Nina Beth Cardin Transcript

Linda Bernstein: Thank you for coming today, Rabbi. I really appreciate your time, and just to give you a sense of our time schedule here. We have one hour, and I have about, I don't know, fifteen questions or so. So, I guess I would encourage you to keep your answers semi-brief, just so we can cover a lot of ground. But if there's something you feel very strongly about, I'm perfectly happy just to let you continue your discussion. Okay. Great. I just wanted to give you a very quick overview of my background, and then I want to get started. So, I am a pharmacist by training, but I decided in 2019 to pursue my other passions of life. And one was to become a cantor. So I entered the Cantorial Internship Program of the Cantors Assembly and decided to fulfill that requirement by taking courses at the AJRCA, Academy for Jewish Religion, California. I started that in 2019, and then that led to getting a Master's in Jewish studies with an emphasis on music and Jewish life. And then I got into the rabbinical program, and I'm very excited to say that I'm going to be ordained, God willing, in May of 2024.

Nina Beth Cardin: Mazel tov!

LB: Basically, I have just four more courses to take, and I'll be finished after quite a long journey. I'm taking this class with Rabbi Rachel Adler on Judaism and Genders. As part of my final project, we talked about the possibility of my doing a series of interviews with female pioneers, such as yourself, in the Jewish rabbinate. So I'm really excited to have this opportunity, and you're my first interview of the series.

NBC: I'm honored.

LB: I hope to get three at least. And who knows where it could lead in the future. Maybe I'll be interviewing more people in the future. Just to let you know, I have a media background. So I'm very comfortable in this setting. I've done radio shows and TV

programs as a pharmacist, as an educator. If you want to find out more about me, I have a website, which is www.drlindabernstein.com. So anyway, that's me.

NBC: Okay, I'll look at it.

LB: Great. Okay, so I thought we would begin by your introducing yourself because I have some bio material from you, but some of it may be dated or whatever. I just wanted to get your current situation. So, please introduce yourself, Rabbi Cardin.

NBC: I am Nina Beth Carden. I am living in Pikesville, Maryland, about four hundred yards from the house I grew up in. It's just wonderful to be in a community that embraced your parents and grandparents. It's almost like I'm living in the 1950s or something. Sometimes this community – my sister lives in the house I grew up in. One of my sons lives on the street with me. Pikesville is a very multi-generational Jewish familial community. That's one of the reasons that I came back to Baltimore after being in New York, New Jersey, having my rabbinic profession starting there. I came to Baltimore in 1999, after having lived in the New York metropolitan area for about twenty-some years. I came as the Jewish educator of the local JCC [Jewish Community Center]. I was there for about seven years. For the last fifteen years or so, I have been involved in the interfaith environmental advocacy community, working both to engage faith communities in the important work of sustainability and working in the advocacy community, trying to make sure that we entrench and codify environmental human rights for everyone in our state constitution. That's what I've been doing for the last, let me just say, decade and a half. Just this past summer, I decided, okay, I'm going to hand that task, the leadership of that task, over to others, and I am reentering right now my interest in writing and in teaching. Going back to rabbinic roots, and then we'll see. This is like a sabbatical year, as it were, this year. Then we'll see. But one of the reasons I'm excited about speaking with you now is because, of course, people interviewed me and the other pioneers, whatever it was in the '80s and early '90s. So, it's going to be very interesting to see how

we respond thirty years later or so to who we are and what we've done. So, I'm excited about your enterprise.

LB: Great. Thank you. So what were some of the main factors that prompted you to want to become a rabbi to begin with?

NBC: Okay, let's try to remember that. It was not to be a pioneer. I know that some people, and especially those people who were against women rabbis and accused some of us [of] just wanting to break things and sort of the modern [inaudible] of things. Just wanted to be sort of iconoclastic. That is not at all why I chose to be a rabbi. It would have been so much easier if, in fact, there had been women rabbis before. There's so many ways I answer this. One, I like the diversity. I don't like parking in the same spot every day, doing the same thing every year, being with the same people every year. There's a grand diversity, especially when you're a community rabbi as I, but especially also a synagogue rabbi, you are involved in all aspects of human life of all ages. You are asked to be part of external affairs, interfaith issues, life and death issues. You're part of life cycle issues, internal, external. There's just a world of engagement to choose from. And education all the time, so you're always growing. I like the way rabbis' lives were constructed. They were very demanding, of course, as congregational rabbis, which is why I chose not to be a congregational rabbi, but everything else about it. I enjoyed – and I remember – taking some sociology classes in college and learning that, in fact, society structures positions and authorizes people to take positions in society that society needs. We have police because we need enforcers of law, right? We have teachers because we need to have someone who educates the future generations. Clergy are a sociologically determined class, because society determines that someone's need to hold a standard of goodness and rightness and equity before us, even when we don't feel like being good and righteous and equitable. I liked that. I liked being seen not only personally but as being gifted by society. Once they recognize that I'm a rabbi, being gifted by society with that authority to say the things that other people might not be able or welcome to say,

and to represent things that other people might be uncomfortable representing.

