INTERVIEW WITH PEPI BLOOM

Feinstein Center for American Jewish History
Temple University
117 South 17th Street-Suite 1010
Philadelphia, PA 19103
INTERVIEW WITH PEPI BLOOM

INT: I'll start by introducing myself. I'm Donna Yates, and today is Tuesday, January 20, 1998. I'm here with Pepi Bloom to do the interview for the oral history project. Pepi Bloom is a retired teacher from Akiba High School and an active Jewish educator in the Philadelphia area. I guess to begin what I'd like you to do, Pepi, is introduce yourself. Tell me where you born and when and then if you could just tell me a little bit about the early years of your life, your family life.

PEPI: I was born in New York City in 1927. Spent all of my growing up years in the Bronx. All went to the public schools and my Jewish education was in a schulle, which is a secular Yiddish school. Very funny, because our backgrounds are so very totally different. Marsha Braunstein went to the same schulle that I did, I discovered at one point. However, I also discovered that she was sent there as second best because she was a girl and therefore didn’t need to be sent to a yeshiva. On the other hand, with my parents, it was what they wanted for me. Though actually it was not totally what they wanted for me because it was the one that was in the neighborhood and they would have preferred a Zionist one, because my parents, going back to their European experience, were labor Zionists. Particularly my father was a labor Zionist. And my mother used to speak of Zionist activities in Europe. My parents came to the States in 1921. They may or may not have known each other in Europe. I don’t know. I don’t think so, though I think there were sort of family connections and people who knew them. They were married on January 1 of 1926.

INT: And where did they come from?

PEPI: Both of them came from the Ukraine, an area which had passed back and forth between Poland and Russia, so that my mother grew up speaking Russian. My mother came from a fairly well-to-do family from what I understand. She always spoke of a servant. She spoke of a small orchard. She spoke of a cow. She said her mother was educated. Her mother read Russian. She too was educated in Russian. She graduated from gymnasia.

INT: She came alone, not with her parents?

PEPI: No, she came with her sister, her younger sister, and they were both in their twenties when the came here. They were brought here by an older brother who had come around 1905, who had escaped from the Russian army and from revolutionary activities as well, and he lived in New London, Connecticut, where he had married, I gather also, some distant family connection.

INT: And what brought your mother to the Bronx?

PEPI: She came to New London and was miserably unhappy there and so she came to New York, where I guess she knew people, and my sense is that there was a crowd of what you can call young people who kind of knew each other, landsleit. And she worked, as she always told me, in a factory where they made corsets, I believe. And she also went to night school and learned English fairly well. Unlike my father, who when he came here also went to work for
people that the family knew, and he came to work as a stock clerk in the store which he and a partner eventually bought. Unfortunately, they bought the store in 1929. This was where they made a living until the store was, or the area was, condemned for housing in I guess sometime in the early Fifties, I would say. And by that time he was quite ready to stop working, to retire, and he was not particularly well and in fact he died in 1956.

INT: Rather young.

PEPI: No, he was not rather young. My parents were older when they married. My father was probably around forty or so when I was born. So he was in his early seventies when he died. My mother lived on until 1983 and by that time we had brought her from New York. She was living with me in Swarthmore and her final year and a half was at the Geriatric Center here in Philadelphia.

INT: So as a young girl your grandparents were never part of your life.

PEPI: The only grandparent I knew was my father’s mother.

INT: She came with him?

PEPI: The family, I think, from what I understand, came in bits and pieces. This was a family of six sisters and two brothers and eventually they all landed up here. My father’s father had died young and was in Europe. My grandmother was here and lived with an unmarried sister of my father. I was essentially bilingual. My first language was Yiddish.

INT: That’s what you spoke in the home.

