

Nancy Sargon Transcript

Shayna Rhodes: Hello. Sounds good, yeah. Sounds good. Okay. So here we are, December 23, [2004], at the home of Nancy Sargon. This is Shayna Rhodes, and we're here to discuss Nancy's adult bat mitzvah. We're going to start with just your general family life as a child. Were you an only child? Did you have siblings?

Nancy Sargon: I'm honored to be here. [laughter]. I'm one of three; I'm the youngest. I grew up in Brookline. I have an unusual background because my father is a Sephardic Jew who's from Bombay, and his family, tracing back, if the family tree is right, is from Turkey. But this goes back to the mid-1700s. His father, who also worked – had a job in the Sassoon Mills – was also what was called there a hazzan. They didn't have rabbis, but he was the person who would lead the services. My understanding is that he did this for the B'nai Israel, for those congregations at certain points, and then for other points with the Baghdadi Jews. So, going back, my grandfather was born in Cochin, and my grandmother was born in Baghdad. So, my father and his brothers, who came here in the 1940s, always synagogue life – the political part and the religious service part was always a part of their lives. I only began to appreciate it all the more after he passed away, which I'll come back to. So, we grew up in Brookline, Conservative Jews. My father was among the founding members at Beth Zion, but we went to KI [Kehillath Israel], and then from KI, we went on to Prozdor. So, I did that. I believe, in those days, it was five days a week, two hours a day. It was a real commitment. I don't think I really questioned it. It was just part of what we did. When I thought about what I learned there, there was the social aspect, first of all. Secondly, I'm not sure what we learned there. We did a lot of – I've learned Hebrew. We spoke Hebrew in classes, so that was a great thing. What I remember best are bizarre Israeli teachers who were struggling with managing behavioral problems. When I look in my parent's attic and see the range of

books that we studied, we covered a lot. But I don't think it really sank in for me. I did not have a bat mitzvah. It was not part of my father's tradition, and there was really no discussion about it. I didn't feel a loss for not having it.

SR: Your two siblings are?

NS: I have a sister who's six years older and a brother who's three years older than I am. My sister also went to Prozdor; my brother didn't. Does that answer you for that piece?

SR: Did your brother have a bar mitzvah?

NS: He did have a bar mitzvah. My mother grew up in – she was born in the West End, and then eventually they moved to Revere. She grew up in an observant home, I will say, one in which the boys had some education, but not the girls. For my mother, I think, she kind of lived with certain observances. I'm not sure to what extent she really owned it. She would joke – not in such a pleasant way – about being the rebbetzin in the family compared to her other sisters when she was married to my father. I think she saw it as an obligation. I don't think overtly she'd say, "Wow, this is fantastic." Of course, part of that has to do with things like having the family over for holidays, which was always – she doesn't pride herself in cooking, so that did not bring her great joy. I think having her family together around the table did bring her happiness. She would go to synagogue. She, I think at some point in her adult life, might have learned to read some Hebrew, but only marginally. She always found it a burden to be in a Conservative service because she didn't get it all, and she'd read the English, but still, it just wasn't her. She was doing it. But it really was a part of the general family life. I remember growing up and going with my father to services on Shabbat. I'm not sure if I remember – if I was there more than my sister or brother. Maybe because I was the youngest, I was there alone with him more. Also, part of growing up and involvement was KI, which then had a real flourishing kind of teenage to twenties type group that, especially during the holidays, there was a

tent and people. Danny Margolis was involved there. But it was really, I think, younger people who owned taking on the tradition and services and the prayers. So, that was an exciting thing. My sister connected with it also. Then, after leaving Brookline, I went to school at Rochester, University of Rochester, for two years and then transferred to Trinity College in Hartford. I'd say, maybe five years before, they'd started to have women there. I think it was helpful to be in the minority because I needed to sort some things out about my identity as a Jew. I think I found – this is a social aspect – I think I found it very different being at Rochester, and certainly there was a range of people. I was at Rochester, and then I went to graduate school at Columbia for social work. I saw Jews who were tied into Judaism in very different ways. Again, forgive me for generalizing, but sometimes it was only the social piece that was there without an appreciation of any other of the aspects or nothing that was overt to me. I think I needed to be in the minority to work some things out. I was also, at that point, seeing somebody named (Brian McDonald?) and trying to figure out how everything fit together with that. At Trinity, I had a double major, which was in religion and psychology. I had some exposure to other world religions, which I thoroughly appreciated. It was great. It was great.

