

Hadassah Blocker Transcript

Elise Brenner: Well, this is Elise Brenner, here, on December 16 to have an interview with one of the Women Who Dared 2004 honorees. Her name is Hadassah Blocker. We're here in her apartment in Newtonville. And we'll be hearing her voice next. My first question, Hadassah, is if you could please tell me briefly about your childhood and your upbringing?

Hadassah Blocker: I am the oldest of four children. My father was a rabbi, an orthodox rabbi, and a Hebrew teacher and my mother was just an angel. Just an angel that she brought us up the way she did. If we're any good, it's because of her. She was just wonderful. Incidentally, I have a sister who wants to tell you more about me, and I told her we would call her if you wanted more information. She started to tell me things that I don't remember. She's a very warm, loving sister. She thinks I'm wonderful. She doesn't at all envy me. It's not a matter of jealousy. She's just a great girl.

EB: Now, where did you grow up?

HB: In Roxbury. Dorchester.

EB: So you're a local girl?

HB: Yes, I'm a local girl. I never left the area.

EB: And your father had a congregation?

HB: No. He was a Hebrew teacher.

EB: A Hebrew teacher. A rabbi.

HB: That's right.

EB: What made your mother such an angel? Tell me about your mother some more.

HB: My mother was a good person, and she would do good things for other people. I remember she had a row of boxes, you know, pushkes in the kitchen. And when they didn't really have much money, there was always a couple of pennies for those pushkes and that impressed us and we do the same thing. I find it very hard to say no to anyone, especially a charity that deals with children. Very difficult.

EB: It's interesting that you brought up your mother in such a warm way. I'm wondering, one of my questions later was going to be Jewish role models you had during your life. It sounds to me like she was one of them.

HB: Yes, she was.

EB: Talk a little bit about your mother as a role model and then if there are any other Jewish women or men, or non-Jewish women and men, who are role models to you.

HB: Well, her role was to keep that kitchen going. And she was a good cook and she always had enough food for everybody, no matter who walked into the house. There was always enough food. Of course, we used to come home from school on Friday afternoon dreading what faced us because she was one of these quick cooks, kept going, so that all of the pots and the pans and the bowls were waiting for us. The thing that made it a little more bearable is that when she was cooking fish for gelfite fish, the fish was on the bones, and *that* we could have. So we didn't mind it. But it was a pain in the neck to come back from school with a bunch of books like this and we'd have to stop and clean up for Shabbat and we did have a Shabbat in our house.

EB: You were [Shomrei] Shabbos?

HB: Yes, we were.

EB: That's great.

HB: Yes, we were. All the way. The house was kosher.

EB: Very nice. What was your family's class status in Roxbury? Were you a struggling family?

HB: Oh yes.

EB: Were you a well-to-do family?

HB: Oh, no. We were not well-to-do. We were a struggling family. My father had a Hebrew School job that didn't pay them very well in those days.

EB: No.

HB: Not the way they pay today. And it was just rough. And my father was the kind of a son who took care of his family. When they came over here from Europe, he housed them. He got them jobs. He cared for them. He was the chief of the family. So, no, none of us had much money. Somehow, that didn't matter.

EB: What compensated for the money?

HB: I don't know, really, because we didn't consider ourselves poor. I don't remember feeling poor. We lived in Roxbury. I went to the schools. I can't remember the name of the school I went to. It escapes me. I'm sorry.

EB: Sure. Sure.

HB: Then we moved to Dorchester on Warner Street, which was a continuation of Glenway Street. Are you familiar with that area of town?

EB: I'm not familiar with it. My father grew up in Dorchester on Edson Street.

HB: What street?

EB: Edson.

HB: Oh, right. Oh, no, it's not in our area.

EB: He might have had your father in Cheder -- who knows.

HB: It could be. My father had a lot of kids in Cheder.

EB: That's possible.

HB: He was Principal of the Beth El Hebrew School in Dorchester.

EB: I'll have to find out. I don't know. You know, Leon is gone. I'll have to -- maybe my mother knows. I don't know.

HB: Is she --

EB: Were your parents born in this country?

HB: No.

EB: No.

HB: They came here from Europe. My mother was smart enough to go to night school, even though she had a job. My father certainly did, because he became a lawyer and he went to law school here. Do you know which one it was?

EB: What one?

HB: He was a very bright man.

EB: Law school first and then the Rabbinate?

HB: He came with his *semicha* from Europe.

EB: So he was already a young man, already. He wasn't a boy when he came here.

HB: He was about 16 years old. He got his *semicha* when he was 15. I have a copy of his *semicha*.

EB: He was brilliant. A brilliant man.

HB: Oh, he was. Absolutely was.

