Yeah, so I was at the – I wasn't one of the founders, but I was at the founding convention and then had put much of my political work – I teach women's studies, and I still do women's referencing through co-counseling and do

women's workshops, but the Brit Tzedek work has been – and it's a very female-run organization, and Marcia Freedman, who's the president, is an active Israeli feminist. Well, she's American-born. Then I've just been hired to be the acting CEO for this coming year for Brit Tzedek. If it continues, I'll continue, so I'll be taking a leave from BU [Boston University]. It will be a full-time job. I'll work out of here, but I'll travel. That's exciting for me, [to] be full-time Jewish peace activism. But I see it connected to the feminist work that I have done. And certainly, in Israel and Palestine, a lot of the women involved are active both in the peace issue and active feminists.

JJ: I was going to ask you how being a woman has affected your work.

DB: Right. They're so connected because there's been such an active women's peace movement in this country. As I look back when I was thinking of my peace activities, starting with SANE and starting with the work around Hiroshima and Nagasaki against the destruction of the planet or against war and as a female definitely connected with being a woman and connected with being a Jewish woman.

JJ: Can you talk about some of the successes and some of the challenges of the work that you've been doing in more recent years?

DB: The Brit Tzedek work?

JJ: Yeah.

DB: Yeah. Well, the fact that we've actually built a real organization, I think is – and it's a national grassroots organization, and there isn't any in the United States. Where I think it's a success, and when I give talks that with all the successes and failures around Oslo – and you can analyze that politically – the thing that stood out for me was that in Palestine, in Israel, and the United States there was not an organized base of people who said that when the peace negotiations went bad there were people who would put enough pressure on their governments to find a way to continue. There was a void in

organized politics. I think that even though that's not discussed that much, that is really important. I went to the Geneva Accords, the signing of [the] Geneva Accords. We've worked very closely with the leaders of Geneva both on the Palestinian side and on the Israeli side. Their intention with Geneva was to use Geneva – I have a copy of it if you're interested in the Geneva Accords.

JJ: Yeah, I might look at that.

DB: But to use Geneva to do organizing in Israel, which they did. They got it out to every Israeli household, and the Palestinians publicized it, and we got it out as far as we could, not to every household, not to every American Jew, but to as many people – we brought it to Congress, and everybody in Congress got a copy of it because of what Brit Tzedek did. So we saw it as an important grassroots organizing tool. And Brit Tzedek has paralleled with – we've had various national campaigns which I've initiated or led, something called Bring the Settlers Home. We just had an open letter to the President during the Presidential election to reengage in the Israeli-Palestinian issue. We did a campaign called the Spirit of Geneva. So there have been a variety of campaigns which have tried to organize a base here. So I think those are the – the success will come when there's a viable Palestinian state next to Israel and a negotiated peace settlement.

The short term is – we didn't have anything to do obviously with the disengagement plan of [Ariel] Sharon's, although I think Geneva did. We had nothing to do with the last Palestinian elections, other than good cheerleaders. But I think we're part of an upward trend motion of organized Jews speaking up on this issue. I think one of the biggest successes, though, is that we are, as an organization, accepted in the Jewish community. I think that's the first time you had an articulated peace organization that was really welcomed that fully believes in a two-state solution, fully believes in a Palestinian state next to a secure Israel, be accepted. Nancy Kaufman wrote a recommendation for me for the -- she's head of the JCRC [Jewish Community Relations Council] here – and so I think I would say if there were any successes, that would be the biggest.

JJ: So the community accepting –?

DB: Yes, and us understanding the positive role that we have as opposed to seeing ourselves as alienated and outside of the Jewish world. I think we see ourselves –

JJ: We're moving through the questions so fast.

DB: Either I'm a fast talker –

JJ: Succinct.

DB: Do other people talk longer?

JJ: Let's see. Well, just another question on this stuff before we go on to some other stuff. Have you had role models in your life?