SR: I'm interested in this Rochester to Trinity. At Trinity, there's [fewer] Jewish students, Judaic classes.

NS: I think part of it – Rochester felt like a big school. I didn't really connect with any of my professors. I didn't really feel like I belonged. Actually, I took some time off. I took off a semester before going to school, but I liked the fact that it was a smaller school. I'm not sure that I knew at that point what my major was going to be. I knew somehow psychology was going to be in there. Then, when I saw the range of programs that were available, I thought, "Ah, I've had this exposure to Judaism through my stuff at Hebrew College and Prozdor, and now I can approach it differently." When people started talking about reading from the Bible, and Christians were talking about reading from the Old Testament, I was very interested in going back to the Hebrew and looking at those

words, and my professors weren't interested in that because they had a wider group of students to deal with. So, Trinity meant more [that] I was in a smaller group. I think that's really what it did for me.

SR: Interesting.

NS: I just want to go back to something about my father.

SR: Absolutely.

NS: That he and his brother would be people who would oftentimes read from the Torah. If there was a Shiva house, they oftentimes would lead the services there. My father went to services, I think, probably every morning before – I mean, I remember him coming back from the bakery with bread for us and having breakfast with us. So, it was really a part of his ritual. I think, as I said, it wasn't really until later in my life that I came to fully appreciate it. But on some level, I think I must've felt some void when I went to these other places, and people didn't quite have the same background that I had. So that's another piece.

SR: Did you ever, when you were growing up, feel a lack of women's role in synagogue or wish things were different? When did you become aware that there was a difference?

NS: I think I was aware of it because of my uncle. I remember on Simchat Torah when we'd come up to the bimah. I'm not sure if I remember this accurately, but I think there was some sense of, "Ah, women can only be there then." But there was something about the way he was that let me know that women weren't supposed to be doing certain things. I don't think – thinking about my mother, she didn't really want to do anything more in the synagogue, so she wasn't really – I didn't really look to her as to what are we being deprived of. I don't think I came to that awareness until – fortunately, in my adult life, I was interested in taking on more responsibility, and it was open for me. So, I never felt deprived in that way. Should I skip ahead to the –?

SR: Sure. What made you feel like you wanted more responsibility? What prompted you?

NS: Well, my father passed away. Then I started to say Kaddish. The community at Temple Emanuel is very special, especially the early morning minyan, of which – my father passed away in '98 – I still feel very much connected with. So people are very good to each other, and they're very compassionate. People sit, have breakfast together, and bond that way. My friend Dan Nesson is the ritual director there. Dan grew up in Brookline, and he and my husband went either to kindergarten or nursery school or something together. So they had a long history. I knew Dan and his family actually from a synagogue in Brookline. So, I felt a connection with Dan. Also, I think on some level, I felt the connection with Charles Osborne. Oh, yeah. I forgot all about the musical piece. [laughter] I'd been singing in Zamir [Chorale of Boston] since I returned from New York in 1982. I skipped a piece, but maybe we'll come back to that. Dan very gently offered me – said, "Why don't you do this?" He gave me small responsibilities within the service. Probably, in some ways, [inaudible] the most profound to me was just standing at the Torah, which I'd never realized I'd never really stood by the scriptures. I just hadn't. I don't know why, but it just hadn't happened. At one point, I got to lift the Torah, and that was a great thing. Then Hadassah Blocker was offering a bat mitzvah class. I thought to myself, "Why not do this?" It made sense. It was just the right time in my life. You've interviewed her. So, she really has, I think, from my understanding – and I can only go by what I've heard, but she really brought Temple Emanuel along a far way. I was very interested, and we started a class. I'm probably not going to remember this accurately. It probably took about a year and a half. Does that sound about right?

SR: Yes.