LB: You are kind of the designated spiritual driver of society in a way?

NBC: Yeah, I mean, obviously, you do not have to be clergy for that. And there are many people who occupy those positions. But one, I found it fascinating in that sociological understanding that, in fact, society creates those positions because society feels it needs those people. It needs to have them visible. So even if I don't say anything, a clergy person walks into the room, the temperature of the room changes, right? Because people say, okay, now they're playing that role, and I'm responding to that role. So yeah, so there's something about presenting that role. So even if you don't say anything, you just show up. Hopefully, people understand and respond to the call for good, that hopefully clergy and religions ask us to abide by.

LB: So it sounds like there were many aspects of a rabbi's role that appealed to you on a lot of different levels. What are your memories of the period prior to and just immediately following the change in the Conservative rabbinate rules about letting women in, in 1985? Do you have any memory of that before and after period?

NBC: Well, there was a lot of progress before women were admitted into the rabbinical school. By ‘85, you mean when women were admitted to rabbinical school? Yeah, it was ‘84. So there was a lot of progress before that. I mean, there was just this enormous leap forward, obviously, when women were able to become rabbis. I think that in the popular mind, I'm not sure how much really changed. I'm not sure how many synagogues automatically changed their rules about who could be part of a minyan and who could read Torah, and who could lead davening. I'd love to know if there are people who have done that research, and how quickly did synagogues change from not yet doing it to doing it, and how much resistance there was at the same time. I do remember that between Amy Eilberg's ordination, which was in ‘85, and Nina B. Feinstein's ordination, which was in '87, there was the last stag class of male rabbinical students at the

Seminary. I don't want to misrepresent them and I hope this is not taken in more broadly than I remember it, but I do remember that there were a couple members of that class who really were upset that they were the last stag class, and there was a little bit of tension there that women were now going to be coming in and after Nina, there was going to be this wave of people [after] Nina Feinstein, this wave of women coming in. I think from the very beginning, and again, I say this with all the love and respect that I have for the Seminary at the time and the difficulties of the movement making these decisions because there were people on the right who didn't want us and who were still wonderful, loving members of our community, and we didn't want to alienate them. But I think, and I think others felt too, that to paraphrase in a sense, on Rabbi Roth's teshuvah, how the requirements of women in order to enter the seminary were, we essentially had to look a lot like men. It was Paula Heimann who made a distinction between equal value and equal access, and the seminary was giving us equal access, but they were not giving us equal value. I think part of the tension that I felt among the women rabbinical students at the seminary in those first few years was precisely on the basis of that, that yes, we were extremely grateful that we were given equal access, but we were not given equal value. One of the things that I find highly amusing, even to this very day, is that I was ordained nine months pregnant, and I don't care what sort of robes you wear, you can't hide a nine-month belly. So it's like, in case people thought that women were going to actually be surrogate men in the rabbinate with all the rights that we have, I'm afraid not.

LB: That would have been hard to achieve. I have a quote of yours. This is in the early years of women entering the rabbinate. "Many women felt they were welcome to rabbinical school on the expectations they would act like men." So that ties in with what you just said.

NBC: Yeah.

LB: Okay. So what was it like personally and professionally to be one of the first to break the glass ceiling and entering the conservative rabbinate as a female?

NBC: I thought it was something – I thought it was simply an accident of history. I just happened to be born at that time of an age where I could still take advantage of going to rabbinical school, because I was already in my early thirties, I wasn't young. It was an accident of history. I never really felt that we needed to engage in that way. But I did need to engage in that way because I was representing something. If you were against women rabbis, you were against me. I will tell you a very personal story. There was someone who was very close to my husband before we got married; he and my husband were friends. And after we got married, we were all friends. [He was] dead set against women being rabbis, dead set against it. And when the vote went through, and I can't remember exactly what year it was, whether it was the vote went through or when I was ordained at some point along the way, he came up to me and said – this is a paraphrase, but essentially, “You have made me homeless,” because he could not – he was a conservative rabbi, too. He could not accept that the Conservative movement was ordaining women as rabbis. So he felt that he no longer had a home in the Conservative movement. And I was the representative of his displacement of his homelessness. We have never spoken again, because he disowned me as a friend, because I represented to him everything that caused him that great pain. And on the other hand, there were times when feminists, very, very, more radical feminist Jewish women, holding an ideology of feminism that was more radical than mine. Well, listen to the way I spoke. Early on, I would not sign ketubot. I would not sign. Certainly, I wouldn't be an aid on a get. I mean, I would withhold my authority because I didn't want to jeopardize the personal status of the person on whose document I was going to be signature. I have since changed my opinion on things because it ended up not making a difference. The more right-wing Jewish community has disenfranchised many of our male colleagues as well, many male rabbis as well. So, as long as they're going to disenfranchise the entire Conservative movement, I need not try to play ball so I can make peace between the