PEPI: Yes. We spoke Yiddish at home and my education was in Yiddish as well. My Yiddish has faded. I still obviously understand. I’m likely to flip into Hebrew once I start speaking Yiddish because I really didn’t continue it and as time went on, the usual kind of immigrant thing, where my mother would speak to me in Yiddish and I would answer her in English. My Yiddish never really went much beyond the child’s Yiddish, though I did get a Jewish Yiddish education until I was about sixteen. It was a secular Jewish household. It was Zionist. But being secular did not mean that you disregarded holidays. There wasn’t a holiday on the calender that wasn’t recognized in some way or other, be it through food or other kinds of celebration. The only time my father went to services was on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, but the Seder was an annual event, initially at my grandmother’s house, eventually at one of my aunt’s houses. It was a world, if you will, in which everything was measured as whether or not it was good for Jews. And my parents continued to speak Yiddish till the end.

INT: I was going to ask you about keeping kosher in the home.

PEPI: I was not kosher.
INT: And the Zionist piece you feel came from your parents?

PEPI: Oh sure. They brought it with them from Europe and my father was a labor Zionist, which meant that socialism was an important piece of that. As a matter of fact, he sort of worshiped Kerensky. Hated the Bolsheviks, hated communism and communists, and what was always interesting and again, it's such a very different world, that they had friends who were communists. Close friends that came from Europe. And the solution of the difference in ideology, and ideology is more important, was that they never talked about it. They talked about other things, but you never entered that world of where you could reach conflict and anger.

INT: Between friends and relatives.

PEPI: If the politics were that different, then you stayed away from that. You didn’t ask questions. The only one who observed kashrut in my family was my grandmother, so I grew up knowing what it is but...my mother used to buy kosher meat but she didn’t kasher it. She had one set of dishes. It was not kosher.

INT: And you were an only child.

PEPI: And I was an only child, yes.

INT: You went to the Yiddish day school but you didn’t-

PEPI: It wasn’t a day school. It was an after-school school. It was an hour a day.

INT: So you went to the public school?

PEPI: Yes.

INT: And then after school-

PEPI: I went an hour a day, five days a week.

INT: And what did you learn?

PEPI: Yiddish, the language, history, literature.

INT: Cultural stuff.

PEPI: What you’d call cultural, secular Judaism. When I went to the high school part of it, they began to teach some Hebrew, but not for purposes of religion at all.

INT: Was that where most of your social contacts were from your friends?
PEPI: No, not in those days. In those days my social contacts were school friends, and the neighborhood. My school was 98% Jewish and the neighborhood was Jewish. The teachers of the school, of course, were Irish, but the students were Jewish. Certainly for the first six grades. Eventually, in seventh and eighth grade, the school encompassed a larger area and so it was only partially Jewish.

INT: So for you, synagogue life was really not part of your early years.

PEPI: Not at all. Not at all.

INT: Do you think if there had been a son in the home it would have been a different situation?

PEPI: No. Because it wasn’t a different situation for my father. There would have been a bar mitzvah, I’m sure, had there been a son. I don’t know how it would have been handled. My cousins are all so much older than I, particularly my male cousins, that I’m totally unaware of what was done for their bar mitzvahs. As you asked the question I realized that. They were much older than I. I don’t know what the family did.

INT: I would think a majority of your friends came from a similar background, so the lack of synagogue involvement—was not an awareness for you?

PEPI: Most of my friends had no connection. I was unique in that I was getting any Jewish education. The kids I hung out with got no Jewish education.

INT: Most of their parents were quite secular?

PEPI: But when I say secular I mean this as a conscious choice.

INT: At that time, yes.

PEPI: When I speak of the people I used to play with, this wasn’t a conscious choice. They just didn’t do anything. It was very different.

INT: We were talking about secular today being a conscious choice.

PEPI: I’m saying just the opposite. I’m saying that back then, when I say my parents ran a secular Jewish household, it was a conscious choice. It was equally Jewish. The kids I saw in the street and with whom I played who got no Jewish education that I know of, and as far as I can remember there was no celebration for holidays and so forth, that was simply letting it ride. It was of no importance.

INT: But your parents chose what they wanted to have in the home. Held on to those pieces that were important to them.
PEPI: I also got sent to a summer camp from the time I was very young, which was a Yiddish Zionist summer camp. It was part of the labor Zionist movement and I went until I was about twelve years old, fourteen, something like that.

INT: And what was the name?

