Miriam Yasgur Transcript

Judith Rosenbaum: Okay, so I'm just going to introduce us here so that we have a record at the beginning. It is October 29th, 2005, and Judith Rosenbaum and Miriam Yasgur – is that how you pronounce your last name? – are at the Barnard Conference on Jewish Women Changing America and doing the JWA - Jewish Women's Archive - oral history project. Can you start by telling me where and when you were born and a little bit about where you grew up?

Miriam Yasgur: Sure. I was born at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital.

JR: [laughter] So was I.

MY: And I grew up in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, up until I was six when my parents moved to Teaneck. I grew up there until I went to Israel for a year prior to college, which was here at Barnard, which is exciting. So I grew up mainly in the Orthodox community, and I had a very rich Jewish life throughout.

JR: Did you go to day school?

MY: Yeah, I went to day school, which was [inaudible] and all that stuff. I went to Yavneh Academy for elementary school. I actually began at Yeshiva North Jersey, which was a little bit more right-wing, and then I switched to Yavneh Academy for sixth grade and was there through the end of junior high, and then I went to Ma'ayanot Yeshiva High School for Girls, which was a new high school beginning in Teaneck, and I was part of the first class, which was very exciting. It was very exciting to be part of that. It was actually considered very progressive for the Orthodox community. It was definitely new and powerful.

JR: What were some of the ways in which it was progressive?

MY: At this conference, it's very interesting to see a spectrum of Jewish feminists because in the community where I go, I feel like I'm so left-wing and so crazy, and when I'm here, I feel like I'm this little shtetl girl who isn't doing enough, and is so sequestered in this tiny little box. So it's interesting to have a range, a little bit. At Ma'ayanot – one of the great things about – there's a lot of total intellectual freedom and openness. We studied Talmud on a very high, advanced level, taught by a woman for two years, and we had men for the other two years. But that was a very – actually, pretty left I realize that that religious language is actually different for them than [inaudible]. But I mean, very progressive for the Orthodox community. We led in other various – a different thing that we did is that we had an organized prayer, organized tefillah. I was actually the chair of the tefillah committee, which was a great experience, and I loved it. I loved leading, and I still love leading, and I love really all of that challenge of creating a women's prayer space in a community where women don't count themselves. A lot of people in the Orthodox community, when the school was first forming, thought we wore tefillin and thought we read the Torah, and we didn't. There were lots of things that students wanted to do that we actually couldn't really do or were things that there were still limits, and it was very shaky, or it was a very tenuous balance to strike for the faculty and for us. Although, as students, we weren't necessarily so aware of how we were seen in the larger community or any of that stuff. But I loved it there. I definitely thrived in the small community where the faculty-student ratio was almost even, at least for the first few years. And it was really a lot of creative thinking, emphasis on strong writing and strong communication, a really powerful way to [inaudible]. It was a really important place for me [inaudible] high school. It's changed a lot and become – it hasn't progressed and grown the way I have, but it's still a place that's close to my heart.

JR: So, let's take a step back. I would like to hear a little about your family.

MY: Sure. My father is an Orthodox rabbi, and he was the rabbi at the synagogue in Fair Lawn, Congregation Ahavat Achim. That was until I was six, and then we moved to Teaneck. My parents divorced when I was fourteen, mainly because of religious differences; my mother was not observant. She actually went to Barnard, and she went to Harvard. My father went to Yeshiva University and got his rabbinical ordination there. My mother and father actually have a very wonderfully good relationship. A lot of the bitter, horrible divorce stories never happened between my parents. And my mother lives very close to my father, and they've always maintained a very amicable and respectful relationship, which has been a blessing for me and my siblings. I'm the oldest of four and the youngest –

JR: Do you have brothers or sisters?

MY: I have two sisters and a brother. My sister, after me, is twenty-one. My brother is nineteen, and my youngest sister is fifteen.

JR: And you're –?

