# Shayna Rhodes Transcript

Ronda Spinak: Can you state your name? Tell us where we are. Tell me a little bit about what you do in your rabbinate.

Shayna Rhodes: My name is Rabbi Shayna Rhodes, and we're at the Hebrew College rabbinical school, which is where I graduated from and where I work. I work next door in the beit midrash. I love it here. Can't think of anything else I want to say, so I'm going to stop.

RS: Perfect. All right. I'm going to take you back to your youth. I would like you to share with us a sacred memory that you have or a Jewish memory that you have.

SR: So I grew up Orthodox, and on Simchat Torah, we used to go to Ner Israel Yeshiva, which was about four or five blocks from my home. When I was little, I would be able to go into the men's section where all the exciting dancing and singing was happening. It was an amazing experience. I still, to this day, can hear singing and see the dancing. Then when I got older, I had to go behind the mechitza, and I've been trying to get back ever since.

RS: Did you study a lot as a youth? When you say you were trying to get back to the other side –? I guess what I'm trying to go for is what were some of the defining moments that either turned you towards Judaism to go deeper or turned you away from Judaism? Really, those experiences can do both at the same time.

SR: So, in my childhood, Judaism was everything. It wasn't a priority; it was the priority. Everything else was secondary. I went to a school called Bais Yaakov School for Girls, which was an Ultra-Orthodox girls' school. I went from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Studying was just about all I did. When I wasn't studying, I was reading. Then

you asked about what turned me off. I would say that at Bais Yaakov, we were not encouraged to ask questions and that frustrated me. I wanted to ask why things were the way they were and why we felt a certain way about characters in Tanakh, and they didn't want to hear my questions. I spent a lot of time in the principal's office. Then from Bais Yaakov, I went to Barnard College and became a feminist pretty much overnight in everything but religion. That took about twenty years to catch up. So I sat behind the mechitza for a long time after I started college. It took a long time before I even thought about becoming a rabbi. That was just not in my world.

RS: Was there a moment where you left Ultra-Orthodoxy? You said you became a feminist, but it took another twenty years before you came out from the mechitza. So had you always –? I mean, were you sitting there, and then one day, you said I'm going to be a rabbi, and I'm making a change? How did that transition happen? Maybe give us the story around that.

SR: The transition from Orthodox to my becoming a rabbi was a very slow one. It didn't really occur to me at all. But I was always pushing [for] women's rights. I have five children. I have two boys, and then I have three girls. So at my first son's bar mitzvah, I asked the rabbi of the Orthodox shul that I attended if I could give a d'var Torah. Women didn't often do that, and he said I could. After I gave the d'var Torah, someone came up to me and said, "You should be a rabbi." That was the first time the thought was ever mentioned. I was about forty years old then, and I thought it was a joke. It just didn't make sense to me. My world didn't incorporate that. I couldn't wrap my head around that I should become a rabbi. Then, my second son was bar mitzvahed, and of course, if you do something for one son, you have to do it for the next son. So I had to give a d'var Torah again. And someone else said, "You should become a rabbi." I thought, "Oh, that's the second time someone's said that to me." Then I have three girls, and you would think I might have foreseen this, but they were not allowed to do anything at the Orthodox shul we were attending. They couldn't read the Torah, or the haftorah, or have

an aliyah. My husband could do all that for them, and that was not acceptable. So I think it was having my oldest daughter's bat mitzvah that made me really begin to think about religion and feminism and where I was. And then, by the time my second daughter's bat mitzvah came along, we were members of the Newton Centre Minyan, which is an egalitarian minyan. When someone said, "You should become a rabbi," after my d'var Torah, I said, "Oh, I really could do that." Then they opened a rabbinical school a mile from my house. I walked in the first day of school, and the room had seven people putting on tallis and tefillin. I assumed that was the men's section, so I walked out. Then I said, "Wait a minute, there isn't a men's section." And I never left. I knew as soon as I arrived here that this was my stop. I was getting out here. I wanted to learn and teach Torah. It's what I wanted to do. I think my classmates valued very much their time here, but they were going to move on to other situations, and I wasn't. I come to work every day, thanking God.

RS: Beautiful. Obviously, your husband was Orthodox.

