

Menorah Rotenberg Transcript

Jayne Guberman: There we go. This is Jayne Guberman. I'm in New York with Menorah Rotenberg at the Barnard Conference: Jewish Women Changing America. We're about to record an interview. The date is October 30th, 2005. So Menorah, can you start just by telling us a little bit about when you were born and where, and a little bit about your early life growing up?

Menorah Rotenberg: Sure. Sure. I grew up in Manhattan and went to an Orthodox day school, Ramaz. Although, at that time, the divisions were not so clear—Orthodox, Reform. I didn't really think of myself as Orthodox.

JG: What year were you born?

MR: 1937. I was actually the first kindergarten at Ramaz, and it had four boys and myself.

JG: Oh my goodness.

MR: So I was always Queen Esther and always the Shabbos Queen. I was just telling my granddaughter, who was very interested in that story.

JG: Very impressed, I'm sure.

MR: Very impressed. Both my parents came from Hungary. My mother came from a very unusual and well-to-do Orthodox family, but the kind that you really don't think of, I think, when you think of Hungarian Jews. She had maids and governesses. For instance, there was school on Saturday. So she and her sister would go to school, but their governess would go with them to carry their books so that they weren't carrying on Shabbat. At the same time, her mother would buy, I guess you'd say, tickets or whatever

to the cafe where everybody congregated on Shabbat in the afternoon. They would sit on the Boulevard, and that would be their Shabbos afternoon activity. So I came from really a very unusual kind of background in that sense where there was this Orthodox piece, but also very much part of the world. My mother did not speak Yiddish. They spoke only Hungarian. They were not Orthodox but nationalist. [Telephone rings.

Recording paused.] I was telling you about the unusual background that I came from.

My mother was really a real feminist. She didn't have the words for that. She didn't say she was that. But she worked with my father full-time. They had an antique business.

The thing about her is she never accepted authority. So she didn't really care what the rabbi said. Partly, neither do I. Everybody in my community knows if they ask something, I say, "Okay, just ask me, and I'll tell you that you can do this." I wrote on the questionnaire that I consider myself a Conservative Jew, and I do. But if people ask me, "What are you? Reform, this, that?" I say I'm meykil, which means lenient. In other words, if there's any lenient observance out there of how to do something, I'll take it because I feel life, in general, is hard enough, and observant Jewish life is even harder.

You don't have to make it any harder if you want to kind of keep the joy in it. So, at any rate, I got the sense really from my mother of being a very – without her being able to articulate that she was a feminist.

JG: How did your family express their Jewish identity?

MR: In a very traditional way. So I went to Hebrew day school, as did my sister. We went to the synagogue. That was really it. I think my mother belonged to the Sisterhood. Later on in life, she did a huge amount of calling for the UJA [United Jewish Appeal] as a volunteer. She and my father volunteered for Mount Sinai hospital, but not as a Jewish thing. We lived nearby. There was a strike. They do that. So those are really the only ways that – it was a very, very traditional–

JG: Home?

MR: – home and very traditional way of being Jewish.

JG: With the observance of all the holidays?

MR: Yes, observance.

JG: And Shabbat?

MR: Yes. I went to a Hebrew-speaking camp. I forgot to write that down. Massad.

JG: Where is that?

MR: Well, it no longer exists, but there was one in Tannersville, Pennsylvania, or New York, and one in – there was Massad Alef and Massad Bet. It was part of the – it was very Zionist, and it was very pro-Hebrew. Most people who speak Hebrew very fluently credit Camp Massad for that. Later I moved over to Camp Ramah, which was the Conservative movement's camp.

JG: Which one did you go to? Which Ramah?

MR: Wisconsin first and then the Poconos. There, the emphasis was not on speaking Hebrew the same way it was in Massad.

JG: How would you describe your own feelings about being Jewish when you were young?

MR: When I was young? I think I was proud. I lived on a block that had no other Jews besides me. So mostly, my best friends were Catholics, and they went to Catholic school. I went to Ramaz. They taught me some catechism, and I taught them – I remember, “Eliyahu Hanavi.” At one point, there was one boy who played with us. He said to me – I guess I was in third or fourth grade. He said, “How about us going together?” He said, “But don't tell” – I don't know if it was his mother or mine. “Don't tell

your mother. She would be very upset.” I was very aware that we were different, and they didn't come and share our holidays; I didn't share with them. But we all got along. So I guess I was proud. I don't know that I gave it all that much thought.

JG: Were you aware, as a girl, of differences?

MR: Yes. Again, part of that was my mother. But I remember being very angry. We spent most of our holidays with my grandparents in Williamsburg. We went to a very dingy shul, as I recall, and I really hated it. There was this idea that if two women stood at the doorway, a man wouldn't be able to walk through. These would be girls who were menstruating. Because they'd be impure, walking between two women.