EB: So obviously your family was extremely -- strongly identified Jewish?

HB: No question.

EB: You went to synagogue?

HB: Yes we did.

EB: Absolutely. You celebrated Shabbos. All of the holidays. Now, did you become bat mitzvah at the age of 12 or 13? I doubt it.

HB: It's really funny. When the sisterhood president talked to Rabbi Chiel, he said, "Why can't you let us have part of the service? If it's the sisterhood Sabbath, let us have somebody do the Haftorah. Do you have anybody?" he asked. She said, "Yes, we do." And she said, "Hadassah can do it." And he said, "Really?" He never even asked me to do it for him. He trusted me, Rabbi Chiel. A wonderful man.

EB: When was this?

HB: This was, oh, I would say 40, 50 years ago, and so I did. As a matter of fact, I did the Haftorah. I didn't do anything else. Just the Haftorah. And one of the men, my sister, my sister was sitting in front of him, he said, "My God, if the men could do it like

that, we would really have a service. Listen to her!" And my sister said it was just so good to listen to this, because we were all afraid they would get up and walk out. But they didn't. They stayed, and they were very nice about it. So, after that, we started to -- I started to train people to do the Torah, also. I did the first Torah reading.

EB: To train females?

HB: Yes. I did the first year. And then I did only part of the Torah, not the whole thing, and a Haftorah. The next year, I did more of the Torah and the Haftorah and, at that time, Cantor Hochberg was the cantor and when the service was almost over, the rabbi asked me to come to his pulpit. I said, "What did I do?" That's the first feeling. "Did I do something wrong?" "Oh, no," he said. "The rabbi said the cantor and I have decided that you have fulfilled the requirements of becoming a bat mitzvah, so we are giving you a bat mitzvah scroll." Well, we all thought it was so funny, and yet it was most touching. That's when I became bat mitzvah.

EB: Tears.

HB: I did not have a bat mitzvah before.

EB: And how old were you at that time?

HB: I was -- well, 50 years ago.

EB: So you were in your 40s?

HB: My 40s. Yeah.

EB: And you learned Hebrew, how?

HB: I went to Hebrew school.

EB: You went to Hebrew school.

HB: And then Hebrew college. Hebrew high school and Hebrew College.

EB: But girls weren't reading from the Torah?

HB: No.

EB: So how did you even learn to read from the Haftorah?

HB: My father came to camp. I already was working at camp and he saw me reading from the -- what was it? It must have been the Chumash and I read, because I didn't know the trope. And he said, why don't you sing it? I said, I don't know how. I'll send you a tape. And he did.

EB: You learned it from a tape like that?

HB: Yes, he did.

EB: That's not easy.

HB: He gave me the trope and I learned them and his trope was beautiful. Not everybody uses them, but this is what -- the cantor says, this is the Vilna trope. Whatever it is, it's a beautiful trope. Your mother knows it, too.

EB: Yeah.

HB: Because that's what I taught them. So that's how I learned and I love doing it. So it didn't take me long to learn how to do the Haftorahs, and I enjoyed it. It was wonderful.

EB: So there you are, a trailblazer. How did it get at Emanuel, how did the program get formal and organized so you'd be having huge classes of women becoming bat mitzvah at many times during the year? How did all of that happen? Because the last time we left you, you became bat mitzvahed in your 40s, and then what?

HB: The rabbi said -- after I became bat mitzvahed, he said -- he really was wonderful. He supported us all of the way. If it weren't for his support, we wouldn't have made it because the temple was not that happy with the women. And any time one of the women made a mistake, it was blown up way out of proportion. And I said to them once, one of the women flunked completely, and she was really miserable about it and she was afraid she had done something terrible. I said, "Look, if a man were to do that, nobody would get excited. They'd be upset, but nobody would say this has ruined everything for the temple. Just relax. You'll do it again and you'll find out that you can do it," and she's done it again and done very well. So that's what I said to the men when they tackled me that night, that day. The rabbi said, "Hadassah is willing to teach anybody who wants to learn," and then we sent out a letter and we got a huge response to that letter. Some of them dropped out right away because they couldn't come in the morning, and I wasn't going to teach in the evening because I felt my husband had a right to my time, too. And I was too tired to teach in the evening. This is tough stuff.

EB: Right.

HB: So we had 30 people in that first group and we started. We started. This was in 1976. I remember that. Some of the people are still with me. One of them helps me -- Nancy Parritz, do you know that name?

EB: I know Nancy, of course I do.

HB: Well, she was in my first group and she was very bright, very quick.

EB: Yes, she is. She carpooled me.

HB: Oh, really?

EB: With her sons. In the old days when I was a kid and her children are little -- absolutely.