PEPI: It was called Kindervelt. And there were a number of camps of that sort.

INT: Day camps?

PEPI: No, they were sleep away camps. All of these camps represented an ideology, just as the newspapers did and the schulles did. I went to one schulle but there were three others. Here in Philadelphia, as far as I know, there was a folkshule but in New York there were four of them.

INT: And each was along different ideology.

PEPI: Exactly. These were conscious choices that people made. You didn’t just fall into something. You fell into doing nothing, but once you had made the decision to do something-

INT: It sort of framed your life. So your parents were very idealistic?

PEPI: Very much so.

INT: What about your teen years?

PEPI: Obviously I went to a public high school. I chose the one I went to because I could study Hebrew as a modern language.

INT: At the public high school?

PEPI: At the public high school. That really defined the choice. That made the choice for me. But when I was about sixteen, I guess, I joined Habonim, and at that point my whole life took on a different center and a different focus. I would say at that point just about all of my friends came from there.

INT: Were these friends also from the high school?

PEPI: No.

INT: Totally different friends.

PEPI: Totally other worlds.
INT: So you had two different worlds that you lived in.

PEPI: Very much so. Very much so.

INT: Tell me about Habonim a little bit.

PEPI: What was Habonim? Again, I don’t know if there is an analog to these youth movements as they were seen in those days. I don’t think such a thing exists today. They were seen as life-focusing. They were ideological. We all, of course, had the answer to all of the world’s problems. There was no doubt about that. We knew what was right. We were committed Zionists. The movement initially stood for its members either making aliyah or were they staying in this country to continue with a committed Jewish life, but the Jewish life was not in those days seen as observant. It was again seen in secular terms and very much, from that point of view, really very much like what you see in Israel to this day among what you call secular Israelis. A secular Israeli certainly knows when and where every holiday is. Probably knows a good bit of the background. None of the halacha. And always has a sense of what is happening. And I think the same thing you could say is true amongst the Zionist youth groups. They also had summer camps and by the time I got involved with that I was already working in the summer camp rather than being a camper. I was never a camper. I was a counselor and of all things I was camp nurse for a couple of summers, which was an interesting notion. They were supposedly modeled on kibbutz life. Galil is very much like that. Galil existed in those days. The one that I went to no longer exists. It was in Connecticut. And Galil is to this day I’d say not that different from what I knew except that we would have thought of Galil as the sissies because we lived in tents. We thought that was a bit of all right.

INT: What you thought at the time, you were sixteen, seventeen, were you thinking along the lines of going to Israel?

PEPI: Actually not at that point. Not at that point. Once I met Joel, and I met him...Joel comes from a slightly different background but also Habonim and also a labor Zionist. We met at camp and then continued to see each other through Habonim and he had always thought in terms of aliyah.

INT: You met at camp. How old were you?

PEPI: I was eighteen.

INT: He didn’t live in the same area as you?

PEPI: No, he lived in Brooklyn. But people from Habonim knew each other from all over the city. Actually, he was on home leave. He had come back from overseas and he came up to camp because his younger brother was there.
INT: Oh, he wasn’t working there. He just came to visit.

PEPI: He came to visit. He was in the army at that point. This was 1945. This is in the middle of World War II or close to the end of the war in Europe. Before the war in Japan was over because when he came back he was on leave and then was expected to be sent to Japan when the war was finally over in Japan.

INT: So he came home on leave and never had to go back.

PEPI: No, he stayed in the army. He remained in the army but he never got shipped overseas again. And then he was demobilized in 1946, I guess.

INT: What kind of memories do you have about living through World War II and your family and things that were done, things that you got involved in?

PEPI: It's interesting. There are certain moments I remember with startling clarity. I remember that in 1939, when I was twelve years old, a little over twelve when the war broke out, I remember I was in camp. The war broke out on September 1, which was Labor Day weekend or before Labor Day at that point, and I remember them coming in to announce the fact that war had broken out in Europe, and I remember that absolute...that whole roomful of kids, there were about 350 kids plus counselors, and I remember-somehow I still remember that dead silence that fell in the room in dread of what we didn’t know. I don’t really remember much more of those war years except a friend who had a brother who went to the service, a cousin who was in the service.