MY: I'm twenty-three. It's been a really amazing challenge for me, and I'm always grateful for the relationship I have with both my parents. I'm very close with both of them, and it's been a really great gift to have the complexity of a very passionate rabbi in my family, and the genes in me that want to be a rabbi definitely come largely from there. I mean, my mother is – well, I guess I'll go one generation back also. It's also really amazing to have a more critical or outside perspective and just a general humanist perspective of things and to be close to both of those views/outlooks. On my mother's side of the family – so my grandfather and my grandmother were prominent community leaders in Englewood. I come from a family with a lot of communal leadership and a lot of teachers and education and chesed [loving kindness].

JR: How did your family practice as you were growing up? Were you raised really within the Orthodox community, or because your mom wasn't observant, were there sort of different traditions that you had at home?

MY: So, I was raised entirely in the observant community. My mother was very committed, even after she moved out and even after she announced her non-commitment to observance. I always like to say, though, that she's very observant in a lot of the ways that humans interact, being [inaudible] in that way. I really feel like – I don't feel right saying, "She's not observant." She doesn't observe Shabbat, and she doesn't observe kashrut, and she doesn't identify with Orthodox or Conservative. She doesn't affiliate with a synagogue, but she's a very pious person, I would say. She still actually gave her alimony for us to continue yeshiva. She was very committed to that. She wasn't really pushing her own lifestyle on us. That's something that I took for granted for a while, but realize how extraordinary that is. That she didn't want to sabotage our relationship to our religion.

JR: How did you experience being a girl in the community where you grew up? Can you a little bit about being in your high school? I'm also wondering, in your family and having a brother and having sisters, how that dynamic played out, both in terms of your Jewish identity and in terms of how you saw the world.

MY: Right. I'll just say that I actually grew up for a large part of – well, it's evolved in different parts, but even from a very young [age], I always wanted to be a boy. From as early as I can remember, the age of three, I hated wearing skirts. I hated certain boys because I was jealous. So, very Freudian. I had a very visceral discomfort being a girl for a lot of my life. But I got past that as I went through puberty, or [inaudible]. As I became a woman, I became more in touch [with] and more embracing of that part of myself. But in the community, it felt – I mean, it's interesting. I'm not sure how I would describe it at large. I think it was probably different for me at different times. I always

hate clothes. I don't do the typical female things. I don't go to bathrooms in large groups.

JR: [laughter].

MY: And I don't buy makeup, right? I'm very utilitarian about clothing. So, in that sense, I never felt like I fully fit in [as] feminine. And I mean [in] other ways – it was definitely cool when I was in high school to go to shul and to be part of the male world. As long as I'm sitting in the women's section, that was fine. Well, I guess I don't know what the feminist transformation point exactly was. It was really, I think, in me. My whole life was certainly filled with fascination with maleness. I was never jealous of my brothers. My brother and I never – I have never really fully expressed this, honestly, fully, to my father or my brother. I know that I did a self-portrait. I did a bunch of art classes while I was in college, and one of the self-portraits that I did was actually my face but in a boy's body, wearing a tallit and a kippah. It could look like a really pretty boy. I think that was an interesting process for myself to do that. It's definitely a part of my childhood, part of myself that was present, but not as present as it once was. It was in different phases.

JR: I think that's very true of gender, and I think it's a very complicated issue, especially living in a community where there are very sharp gender distinctions. Those kinds of boundaries are complicated and very noticeable, so it's hard not to come up against [inaudible]. What about in terms of the – not in terms of Jewish terms, but were you aware of differences between what men and women – opportunities they had, or what they were allowed to do, or feminism at all, as a movement out in the world, when you were growing up?

MY: So, I think the first I really became aware of feminism, I heard of JOFA [Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance] in high school, and I thought it was this horribly left – this horribly outside-my-world organization that I shouldn't be part of. I just remember I had – I think it was only because, actually, the girl who brought it to my attention was someone

who was less religious in high school than I was. So I thought that because she was bringing it up to me, it must be because it's not so religious. Actually, I had no idea about the organization. I didn't bother doing much research about it. I definitely did not identify with feminism at all until the very end of high school. I really was very conflicted about my Orthodoxy, even about women studying Talmud for the first two years of high school. I really was so opposed, or much – whatever apologetics I heard about women being on a higher level and all of that discussion, rhetoric was stuff that I had bought and was stuff that I used to argue with my Talmud teacher about why she shouldn't be teaching us Talmud, and we should all just be ultra-Orthodox in Israel because that's the adolescent mindset that I had of a very black-and-white world. So, feminism was certainly considered – I considered it to be secular and outside. By the time I got to the end of high school, I was realizing the value of my education writ large in high school and realizing the importance of feminism. I began to read things about Jewish women, which guided me to more apologetic discussions. It was only really when I was in my year in Israel that I studied with Tamar Ross and a few other teachers, but mainly her. Her class really helped me think about women in a very different way or be able to build upon my high school education to think about feminism with more open eyes or more understanding of its religious value.