HB: Now they're all fathers. Two of them are married and have children. The 3rd son never got married, I don't know why.

EB: I don't know. I never really kept in touch with them. Of course I know Nancy. Has she taken a lot of the responsibility? Shared the responsibility with you?

HB: In the last few years, yes. Of course, she has. Because when you have a large group and some of them can read and some of them can't, you have to do something about that, so we worked it out that she would help with the reading and she also helped with the trope, because she learned them very quickly and does a beautiful job herself. I don't know how well you know her. She's got a beautiful voice.

EB: Yes. No, when I go with my mother to Emanuel, I don't belong to Emanuel, but I belong somewhere else. But when I go with my mother --

HB: Where do you belong?

EB: Dorshei Tzedek.

HB: Where is Dorshei Tzedek?

EB: Well, we rent space. It's Reconstructionist.

HB: Oh, sure.

EB: Tova Spitzer. Rabbi Spitzer.

HB: Yes. I trained what's her name --

EB: Elaine?

HB: Who?

EB: Elaine Polnick?

HB: No. I know Elaine.

EB: Oh.

HB: I trained the son of one of my -- the grandson of one of my bat mitzvah. What's her name?

EB: Someone from my congregation though?

HB: Sure.

EB: I like it very much there.

HB: You are in a church in West Newton?

EB: In West Newton. That's it.

HB: That's where his bar mitzvah was.

EB: Yeah. Same with my first daughter and the second one when we do it.

HB: Why can't I remember the name?

EB: Listen, we've grown quite big. I might not know everybody anymore. We used to be small. Now, we're huge.

HB: Really?

EB: Well, huge. Not Emanuel huge, with something going on every minute of the day. You know, I was actually very interested in the resistance issues. The resistance you got from the men in the first years. You say they would ridicule the women if the women made a big mistake. Did you ever get *women* resisting?

HB: Yeah, a few. "You're doing this because you want to make a show out of it." I said, "No, I'm not. I'm doing this because I would like families to be involved, and when a mother is involved, the children will be involved. The children will learn. And be very proud of their mothers." You were, weren't you?

EB: Oh, yes.

HB: I mean, a woman in the 50s, 60s, to start learning this stuff, is not easy. They were wonderful about it. Just wonderful. They are wonderful to this day.

EB: Definitely. Definitely. That's unbelievable.

HB: Phyllis. I got her first name.

EB: A Phyllis?

HB: And the mother of this child is active in your temple. I wish I could remember her name.

EB: I don't know. Too bad. You know, you mentioned your family responsibilities and your active work at Emanuel, and sometimes you had to balance the two of them, so one of the things I'd like to ask is about conflicts between your family responsibilities and your -- we call it activism at the temple.

HB: Well, my husband was fully supportive.

EB: He was?

HB: I had no problem there at all. He was very proud and very supportive. In fact, I taught him how to do Haftorah, too, and he did it on a Brotherhood Sabbath. He didn't want to. I said, "You've got a beautiful voice and I'm your teacher. For God's sakes, do it." He did it.

EB: People do what you say, don't they? Pretty much?

HB: He did it. He was very good.

EB: Well, that's wonderful.

HB: Oh, Ruth knew him.

EB: Hmm?

HB: Ruth. Your mother. I think your mother knew him.

EB: I'm sure. I'm sure she did. Absolutely. Absolutely.

HB: He took their pictures. Uncle Ben. You know, that's what they called him. The kids at camp called him, that, too.

EB: That's sweet. Now, obviously, you challenged women's traditional roles within the synagogue. Could you talk about that? How you stood up and challenged the traditional role of women within the Conservative movement?

HB: Well, I didn't have to work too hard because I had Rabbi Chiel. And he was totally in favor of giving women the same kind of training and the same kind of recognition as the men. And he said, he said it openly, "I wish you men could do as well as these women are doing and how much they've already contributed to the temple, to the congregation, because of their loving" -- I mean, I had said to them, and I think your mother heard it from me, too -- "this is not the end, friends. This is just the beginning. And you have to keep going. You have to keep studying." You have -- does she go to Ma'ayan?

EB: She finished Ma'ayan and she went to the second. The post-graduate.

HB: Yeah.

EB: She did. You are responsible for that. That's right. You told people they'd have to continue.

HB: The first year that Ma'ayan came to our temple, I don't remember who the instructor was, but he said, "What made you to come to this course?" [*Students would say,*] "I graduated -- I became a bat mitzvah with Hadassah Blocker. Around the room. He said, "Who is this Hadassah Blocker?" She said to him, "You should know her, Rabbi." I think he was a rabbi. "Because she is responsible for so many of us being here. We had to keep studying. We knew that we were -- that this was just the beginning."