INT: Nothing of your family being Jewish and having a sense of what was going on.

PEPI: I have different memories but they weren’t necessarily connected to the war. I can remember when I was much younger, and that would have been in the early-middle Thirties. I remember demonstrations that I went to with my parents, demonstrations against Hitler, against Nazi expansion. It must have been, given the slogan, it must have been around '38 with Sudetenland. The slogans would have related to that kind of expansion. So these are sort of not clear in my mind but they were there. When I first became aware of what was happening to Jews in Europe I don’t know. I don’t know. The other thing I remember, again, apparently clearly, I was at the movies with my mother. This was in 1945. It was in the spring. There was a false V-E day. That happened a few days before the real one. I remember being at a movie with my mother and they stopped the movie and made the announcement that the war was over, and I remember going into absolute hysteria, but just uncontrollable. Again, I don’t know why. And then to discover, of course, that it wasn’t, so when the real news came through the emotion had been spent. But it’s interesting I remember about it. I certainly do remember neighbors, a good friend’s brother who was killed, but beyond that...it’s interesting. I remember silly things like I used to read PM. By this time I was starting high school. No, wait a minute. I went to college ’44 to ’48. Sure, so I was in high school during the war and I remember the maps in PM. They had very,
very good maps. PM was a sort of left-wing newspaper. I remember odd kinds of things, bits and pieces, like the flip around. This tells where you my mind was in those days. The flip around of the communists from being opposed to entry into the war to struggling for a second front, which had to do with when Hitler broke the pact. Before that, they were opposed to the war and after that they were faced with it. But the rest I don’t know. I can’t put my finger on it. That the awareness was there, there’s no question, because I can remember in other contexts having to think about it and try to come to terms with it. I remember after the war. I remember November 29, 1947, which was the United Nations vote on partition. There had been a rally scheduled in New York at some place called the Saint Nicholas Arena. It was someplace up in Harlem. And it was decided that the rally would continue and we all streamed up there, thousands and thousands of people. I can’t remember—it was someone who came from the UN after the vote. It may have been Sharett, but I’m not sure, who recited the Sheheceyanu. These are powerful moments that sort of stand out. Dancing in the street. All of that kind of thing. And certainly on May 14, 1948, I remember I was in school.

INT: You were in college.

PEPI: I was in college. I was close to graduating. I graduated that spring. I remember the kids, all of us dancing in the hallway there. But the Habonim experience was a very, very powerful one in terms of friendships, all sorts of interesting people that I can call on to this day.

INT: People you stayed in contact with?

PEPI: To some degree. But to this day. Actually, of my kids, two of my kids, two of the three kids have had similar experiences.

INT: You joined Habonim at what age?

PEPI: About sixteen.

INT: And you stayed involved-

PEPI: I stayed involved until, I guess...well, we went to Israel at the end of ’49 and came back in early ’52, so by that time I cannot say that I was involved with Habonim, but certainly most of our friends still came from that milieu.

INT: But from sixteen until eighteen, nineteen, twenty-

PEPI: Oh, if you look at my wedding pictures, most of the people there were from Habonim. Our contemporaries were from Habonim and we still remained involved. But of course it was a more and more social kind of thing rather than going to meetings and that. But before that, every week there was a meeting.
INT: Tell me a little bit about your decision to go to college and where you went and what you majored in.

PEPI: There was just never any doubt that I was going to go to college. My cousins all went to college and I was going to go to college. There were these four marvelous city colleges that were free, so I went to Hunter. I went by subway. You were there in a half hour, forty minutes.

INT: And what did you decide to major in?

PEPI: I eventually majored in something that was called pre social-work, because I thought I would become a social worker, which I never did. We left for Israel a year after I graduated. I guess it was a good school. We used to sort of talk about it often as an overgrown high school because we saw it as sort of rigid, but there were good people there. There were good students, there were good teachers. I think I got a what you can call a decent education there.

INT: That's interesting when you say we. Did you have friends who went with you from high school to college?