JR: Well, is feminism something – how much did your school – I would imagine, as a girl's school, that these issues came up. But how much did your school talk about the challenges, and what was radical about some of the things that they were doing? Were those issues debated, or were they done but not talked about?

MY: It’s interesting because I maintained a very close relationship with my principal from high school, which I'm thrilled that I’ve been able to do. We’re very close. I've spent many Shabbatot at her house, which I realize is very weird, but I love it. I've actually heard a lot about the school after I graduated that she could tell me, not being in the school, and she's no longer the principal there, so there are lots of things I know about it

now, in retrospect. But, at the time, as far as I can remember, I remember that when people would ask, “Do you wear tefillin there,” I became able to argue well why women should be able to learn Gemara and why women should be able to be active in tefillah and things like that. And I was aware of the fact that we were considered a progressive school, but larger feminist issues were not really discussed. I mean, there were a lot of things that the school did that I didn't question because I was in school. But things like, we had great workshops about body image. And we had great things about – I think we had something about eating disorders. A lot of things that were really important for high school girls, that are really progressive, actually. I don't know in terms of the larger community, but in most girls' schools in the Orthodox community, those things don't take place. Certainly, still sex education is bad in all of the schools. I think when I left Ma'ayanot, and I went to Israel, and I sort of realized myself in comparison to a lot of other girls that came from all different schools, I realized, "Wow. What an amazing education I got, and what a forward-thinking institution I was part of." And, you know, I really only realized it as I saw it in contrast to others.

JR: Mm-hmm. It's hard, it's very hard in the midst of something, which is what you know. Let's transition a little bit to some of the particular experiences you want to share. So, do you want to start by talking about the art exhibit? Was that kind a particular turning point moment for you?

MY: Maybe I'll begin actually with mezumenet because that's something that I actually learned – because I feel like I should be somehow chronological.

JR: Sure. No, I totally understand. I wasn't sure if this because it was in the context of transformation, was sort of a starting point that led you to some of your tefillah activism, or whether this was kind of the first...

MY: Right, so I definitely think the seeds of my passion as a Jewish woman and my interest in ritual and organizing definitely, I feel like I got that foundation in high school,

for sure. I don't think I could have even thought about leading tefillot in other places if I didn't know how to do that from that safe space in high school, where it was just chazanit [female cantor]. You know? I'm not sure I've moved so far from a just chazanit kind of position, either. But certainly the confidence and all that stuff I gained in high school. Um, but I'll talk about mezumenet, the invitation before grace after meals, because I actually know it's the first – something I learned how to do the first day of Talmud class at Ma'ayanot, was [inaudible], in the tractate of Berachot, when learning about the fact that women actually can and should, when they're eating together, should have that invitation, should say, "Chaverotai," should say, "G'virotai," [same as chaverotai but grammatically female] or, you know, whatever that is. And we learned – and it's still true that – we learned that men and women shouldn't do it together, but it was still a very – and that was something we were able to see, in the sources, like this is a vow. Tosafot says, "We don't get why women don't do it." And so it was sort of that reading that gave me the confidence to be able to then go back to my father, go back to other places and say, "You know, Tosafot says [we should say mezumenet, so] we should do it." And it took years of constant discussion, every single Shabbat before – I don't think I jumped to it right away. I was trying to think back to when was the first time that we did it. That was a very hands-on, regular way in which what I was learning in school was having, was going to have an effect on what we did in our family. And my grandmother, to the day – she just passed away in September – but right even until the last moments that she was having meals with us, she was still always asking, "Really, such a feminist? What do you gain from this?" Like, it was a scene, we never really stopped, but she'd say, "Okay." You know? Like it was never really something that she, I don't think it was ever something she really appreciated, or she really ever understood. But I started off by doing it as, like, "No, this is a halakhah." Like, I didn't start off by saying, "This is feminism." I was able – I kind of kept this illusion of separateness through high school. But now it's like a regular part of our family, it's a very accepted part of the meal. I'm still the only one in my family – I have my sisters who, you know, we only get to do it, get to lead it. But my father, after he spent