EB: Isn't that a tribute. Well, no wonder you were nominated for this. Now, I know that Emanuel is Conservative and not Orthodox, but what can you tell me about -- and this will help people who read about you -- to understand the issue of *kol isha* and why that has traditionally, in Orthodox Judaism prohibited, and why Rabbi Chiel, you, Temple Emanuel, overcame that.

HB: Because we don't agree with it. What's so terrible about a woman's voice? It's a beautiful voice. Some of them have beautiful voices. Some of them don't. But what is so sinful about listening to a woman's voice? See, that's the thing that I couldn't understand, especially since my father, who was an Orthodox rabbi, taught me -- taught me everything that I knew in this area and was very happy to have me do it.

EB: Was he alive to know about your work at Emanuel?

HB: No. Unfortunately, he wasn't. My mother was.

EB: Your mother was. And, as an Orthodox woman, how did she feel?

HB: I don't know. She never said no to me. She came to hear me and she enjoyed it.

EB: Oh, she did.

HB: Yeah. I think she was in favor of it.

EB: Now, we still don't find this in the Orthodox movement, do we?

HB: I think that they have some kind of a -- I'm not sure -- a kind of program.

EB: I mean, women can do it but separate from the men I believe.

HB: Well, I'll have to tell you something funny. It's not for quotation. I am related to Josh Jacobson through marriage. My niece is his wife. Do you know her? Ronda? And I taught her for her bat mitzvah. I taught everybody in my family. And she didn't know Josh at that time when she was bat mitzvahed. But a couple of years ago, on Simchat Torah, she and several other women read the Torah portion separately, in a separate service, I said, "Josh, did you go to hear them?" He said, "No, I taught them. Why do I have to go hear them?" I said, "But they were your students! You didn't want to hear them?" "Nope. I've heard them." He didn't go to shul that morning. He went to the regular service. He did not go to hear them in there and he -- but look at what he's doing with Zamir [a Jewish choir in Newton].

EB: With Zamir.

HB: How many -- it doesn't make sense.

EB: No, it doesn't. Well, they're not on the Bimah with Zamir. They're not reading the Torah. That's the difference, isn't it, is the context. Yeah. So, you got the women up on the Bimah. You got them up on the Bimah. Now, at the time that Emanuel and you were doing that, was that happening at the other Conservative temples, or were you, Emanuel, and Rabbi Chiel the trailblazers?

HB: We were. We were. And several people wrote to him to ask him about the program and he referred them to me and I answered them and I told them what we were doing

and I understand that some of them did implement the program. I gave them all of the details.

EB: Oh, you did.

HB: Sisterhood – no, the Women's League, I became very interested in it. And they have issued a program which is very different from what we're doing. And what they're doing at Temple Emanuel now is not the same as we did, because they have large classes that come at night. So they can't use all of them. They can't fit them all on the Bimah at the same time. So they're not learning the same thing. Our women learned to do Torah and Haftorah. These women don't. Some of them do Haftorah. Some of them do the Torah. But they don't all learn the Torah. I think that's too bad.

EB: OK. It's been -- it's just gotten too big and got a little diluted, would you say?

HB: Yes, it is. And yet on the other hand, the rabbis are giving them all kinds of wonderful talks on what Judaism is and I think that's very important, and I think there has to be a way of doing both. And so it takes three years instead of two.

EB: But at the end of three years, all of the women don't have exactly what you have.

HB: I have not seen any of them. I have not seen any of them on the Bimah.

EB: I see. They want to be involved. You started something where at least people want to be involved. They might not be able to do exactly what your older students did in the past, but at least they want to be involved.

HB: Yeah. They are. They are involved. And not all of our older students will get up there and do anything now. Like, for example, Cheryl. Cheryl can do it, but she won't do it, but she's studying, too. And it's OK. As long as they're involved that way, it's OK.

EB: This is truly wonderful. What was -- well, what have been some of the greatest challenges for you in doing this work for women in the conservative movement? What have been some of the greatest challenges for you?

HB: I'm not sure I understand what you mean.

EB: Hurdles to overcome. Things that were the most difficult in getting this educational program for women off the ground. What were the difficult parts?