NS: We learned the ta'amim. I realized within my group, because I had the musical background and the Hebrew background, that I really had a lot going in my favor in terms

of plunging into this. For the musical piece, she would turn to me oftentimes, and the other group members did too, to help them to carry the show. Although I've had leadership roles in other aspects of my life, never within the setting of a Jewish activity. Then, I decided that I wanted to read haftarah, which I did before my bat mitzvah – it was months before my bat mitzvah – and realized that I just wanted to keep on moving with this and that there was something special that happened for me when I read from the Torah, and I sang at the same time. That something, which I can't fully verbalize, came out. Because I understood the words, it took on different meaning. Whereas I've been singing in Zamira since 1982, I only over the past few years have taken on solos. Something that happens – I'm not self-conscious in the same way about my voice. Fortunately, most of the Torah portions I've read are ones in which there's a real story to narrate rather than a list of names so that I feel like I'm a storyteller. Then, from there, I proceeded to learn the melodies to sing – the other special melodies for the other holidays. So, I do that annually. Part of it is people give me this feedback that it really means something to them to hear me. It's very exciting. My involvement with reading from the Torah is a very heart-connected one. So, we had a bat mitzvah, just to go back to that. Each person had – it wasn't a great amount to read. I forget how many lines I had. I probably had more than other people. But it's funny because I listened to – it was taped, which I'm not sure should have been done, but it was. I listened to the tape, and when I sing, all of a sudden, people are quiet. What does that say to me? It says to me that I have something special to offer this and that I should continue to pursue it. It's meant for me. So the bat mitzvah training, just to go back, with what we did with Hadassah is, besides learning the trope and the different melodies for the Torah and haftarah, was also studying some Jewish history, talking about customs, talking about the holidays, a whole range of things. I was with a group of people. I'm fifty-two now. I'd say the range of people were maybe mid-thirties through late-seventies, early eighties. There were some people who were college-educated in that group and others who were not. Some professionals, others not. We really needed to work together. We each had

our little piece. One woman, for example, an older woman, had written a d'var Torah, which was kind of not really so together, and I helped her with it. I took on other responsibilities. I like doing things on my computer, and I printed invitations and decorations and all kinds of stuff, which I think hadn't been done before. In this, I realized there was a creative part of myself that came out in a good way and helped to enhance this particular special day. What else can I say? I guess among the meaningful things for me in terms of the bat mitzvah – my grandfather's yad, which is a yad from India, is at a synagogue in Brookline. We borrowed that, and I used that, so that was quite potent. I am very grateful to Hadassah Blocker. For various reasons, she turned to me, and partially she knew my cousin, had good feelings about my cousin from back in camp days when Hadassah was in charge of camp. She knew my family. I think that made a difference for me, too. Actually, my son is now fourteen. I'm the person who taught him his reading. Within the service, the rabbi acknowledged Hadassah for what she had done, which was really neat.

SR: She calls you her star pupil. Did you know that?

NS: No.

SR: How did your family feel when you were going through your bat mitzvah, your husband and children?

NS: Well, my husband's very proud of me. My husband respects this passion – I guess I'll call it at this point because it really is – that I have. I think he sees in part, there are things that maybe he doesn't have the time to do, or it's not quite him, but he sees in me; it comes through in a different way. So very supportive, I would say. My son also – very supportive. I can remember summer vacation before the bat mitzvah, sitting and canoeing on a lake. I knew my reading well enough to be able to just go through it without reading it. He would listen to me and critique me on it. I think that was a very great thing. My daughter, who's younger, is more trying to figure out how this fits in, is

not quite as comfortable being a Jew.

SR: How old is she?

NS: She's now eleven. So, I hope there's some way that she finds it to be meaningful. I think right now, in some ways, she finds being a Jew as being a burden. She'd much rather be homogenized milk.

SR: Will she have a bat mitzvah?

NS: Well, we hope that she will; that's our intention. But what will motivate her to do it is very different from what would've motivated my son. I think in part – my son and I have always been close, despite the struggles recently, but my son also has a memory of my father, and my son also has respect for the bond that I had with my father. I think on some level, he feels a continuity there, besides just being very much identifying himself as a Jew and being comfortable with that.

SR: Interesting. It sounds like your father was a really important role model in your life and Hadassah. Is there anyone else that motivated you to do this or championed the way?

NS: Nobody stands out. I think it was just – it felt like the right thing to do.

SR: Yes. When was the bat mitzvah?

NS: I think it was probably in 2000 or 2001. I certainly can check and tell you what it is.

SR: Was it on [inaudible]?

NS: It was on Sukkot.

SR: Sukkot.