SR: No.

RS: He wasn't Orthodox?

SR: I intermarried. I married a Conservative Jew.

RS: Okay. So, let's [go] back. He went along with the Orthodox. Go back and tell us a little about that.

SR: I met Johnathan at Israeli dancing at Columbia-Barnard, and we went out for about a year or so. I brought him home, and my parents were very upset because he's not Orthodox. He doesn't know how to learn Gemara, which to them, is the only learning that there is. They like him very much as a person. They took a while to come around, but they did. I think the five kids helped. He is very – what's the word I'm looking for? – good-natured. He was so supportive of me applying, and my daughters particularly. My

sons had already left home when I applied. My daughters were my biggest cheering section when I was writing my applications, and I think there was no one dancing more happily at my *semikhah* than my husband. He was so thrilled for me. So, he's been great.

RS: Great. Did you consider – [Recording paused] – seminaries?

SR: Well, not seriously because I really wasn't looking for the rabbinate. It was just amazing that this institution was a mile from where I lived. I did briefly look at JTS [Jewish Theological Seminary] just to see what their website looked like and what their application process [was]. The first thing I noticed was it said that everyone had to wear tefillin, and I said, "Well, I can't do that." It took me a few years to be able to wear tefillin. At that point, the idea of me wearing tefillin was just totally a non-starter. So I don't think, practically speaking, I would've been able to commute to New York with the kids. We weren't moving to New York, so it wasn't really – but it was really wonderful that this particular rabbinical school is trans-denominational since I don't really fit into any particular box nicely.

RS: Can you share your experience, the first time you put on tefillin, and what made you decide to finally do it? You didn't have to do it.

SR: I didn't. Well, I was a third-year intern at a synagogue in Boston, and the head of Hebrew school said, "Well, of course, you'll help the seventh graders learn to put on tefillin." I said, "Sure." Then I went over to my teacher Rabbi Ebn Leader, and I said, "Ebn, I have to learn how to put on tefillin. I am not taking on the mitzvah. This is just for education purposes," and that lasted for one day. That day, really, I felt – more than anything else, I felt a civil war, half of me saying, "What are you doing?" And the other half said, "What took you so long?" After that, there was no more question.

RS: Do you put on tefillin every day now? Maybe you can share with us that.

SR: It's just part of what I do now. It was easier to adapt to a tallit. I started rabbinical school without one. I ordered one, and I just really liked the idea of wrapping yourself in a garment that takes you to a certain place spiritually, mentally. Tefillin did feel strange, and I do still feel that they are masculine. So I try to impose something of the feminine on them. I don't wear them [on] Rosh Chodesh because you don't wear tefillin on holidays, and Rosh Chodesh is a women's holiday. But I still have this little voice in me that says that this is a masculine thing I'm doing and I shouldn't be doing it. It still pops up once in a while.

RS: Interesting …

Unknown: What was your parent's reaction when you said you were going to become a rabbi?

SR: My parents? When I wanted to become a rabbi, my father was really – my parents had me when … When I decided to become a rabbi, my father was not really – well, my father had passed away. Boy, this is really confusing me. When I decided to become a rabbi, my father had already passed away. My mother – I don't think she was that surprised at that point. I had been taking aliyot in the minyan. I had asked her to; she never did. I asked her to say the Motzi at one of my daughter's bat mitzvahs, and she agreed. But she understood it as she's saying a Motzi just for herself. But she didn't really protest. I think she was not that surprised. In her own day, she was something of a feminist. She went to college, which was very unusual – she was very poor and very orthodox. It was an unusual combination in the '30s for women to go to college. She also refused to cover her hair. So she, I think, understood and sympathized a little bit with where I was coming from, not that she would ever say it, but I could sense it.

RS: Nice. Very nice. Good question. Thank you. Obviously, you had a previous life. You were ordained in '08. What were you doing? I know you have five kids. Maybe you were being a full-time mom. Did you have a career before? You went to Barnard. Did

you have a career?

SR: Yes, after Barnard –

RS: This is your second career. Talk about this being your second career. What did you do in your first?