HB: I think the attitude of the men in the congregation. They were not too happy. They were not supportive. You could see that if it hadn't been Rabbi Chiel, they would have dumped me right away. You could feel that. But, I just kept going. And I think one of the times that I realized that we made it, there was a -- oh, a friend of my sister's had a son who was going to be married at Temple Emanuel, so they had an *aufruf* for him and, evidently, the person who was going to be doing the Haftorah didn't show up. So the usher, who was not very much in favor of women being involved, comes down the aisle to me, throws the Chumash at me and says, "Here, you do the Haftorah." I said, "Wait a minute. What do you mean?" Terrible. I said, "What is this?" "Well, the person who is supposed to do it is not here, and none of the men will do it at a moment's notice." Oh, I said to myself. I'll do it! "Okay," I said. "Tell me which one it is and give me 10 minutes," and I did a perfect job. My sister was there. She said, "I didn't know you were going to do it." I said, "I didn't either." I found out when he came and threw -- literally, threw the Chumash at me and said, do the Haftorah. So, I guess we made it. At that point, we knew that we were in. It was awful.

EB: That must have been a disrespectful, horrifying way to do it. Your stomach must have just sunk.

HB: Yes, it did. And I did it, and I did a good job.

EB: When you said just a moment ago that the resistance by the men was the biggest challenge, but you said, "I just kept going." And this is a hard question. What is inside you that kept you going? I mean, what is it about *you*, Hadassah, that you didn't give up at that time?

HB: It's because I'm stubborn.

EB: Yes.

HB: I am. I'm stubborn.

EB: Yes. It's because you're stubborn. Can we say tenacious, instead?

HB: You can say tenacious. It's all right. That's why -- I mean, I wasn't going to let that kind of thing stop us from opening this beautiful, beautiful material to the women. And they all love it.

EB: So this beautiful material, it's about this gift that you want to share with people?

HB: Yeah.

EB: That women have been denied access to, traditionally.

HB: That's right. And it's been picked up by many congregations. Not all. Not all of them do it. But many Conservative congregations. And in some Conservative congregations, it's got to be a paid worker. I was not paid one penny for my work, and that's okay. I could afford to give my time, and that was the way I wanted to give it. There are congregations where they have to charge the women; we charged them only for the materials that they bought. The books. That's all. Nothing else. Because it cost them money anyhow, because they were always giving me gifts. And I used to say, "Please stop it. Just do a good job. That's the best gift you can give me."

EB: Isn't that great. That's very nice.

HB: And they are friends. They're my friends. I walk into shul and I know a lot of people and it's nice. Very nice.

EB: That's wonderful. Any resistance, now? Any of those challenges, or is it just absolutely not?

HB: The girls do a wonderful job. The girls used to have their bat mitzvah on Friday night --

EB: Yeah.

HB: -- and the father would say the blessings and the child would do the Haftorah.

EB: Right.

HB: No way.

EB: That was my day.

HB: Saturday morning, now. Not our *mincha* and not that half-baked stuff.

EB: That's what it was. That's all you were allowed. Yeah.

HB: Do you remember Emanuel?

EB: Yeah. My mother was way back then. I went to Emanuel with the Parritz's kids. That's why I say the car pool. Sure. I had the Friday night thing.

HB: And your father said the blessings?

EB: Yes. Absolutely.

HB: I'm glad I didn't witness that!

EB: Absolutely.

HB: It was a battle, I remember. Nationally, it was a battle, too.

EB: Nationally?

HB: Yes, when the Women's League began to look into it, and they saw what was happening, one of them got up and said, "How do you dare say to a girl, 'You can go just this far and no more'? What makes her different? If she wants to learn, give her the chance to learn. If she wants to be a rabbi, let her be a rabbi." And we have many -- you've got one.

EB: Right. Right.

HB: Is she still your rabbi?

EB: Tova Spitzer?

HB: Yeah.

EB: Reconstructionist. But not Conservative. More [inaudible]. We split, but I would say more of our people are kosher than not. I mean, it's fairly based in Conservative.

HB: Look. How many people do you think are kosher in our congregation?

EB: About the same as in ours. Yeah. I know people don't have, don't all practice it. Yeah. This risk-taking that you did, obviously you took a risk, and I know you talked about it, but again, another of the harder questions, what was it like for you to take these kinds of risks within your own synagogue, within your own community?

HB: What was it like for me?

EB: Yes. I know. It's a hard question.

HB: Yes, it is.

EB: Focus on the risk part. That you took a risk. That's what we really believe. That you took a risk.

HB: Of being bumped out of the congregation perhaps?

EB: Sure, that's right. That's right. Just being unpopular, being disliked. Not everyone stands up for what they believe in. It takes a risk to stand up for what you believe in, and that's kind of what I'd like you to talk about if you could.

HB: Well, I don't remember that it was that much of a risk because, as I said, Rabbi Chiel was with me.

EB: Mm-hmm.

HB: He was the one who started this whole thing. So, yes, it was unpleasant, sure. And I'd walk into a room and I knew I was getting baleful gleams, but, it's as I said to you: I'm tenacious.