NS: So, it was neat. It was a whole – there was a nice luncheon afterward for the whole congregation. I had friends from work there, and I had a dear friend from New York who came, and my brother came from Canada. It was a special event. Also, I think it's always been a dilemma for me how to connect my work life, which was basically directing an organization, but being the other – there was perhaps only one other person who was Jewish there – and not really knowing how to communicate to my staff, what this all meant for me. Then, suddenly, they were immersed in my environment. Actually, to jump ahead, I did make a decision to stop my work and to continue to pursue my interests in Hebrew College. In some sense, I feel relieved. I feel like I don't have to work at trying to reconcile these two very different worlds.

SR: What were you doing?

NS: Well, I have a degree in social work, and I was directing a small organization that had a day program for adults, people [who were] elderly, disabled.

SR: Did your mom come to your bat mitzvah school?

NS: Oh, yes. She was there.

SR: She was there?

NS: Actually, I forced her to listen to me when I was practicing, when I would do some of my readings, haftorah reading. So, she listened to me. This was after my father had passed away, and she'd smile, and she'd say, "Your father would be proud of you." So, that pleased me. I could see it – although it wouldn't be something she would do, she was supportive. But I think she couldn't realize – it wasn't really in her context to think about what this personally would mean. She just knew I'd kind of acquired a new skill, or it's a new activity that I was doing. Just to go further with this in terms of what I see as being my responsibility since my bat mitzvah time. Well, there are many things to say, and I'm sure some of these things, I would say, even if I didn't have a bat mitzvah. The

most obvious is that I feel a responsibility within synagogue to read, to take a role. Mine would be more on this ritual basis rather than to join a committee. I feel responsibility, although I haven't succeeded, to continue to expose my children to what I know, what I've done, what they can potentially learn. It's also, I'd say with my daughter, a difficult thing because if one imposes it, then it won't work, won't go anywhere. But even if I didn't have the bat mitzvah, though, I think the fact that I gained the knowledge and the skills, I would have still moved ahead with that. I don't think I said this. I think the other thing for me – the minyan is a wonderful group. As I've had to make decisions about where I'm heading next in my life, members have been extremely supportive.

SR: This is the early morning minyan?

NS: Yes. It's based on what they see me – well, what they know about me as a person and what they see me doing when I do have the opportunity to read.

SR: I'd like to talk now about your spiritual journey as a religion major. I said something early on – you were going somewhere.

NS: I have to say, in terms of my spiritual journey, I think it took a different direction after I had more responsibility for children, in particular. There has always been a part of myself that's looked at nature, looked at poetry, looked at the world, try to connect with things, and see things as being more than just my narrow existence. I think that's part of why I went after the majors that I did in undergraduate school. It almost feels like a luxury, though, because, I think over the past years, there are so many tasks one needs to do. For example, I used to sit and write sometimes, just kind of reflect on what was going on in my life, what I saw around me, and I stopped doing that probably after my second child was born because I felt there were so many tasks, and that just filled me up with not allowing myself the opportunity to sit back and gain another perspective. I think that's part of what the spiritual or religious journey is, is gaining a perspective beyond the narrow path. Probably what resonates for me most strongly is the Buber idea of I-It and

I-Thou. I think one has to be open, have some receptivity there, and receptiveness for those I-Thou experiences to happen. I think that I closed off a lot of that. What I would say is, I think my idea of where I was – when I was eighteen years old or twenty-eight years old, I was involved, I think, in a more focused way. Maybe that's just a part of the nature of where one is anyways in life. I feel like I've done a lot of busyness. I feel like I have the opportunity to explore a little bit more now. I think one of the reasons why I like reading from the Torah is that when I look at the words and what they mean, there's always a lot of room for discussion about what's the root of something, what was the real intention of things. I like having that opportunity to look at something and reconsider it and try to see it in a new way. Part of that happens to me as I read the Hebrew and think about the energy behind the grammar there, which I don't understand, but how there's another world that's presented through that. In terms of talking about where does God fit in, the big answer is, I don't know. I'm not sure. I do believe strongly that people can make differences in their own lives and affect other people. Fortunately, I've never had an overwhelming experience in my life that made me – I mean, I can think about the Holocaust, and that has meaning. I can think about September 11th; that has meaning. But it's nothing that's so overwhelmed me that it's dashed my hope or desire to look beyond. I feel grateful for that.