denominations. But when I would say things like that, once upon a time, there was one woman at least who came over to me and thought that I was some sort of betrayer because she had an idea of who I needed to be as a pioneer woman rabbi. I had to represent her understanding of what it meant to be, to her, a pioneering feminist rabbi. I didn't abide by all of her preconceptions. It wasn't about me, per se. It was about how I was living up to her conceptions of what she needed me to be. And she felt that I was betraying her. That broke my heart, too. So both sides cast me, and, obviously, this was not personal at all; it was just reflective of the beliefs people had at the time.

LB: So, did you feel like you didn't have the authority to sign a ketubot, or did you feel like you weren't of value enough to do it? What was that decision? Even though you were ordained, you were an official rabbi.

NBC: I was ordained. You don't even have to be ordained to sign this. I had the authority. I had the right. I had the dignity. No, there was nothing that said, “You're not worthy of signing.” Not at all. But as I mentioned, because this document means something, and if, because my signature was on it, I was going to jeopardize the future of the person whose document it was – especially if it was a get, for example, someone did not accept that she was divorced, and therefore, that would create severe problems for her ability to remarry or whatever. I didn't want to be the one to create those problems. So, I said, “Okay, I will withhold the authority that I could in fact exercise so that I will protect the personal status of this other person and cede my position right now if she's asked me to sign it to a male whose signature for no good reason would be more acceptable than mine, but at least it would not jeopardize her future status.” So, no, it was something to protect her, and I was willing to cede that act. But as I said, once it was clear to me – it probably took about ten years or so – that we saw that the right in the rabbinate Orthodox community in Israel was rejecting Conservative Judaism outright and the authority of all Conservative rabbis, male or female. I said, “OK, well, that's it, guys. I've been trying to play ball with you, and you're clearly not playing ball with me. So, you know what I am

going [inaudible] I'm going to reclaim all of my exercising – all my authority. So, that's why I did that.

LB: Interesting. So, thinking of success, accomplishments, challenges, barriers that you might have experienced, how did that shape your training and your career in this field?

NBC: Say that again.

LB: Okay, so thinking about your training that you went through, and then thinking about the rabbinical school, and then thinking about your career subsequent to that, what were some of your wins and what were some of the challenges? I won't say losses, but some of the things that came not so necessarily easy. Nothing was easy, but that were in your mind was kind of a success as part of that? And then what were the biggest challenges that you faced both in your training and in the career, in some sense?

NBC: So, let me just first say that I did not face many of the challenges and prejudices that many of my female colleagues did face. I mean, hearing some of their stories that they had to endure and experiences they had to endure just was horrible to hear. I don't remember any negative reaction or resistance to my being a woman rabbi. On the contrary, there were times when it was clear that people were inviting me to participate simply because I was this novelty. I know a woman rabbi. Now, again, I wasn't looking for a position in a congregation, right? I wasn't looking for a position in a traditional structure. I was always looking for positions in what would otherwise be non-traditional rabbinic categories. So that certainly helped. But yeah, I just had a totally different experience than many of my female colleagues. And that just breaks my heart to hear what they went through. As far as the training, the historical and textual training that JTS [Jewish Theological Seminary] gave me is the foundation of my authority. Four years was long, but in some sense, not long enough. I just still need to learn every day. I need to learn more and more.

LB: Was there anything lacking in your training that you would have liked to have had? To prepare you, especially as a female rabbi? Was there something in particular that you would have liked to have more?

NBC: Now they have clinical pastoral education. They're spending more time on pastoral education. I think a little bit more of that. We had just the beginning, a little bit of that. Do you know what I think the power of ritual – what liturgy really is? Not just the davening skills, but what liturgy is and what liturgy does and what ritual is and what ritual does. We're on the cusp of needing to create so many new rituals, delving into our traditions and getting, creating, crafting based on that foundation of our tradition. New ways of understanding how we mark the lives of modern Jewry. I think that's really very important.

LB: Can you give an example of some of the new things that you felt you had to create?