EB: Right. But it's -- the tenaciousness has to be based in your strong beliefs in what you were doing.

HB: Yes. I did believe that it was important for women to be given this opportunity.

EB: Yeah. Yeah. So what's been the most rewarding thing about the work you've done? All of this work? All of this time? All of this effort? What's been just the most gratifying and rewarding --

HB: When they get up there and they speak their peace and they sing their parts and they do a good job. That's it. It is. And people say to me, "Oh, you've done it again,

Hadassah.” That's nice.

EB: Isn't it.

HB: Yes, it is. It's very nice.

EB: So, one of my questions here, it's kind of ironic. It says, “How have your contributions affected others?” I know it's kind of obvious, but it would really help me and the whole program if you could talk about how your contributions have affected others. Even if it's repetitive.

HB: Well, for one thing, they've become very much involved in the temple, some of them on an administrative level, not always with the Sisterhood, although this is not only a Sisterhood-sponsored program. It's a temple-sponsored program. And some of them have come back again and again and have read Torah, have been given the chance to do Haftorah. And that's gratifying, when I see that happening.

EB: So, it's affected people very personally with their choices to continue to study and to continue to participate. Absolutely, wonderful.

HB: Did you go to Ma'ayan, too?

EB: No. I'm a Hebrew College graduate, so I haven't done that yet. Maybe when I'm older. But I want to wait a while.

HB: But you know, even as a Hebrew -- and I'm a Hebrew College graduate, too --

EB: Right, yes.

HB: Even as Hebrew College graduates, we didn't get all of this material and the way it's being given to them, I'm reading Brettler's book. That's an incredible book. What's it called? *Know the Bible* or something like that. [*How to Read the Bible* – ed.] Incredible.

That man is remarkable.

EB: Of course, there is new stuff and there are new approaches, absolutely. But I have my mother to show me in. No, I'm not going to the classes now, it's true.

HB: Do you have small children?

EB: No, they're 12 and 16. They're middle children. Middle and teen. Yeah. They're great. I want to finish with just a few more questions. We're almost done. Now, obviously, you just said how your work has affected others. I'm wondering how else it's affected *you*. How has *your* life changed as a result of all of the work you've done? How has your life changed?

HB: Well, it's made me a very popular lady in the temple.

EB: It has.

HB: It has. I walk in and it's like, "Hi, Hadassah, good Shabbos, Hadassah, how are you?" It's a good feeling. Especially when you're relegated to the back seat now. I can't do what I used to do. I could still teach, if they want to come here.

EB: Tell us how old you are?

HB: Eighty-nine.

EB: Eight-nine! You're doing great.

HB: So, it has had an affect, and I've had some wonderful friendships, just wonderful. So I think that the positive is really what we emphasize here.

EB: Yes. Thank God you have all that. What advice would you have for young women today interested in being activists, interested in taking a risk – maybe it doesn't have to be within the context of a synagogue. Just any young woman, or middle aged woman,

because that's when you really took it upon yourself – what advice would you have for people interested in being involved and being activists and taking the risk?

HB: Do it.

EB: Do it. Just do it.

HB: Just do it! It's not the same now. They are involved -- many of them have jobs and it's difficult, when you have a job, to do this kind of thing. Even these women who are in this program now who will become b'nai mitzvah at Passover, they are working, and it's not that easy. In the time that I started it, not all of them were working. Some were and some weren't. And it makes a difference. So do what you can do but don't let go. Don't say "I can't do it." You can.

EB: Don't say you can't do it because you can. Absolutely.

HB: Do you want to talk to my sister?

EB: Not today. Unless she's right here.

HB: No, she isn't.

EB: Is there anything that you would like to say that we haven't covered that you think is important to say? For when other people read about your life, your contributions, what do you think needs to be said that we haven't talked about?

HB: Well, for 32 years, I worked with the children at the children's camp, and that's something we haven't touched on at all.

EB: You're talking about Camp Pembroke leadership?

HB: Yeah. I was the Director of that camp for 32 years. And it was a very important part of my life. It consumed me because that was hard work, and it wasn't just one day. We

worked every day, even in the winter I would be working at it.

EB: Of course. So that's been a huge part of your identity.

HB: Of course.

EB: And talk about the Jewish component that you brought into Camp Pembroke.

HB: Oh, we certainly did. First of all, I brought Israeli staff over, and I always had at least eight or nine Israeli counselors. And that was wonderful. Wonderful for the children, and wonderful for me. I could sit and talk in Hebrew with some of them, and for the kids it was great. Their programs were good. We used to have wonderful programs, which they helped put down, plan across, and, at the times, the other counselors resented them -- they thought I was being much too involved with them. And I said, "You could involve yourselves, too. They love being with you." So they started taking them out at night for a drink, and that kind of thing, and they loved them. They were so wonderful.