SR: At Barnard, I received a degree in history, and then I moved to Boston. My husband was going to a medical school in Boston. I became a computer programmer, and I subsequently got a master's degree in computer programming, which I felt more [that] it was a job that I did. It was interesting. Didn't really grab me, but it was something I could do, and it was interesting and fun. Then I began to have children, and I stayed home with the kids a lot. I really, really enjoyed raising my five kids. It was just so much fun. They were amazing. Off and on, I would teach computer languages at colleges or do some part-time work. When the youngest was in third grade, I went back full-time for a few years, but my training was so outdated that I really had to either completely retrain for modern computer use or do something I actually liked. Then when this came around, there was no comparison.

RS: Can you share with us a pivotal moment in your life and how Judaism helped you get through it? It could be a crisis moment or a difficult moment.

SR: I would say that moment would be the moment that I heard that my father had passed away, and somehow the world just froze. I didn't know what to do. All of the Jewish laws on mourning were so incredibly helpful. The fact that before the funeral it's okay to be in a sort of state of needing to be helped with everything and not being expected to perform mitzvot, and then having this transitionary time when your family visits and expresses condolence. It really helped me through that. So I'd say that would be one of the times that Judaism helped me through something that was very difficult.

RS: What's your understanding of God?

SR: So my understanding of God is rather complex. I have come to terms with the fact that I'm never going to completely be free of the God of my childhood. It's with me. I carry God with me. I converse with God. My rational mind might say that that's not reasonable, but it's not going anywhere. When I came to rabbinical school, I believed that the five books were given by God to Moshe. I had heard about different theories but paid them no attention. Then teachers that I really loved and respected showed me how all the scenes in the Torah, how it was pieced together, how there are double stories, how there are things that just don't match up, out-of-date language, out-of-date concepts. That was really difficult. There were a few of us that first year that found it very difficult because once you're shown that, you can't unsee it. So then you have to find a way to make meaning out of the Torah if it wasn't given by God. If it was just something that humans came up with, divinely inspired or in their finest creative moments. That's what I've been working on. Trying to not give up the God of my childhood but to incorporate with that a more complex understanding, and I think it's going to be a lifetime project.

RS: Good. Can you share with us a holy moment in your life?

SR: There are several. I'm trying to think [of] which holy moment. So I would have to say, at some point in the first year of rabbinical school, I realized that the study of Talmud was a very special thing to do, that God's presence was in the room, that being part of conversations that had happened two thousand years ago and were ongoing had a holiness to them. And since then, I found a lot of holiness in studying. (Rev Cooke?) says that holiness is, wherever the holiness is, it's Yezi'at Mizrayim. The exodus from Egypt is a source of holiness. I view studying as a way of coming out from the narrow places and finding holiness there.

RS: Nice. Do you have a favorite piece of text, a passage in the Torah, or a sacred text?

SR: There's a piece in Brachot that I love. Well, there are several, so I'm trying to limit it to one. The one that I actually bothered to have printed and paper cut and put on the wall at my home is the one that thanks God for making my place in the beit midrash, which is right from Brachot, which is the way I feel. The fact that I work in a beit midrash is something that so easily could've passed me by. I had to be born at the right time and the right place. Everything had to fall in line for me to be able to do that, and I am so happy in the beit midrash. My uncle is a rosh yeshiva, and he used to say that the air was different in the beit midrash. I never understood that until I started working in one. It's just an amazing place to be.

RS: What do you do in the beit midrash?

SR: [laughter] The beit midrash is where I feel the real learning in the school takes place, and I'm a classroom teacher, too, so I do teach in the classroom, but the real learning takes place in chavruta, in partnership study, in the beit midrash. My function, besides directing it, which means just making sure that it runs properly, is actually working there and going among the different chavruta pairs and facilitating their learning. When women come back to the workplace, they ask them what you can do, and they say they have no skills. Of course, that's always false; they have loads of skills. For about twenty years, I'm working with my children in the dining room, helping them with their homework, never giving them the answer but leading them to find the answer on their own. That's what I do in the beit midrash. I help people. I enable them to learn on their own. My goal is that I should become totally unnecessary. So I try never to give them information. I try to give them ways to get information. I point them in the direction of which books they need, and if they're stuck, give them a little nudge in the right direction. Sometimes, sit down and just talk about the concepts that they're studying [and] what the impact is on their lives. As a co-director of beit midrash, students come to me with all their problems in any form or other, and I talk with them [and] help them. That's what I do.