SR: When you read from the Torah now, do you still feel the same as at your bat mitzvah? Has it sort of worn off?

NS: It's different, actually. Among the things that happened, besides the fact that I have more experience – but I still need to have more – I did take a cantillation class last year with Josh Jacobson. So, I studied for two semesters and gained a different knowledge of how to approach the words. So, I now can look at the markings and think more about how the sentence is structured, what the grouping of words means. So, that's different. I also am not as overwhelmed. For example, in a few weeks, I have a reading to do, and I'll pick it up, but I haven't – I'm not panicking about it. I can take on more. I still

approach it with the same kind of wonder, though. It's another story to tell, and that's how I see it, and I want to do it appropriately. I still get annoyed with myself if I don't do it perfectly as one needs to do, but I'm learning.

SR: How about your prayer life? You go, you say, every week to services? When you were saying Kaddish, did you go more often then?

NS: Yes, I did. I did. I don't think I quite went daily, but I went more often. Actually, I used to go two days a week; I used to go on Saturday and Sunday, but my family life changed, and Sunday's the only day for us to be together, so I stopped doing that. When I'd go to services on Saturday, I liked that time for many reasons. Probably I like it best because it's a time for me to read the Torah. I love doing that. I think within the prayers, and also through the courses I'm taking now in the cantorial arts program – but I'm actually doing more than the program – I find that there's so much text that I need to really focus maybe on small pieces and decide that that's what's going to be meaningful for me so that it doesn't become mechanical. We spent a lot of time this past year, this past semester so that we arrived at a point where we could each lead the mincha service. I really didn't have the familiarity with the Amidah, which I gained over the past few months, and it's taken on new meaning for me. I'm not quite sure how to tell you how it has. Would I choose any prayer as being my favorite prayer? [laughter] No, I don't think I would. I think each one speaks at a different point. So part of this is my love of Hebrew. Part of it is my love of being a member of the Jewish community. The other piece – and probably the more challenging one – is how I kind of integrate the prayers, how I make them relevant to what's going on with me. I'm not sure if that's an answer. That's what I think about in response to your question.

SR: Did you ever pray at home? Did your father?

NS: My father did. Do I? Not on a regular basis. Sometimes, before I go to sleep. On Shabbat, if I light the candles. On the Kiddush, things like that. We make a

(shehecheyanu?), my husband and I, whenever we're doing something that's special, even if it's not in the book – just something that's so precious and that we're grateful for. I think that's the level of which it happens right now.

SR: When you first married, did you light candles every week? What was your observance in your home, and has it changed?

NS: If anything, it's become a little bit less regular. I would light candles all the time. We try to make a point of making Kiddush and saying hamotzi. It's happened, but less regularly, partially because of everyone having different schedules. The other question, of course, could be my initiating something and saying, "This is what we're going to do on Friday nights." That hasn't happened right now. People don't all eat chicken in this house. People all don't want to be around the table to even make a Kiddush, which is a challenge. So it's not where I would ideally like it to be, but that's where it is right now.

SR: But are there rules at home? You light the candles. Your husband makes Kiddush? Is there a gender definition of your Jewish roles at home?

NS: I light the candles. There's no question about that. Kiddush, we try to share. If we have a holiday and family is here, it usually goes to me to do it. I guess because people think I'm more knowledgeable musically. For example, on Pesach, I am the person who leads the Seder.

SR: How many years have you done that? Have you always done that?

NS: Well, even after my father passed away, we would still have a Seder at my parent's house in Brookline. So there, my older sister would lead the Seder, but when we were here, I would lead the Seder. So, I've probably had a Seder for maybe five years' time, something like that. I find it very difficult actually because it's too difficult to do the food and to lead the service aspect. So, I think we should just have someone serving us.
[laughter]

SR: Do you remember your father leading the Seder?

NS: Oh, extremely well.

SR: What was that like?

NS: Oh, it was great. It was great. I have great memories of that. He'd be the head of the table, and I'd be here on his left side. I was always there on his left side. He had a certain few melodies that were different from our melodies, and we made a point of learning them. Just going back, things like hiding the chametz – certainly great memories of that part, too. But people kind of viewed him in my family as being the rabbi. The reality is he didn't understand Hebrew. He read it. I think he read it very well. He was interested. He was a Zionist. He was interested in reading and learning, but he didn't have the same background that we had. I remember going around the table, and people would read in Hebrew or English at the Seder, and he'd correct them, which was the right thing to do, but sometimes too quickly. But I think it's a very positive memory that I have.