EB: So you got them to mix at that level?

HB: Right. And in fact, in one case, one of the girls has made aliyah and her father never forgave me. I said, "I didn't send her. She did it herself." "Yes, but you made it possible with all of these counselors." I said, "If you want to shut your child off from all kinds of influences? Come on." But he was a difficult man. And she's still living in Israel.

EB: Talk about your experiences in Israel. You took many trips to Israel?

HB: Oh yeah.

EB: At what age did you start going?

HB: In 1961. So I was not a youngster. And then after that, Ben and I went several times. Twenty-one to be exact. Twenty-one times. He loved it, too. He'd say, "Let's go somewhere. Where do you want to go, darling?" "Let's go to Israel."

EB: Twenty-one times!

HB: That's right. And I miss it. And I miss my friends there. And I worry about them. I have family there. My niece, Josh's wife's sister lives in Hod HaSharon, which is not far from K'far Sabah, which is not far from Kal Kiliya. Do you know that name? You've heard it?

EB: Yeah, of course. I have family, too, there. From my father's side there are people there who went from Romania to Israel or Palestine instead of -- or some came here, to Canada, some went there. And my mother's side also. My mother has a cousin with a daughter there and her children. They are in [Safed?]. It's very tough.

HB: My kids have, too.

EB: You have children?

HB: No, these are my nieces.

EB: OK.

HB: But I consider them like mine because they are wonderful children.

EB: So it is very difficult right now. There's no doubt about it.

HB: It's awful. Of course, the oldest one has done his army service and more, and now he's traveling around the world with his fiancé and so I said, "Why don't you get married first? If she's going to be your wife" – "No, we do it this way in Israel." It was so funny to hear this. That's how they do it. So, okay. If that's how you do it, do it. One of them is

here in the states studying. She got into -- what's the name of that college in New York -- Baruch College in New York?

EB: Yeah. Baruch.

HB: That's where she went. That's where she goes.

EB: Sure. Sure. Many people come here for schooling, I know.

HB: Of course. And the youngest one just finished his army service, so he's going into college there.

EB: And it's not just army that you worry about. No. It's any day, anywhere.

HB: It's awful.

EB: It's just devastating for everybody.

HB: And then I'm here and you can't even discuss these things with these people. These are Jews who don't know *anything*, as one of the women who runs the program here is also a Hebrew College graduate. Joan, oh, what's her last name?

EB: Oh, she's probably younger than me, no?

HB: I don't know. I don't know how old she is. And she says, [speaks in Yiddish] "They don't know anything here." It's awful.

EB: So they had holes in their Jewish education. I mean, you can't fill everybody's --

HB: Big holes. But I do have a Friday afternoon service and that took a lot of work and a lot of guts to get going because they were not very happy with me.

EB: Oh, I'd love to hear about that.

HB: Well, the woman who was very supportive was non-Jewish, and she knew more about these things than some of the Jews did.

EB: So you had trouble from the residents here?

HB: Yeah. They are secular Jews. That's what they call themselves.

EB: Okay.

HB: They don't believe in God. Okay. That's your right. What do you believe? I haven't heard yet what they believe. And one of them is teaching a course on the women in the Bible. Oy, is she [inaudible]. She says she doesn't believe in God and she keeps quoting the articles that appear in the magazines and I said, "That's not proof. What you are doing is reading, or talking about people who are writing about the Jews, but they don't -- they're not telling you anything *about* the Jews." For example, one of her statements: Eve was an evil woman. I said, "Where did you find that?" She said, "It was in her book that she talked" -- she's a Reform Jew and she taught a Sunday School class and it was in that book that she found it. Why was she evil? She was non-obedient. She was asked not to eat from that tree, but evil? There was no mention of her being evil. I can't get her to stop.

EB: Nobody teaches that. I've never heard of that.

HB: I never did either. We told her that. We have another person here who is wonderful. The name Kling, does it mean anything to you? Her husband was a rabbi, and her son-in-law is Perkins at Youth Ali and Temple Aliyah.

EB: Carl Perkins, I know.

HB: That's her son.

EB: I know him. I know him. No kidding. That is --

HB: So, the two of us, she lives here. So the two of us, we go to that class. We wouldn't stay away. And we keep bringing up the -- what should be taught and we tell -- Edie is wonderful. She remembers things right away. I'm not that quick. I get so angry.

EB: The issues get in the way. I get it.

HB: Are you almost? I --

EB: We're good. We're good. I just want to make sure we're running and everything is good. It's perfect. You're doing a great job. You're making my job much easier with your great answers.