RS:  You're the mom.

SR: [laughter] In a way.  In a way.

RS:  You're the rabbi mom.

SR:  I'm the rabbi mom.

RS:  A had a really nice question, which I can't read.  Explain how to discover voice in the text.  Are there voices in the text?  I think I read somewhere where somehow you help – gosh, darn it.

SR: Well, I try to empower women –

RS:  – to find their voices in the text.

SR: – to find their voices in the text.

RS:  Yeah, that's what it is.  It doesn't say "woman," though.  It says [inaudible].  So that's what it is.  [inaudible]

SR: I do try to empower everyone.  But I am particularly interested in women studying Talmud.  In my family still, women are not allowed to study Talmud, or Mishna, or Gemara.  I feel it's really important that women rabbis be successful in lots of areas, but particularly in Talmud.  When I started rabbinical school, I didn't think I'd be asked to sing in public; that is not why I came to rabbinical school.  Since then, I have had to sing in public many times.  Being a Talmud scholar is something that – the world needs more women in that department.  I think the whole Talmud has a very male voice, and if women had been part of it, it would be very different.  But since it's a continuing conversation, it's not too late.  So I would like to empower women's voices to be heard.  It's one of my goals.

RS: Do you write any commentary, new commentary?

SR: I haven't written. I write divrei Torah when I'm asked to. Everyone yells at me to write more. I've heard I should be writing. I find so much of my time is taken up studying and teaching others. I don't really have a lot of time to write.

RS: Do you think that will happen someday?

SR: Probably not.

RS: Okay. Interesting.

SR: I started studying Talmud so late that – I mean, the rabbis of my childhood, I will probably not approach their ability. I've come to terms with that, but I still am trying to get there, so I want to spend my time studying more than writing.

RS: Good. This question feels irrelevant after getting to know you, but I'm going to ask anyway because there might be an answer there. I sense that you've gotten so much from this experience [inaudible], and you've grown so much, and you've taken on so many things, but I'm wondering have you given up anything to become a rabbi?

SR: The one thing I think I may have given up by becoming a rabbi is – I don't know if the word is privacy. There's a feeling that I … The one thing I think I've given up by becoming a rabbi is privacy. I feel that people look to me to be Jewish for them and look at how I do things and are interested in – I mean, the only way I could say it is it's a loss of privacy. What I do seems to be representational in ways that I hadn't expected.

RS: What advice would you give a woman as she starts out on this journey in rabbinical school? Is there any advice that you would give?

SR: I would advise a rabbinical student to take it one day at a time, don't close any doors – you never know where a door will lead to – to be flexible. I've seen many students

come into rabbinical school one way and leave completely different, and that's fine. That's one reason why I love this school. We encourage people to find their own place rather than have a place ready-made for them. Be prepared to change. People asked me before I started rabbinical school, "Will you change?" I said, "I'm forty-seven. I want to learn, but I'm not going to change," and I changed so much. So be prepared for that and the problems that may cause in relationships that you have. It's not always easy when one partner changes a great deal.

RS: Could you – [Recording paused.] – the biggest change that happened to you personally?

SR: [laughter] The biggest change that's happened to me is my – I'd say my tolerance level for different expressions of Judaism. When I started, I had a picture of what Judaism was, and nothing else fit. I didn't really give a lot of credibility to other expressions of Judaism, and I've completely changed. For prayer, I wanted it to be just the way I was used to in Hebrew and with most of the traditional prayers said. I found it very difficult at first to pray through other methods, contemplation, or musical instruments. And now, as part of my functions here at Hebrew College, I coordinate the daily services. Every day it's different. I come to school not knowing exactly what I'm going to get that day, and I love it. It pushes me every day. I don't know what davening I'll come into. I find it exciting and stimulating. I think that's the biggest change. I also daven much slower now. When I came in, I would just race through the way I was used to. And now, I take my time. I don't feel I have to say every word. I try to see what's going on and help support the davening leaders with what their goals are. I think that's my biggest change.