DB: I don't. There were images of women – we always used Emma Goldman. Used these tried and true – Rosa Luxemburg. You learn from women in all different kinds of ways. Was there a big teacher in my life? No. It's the difference between this generation and our generation. We were it. We were it. There weren't certainly – I felt badly – I was in Paris when Simone de Beauvoir died, and I said, "Oh shit, I could have met her." I could have last year when I had been in Paris. I just should have looked her up, but I didn't. So, I was in Paris when she died. There isn't one woman, but there's so many women. They're peers. They're peers and contemporaries. I think for a Jewish woman, certainly, the idea of power and courage and strength and leadership is in the tradition. I worry about this generation that grew up with Jewish American princess and all the changes that have taken place. But I certainly think the imagery for Jewish women is one of courage and outspokenness. There's a lot of sexism and antisemitism that gets hit with that imagery in this country, but certainly am proud of that connection, and I think a lot – there were so many Jewish women active in the Second Wave, and I think so much came out of our mothers' generation that I've emulated or we're proud of

certain qualities in a woman. How old are you?

JJ: I'm thirty-six. Actually, that's about it. I wanted to know if there was anything else that you want to add or that you haven't said.

DB: Well, there's so much I could talk about, but it depends really what you're interested in. We're not obligated clearly either, so I wouldn't want to have the shortest of all the –

JJ: We have talked about this, I feel like, but how has being a woman impacted your work?

DB: How has it not?

JJ: Can you talk about some personal –?

DB: Well, it's interesting teaching younger women now. I've been at BU teaching women's studies for nine years. It's been very profound to teach younger women because it's really had to – like what I said about Jewish American princesses. I do a whole two days on antisemitism and Jewish American princess being –

JJ: In your classes?

DB: Classes. And they don't get it for a while. They don't really think it's antisemitic. They just think it's funny. I say to the Jewish women, “You come from this remarkable tradition and remarkable women who are revolutionaries, who are activists, who are some of the brilliant minds, and you're left with Clueless, the movie Clueless.” And thinking that Jewish women are materialists and that's the – and sometimes I cry when I talk about it. I said, “You can't lose who we are. You can't let this culture do that to you. You can't have your self-image be so distorted that you don't know where you come from and who you come from. You can't have that taken away from you. Basically, you got to fight for it.” Sometimes, they get it. I've had a few women appreciate me. I was at

a conference in New York. Actually, Letty was on the panel. There were some other women on the panel. I hear this voice, “Professor Balser, Professor Balser,” and I turn around. It's a woman I had taught two or three years ago, and she said, “Your class turned me around about being Jewish and now I'm active in Jewish feminism.” So there are moments like that when you say, “Oh, well, good.” But all the contemporary issues around sex and the beautification industry and all of those, which certainly were part of my generation but not to the full extent, is – I don't know, it's just interesting to try to place myself as an older woman now in that context, but still an activist and a leader and not so conscious of myself as an older woman other than I know I am an older woman according to my birth certificate anyway. I don't know what more to say. I think I just read an article. Did you see the article in the Globe about the pornography issue?

JJ: No.

DB: Oh, it was interesting. They were talking about how feminists lost that issue, and I just think of the very contemporary issues for women and how they fit into my own development and how I teach them in class. I think that so many of the women younger than you, and you went through – your parents were political obviously, and you were in a political milieu, but this is not a political generation in quite that way, and so the inspiration we had around being Jewish females, how do we convey that to another generation of Jewish women? So those are just issues in my own mind.

JJ: Another question I actually wanted to ask you earlier was – and this could be around the work you've done either around women's work or the peace work, but what kind of impact has it had globally?

DB: Well, the women's work is – when I went to Nairobi in 1985 – and it's interesting when you go to the international women's conferences because all these issues are out there. You try to figure out what's a women's issue, and it's gender issues, but it's also war and peace, and it's also race and economics. So I think in the International Women's