the time to look into the sources himself, he even agrees that it's the preferred thing to do. And especially since my brother's not there. I mean, it's still kind of frustrating when some of these random guests come, so then it's the men who, who sort of take over there. So it's like, I realize that the system that we're working with is still hugely patriarchal, but it still kind of cosmetically certainly feels like a very important step in our family process. And so yeah, now my father reminds us, "Are we gonna do it?" It's a very exciting evolution to feel in my family, even though I still – it doesn't solve all my larger issues with Judaism and feminism, but I feel very good about how the family – I mean, it would be great if one of my sisters – I always ask my sisters, even though I kind of know that they're probably going to say no. But, it's nice that through my family as well, through different discussions, I've been able to impart within these ideals my ways of reading Judaism through this lens. Or reading feminism through Judaism's lens. You know, I really feel like we've built strong, strong relationships through that, so...

JR: And how do your sisters – like, what's their take on your readings on both these issues in terms of feminism? Or, your family in general, I guess. Not just your sisters.

MY: Right, right. Well, it's interesting, like there was a couple of years when I said like, "Okay, feminism is just off limits." The discussion was too heated, too passionate, too like... I actually asked my father, I asked my mom – we just can't talk about this anymore, it's too raw, and we won't get anywhere. So there were a couple of years where we didn't talk about it. And finally, I'm not sure exactly what made me change or what exactly shifted that we decided that we could talk about it again. Because really, I think my sisters see me as like, "This is all I ever talk about, it's all I ever care about. I'm like this one issue person, and I can't talk about anything else, I have no other life," and whatever. They also passionately distinguish, "I am not a feminist." But, over the years, you know, as we continue to talk about different things, what's amazing – which is frustrating but also amazing at the same time, is we still have conversations about the height of the mechitza [physical divider between the men's and women's sections] in the synagogue.

And I stopped, I largely stopped going to the Orthodox shul that my father goes to because I just don't – like, what's the balance of anger and fulfillment? [laughs] But I still, I guess, care about it in some way. So, my sisters also find themselves speaking the voice of a feminist, and I'm like, "Oh, yeah, right, you aren't a feminist." And they're like, "No, what are [you] talking about?" And they become self-conscious and embarrassed about the fact that they too, also – I mean each in her own way, but they too also really want to change the status quo of the way things are. They'll say, "Well, actually, I'm really glad we don't have to, like, get up and go to daven." They go, "I'm glad I'm not obligated in mitzvot. I'm glad that I'm not..." Like, they'll say all of those things. But then when we're actually having a discussion about it, they'll have these passionate thoughts, and we'll have these like flying arguments. I think one difficulty that they have, apart from feminism in general, is like, when the conversation reaches a certain passion level, even if it's not like anger or bitter, but it's just very heated, then it's too much. So there's that kind of dynamic as well. But I feel like, even in conversations, surprisingly, even about things like mikvah [ritual bath], or things that I found out about later – one time, when I was away for a Shabbat, my sisters had a conversation with my father about mikvah, and discussions about sexuality, and like all of these really fascinating things. And I was like, "Well, I'm glad I wasn't there for that weekend so that they could like – I didn't crowd the space."

JR: Right. So they'd have a chance to...

MY: Right, so they could just steer – and I think it's a very interesting, gradual process; it still sometimes feels really frustrating to talk about mechitzas when it just seems like there are so many other things to talk about. But obviously, that's the physical barrier they face, so...

JR: Right.

MY: And there're all kinds of other things.

JR: But it's also interesting because it seems like part of what you're describing is the ways that ideas kind of get out there and have an impact on people who might not realize it, sometimes. And how important it is to have those conversations over and over again because you make slow progress, and then, even if the actual height of the mechitza doesn't change, that, you know...

MY: Right.