JG: Are you talking about in the '40s, basically?

MR: Would it be the '40s? Early '50s? Let me see. I was twelve, so how old –? I was born in '37. Yeah.

JG: So very late '40s, early '50s.

MR: Right. So a girlfriend and I decided one day, that's what we were going to do. We were going to stand on either side of the doorway and block it so the men couldn't go through. They pushed us away. However, years later, I put this idea to a practical use. I was on an El Al plane to Israel. There was a young woman on the window seat, and I was on the aisle. A Hasidic man came by with the stewardess to ask if we could move over. I had seen him coming and told the woman to say no. I hope we could keep the empty seat empty. When we both refused to move, the seat remained empty for the flight. It made the flight much more comfortable, and I had the satisfaction of reversing the push that the man gave us from the doorway of the synagogue many years ago. It annoyed me that these Hasidic men felt so entitled. Clearly, there was a sense that you couldn't do a lot of things. In high school, because I think they were just understaffed – Ramaz was still a new school – the girls did learn how to read Torah and the haftarah

because they didn't have the personnel to divide the girls from the boys. Later on, they did. So, for instance, my sister, who's six years younger, didn't learn that. Later on again, way later on, they put them back. They did that.

JG: So when you were learning to read Torah and haftarah, what was the presentation of that?

MR: The presentation? You mean in terms of what we were going to do with it?

JG: Yeah.

MR: Nothing. But I decided that I would teach boys bar mitzvah lessons, which I did. I got Haskel Lookstein, who's now the rabbi at Kehilath Jeshurun. He's probably about four years older than I am. We were friends, and I got him to go with me to a recording studio to make a record of the haftarah trope.

JG: So when you made this recording with him, was it his voice?

MR: Yes.

JG: Because Kol Isha was an issue there?

MR: No, it was his voice because he knew it better than I did. That's why I wanted him to do it for me. Actually, I have it.

JG: You still have this?

MR: I have it. It was one of these, small 45 or 30 – whatever.

JG: 45. A record? A single-play record?

MR: Yeah. Right. It got a little wobbly because I left it on the radiator, but I do still have it.

JG: Well, it's a wonderful story. As you grew up, how did you take that sensibility into your adult life?

MR: I don't know. I have a feeling that I was angry but was really unaware of it.

Because what I remember is – when we moved to – when we lived in Manhattan – when my husband and I got married in 1968, we lived on 95th Street or whatever. We would walk to the seminary to go to the synagogue. But when we moved to Boston, we joined an Orthodox synagogue. I didn't think one way or another about it. I actually belonged to the Sisterhood and made some very good friends, and it was very pleasant.

JG: What synagogue was this?

MR: I think it was Young Israel of Brookline, and Saul Berman was the rabbi. So we've remained friends since. At that time, he was not a big feminist. There was nothing of that in the shul at that point. What he did was to make things easier for Passover. Like you could buy tomato juice beforehand; you didn't have to buy special tomato juice for Passover. He was at the forefront of that whole movement but not into feminism. Then we moved to Montreal in 1971. My oldest son, Josiah, was nine months old. In '72, I had my next son, Ethan, and in '75, my daughter Elizabeth. I didn't belong to the Sisterhood. I had a sister-in-law there, and she said, "Don't belong," and I didn't. I did nothing Jewish. I belonged to a Recorder group that played classical music. I also belonged to a social work group.

JG: You had become a social worker by this time?

MR: Yeah. I had become a social worker. I didn't continue with my Jewish education. Here's something very sad: I didn't think I was smart enough to – I worked with Salo Baron at Columbia, and he was just so brilliant. I didn't think that I was smart enough to continue after I got my MA [Master of Arts]. But I just recently found something and showed my kids that there was – he always had you send your MA thesis into the

National Foundation for Jewish Culture, and I won second prize. I told my kids, you know who won first? Robert Chazen, who's now head of the NYU Judaic department [Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies], and Michael Brown, who was third, who was now head of the – he just stepped down – York in Toronto, University of Toronto. So, that's not a Jewish female thing, but it's a feminist thing of not thinking you're smart enough. I actually have combined my psychoanalytic and Judaic stuff now because my big thing that I'm writing is about the matriarchs and patriarchs in Genesis and looking at basically the transmission of transgenerational trauma and looking at how issues repeat themselves. So, for instance, how every separation in Genesis is either premature, precipitous, or forcible. There isn't one normal separation. So, I'm sorry that I didn't go on academically, but I think this is a wonderful thing that I'm doing. I've started to publish, and hopefully, I'll keep doing that.

JG: That's great.