RS: Since you graduated from here and you teach here – and this is, I guess, trans-denominational, post-denominational – what do you say when people ask what denomination is the college when you're talking to people outside? And how does that

work in the world? "You mean, you're not Conservative? You're not Reform?" How does that work? What's your response to that?

SR: It's interesting. When I'm in Israel, especially, they like to put you into a box. My cousins, my family there will say, "Well, what kind of Jew are you?" I say, "I hope I'm a good one." People have a hard time with this lack of definition. I really think more and more, we are moving beyond definite denominations where you have to decide on one particular way to do things, and that's correct. I think the times are changing, and I think this is great. I personally do not fit into any box. There's no way I'm going to work anywhere. I don't have a problem with people that do, and some of the rabbinical students come in and go out as a particular denomination, and they are rabbis [inaudible] of denominations, and I think that's wonderful. But I don't see the need for it, and I think it's very freeing to go beyond.

RS: So, a practical question because I just don't know. We've interviewed at the CCAR [Central Conference of American Rabbis], the RRA [Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association], WRN [Women's Rabbinic Network]. We've interviewed at the conventions of the biggest denominations. It provides a collegiality, a sense of connectedness. They help each other. What is there for folks who graduate not in those denominations? Because it can be a very lonely profession. So what is the college doing? Is there some connectedness in the post-denominational world that's happening? Is it happening as we said it should be happening? Should it not be happening?

SR: Well, I can't speak for the entire post-denominational world, but for our little niche, for Hebrew College, we do have some bylaws. One of our graduates was a lawyer who put together a document. I think the most connected we are is through our listserv. That includes faculty, students, alum. People ask questions on it all the time, and then we all just answer, and it's archived. So there is that support. We meet at the *semikhah* ceremony in June. The next day is always alumni day. This year, we had a seminar in

January in honor of Art Green on mysticism, and a lot of the alumni came. This is our tenth anniversary, so we're having a big gala on May 7th. Hopefully, all the alumni will come, but some of them live rather far. So we know we're there for each other. But I do think sometimes it would be nice to have a lovely cushion of a denomination to support you. We don't have that, but I wouldn't change anything.

RS: Maybe you don't know this. What percentage of graduates actually take pulpits? I'll ask Sharon that later.

SR: She might know that.

RS: She might know that.

SR: I'm guessing fifty, but that's just a guess.

RS: I think I'll ask you three more questions. The first is, do you have a goal for your rabbinate or mission for your rabbinate?

SR: I have been working on my mission recently. As an older student, I realized I don't have infinite time left. What is it that I want to accomplish? I haven't solidified that yet, but I love teaching Torah, and I love empowering women. So my goals will definitely incorporate those two. I want to show that there's a different kind of rabbi out there. My niece is Ultra-Orthodox; she lives in Brooklyn, and she does not think much of me as a rabbi. I've realized that there is no way I can be a rabbi to her in the way that she's used to rabbis being. I simply don't have the years of training, nor do I think that's the point. I think the world needs a new kind of rabbi than the ones we've had in the past. I'm working on exactly what that means, but I think in this country, in particular, it involves bringing people closer to Judaism, making Judaism alive for people. It's really an easy sell. The Torah is so wonderful that just contact with people who've never experienced it before – they are so grateful and happy. So I want to spread Torah. I'd just like to leave the impression that women can be Talmud scholars and caring rabbis all at the same

time.  I'd like to bring the rabbinate out of the study hall and out into the world, do some changes fully based on the learning acquired in the study hall.

RS:  I want to go back to something.  You said that you spent a lot of time in the principal's office because you wanted to ask questions.  I guess my question is, when was the first time that you were able to ask a question, and was that a moving experience?  Do you remember when you first were able to study Torah and be able to ask?  Weren't boys learning to ask questions and girls were learning to –?

SR:  I was in a girls' school.  I don't know.  I'm blanking on her name.  Oh, shoot.  A teacher at Maimonides, who was then the head of Ramah – I can't remember her name. I took a Tanakh class in Brookline when I was living in Newton, and the teacher there studied Tanakh in a way I'd never seen before.  Not so much critically as far as academically – what dates [and] when, but her analysis of the character.  For the first time, she did not study them as perfect people whose every action was appropriate.  We were doing Shmuel Aleph, and she had a lot of critique on King David, and it made so much sense to me.  It was so freeing to be able to just sit back and think, "Well, was he right to do this?  Was he wrong to do this?"  Because in the Gemara, it says, "Whoever thinks that David sinned has made a mistake." That's the way I was raised.  It was really a great experience.  She was a phenomenal teacher.