NBC: Oh, when I created the Jewish Women's Resource Center, in part so that we could have a place where we could create and collect these new rituals that women needed – pregnancy rituals, mikvah rituals, birthing rituals, nursing rituals, weaning rituals, menstrual rituals. I mean, just all of that about women's bodies. I mean, right now, I was just talking to Mayim Chayim just a couple hours ago. There is an organization called the Jewish Grandparents Network. They're creating rituals on becoming a Jewish grandparent. I mean, there are just so many ways that we need to mark our lives. I even created a ritual for my children on getting their driver's license, right? Going out for a drive by themselves for the first time. And these are rites of passage in our contemporary society – voting rituals. I mean, life is ritualized, and we can enhance that or let people do it on their own, which I think is – they miss so much. Anyways, I create rituals right, left, and center, but I wasn't – and I was an anthropology major in college. So maybe that's why I felt that I knew that I wanted to learn more sociologically and anthropologically about rituals of Judaism, modern Judaism as well. I just felt that it was missing there. But

I would also say, and I don't know how they fix this, but our education was sort of Euro-Ashkenazi-centric as well. And when you get out in the world, not everybody's a Russian, Eastern European Jew. What about those traditions as well? How do we understand Judaism when we look at it through the lens not of – so you have classic Ashkenazi Jewry. So, I think that there was a narrowness of understanding what Judaism was, which I think needs to be broader. I really don't know what the Seminary is doing now, or what the other schools are doing now, to maybe – AJR [Academy For Jewish Religion] is doing a better job of providing a more expansive vision of what Judaism is all about. Of course, when I was going to school, intermarriage was absolutely forbidden challenge – threat to the Jewish people. So, it never taught me how to engage interfaith families. And that was also very, very hard. Just had to come to terms with that vision of absolutely rejecting interfaith and to figuring out how to welcome and accept and embrace new constructions of Jewish families, never mind the gender issues. I mean, there's just a whole bunch of stuff that we didn't –

LB: What's your view on the fact that Conservative members of the Rabbinical Assembly can still not officiate at an interfaith marriage?

NBC: You know, that is so fraught, and we have half an hour left.

LB: So, let's say you don't have to go there. If you don't mind, that's fine.

NBC: Okay, we can move on from that question.

LB: All right. So, did the level of acceptance of you as a female rabbi within the movement, within your –? You weren't in a congregation necessarily, but society or other positions that you had, did that change over time? As you got more confident in your role, people became more accepting, or what was the flow of that?

NBC: No, as I mentioned, it was always an asset to me, which I embraced. I mean, one of the problems was that my experience as a Jewish woman was not celebrated at the

Seminary. So, it was not something that was built into my education as a rabbi because I was a man at the seminary, right? So, there was no way that I incorporated that in my learning. It was something that I had to do, had to develop on my own. But yeah, no, it was always an asset to me.

LB: Okay. What did you feel was the biggest thing that the men were afraid of to engage with you as a woman, as a female rabbi? Was it a turf thing, or was it just a threat to the patriarchal traditions? Was there a particular thing that you felt like you, that friend of yours who was dead against you being a female rabbi or within the conservative movement? Was there one particular thing in your view that you think people were afraid of, particularly men?

NBC: I think that they were thinking – and obviously, it's hard for me to know. I'm not even sure I was thinking; I think it was more in the gut, that there are some lines that you just don't cross, right? Women being accepted as rabbinic authorities was just so alien and foreign and contraindicated that somehow it would – it's like you're playing a game of Jenga or something; even though it was just one little brick, you'd be removing that one brick and everything would fall. That would be destructive of the entire infrastructure. Again, there was nothing against me; I knew that. It was not even against what we would do necessarily, although there might have been some concern for what we might do, because once the structure falls, who knows where the boundaries lie, and then everything could break loose. But I think it was just a symbol of how, in fact, vulnerable the entire structure would be, and all bets are off, and the future terrified them. So they had to stick their finger in the dike and say, “You're going to remove that brick; I'm going to stop it, and we have to protect Judaism.” So yeah, that's all I can think of. It was so visceral. It was so deep.

LB: Has anyone since then, since those days, come to you and say, “I was against you becoming a rabbi, having women be ordained, and I was dead wrong?” Has anyone kind

of said that in retrospect that they had some thoughts about?

NBC: I can't remember a particular “aha” moment, but in short, yes, I have heard that. Yes, I would say in the air around me, I have heard people go, “Oh, you know what?” Actually, women add a lot. Not only do women add a lot to Judaism, but women as rabbis open up opportunities for men as rabbis to behave differently. It is a lot easier for men to be active fathers now, right? And it is much easier for men to represent an expanded understanding of what Judaism is, creative midrash, and all the rest. In other words, we provide an expanded view of what the rabbinate as a whole could be for ourselves and for the men as well, and also for different kinds of sexuality and identity. So, all of a sudden, what we have done is provided a greater sense of liberty of personal expression for others as well.