MR: But to get back to the sense of my consciousness, in retrospect, I realized that I think I was very angry because I hired a babysitter to come in Saturday mornings. My husband would take either one of the boys or sometimes both of the boys. My daughter was too young. I hired a babysitter so that I could sleep and stay in bed. I did not hire a babysitter so that I could go to shul. I then had nothing to do really with Jewishness until we moved to Teaneck. Then, Elaine Cohen moved in a year later. She already knew about the havurah movement, and that's how I then got very involved. Then, I had that click moment that I mentioned on the sheet.

JG: Can you tell us about that? Also, tell us when we're talking about.

MR: Okay, so Elizabeth was, let's say, three, and she's thirty now. So twenty-seven years ago, and I'm bad at arithmetic. So tell me, what year was that?

JG: Well, what year was she born?

MR: Right. Okay.

JG: '75?

MR: '75.

JG: So '78, about.

MR: Right, right. '78, '79, something of that sort. What happened is that one Simchat Torah, my husband was sick and couldn't come with us to shul. We were still going to an Orthodox shul. So, I took the kids, sat behind the Mechitza, and they all just cried because they couldn't participate. I didn't care that I didn't participate. That was not an issue. [It] had never occurred to me – “Do women get the Torah, or don't they get the Torah?” It was really that I saw that this was horrible. If you weren't a man, who could take their kids?

JG: That's who was [inaudible], men and their children.

MR: That's it. All the women sat in the back. So, we went home early, and I said to myself, “I am never, ever going to let my Judaism depend on a man again.” Now we didn't move out right away. But the following year – and I basically stopped going for Rosh Hashanah. The following Rosh Hashanah, I went to the Reform synagogue because – I don't know if you know Marc Gellman. He had come into our community, and he used to write – he was one of the very first people to write contemporary Midrash. So, I went to hear him there, and I went. I did that for about two or three years. Then our congregation that I now belong to, Congregation Beth Shalom in Teaneck, got a new rabbi. It had really been a dying congregation.

JG: This was an Orthodox congregation?

MR: No, no. Now I'm talking about the Conservative. For a while, I went to the Reform for about two, three years, and my husband went with the kids to the Orthodox. Then, the congregation got a new rabbi, and my nephew, by marriage, moved into the community. His name is David Golinkin. He's the president of the Schechter rabbinical school [Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies] in Israel. Some say he was on the shortlist for chancellor of JTS [Jewish Theological Seminary] now. Don't know if that's the case. At any rate, he moved out to Teaneck. He was a Rabbinic intern. I think that gave my husband the impetus also for us to really be a family together in shul.

JG: How had you interacted with your husband around your decision? Was he able to understand? Were you able to explain it to him?

MR: I think he probably understood it. It wasn't a discussion in a sense. "I'm not going anymore, and you take the kids." Fortunately, we were able – it was really very fortuitous. I never thought about what would happen if we didn't have that Conservative shul open up that way. I really never thought – it's interesting. I never really thought about what would have happened because I was not happy in the Reform setting. It was not traditional enough. Didn't use enough Hebrew. Now I might be more comfortable. Going back to what my niece, Nessa, had written about her grandmother.

JG: This is Nessa Rapoport.

MR: That's his mother. Nessa is his niece. Nessa is a niece by marriage. So her grandmother is my husband's mother. She was a formidable woman.

JG: The grandmother?

MR: The grandmother, Mattie Rotenberg. And certainly deserved the many articles that have been written about her. Actually, I think it was a shift for him, certainly. But, again, when he was growing up, as much as when I was growing up – and he's twelve years older than I am – the demarcations of Reform, Conservative, [and] Orthodox were not

big. In fact, he has two uncles who are Conservative rabbis, one of whom was head of the Rabbinical Assembly for a long time – Gershon Levi. I don't think it was a big shift. A lot of the people in the congregation were observant, and [for] those that weren't, it didn't matter; we were. Our kids went to Solomon Schechter Day School, where hardly anybody was observant. He was on the board of the school. It was a new school which needed a lot of parental support. So he was on the board. I was on the Board of Education [and] wrote the religious policy committee. We became very active.

JG: You described this click moment that happened at the Simchat Torah service and then your withdrawal from being actively involved in going to this Orthodox shul. Did it have an impact or ramifications in other parts of your observance?

MR: No.

JG: Either in the short run or in the long run, did you take on at any point any other learning or rituals that you might not have?

MR: No, I didn't. Oh, yes. Because we were founders of this Havurat Reyim, and also, at the same time, because of this new rabbi and there was a push from some of the younger congregants that just joined, some of which were JTS seminary faculty – we have a huge number because we live so close to the city. There was a push for an egalitarian minyan. So in both of these places, I started to leyn, to read Torah, to read the haftarah. We did [inaudible] services for the children. I became extremely active. I taught new songs. I love to sing. I love melodies. I taught Sephardic melodies. I once did “Adon Olam” to “Greensleeves.”