RS:  I read somewhere that your big thing is to combine tradition and feminism.  I guess the question is how – I mean, you did speak a little bit about finding women's voice in Talmud – or not in Talmud so much, but finding women's voices and bridging the gap in the way Talmud is written.  Can you tell us a story around how you might have done that?  Combined the two?

SR:  Can you just repeat combining –?

RS: Tradition and feminism.  I read that that was important to you.  I mean, that's old.

SR: Well, there was a point in college when I thought maybe I should just leave religion altogether, that what I had been used to was so anti-feminism. I won't say misogynist because I didn't really see that much of an expression of misogyny but certainly not feminist. I thought about it. I didn't really see as viable, a midway, a midpoint. There was only one way to do religion, and that was the way I was used to, so I thought about giving up religion altogether, and then I rethought it and said, "Why should I leave religion to the Orthodox? Why should they have sole jurisdiction over it? There must be a way to combine tradition with feminism." I still didn't think I felt comfortable with any of the other denominations. So I decided to just make my own way, and that's basically what I've done. I think it must be hard for women who – I was talking about this just this morning – for women who are in very empowered positions at work and then go home and sit behind the mechitza and don't count for a minyan. In fact, a woman was telling me that there's a law firm in New York where the men have a minyan. She asked, "Are there any women in the minyan?" He said, "No." He realized, "Oh, I guess it's Orthodox." So these women are equal except for that. I think our traditions are amazing. I think Judaism has given so many gifts to the world. My uncle and aunt who are – my uncle was Rosh yeshiva in Israel. When I visited him, his world was so beautiful that I think in my moments of leaving, that's what I thought about and said, "I just can't leave that." But I can't stay with it as it is. Sometimes, I miss the Orthodox world. The Orthodox world has a very good concept of community – very powerful – that hasn't quite made it – I don't think – as well to the rest of the Jewish world. But I can't go back to it. So it's an effort to constantly be inventing and combining and making new combinations, but I guess that's my mission now that I think about it.

RS: Last question. In June, three women were ordained in the Modern Orthodox movement. Have you ever considered going in that direction?

SR: When I first started rabbinical school, they asked me. There were three of us here. They asked, "Would you like us to find an Orthodox rabbi who will give us a program that

he wants you to study, and he'll study it with you, and then he will give you the Orthodox *semikhah*." All three of us said, "No." If you ask the women do they get counted in minyan, I know one of them will tell you no. So that's not where I'm at, but we all felt that we didn't want to be given *semikhah* by someone we didn't know. We had wonderful teachers here who were really giving us their all; they were just putting so much into it. We valued that, and just to be Orthodox in name just didn't make sense to any of us. I don't call myself Orthodox. I think it's wonderful. I'm so happy to see it, and I would like it to be more and more common. But it's not my place anymore. I don't belong there.

RS: Anything you would want to share with us that we didn't cover or a question that maybe you were hoping we would ask?

SR: I didn't really think about what you were going to ask. Maybe I should've. Like for my interview, my husband said, "They're going to ask you about God." I said, "No. Who talks about God?" In the Orthodox world, you don't talk much about God. At my interview, they did.

RS: Did I ask you –? Did I ask her understanding –?

SR: Yeah, you did.

RS: That's what I thought.

SR: [laughter] That's the way I've changed. I'm used to talking about God now. When I first came, I wasn't. I don't know.

RS: We covered a lot of ground.

SR: I think it's great what you're doing. I think it's fabulous.

RS: Thank you for giving us your time today. It's really special. It was really lovely to get to know you. You have a very interesting and wonderful and important view that you

bring into this University.

SR: I don’t think interviewing is my forte.

RS:  You did great.  Trust me.  You did absolutely fantastic.

Unknown:  It was beautiful.

RS:  It was really beautiful.  I learned a lot.

SR:  Okay.  Disconnect me!

[END OF INTERVIEW}