JR: There's the measurable – there are different kinds of measurable –

MY: Right. And my father is a very prominent person in the community, and people really respect him. All the men. Because he's male, because he shows up, and he's a very active and respected member. And so he hears these conversations, he's affected by them, he brings them to the rabbi and brings them to the, like... So as little and silly as it may seem to me – and it does seem silly to me – so, great, when the rabbi speaks, now they take off the mechitzas. And that's great, so women are people for the sermon, you know? [laughs]. For me, it still feels like it's so slow, but perhaps there is something gratifying and encouraging. And I go back and forth between feeling like, where should my energies be spent, you know? I think what Katya Azoulay, the lady who spoke earlier, said tonight about preaching to the converted vis-a-vis is not really worthwhile. And so, I feel like it's really the more traditional circles, the places where the caution is greatest, or where the problems are most difficult, where the battles I feel have been won for me, haven't been won for them. So, it's still a process for me deciding where I want to put my energies and how and where I want to organize.

JR: Right. And it will probably change in different times.

MY: Yeah.

JR: So do you want to talk a little bit also about some of the other pieces of tefillah stuff or JOFA stuff? Or do you want to talk about the art exhibit? Because I'd like to hear

about that too.

MY: Sure.

JR: But we can get there.

MY: So I guess, in terms of the art stuff: throughout college, I took a lot of different art classes, and I had the chance to go, both through poetry and with painting, really find my voice. So I did a few different – my last, I guess it was two years ago already, I did a couple of paintings on... One was a mechitza painting, actually, that had a physical lattice in front of the synagogue painting. And another was a self-portrait of actually me wearing a tallit and tefillin, but with a mask. Because that's how I feel. Like, that's how I – I did take the mitzvah of tallit and tzitzit on for a while. I stopped for a lot of different reasons, which I'm really sad about. It was a long process, which I'll maybe say a little bit about after. So I painted myself with that. And that's what I painted, the tefillin part. All those paintings were displayed at the Barnard/Columbia Hillel art show.

JR: And did people respond?

MY: It was really fascinating being part of that exhibit. I placed the mechitza picture right at the entrance of the women's section of the Orthodox minyan, which I regularly attended while I was here. And just hearing people's reactions to it – I wanted to put a tape recorder behind the painting so I could hear what people were really saying. You hear people say what people said, and I would even share with some other friends. I think my father finally, and my grandma – I brought my father to the show, and I think he finally understood a perspective that he never saw before. Immediately, it puts the viewer behind the mechitza, behind those hideous mechitzas that make my eyes spin and my head hurt. Those kinds of things.

JR: What were some of the things that people said?

MY: So, some of the things included, like, "Did she need to be controversial?" Or, you know, "I get it." What was, I think, the most exciting response was some of the people who sort of understood my perspective already, they got it more completely. But I think the most exciting thing to hear back was the really frum girls, the really frum students; the women, mainly, is what I really cared about because the women understood it right away because they're behind mechitzas, they got my – these huge stories about… "I get it," and, "Oh." Or just some way of really speaking to the community who was seeing it, was very exciting to have this kind of exhibit right outside of prayer space.

JR: Yeah, it sounds amazing.

MY: The whole idea of the mask was, if I had a mask over my face when I painted myself, was like that – I really felt like I could not, I didn't daven with the tallit in public, and I was advised that by Rabbi Avraham not to do it, and I'm very grateful that I didn't do it, because... But, at the same time, I felt like I had to mask myself for those, to be completely anonymous in my identity. And so I was glad to know that only my very close friends could recognize me in it. But, most people, I don't think, did, but the sort of, "Does she mean to be controversial?" Or people really thinking about the images. I think was very exciting to me, and I guess that was a moment of transformation, it was a first of really feeling like I put my heart out there. Where I felt very scared and vulnerable. I had no idea what would happen because, in previous years, people turned down nude paintings because they were offended by them. When you display in a religious community, it's scary. So, I guess I felt a sense of leadership. I always wonder in what sense I'm a leader and in what sense I'm afraid to be a leader, or maybe just what leaders are. But I felt like it was a way in which I was able to express, in a reasonable venue, in a non-confrontational way, but a very confrontational way, a non-verbal way to speak only with the community, in the context of that community, and be completely