LB: Do you think that is one of the greatest contributions of the female rabbinate, or are there other things that you also think that you particularly bring to the rabbinical table, so to speak?

NBC: Well, it is interesting you should ask that question because I haven't thought about that for a long time, but one of the things I thought, it's not – this might come out wrong, but let me see if I can say it right. It's not so much I thought that women bring this to the whole rabbinate. It is that the system has welcomed women in. Once the system realized that it was welcoming women in, it all of a sudden said, “Oh, there is a breadth that we can embrace,” right? Not because a woman taught me this, but what bringing women into the system taught me is that Judaism is much more vibrant, much more flexible, much more elastic than we had thought before. So then, just the thinking expanded. Again, it wasn't any one particular thing that we did, but the fact that we didn't break things as people were afraid, but added. We created value-added. Oh, so if we do that and values added, wow, then maybe we can do other things and value will be added. I think it was that the system realized the benefits a new structure, a new component could bring. I

think that was very beneficial, if that makes sense.

LB: What did you feel that you brought as a pioneer in the field? What were some of the main contributions that you have made that were unique, and because you became a rabbi, allowed you to do those kinds of things?

NBC: So I think the – I'm sort of hesitant to say this, but the female voice, whatever that means. In other words, I was able to write a book on infertility or edit a book on infertility. And I didn't have to be a rabbi to do that, but it gave me some sort of authority and interest from publishers to be able to do that. I was the first woman to give a Dvar Torah at the Rabbinical Assembly convention. This was back when it was still in the Concord or Grossingers or whatever. I spoke about my then nine-year-old son climbing into my lap. My Dvar Torah was based on that sense of intimacy, maternal love, filial love, all the rest. And people were very worried. What would I do? Not so much worry, but curious how would I structure this Dvar Torah, the first sort of woman rabbi structure in the Dvar Torah. I intentionally made it in a woman's voice, in a woman's key, just to remind everybody that equal access is only part of it; equal value is another. It was extremely well received. Extremely well received. So, I think people go, “Oh, wait a minute.” It’s almost like a sigh of relief. First of all, she's not pulling her punches. So women don't have to pull their punches, right? They can be who they are. Two, there's a beauty. It sounds sort of prideful, but none of the – I think this is the feeling that I got after I spoke. There is a beauty that they can bring in a voice that is recognizable, but different from ours. And so there was a –I think there was an appreciation for what women could do.

LB: Great. Thanks for sharing that. Right now, I'm going to get into some other series of questions and just remind ourselves we've got about twenty minutes to go. Did you experience personally or hear about incidents of sexual or other harassment in your professional role as a rabbi that you would want to share or just talk about?

NBC: Rabbis themselves being harassed? Personally, I was never harassed as a woman rabbi. No

LB: Do you think that the rabbinical training for women should differ from that of men, and if so, how?

NBC: Oh, in a sense, I would hope not. I think the rabbinical trend again – I don't know what the seminaries are like these days, so I could be speaking out of turn here, but, I do think that both men, women, other gender identities – I mean, first, I think that we have to understand, there are also other gender identities that we have to – that's the class you're taking, right? I think we need to understand each other. So even if there is a time, and in a way we would talk specifically about male and female identity, especially as leaders, as religious leaders, and the identity of other genders, I think we all need to hear that. We just all need to understand it. So even if we're not talking about me, I need to know how other gender identities might be imagining, articulating, or experiencing their leadership. How are they manifesting their leadership? I will be a better rabbi and a better person if I understand that, as well as they understand me. So maybe, I don't know, you're taking the course, and Rachel has a better answer [than] me. Are there distinctions that need to be highlighted and profiled so that people understand it? And if the answer to that is yes, then teach all of us.

LB: Do you think women or female rabbis in training need to become more empowered as part of their training? So, in other words, to boost their confidence, to make them see themselves as fully functional and their role as a future leader. You think that's something that women should get some extra training in, or you think nowadays women are feeling pretty strong about themselves?