JG: Is this where you also pulled out that recording with the trope?

MR: Yes, I did.

JG: How did that feel?

MR: That was terrific. I at least thought I should tell Haskell that I was using it now for that purpose. Yeah.

JG: [inaudible] So, it sounds like there really has been a huge transformation.

MR: There's been a huge transformation. Yes, from being very unaware – also, we were in Montreal during the '70s when a lot was going on in terms of feminism. But Montreal, and Canada in general, is almost half a generation behind.

JG: Well, that was the other thing I wanted to ask you was, this period that you're describing was a period, as we've been hearing at this conference, where Jewish feminism was becoming established; there was a lot of activity, at least in certain circles. I'm curious how much you were aware of that and how much of an impact that had on your changing sensibilities.

MR: Yeah, it had very little. I think because we didn't stay in Boston [for] a long time. We were there for a year and a half. In Montreal, there was nothing. I don't even know – the one Conservative synagogue where the Bronfmans used to go to was extraordinarily traditional. Women, I don't think, did much of anything. So I was really kind of shut off from anything. There wasn't any feminist – and even my social work group, the issues we discussed were not feminist issues. It was like there was this cocoon.

JG: So it wasn't until you came back to the States –?

MR: It wasn't until I came back to Teaneck and really, really because of – I would give Elaine Cohen a lot of credit because she galvanized a community, in a sense, because they had been in Boston, and they came with a sense of knowing there was this big ferment.

JG: So, was there a group of women that gathered around Elaine and helped make change happen in this community?

MR: Yeah. Right. It was not only women, though. All the men participated. All the husbands really were – what do you call them? – feminists or egalitarian. They all were part of this. We even drew in some Orthodox. There were two couples who were Orthodox, but the wives were more in tune with the fact that they didn't like their roles. So they joined in with us as well.

JG: Over time, was your husband really in tune with you?

MR: Yes, very much so. I think the fact that he had a daughter and wanted her to have full equality – which is interesting because it's the reversal. He had four brothers and one sister. One of the things that he always said about his mother is that she treated the boys and girls the same. They all had to wash the dishes. It wasn't his sister who got stuck with them. So, in that sense, he came with an egalitarian ethic. The funny thing is that – actually, this is one of my feminist moments in a way. Right after we were married, I was starting to make the bed. He said, "Here, let me help you with that." It had never occurred to me that – "Oh. So I said, "Fine." That was the domestic level of my feminism.

JG: Very often, in very small moments, that consciousness gets transformed.

MR: Right.

JG: So, we're actually coming to the end of our time here. I'm wondering if there's anything that you'd like to communicate to your children and grandchildren and the younger generations about what you hope for in this world.

MR: Well, it's interesting because someone said, "Are you bringing your daughter," who's a Barnard graduate also. Whenever I mentioned something to her, she says,

"Mom, I saw it." [laughter]

JG: How old is she now?

MR: She is thirty, and she's a lawyer. She's just so busy that I couldn't imagine her taking the time off to come. But she is very much a feminist. She leyns beautifully. She is very active in her synagogue. My older son has married someone who's Orthodox. I think he could have almost gone either way. My middle son is beginning to be a little bit more egalitarian. But all three of them went to an Orthodox high school.

JG: Which one?

MR: Frisch in New Jersey. Because Solomon Schechter High School was just too far away at that time. Now we have one locally. I'm sorry about that. What would I want for my children and grandchildren –? I would hope very much that they would be feminists and not want their children to sit behind mechitzas, but I am not sure that will happen.

JG: Because?

MR: Well, my oldest son is married to someone who – she can leyn also, which she would do it in a – I mean, she doesn't, but I know that she did for her Shabbat Kallah. I think she has a more traditional sense of how things should be. My son either goes along with it or sees it that way. My middle son, who, by the way, was the one who got me into making tallitot because he wanted one and asked me to sew it for him. Then I said, "Oh, this is easy." I went on, and I made many elaborate ones. I think he would be – I think he is, in fact, a little bit more sensitive to the rights of women. He has many good women friends. He's not married yet, so a lot will depend on that. My daughter married someone [who is] Conservative, so I feel that I've gotten one out of the three and possibly one other. They're all very respectful, but I just would hope that they would all recognize how important it is for everyone to have equal opportunities.

JG: Well, thank you. This was really wonderful. It was wonderful to hear your story. I loved the Simchat Torah story. We will make this part of our archive.

MR: Wonderful.

JG: Thank you very much.

MR: It's been a pleasure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]