HB: What are you going to do next?

EB: So tell me about the Friday night you started here? The Friday afternoon study.

HB: The first time I had it, I had maybe 10 people.

EB: That's pretty good.

HB: Yeah, pretty good. And we did as much Hebrew as we could. It's all transliterated. It has to be. And we picked out the Friday evening services some of the songs they could sing. And then we started out with a... [*She sings a niggun*] Do you know that? They love it. And one of the men, he runs the desk here, has a gorgeous voice and he learned to sing it, so he starts my service for me. I love it. And now he's learning Shalom Aleichem. They are, too. They are learning to read the transliterated Hebrew and to sing.

EB: Did you know these songs?

HB: No.

EB: They were innocent.

HB: I'm telling you. They don't know anything! [*She says in Yiddish –ed.*] And the congregation has grown to 35 people, now, which is really remarkable.

EB: In how long of a time?

HB: Six or eight months.

EB: Oh gosh. No matter what you touch, it turns to gold doesn't it? You have the gift.

HB: I hope so.

EB: Because you believe so much in what you're offering.

HB: Yeah.

EB: And people feel that, and they have to come.

HB: I hope so.

EB: Well, obviously, they do. So you haven't stopped?

HB: No, I can't stop.

EB: I don't think that anyone knows this. This is going to be great, that you're still trailblazing.

HB: And I'm still teaching people for bar or bat mitzvahs.

EB: You still do it.

HB: Yeah.

EB: Do they come here?

HB: Nancy's grandson is going to be bar mitzvahed in April, I think. In April. And Nancy and her husband and her boys are going to be reading from the Torah. So I -- and she just left all of this stuff over here. We're going to tape it for her so she --

EB: I cannot believe that you are doing that.

HB: I love it.

EB: You are really incredible. [*Other female voices in the background agree*] You are an incredible lady. A real trailblazer. Do you feel like we're -- that we did a good job here? That you said things that you wanted to say?

HB: Yeah, I think so.

EB: I think so, too.

HB: I'll call my sister and tell her that maybe, at another time, you'll call her.

EB: Well, the goal of the kind of interview I do, I'm an anthropologist and folklorist, the goal is to have your voice be heard. It's much less to have kind of the supporting testimony. That's not as important. Of course I'm getting all of this on the tape.

[break in audio]

EB: I think I'd like to ask you one question explicitly, the one I just saw on that -- which is, how have Jewish values affected your work? Just in your own words.

HB: How have Jewish values --

EB: Values influenced your contributions?

HB: Well, the value of education. The importance of education, which has been part of my life since I was a little girl. My father used to take me to the Hebrew schools where he

was teaching and I used to sit -- as a matter of fact, Gaby Hochberg remembering my sitting on his lap, and he would sing for me. That's how far back it goes. I was maybe three or four years old. I just loved it. And it was important. I think there is your answer.

EB: It is. It has to be. And you brought that forth at Pembroke, too. I mean, Pembroke there is fun and the swimming and all of that, but we know that at these camps, the Jewish education component and the Jewish experiential component, were so big. That's the hard work.

HB: It was.

EB: Making that stuff come alive for kids.

HB: The first year. "I didn't know I was coming to a Zionist camp!" I said, "Well, now you know. Why don't you try to find out what it is?" "I don't want to." "Too bad. You're here."

EB: You're here.

HB: They found out and they were very good about it, most of them. Some of them didn't come back. That was OK, too.

EB: That's their choice.

HB: We couldn't make it with all of them and Eli never held me responsible for that, which was nice. He was a wonderful man to work for. Did you know him?

EB: Eli Cohen?

HB: Yes.

EB: My first years at Tevya I knew him, and then I don't know -- I stopped -- I went to Tevya for many years. I'm not sure why it was Tevya and not another camp. I was too young to know why my parents chose one versus another. It was nice. I always loved it.

I always wanted to go back.

HB: That was when Aaron was there. Right?

EB: That's right.

HB: And he ran a good camp.

EB: He did. But my niece went to Pembroke. I know that. For two years.

HB: And your niece?

EB: Laura Brenner.

HB: Oh, yes. I remember her.

EB: My brother's daughter.

HB: The Brenner who is now the director is not related to your people?

EB: No. How funny is that?

HB: That's strange.

EB: And there are not that many Brenners around. And we're not related.

HB: She comes from originally Belmont, I think.

EB: No. People sometimes ask, am I related to this or that. No. We don't have a lot of us from my particular line. I think it's because they were spread out. Some went to Canada. A lot were in Canada. You know, like Leon's side. My mother's side is around here.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