NBC: You know, I don't know how to answer that in a gendered way. What I have been seeing is that I have been privileged because I'm not in a congregation and I am not muzzled and constrained the same way. I did once get slightly reprimanded as the

director of Jewish Life for the JCC when I was giving a Dvar Torah to the board and it was during the Bush administration and I spoke about how some of Bush's policies I thought were antithetical to who we were and of course there were some Bush members of the board who spoke to the executive director who gently said to me, “Can you just give me –?” He was great. He said, “Just give me a heads up when you want to do that again.” So, he didn't say, “Don't say it again.” But it made me very much aware of what many of my pulpit colleagues experience all the time. I don't think that's a gender thing. I hear that among the men as well that in the 1950s and 60s when rabbis were public voices and they were megaphones for Jewish values and they spoke to the Jewish community and beyond the Jewish community and if you disagreed with your rabbi, you'd disagree with your rabbi and you would go to your rabbi. You can say, “I disagree with you,” but you would never threaten to fire them or otherwise castigate them for saying – we're so past those days. I hear again with great concern about rabbis who are censoring themselves. And I don't think that has to do with gender. Maybe in the beginning, women needed a little bit more sense of confidence and authority. I don't know. You would know better, given your research, how women are doing today in the rabbinate. But I think it's less gender-based these days than it is the fragility of the position of the rabbi, which is just tragic. And of course, the incredible polarization and lack of acceptance of other positions that we live in today. I mean, just the divisiveness that we have today in American society. And this is a polarization of communities and opinions in American society, and the demonization of the other as opposed to a disagreement of the other. I think that's the greater issue here. That is just scary.

LB: So, making sure that rabbis being in that position to field opinions from so many places and so many diverse and so many diverging opinions, how do you think you can best prepare them for that?

NBC: I'm not sure that it's a lone issue. I don't think it should be up to the rabbis alone. I think it's something that the rabbinical organization should take a part. I think the

congregational organization should take a part, and I should say, look, this is the way rabbis and congregations need to function. A rabbi has to be able to say what they think, and you have to be able to receive it and argue with them when you need to. But they are not to be demonized. They are not to be threatened. Their job should not be on the line because of positions that they argue from a Jewish perspective, right? And so I think putting it on the rabbi themselves to figure out how to do it will fail. I think there has to be an institutional response to make sure that the institutions, both rabbinic institutions and congregational institutions, and maybe beyond that, respond to this and change the culture of the institutions.

LB: Okay. We're going to address that a little bit more in a moment. But what I wanted to – I've got four questions left, and I wanted to ask you, do you have any advice for future female rabbis, given your experience?

NBC: I can't guide you in the congregation. So I can't talk to you about that. Going beyond congregational walls and being in the community out here is just fascinating and fabulous. Depending on where you are it is less financially secure and maybe less financially lucrative. So, you have to be able to accept that. But if you do, there's a world of opportunity out here, and you meet so many people, and there's a freedom that you have out here. So if you can afford it, be creative. You might want to think about creating your own vision and your own structure of what a rabbinate is, what a community rabbi could be. Otherwise, yes, just exercise every aspect of your being, which I know congregational rabbis do too, but there are, as we talked about, some constraints; there's less constraints in the community world. But yeah, I'm not sure what else I could guide them with, but anyone who wanted to talk with me, I'd be delighted to talk with them about things.

LB: That's good advice because just yesterday, I was talking with a member of the Rabbinical Assembly staff and was asking how I can join the Rabbinical Assembly once I

graduate. I found out that you have to wait three years before you can even apply to be in the Rabbinical Assembly. I'm looking at the job prospects in San Francisco, the area, which are very minimal. I mean, I have been looking for months, and I haven't seen one job that actually says the word rabbi in it. So, I said to him, I don't know if I'll be able to ever say that I worked as a congregational rabbi for three years, and even be able to apply. And he said, “Oh, it doesn't have to be that. It could be however you decide to manifest your rabbinical state.” And it could be – so I think that ties in. It's actually encouraging for me to know that there are many ways to fulfill your role as a rabbi in the community.

NBC: Especially as congregational membership declines, but there are still Jews out there who want passionately to be part of the Jewish community in creative ways, and they will look for leadership, and it could be rabbinic leadership. As I say, it's less secure and it's less financially lucrative. But if you can live with that it is so fulfilling so yes you can craft your own version of a rabbinate absolutely.

LB: That's exciting to hear. All right. So, one thing I mentioned briefly in my email, too, is that I'm doing my rabbinical thesis on the changing face of Conservative Judaism, and so I was just wondering if you had any particular comments pertaining to the Conservative movement, and then specifically what the Conservative movement could do more to support female rabbis. Are there any things that you would like to see happen on those fronts? It could be in any way you know whether it's administratively, whether it's training, whether it's halakhically, in terms of Teshuvot? If there is, is there anything that's been on your mind that you wish the Rabbinical Assembly would do or you wish the USCJ [United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism] would do?