SR: Sounds like it.

NS: Yes.

SR: Your father must have been very special.

NS: Well, yes. Yes.

SR: Were you conscious of changing roles of women in Judaism, as time was going on that women were doing more? Did that make an impression?

NS: I'm just trying to think in terms of how that made a difference for me. I guess because of where I was at, I never felt that I was denied doing things, but then I didn't have the desire before. I love hearing Hadassah tell her stories. I'm very proud of her,

also. She holds clearly a position of respect. I think sometimes we try to think about whether or not – my father, I believe, would be proud of me for my reading. But my uncle, again – I refer back to him – I think who was more Conservative, I think [he] would not have been so supportive of my pursuing whatever I'm pursuing. [laughter] He would have seen there be more limitations. So, just to summarize again, the point where I got involved is great. I mean, clearly, I've been to Orthodox services, and I found it very frustrating. I want to jump in there and be doing the same thing the guys are doing. So, I found that very hard to watch, so I don't go to those services.

SR: Where do you think you're going to go now with your career? You're sort of in a cantorial, rabbinical –

NS: Well, first of all, part of it, I've never – up until the mincha service, which I led a few weeks ago, I'd never led a service. I used to think – which I feel differently about – that in order to lead the service, you had to have arrived. I think now you have to, first of all, know how to read and at least get the melody across. But I think it's not – I guess it's a difference between seeing a cantor as a performer versus as somebody who enables. I'm not sure if that's quite the right word, but that is a voice in part for the community – not just that but is there as the base, and other people build on your base so that when people join in the prayer, you're offering the direction in which it might go. But I think even in the solo aspects, one's tone of voice – one can offer a great deal emotionally. I think I felt that in part just in my limited experience at school. My next task – well, I'm not sure I'll call it a task – I've already called up Dan at Temple Emanuel and asked him if I could lead the Maariv service. So he has to listen to me and make sure that what I'm doing is Kosher.

SR: Friday night? Every night?

NS: Weekdays, I know at present, we're learning the Shabbat Nusach this semester. I think very easily I could take on that role within the minyan. Different people do it, but I'm

sure they would welcome my doing it. So, at least on a voluntary basis, I am moving ahead. I'm excited about that. I think I needed to have my one experience, and then I'm ready to plunge in. That's how I feel. Longer range, somehow I'd like to make this into a career. I'm not sure how to make that grow. We've had some discussion about if I follow the cantorial track, do I go to rabbinic school? Where do I go? The answer is, I don't know right now. I think I need to talk with more people. In my mind, there's the personal journey, but I also, in my mind, feel that it needs to lead to some job that I will have. I'm not quite sure. I'm sure as these new graduates come out, new types of jobs are going to be molded to kind of meet what people have to offer. That's my hope. So, I'm not quite sure long-range, but immediately, I have the interest and have taken at least some preliminary steps to taking on some more responsibility within my religious community.

SR: Do you see yourself as still on a spiritual journey or even more so now that you seem more involved?

NS: For sure is the answer to that. I guess I feel the responsibility for myself to do that and my responsibility if I'm up there as the prayer leader in whatever form it takes, that it should never seem that I'm just reciting things, that I need to bring meaning to what I'm doing. So, yes, for sure. It's deepened because I have this new knowledge now.

SR: That's so interesting.

NS: Well, I'm very fortunate. That's what I have to say. I also have to say, and not just because you're interviewing me, but that I'm so grateful for the people that I've met. I am not sure exactly who or what I expected. But I don't feel left out. I feel that there's much that I share with people at school.

SR: I'm just wondering about your family, and I'm sort of projecting myself into this because I'm going through this – wife, mother, rabbinical student. Do you see a division in roles? Do you see conflict in time demands?