honest. I just feel like I don't recall any other situation, any fusion of all those different benefits and contexts. I wonder, other than art, what other ways there are to do that? So, there's a lot more to say on that, but I'll pause there about that piece. This part about the tallit and the tzitzit is still very, very painful to me because I really want to continue to do the mitzvot, but I couldn't – like the tzitzit that I had weren't working with my body. I still really want to do it, but I haven't been able to make it work, in the discomfort of not feeling like I can wear them out, and not really feeling like – because I don't want to be known as the person who wears… even though I maybe do want to be known as that person. I'm not embarrassed about it, and that's the problem that I have, is that I hate hiding, I hate it. I just like to be open about who I am; I have a strong sense of self, [and] I'm grateful for that. I have no reason to hide. And I can't – I found the conflict and the torment of needing to do something behind closed doors so painful. I'm sad that my decision was to stop doing it instead of to decide to go public about it. So, it's not over. Tallit is not over, I want to still do it, and I want to do tefillin, and I want to really embrace the tangible and the active parts of my tradition. But for now, they're sort of dormant desires.

JR: Because you feel like they cause a lot of tumult in your community? I mean, in terms of the public aspect? I just want to make sure I understand.

MY: Yeah, I know some women, some really amazing women, who are comfortable bringing their practice to minyan. And I guess I never was discouraged from doing it from the beginning. [But] I found the stress of needing to make – wanting to show, to continue to be committed to it, but having to make that extra time to do it on my own. Which, I wanted to do, on my own, but the reason why I was doing it on my own is 'cause I couldn't combine my public involvement with my personal commitment, and I just didn't like to do the split like that. I was afraid of what people would think. And I didn't want to

have confrontations about it all the time, didn't want to become the martyr of that, for this one single issue. Sadly enough, within Orthodoxy, it's true that the woman who wears the kippah [and] the woman who wears the tefillin and tallit are known as that. I just didn't want to be seen narrowly. So I did allow public opinion to shape my practice, and I'm not proud of that. I just don't know if I like to cultivate my private space in the way that I don't feel regretful about it.

JR: And I think there's also the kind of issue – and I don't mean to be putting words in your mouth at all, but one of the things that you were saying also reminds me that when you become a symbol in that way, it also, like, if you're talking about your spiritual life...

MY: Right.

JR: You don't necessarily want your spiritual life to be defined only by that piece of the experience.

MY: Yeah, it's true. But in contrast, or an interesting complement, is that I blew shofar in college, for the Orthodox community, for the month of Elul, for four years.

JR: Wow.

MY: And not that it was every day, depending whether it was me or someone else. But that was an amazing experience because it's something I love doing, it's something that demands my presence as an act of [inaudible] in the Orthodox context. It's something I was actually respected by the women, and I think that meant I never got any flack for it. That was very exciting, because it was really unusual, and also appreciated. And I didn't realize how much it was appreciated until, on Yom Ha'atzmaut, some really bad shofar blower, some bad guy, blew shofar, and then this really, really frum woman came over to me afterwards and was like, "Why didn't you do it?"

JR: [laughs].

MY: And that was so exciting because I somehow always felt uncomfortable. Every single time, before I did it, I felt so nervous, but being able to – so these little changes seem so inconsequential, at times. But, they really also were important moments for me, and I think also they helped me feel excited about the fact that women were seeing a model of something else, something that they could see, and not be threatened by. It's a fairly tenuous balance. I hate that kind of dance of, well how much am I in, and how much am I out? Like, how am I speaking the language of the community? And sometimes, I just want to not deal with that question anymore. But, I guess, whatever leadership role I have, or education role, or anything that I do, I always have to ask those questions about, "Will I be respected as a member of the audience or as someone that you heavily contest?"

JR: Who taught you to blow shofar?

MY: I just learned it. I just picked up on my own.

JR: I think we should probably wrap up because I don't want to keep you here, even though there's like a thousand more things I'd love to ask you and talk to you about.

MY: Sure.

JR: So, our reflection questions were some of these questions about whether you consider yourself a feminist and whether your feelings have evolved over time. I know you were intrigued by that question on what feminism means on the pre-interview questionnaire, so I don't know if there's anything you want to add about that.