NBC: Yeah, I don't. I've been sort of removed from the movement. I mean, sort of being in the advocacy environmental world, and sadly, the Jewish community [is] not necessarily the most active in that. Although now we have Dayenu, and we have Jewish

Earth Alliance, and we have some other wonderful Jewish environmental organizations that are coordinating things. But the – and now we have JCLC [Jewish Climate Leadership Coalition], Adamah, right? I mean, we had Hazon, but as a high priority, sustainability was not top of the list in Jewish organizations. So I spent most of my last ten, fifteen years outside the Jewish community. I really don't know the Conservative movement very well, I must tell you, which is a sad thing to say because I used to be – I was very, very involved for fifteen, twenty years. So I don't know how to answer that in part, but on the other hand, I miss it. I mean, I'm in Baltimore. There are dozens of Conservative rabbis here. There are probably ten or more women rabbis. One of the things that I keep wishing we could do would be to get together both in the broader spectrum, but I would just also – women rabbis, just getting together as women rabbis. I keep saying that I'll be inviting people to join together, but everybody's so busy. I know that the Conservative movement has, and the women rabbis have, a group that they try to get together once every few months on Zoom, and some of us come. I don't know logistically how it could work and succeed, but I do miss – I do miss the camaraderie. I do miss, as it were, the sisterhood of being together with other women rabbis. If there were a way that we could study together on a monthly basis, some otherwise, some substantively, be together and be with each other. I know I would love that, but I'm not quite sure how to make it work.

LB: So there is no women's rabbinical organization, for say – I think there's Jewish women's organizations for sure, but specifically rabbinical women.

NBC: Yeah, I mean, the Reform movement has it, I know. I don't know about the Reconstructionist movement. We have, as I say, there's a core group of women rabbis in the Rabbinical Assembly who strive to get small groups of women rabbis together, I think on a quarterly basis or something like that, through Zoom. I give them all the credit, and every now and then, I go – many times I don't go, so it's my fault too. And it's mostly social, and I try to make it as entertaining and engaging. But I would love to study with

my women colleagues on a regular basis. And a bit more interesting than the chavrusa even, and I don't know how we do it over Zoom. But I just think – yeah, and study different kinds of things. I mean, there's so many traditions, again, that the Seminary didn't introduce me to. I mean, tehines of women in Eastern Europe. The tehines, the women's prayers from Eastern Europe. Oh, it's a world of women's prayers from Eastern Europe. It's a world of women's prayers from Italy. There's just worlds of traditions that we could learn within for each other. I just would love doing something like that. But maybe now that I'm finishing my other work in the environmental world, maybe I'll take the time and see if I can, in fact, gather women together on Zoom, and we can study as rabbis together, some of these rich traditions. Just so much out there.

LB: In our closing moments here, what are your top three wishes for females in the rabbinate for the future? And if you have any other closing comments you'd like to make sure that our listeners hear about you as a pioneer in this field and what you've learned.

NBC: The top three wishes for women in the field?

LB: Yeah, in the future. Then just some closing remarks about what you've learned from this journey and what you'd like to convey about that experience.

NBC: There's this wonderful midrash in the Song of Songs, which talks about honey dripping from the lips. It says something like there are 600,000 women prophetesses, whose voices were not heard until they were needed. And I see the coming of women rabbis as an indication that now's the time when the tradition has recognized that the voices of women are needed and that women rabbis are part of those 600,000 prophetesses that emerge. So, I guess, yeah, understand that we need your voices. We need your voices. We need you steeped deeply in the tradition. We need you to uncover aspects of the tradition that classic education might not have given you. We need you to elevate and amplify that and add to it your voice and your perspective because you, to,o have the authority. Now, once you are grounded in that tradition, and that tradition just

permeates everything that you are, you now have the authority to carry that tradition forward, not just to mimic it, like a water carrier from place to place, but to add your voice to it. So, just know that and celebrate that.

LB: What is the need you're talking about? Because you just said, right now, we need it. So what are you reflecting on, all the craziness in society, the wars? I mean, what's the particular area that you think has a need? And how that ties into that, what you just said?

NBC: Judaism is at an inflection point. I mean, the question is, what is Judaism going to look like twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, a hundred years from now? Our infrastructures, our structures, our organizational structures are struggling. Synagogues are struggling, our seminaries are struggling, our federations are struggling, so there are more Jews outside the organizational structure of the Jewish community than inside the organizational structure of the Jewish community at any one time. So, what are the structures of Judaism that need to emerge? And how do we build them? Is structure even the right word? I mean, maybe it's ways of organizing. What different ways of organizing –? What is Judaism? What's going to –? What are the containers of Judaism going to be? How do we establish boundaries of Judaism when things are so porous now? So you can't have eternal porosity or absolute porosity, because if you do, you disappear as an entity. And yet if our boundaries are too tight, we will suffocate. So what are the new ways that we can imagine building those ways of organization and identity and celebration? What about the rituals? What about how we mark time? How do we build our families? How do we approach our classic texts? I mean, some of the times, even I read the liturgy, and I'm going, “Oh, I like the tune, I like the familiarity,” but if I'm new coming to this, sometimes people say, “Oh, can you teach us the prayer book?” I go, “Maybe let's look at something else,” because there's some prayers in there that I don't want to teach, which it's not the same, and obviously even Tanakh – I mean, the abuse that we can make of several things that are in our Tanakh, if we don't handle it well, and yet there are difficult texts – you can't throw out the whole Tanakh. So, we have so many challenges to Judaism that