NS: Actually, at this point, given the age of my children, they don't need me in the same way that they used to, although I will say – it's hard for me to answer this question. They need me in different ways. I've been a lot more task-oriented. My husband keeps referring to me as a model, which totally amazes me because I think as my style in the past is, I juggle a lot of things. Some things I leave to the last minute. It all gets done in the end, but it involves a lot of pressure. My way of approaching my studies is I know I have fifteen minutes; I'm going to work on something, I'm going to sit in the car while I'm waiting for so-and-so and work on this piece that I needed for my nusach class so that I use my time differently. My hope would be that I'm doing my study period and my children would also do their study period. Some of that happens; some of it doesn't. I'm not sure. The piece that I, for sure, offer is – and my husband talks about this often – is that he said he had a wish that he'd come home at the end of the day, and he'd find me enthusiastic about what I had done during the day. My last year and a half in my work was very stressful. It was actually my husband who suggested, "Well, maybe you make a change," which I really hadn't considered. He, at some level, gave me permission to do this. So, I indeed do come back with many stories, much enthusiasm, teaching him little pieces of this and that. I can tell it enriches his life. So, I'm pleased for that.

SR: That sounds wonderful.

NS: So, that's the great thing. My children – hard for me to tell. I made this tape yesterday for my class. My daughter, who doesn't usually respond to much, listened; I could tell she was pleased with the sound of it. That was great. I think, in theory, my son is behind me on this, although I think he's in his own world right now. My mother, I try to figure out what it means to her, and I'm not quite sure. I'm not sure she's totally connecting everything. My brother and my sister, I think they think it's an interest I have, a hobby I have. I don't think, at least, my sister fully appreciates the extent to which I want to make this part of my new direction.

SR: Would you recommend adult bat mitzvahs to other women?

NS: Oh, there's no question I would. I guess it's structured very differently according to whoever's leading it. As you can tell, from when I've talked about, key pieces for me were the musical part, the focus on the Torah, gaining a different sense of my Jewish community just through the women who were there in the class. I think it needs to touch on many things in order – so, it shouldn't just be the reading in itself. I think it was great to have such a wide range of people in the class. As long as one is tolerant of that, it works. I have a bond with these people now whenever I see them. It was a great process. It was a great process also, as I mentioned, to be able to show those other people who have are involved in other parts of my life to have a special reason for bringing them to the synagogue for them to see this special aspect of my life.

SR: Is there anything you would've done differently?

NS: Regarding the bat mitzvah piece?

SR: Yes.

NS: No, because it really suited where I was at. I was working, and so my responsibilities were in different places.

SR: You took the evening class?

NS: I worked three days a week, but it was on a day that I didn't work.

SR: That's why you had Hadassah?

NS: Yes.

SR: She taught during the day.

NS: Yes.

SR: Was [inaudible] involved at all, or was he already –?

NS: Well, actually, at Temple Emanuel, there are two different bat mitzvah groups. There was the Hadassah group, and then there was a group run by the clergy. Actually, the assistant rabbi, who now has another title, [Wesley] Gardenswartz, joined us a few times for some discussion, but it was basically Hadassah. I think it's helpful to have a clergy involved. I think the real – for me, the important piece of that – and it's good to have an ongoing relationship with them. I think learning with them as a part of the bat mitzvah curriculum, if you want to call it, is very helpful. So maybe, if we'd seen more of that, that might've helped to enhance what we were doing.

SR: It sounds wonderful. It sounds like you really were Hadassah's star pupil. She's so proud of you.

NS: I'm glad to hear that. I would go back to her each time. Some of the trope, as we continued – the High Holidays, she taught me. Other things she didn't teach me; I had learned from a tape, or I learned from Charles or Dan. I still see myself as being her product. [laughter]

SR: That's fantastic.

NS: Actually, my gift for her, which hopefully I'll do some time, is that she has all her stuff handwritten, and so it's been copied many times. What I would like to do is to write out the trope on a computer and have it as a more permanent form. Another project, which I'm not sure where this will happen, would be to record her also teaching it because she's great.

SR: I have a little bit of her recording when I went to interview her. She sang for me. It seems to me like Hadassah made the initial move, but I think it's people like you that are keeping the momentum going and being a real role model to women.

NS: Well, another part for me is that she learned her father's tradition, which was Lithuanian. Some of the trope is sung differently. I think it's very intriguing, very unusual. I always feel a responsibility to perpetuate her tradition.

SR: You don't use the Sephardi trope at all?