MY: I don't know if this is relevant or not, but I'll always worry that I'm just gonna somehow devolve and degenerate into a complacent, suburban housewife. [laughs]. Even though I don't think will ever happen to me.

JR: It doesn't sound like it.

MY: I don't think it will ever happen to me, but I'm so just always afraid somehow. I get nervous that what lies in store for my future as my figure changes... [laughs] Silly things, but I definitely feel really excited of the fact that I think I will always classify myself as a feminist. I hope that I won't be in too many contexts where I'll have to question if I can say that or not. On the other hand, maybe those are the places that feminists need to be the most. The places where people have no awareness of it. Which is, I want to ask, "Well, what are we doing, as Jewish feminists, about the Haredi women who are being oppressed and abused? Are we just writing them off as like ultra-Orthodox rabbis who oppress us, and therefore we're not going to talk to them?" Like, we're not going to deal with the realities that the women in the community are like truly, by my standards, and by feminist standards, oppressed. How many personal sacrifices am I willing to make in order to serve the communities [where there's] still too much work that has to be done? So I don't know what the answer is.

JR: Yeah, that's a really difficult question. Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you wanted to talk about or to mention?

MY: Just something really short since I jotted down "mikvah." Which is just that I am very excited about – I just began this exploration in the past – well, I thought about it over the years, but over the past few months, I really began the exploration of actually going to the mikvah, even though it's really not done for single women in the Orthodox community. But I'm very intrigued that this is a women's mitzvah. Possibly resentful about what it's represented in the past. I'm studying the halakhot of niddah [purity laws about menstruation] now, and kedushah [holiness], which is really painful and difficult, and exciting, and challenging experience to read these texts, written by men, about women's bodies. And that mikvah is caught up in all of that, and so I'm excited about looking at this ritual and taking it seriously in the terms of the halakhah, and also in terms of a personal

relationship that is unrelated to sex, is really what I'm excited about. I hope that pretty soon I'll be able to sustain, in a different way, in a more permanent, sustaining way, than [inaudible] will inspire a sustaining mitzvah [inaudible].

JR: What does "mikvah" mean to you in that context?

MY: It feels cleansing, it feels removing. There are all these mystical ways of understanding the different tefillot, the different things, and this is very personal, but something that mikvah is supposed to do is helping remove anger. And I feel like as a woman, as a feminist, as a movement, this feminist movement, there is a lot of anger. I think anger can be good when it does good things, and it can be destructive and harmful when it does bad. But when it's not understood, or when it's not responsible. I feel that's a really good personal challenge for me to harness or channel passion in a way that's healthy and constructive and to find ways to remove my anger, not to suppress the feelings. Not to suppress the anger, but to – and I think it's something I've been struggling with for my whole life, but really especially since the conflict of feminism and Orthodoxy and mitzvot has reached such a peak, such a crash, clash in my life, that the anger is present, and I don't want it to be destructive. I think it's a really personal journey through mikvah. I haven't done any of the communal, naked women in the ocean things. which sounds really exciting, but I haven't done it yet, and I'm not sure if I will. My next step is to talk to the mikvah lady in my community to find out whether she'd be okay with my going in the winter. I can go in the ocean, in the summer, by myself, which is really simple. And I'm at the somewhat different phase now of trying to deal with it in the context of the community.

JR: I don't know if you ever come to Boston, but there's a really wonderful mikvah called "Mayyim Hayyim" that is open to anybody, well, any Jew. And it was created basically by the non-Orthodox community so that people wouldn't feel like they couldn't go to the mikvah for other reasons other than the traditional reasons. Even people who are going

for traditional reasons could go to a place that felt more comfortable, where they could...

MY: Oh, that's really nice. That's great to know.

JR: So, if you're ever in the area, you should –

MY: We need one around here.

JR: And it's also beautiful, it looks like a spa.

MY: That's great.

JR: And you can spend as much time as you want, and you can have a mikvah lady or not, and you can...

MY: That's really exciting to me, thanks for telling me. Yeah, so we'll see. I mean, I'm excited about it. We'll see how it is. I think what I'm most excited about is to make mikvah mine. Not his, not the rabbi's; mine.

JR: Well, thank you so much.

MY: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]