Movement it's more integrated. I was just at the – there was something from International Women's Day in Simmons that was from the Beijing conference, and I was at Beijing. I was at Nairobi, and I was at Beijing. I remember Nairobi, and it was just phenomenal. I kept thinking, “My God, there's fifteen thousand women.” And Beijing had forty thousand women. I said, “We started out in Cambridge with nothing, and in such a short period of time, you've changed the face of the planet around gender.” It's just so remarkable to have been part of it. And obviously, a lot has gone downhill, but the consciousness is still there and the understanding that this is a key battle to be fought, which wasn't true in political movements of the late '60s and early '70s. I can remember the movements around Latin America, for instance, Nicaragua, Chile. The women were told you wait until after the revolution, and that was really the – and I would meet some of those women years later. They said, “We were wrong; you have to fight the battle of sexism at every point in time.” You can't wait the fifteen-year period of time. So I've given women's talks in South Africa. Oh, that was another interesting – I was asked a few years ago to give a talk. There was a conference at Brandeis. I had been on the thesis committee of a woman, Black African woman, who had done her thesis on sexism in the ANC [African National Congress], Black women's roles in the ANC, and so then she asked me and somebody else from Brandeis to talk. I gave a talk on women. It was a conference sponsored by the government, the South African government. It was really, really interesting to meet leaders, women and men leaders in the ANC and to talk about the issues of women within the ANC and the struggles there. I did talk about being Jewish, tried to raise that issue, and it was conflicted for people. But interesting. And when I gave my talk, I gave my background and said I was brought up during the European Holocaust. A lot of people didn't know what – some didn't know exactly that much about it. It was very interesting. Can't remember what year that was in. It was like early '90s. Nelson Mandela was still president. I actually was in the home of [Thabo] Mbeki, in his home, somebody knew him, [and] we were part of an international delegation. So those are amazing – to have been part of so many different world-

changing experiences.

JJ: Global capacity.

DB: Or at least I was there at the right time and the right place. Israel and Palestine, at some level, it's a very – we're talking about a little land. We're not talking about much.

It's like the size of New Jersey. But clearly, it's pivotal because of racism and antisemitism, the connections between the two, and if this could be solved, I think it certainly will be a contribution. And women are very much in the mix of it. I think it's important for women to be in the leadership of pivotal world issues. That is our role as women activists. It isn't just gender issues. In the international women's conferences that was discussed. What is a women's issue? But clearly, it was the women from the developing nations of the world that said we have to lead on everything; we can't only lead on women's. We can't ignore women's issues, but we can't lead only on women's issues. I think the other thing probably in the Second Wave to now is a better understanding of leadership. That the beginning of the feminist movement was leadership is bad. I think it's evolved to understand that we need to produce many women leaders. I think that's been an evolution. So, I see the work I've done in Brit Tzedek as vice president, now as CEO, as providing female leadership to what would be considered a global –

JJ: Global organization.

DB: Yeah, it's only United States, but it impacts a global issue that's very controversial and at the center of Jewish life. This issue is one that people – Jews hate to talk about, but is at the –

JJ: Okay. Yeah, that's it.

DB: Yeah, I was thinking of the other thing, the Palestinian-Jewish issue is the relationship as Jewish women with women of color. That was certainly an issue that our

generation tried to work out through the Women's Movement, now through the peace movement. And you see it, particularly in Israel and Palestine, where there have been Palestinian and Israeli women who have tried to forge a relationship over the years. Less so in the United States, but I think our relationship to women of color remains a pivotal issue in all of this as Jewish women.

JJ: What have been some of the challenges around that you've seen?

DB: Well, I think certainly for us as Jewish women looking for those of us who are Ashkenazi, what does it mean to be white? And Ashkenazi Jews in Israel, you have Mizrahi Jews, and so you see some of the conflicts more upfront. In the United States, most of the Jews are Ashkenazi, mostly white. So we needed to look at what is our relationship to racism. Is it the same as gentiles', or is it a different thing? And then to confront and look at anti-Jewish issues within people of color. You saw those conflicts over the issue of Israel that still get battled. I think for us, as Jewish women, there's an identification with African American women, but then there's so much around the beautification industry and issues around our looks. I love teaching the issues of female identity and is there a Jewish female identity.

JJ: What classes do you teach at BU?

DB: I teach women's studies.

JJ: A range of –?

DB: I teach two introductory women's studies courses, and I teach global feminism and women in politics, and now I'm teaching a women in leadership class.

JJ: But you get to infuse Jewish women's issues in through –?

DB: Yes, there are quite a number of Jewish women.

JJ: Okay.

DB: Good enough?

JJ: Yeah, that's great.

[END OF INTERVIEW]