NS: I don't know it. I don't know it. As a matter of fact, I don't think we have anything recorded of my father. I don't know why I haven't pursued this, but maybe I'll pursue this sometime soon. I hear sometimes, for example, there's a man at temple, (Emmett?), who when he chants, he sounds like my father, I'm told, or my uncle, he sounded like. So, I should find out these things before one can't find out.

SR: Yeah. There are people at the Hebrew College. Does Scott (Sokol?) know?

NS: No. Actually, I must say, when my father – my father went from Beth Zion to KI, and I believe – because I actually have my father recorded doing other things. My father had an okay musical ear, but the chanting is very different. So what he felt was that he would offer to read the Torah, and the sexton, I guess he was called there, would not always want my father to read. My father's thought was that he didn't think it was as melodic, the chanting.

SR: Did your mother have a beautiful voice? I'm trying to (inaudible) where you got yours from. [laughter]

NS: My mother sings. She sings. I don't think either – I don't think any of us regard ourselves as having a beautiful voice. We just did it. My father did it through the synagogue prayers, but he'd always sing me songs from – I'm not sure when – back in the old days – India, from these British musicals. I'm not quite sure what they were. My mother would sing too, but nobody said, "I'm the singer in the family." It was just a part of the routine, just what we did.

SR: It sounds wonderful. Well, thank you so much. Is there anything you would like to add that we should know about? Something you feel we didn't cover? Something that meant a lot to you about the bat mitzvah, either the preparation or the event or afterward?

NS: I'm not quite sure where this is going, but I had the opportunity to – when it was my son's bar mitzvah, we had a smaller group that met of the families and the kids. I'm not sure if it's possible to bring something of – and I can't even identify it right now. I had such a positive experience. I know there are kids who have bat mitzvah training and don't have such positive experiences. I'm not really looking to be a bat mitzvah teacher or bar mitzvah teacher. But I wonder if there's some way to help them to appreciate more fully the importance of what they're doing and just how precious it is that they have this opportunity. I don't know. Maybe that's something that only comes as one matures. But I think that's what's helped me, is that I'm not there – at some level, I am performing, but I'm not because I'm doing something else. For people to understand that something else, I think it helps to really make it all the richer experience.

SR: You differentiate, for example, between how you sang it for Zamir performance and how you did services.

NS: Yes.

SR: When you read the Torah.

NS: Yes. I mean, I will say when I sing for Zamir, I need to think about the words and express that. But it's different because, if I'm a soloist in Zamir, I still, at this point, get nervous. I still get nervous when I read the Torah, but it's for different reasons. I'm not worrying about vocal production.

SR: What are you worried about?

NS: Well, first would be, of course, the obvious is just remembering the grammatical issues and how to pronounce the words. That's probably what I'm thinking of most. I must say within my congregation, clearly, as in every congregation, one needs to read it perfectly and needs to be corrected if one hasn't read Torah perfectly. People are very supportive. It's not scolding, but I think I want to do a good job, and maybe that makes me nervous sometimes. I'm not sure. I think as I gain experience, it changes. The only thing I can equate it to is, after we eat breakfast, we say Birkat Hamazon. So, on Shabbat, they tend to turn to me to lead it, and I remember being nervous about it. I did it recently, and I thought to myself, "I'm not nervous anymore." It was great. [laughter] It was great to be so comfortable with it.

SR: Do you think you were more nervous originally because you were a woman and thought you had to show that women could do as well as the man? Or do you think it was just really personal, nothing to do with gender at all?

NS: Again, this may be unlike other people you've interviewed; I've been so lucky in not feeling like an oddity. Within my service, the Torah readers – there are two women who are probably in their forties; one learned to read relatively recently, and one has read since her teens, who are called on all the time to read. Then there are some older men who read. For some reason, actually, within my congregation, the younger men aren't reading. I'm not sure why. So, the gender thing has not been an issue, and it's not an issue within Hebrew College. Obviously, it wasn't an issue with Hadassah. So I've never come up against that. Maybe if I were to be leading services in another setting, I might sense something then, but so far, that hasn't happened for me.

SR: Well, thank you so much. It's been a pleasure talking with you.

NS: Thank you. Thank you for this work. It's a great thing.

SR: I look forward to seeing you at the Hebrew College in the rabbinical school.

NS: [laughter]

[END OF INTERVIEW]