we haven't had in the past. And we need creative voices, and Jewish women bring a special creative voice to that. So, I think that's why. Steep yourself so that you are, as I say, just infused with your tradition, and then bring it a new emerging voice so that we can respond to new emerging issues.

LB: What do you feel is the root cause of all of this shakiness within the Jewish structure and within the fact that there continues to be a downward path in membership and synagogues and also in the membership of the USCJ, for example? Do you feel like there's a particular shift that's happened in the way Jews think of themselves, the way they want to express their Judaism and the traditional structures are just not fitting those needs anymore?

NBC: Yeah, huge question. There's sociologists out there who could answer this much better than I, and I don't even know if they've got all the answers to it because clearly the problem is not only internal to the Jewish community. We are part of the larger society, which I was just listening to a podcast which was talking about the infrastructure, the built infrastructure of America, and how we have not really engaged in an enterprise of building some significant infrastructure like our water mains, our roads, or even energy structures in fifty, a hundred years. They said not only is that a problem because the infrastructure is aging, but because we no longer have the social structures in place to craft big issues of how do we create new infrastructure? We are a society that cherishes the individual and the autonomous. We saw this with COVID. How many people would say, “I'm not wearing a mask? You can't tell me to wear a mask for the benefit of everyone. I'm not going to get vaccinated.” We have so idealized and idolized the autonomy and the personal liberty that we have that we don't do anymore for the community as a whole, which is what we did twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years ago as a society and as a Jewish community. I mean, Robert [Putnam] – whatever his name was, right? – *Bowling Alone*. So, we know this. It's not internal to the Jewish community alone. It's a larger, larger issue. So the question is, do you buck it? Do you try to buck that trend,

which is a grand trend, which seems to be not very successful? Do we ride it? Do we just say, “Great, this is what we wanted to know because then there's no sort of structure?” So, how do I mean – that's why we need creative people. Everybody coming together as it were, which we don't do, but everybody coming together and sharing their best ideas of how do we craft new structures and responses and ways of organizing the Jewish community in a society, especially in American society, where organizing and structures are just not part of what we know how to do anymore. So, it's a huge question, but it would be good if that were the question we were gathering to ask and answer. So, we need institutions like AJR, Jewish Theological Seminary, the Federation World, to say, “Let's get together and talk about how we do this.” Because I know here in Baltimore, I think elsewhere, the central organizing organizations don't always help us on these grassroots folks respond to those big questions. And we do it. We respond in an isolated individual fashion and often blame ourselves for our failures, for the failures of our institution, which is unfair. We know that we have to do it as we have to respond to this as a collective.

LB: Thank you so much. Any final thoughts about your role as a pioneer in the female rabbinate and any messages for those listening?

NBC: What a big burden of a question. I have loved being a rabbi. It's just been marvelous. I can't imagine what I would have done with my life. Otherwise, I think it is one of the rare professions that allows you to go in so many different directions over a trajectory of your life and still carry that one title and that one unifying identity, despite the fact that you might be working, you know, with all different organizations and facets, you still do that as this one identity as rabbi of the Jewish people, for the Jewish people, and for the world. So, it's just so – I don't have the right word for it, but it's so flexible, and it can embrace all decades of your life, all different kinds of aspects of your life, and gifts that you cherish and that you want to share with others. So, I just think it allows you to be you in as many different ways that you want to represent yourself to the world and

contribute to the world. It's a great platform to be who you are.

LB: Rabbi Cardin, thank you so much for your thoughts and sharing your experiences. As someone who is six months away from ordination, I feel like it's a very optimistic view of what a career can be and how meaningful it can be in so many different ways, just depending on where you are in your life, and where you choose to point yourself. So, thank you so much.

NBC: Well, thank you for doing this. I hope your other interviews go easily. I am very eager to see the takeaways, the deliverables from this, what you learn, and what you can teach us about who we are. That would be just wonderful. Thank you.

LB: Thanks again.

NBC: All the best. Mazel tov to you. Thank you so much.

LB: Take care. Bye. Thanks.