PEPI: No. There were a few people. There were a few people but in the main no. When I say we I mean we who went to Hunter.

INT: I was wondering if it felt like an extension of your high school.

PEPI: Not from that point of view, no. No. Not at all. First of all, high school was coed and college was all women. It isn’t any more but it was then. Men began to come in toward the end.

INT: I’m curious about the Jewishness of Hunter College and if that played any role to your decision to go there.

PEPI: That would have been true of any of the city colleges. That didn’t make any difference.

INT: There was a large Jewish population?

PEPI: Look, a quarter of the population of New York City was Jewish and if you think about it, those were days when Jewish kids went to college. Other immigrant groups were less likely. I’m not going to say nobody went that was from another group, but the people who took greatest advantage of college, and particularly the city colleges...Did you see that marvelous movie they showed at the Y a few weeks ago of “Arguing the World?”

INT: No. Was that that period of time?

PEPI: Well, it’s earlier. It’s earlier, because these people are probably in their eighties now. Irving Howe and Daniel Bell. What’s his name? He turned all the way right. His son is involved
INT: I was just curious if there was a major change in going from the high school environment to the city and to the college environment, if there was any kind of-

PEPI: Not really. I think that was probably why we talked about it as an overgrown high school. Hunter in those days...simply as background, Hunter used to have an uptown campus and a downtown campus, and the uptown was actually quite close to where I lived in the Bronx, except that during the war it had been taken over by the WAVES, the naval part of the service-women. And then it was the first home of the United Nations. Hunter College uptown. It's now called Lehman College. When I came to Hunter College in the city, the new building had just been built. I think it had only been open for a year or two. It was a big, sixteen story building, and the whole college was in that one building. And so you really sort of disappeared into the building in the morning and reappeared in the evening.

INT: Which is like a high school.

PEPI: In that kind of thing, yes. It had that feeling. The libraries, of course, were much more but...I was also involved, again, with...Hillel was located at something called Roosevelt House, Roosevelt being Sarah Delano Roosevelt. She had left this house to Hunter College, and it was an interfaith house, so the Neuman Society had its place there and so did Hillel, and within Hillel there was what was called IZFA, the Intercollegiate Zionist Federation, and so I was involved with IZFA. There were these kinds of funny things that to this day, the more things change the more they remain the same. This kind of internal thing that Habonim had to position itself in IZFA so that it would be one of the major forces taking over, and then there were the General Zionists who were doing their thing and somebody else was...exactly the same, but you saw the mirroring of what was happening in the adult world, if you will. But there were all sorts of activities and so forth that I was involved with at that time with IZFA.

INT: What year was this?

PEPI: This was '44 to '48. I graduated in '48.

INT: Right before the State of Israel. so there was a lot of activity going on and a lot of things to be involved in politically.

PEPI: It was an extraordinarily exciting time. I've often tried to think about how that differed from what my kids knew in growing up, and it was a time when we were pretty sure we knew what was right and what was wrong. It was a time where there was an absolute evil in the world. There were no grays about certain things that went on in the world. And it was a time when we really thought we could make a difference. We were, in that sense, I think, really very optimistic.

INT: Do you think that's changed for young people today?
PEPI: Oh yes. The notion of...I shouldn’t say that. My kids are, all three of them I think, are very much involved in trying to make a difference in the world, but I don’t think they view the world quite as optimistically as we did, despite the fact that we lived in a time of grave horror. There was something about thinking that the world was reparable. I think that was maybe it. I’m not sure. I think that was it.

INT: What are your impressions or feelings about being a woman at that time? It’s such a major issue today.

PEPI: It’s something I’ve been thinking about a lot recently in another context altogether, but it’s a story that keeps coming back to my mind. Joel and I were married just before I graduated from college. We were married in March of ’48 and I graduated from college in June of ’48. But at one point, I guess at some point in my last year, my father turned to me and he said, “Pepi, would you like to be a doctor?” I was very surprised because he had never said anything about that, and I went into all the reasons why I didn’t want to be a doctor, but what went through my mind, and I remember this clearly. What went through my mind at the time was that my God, my father really wanted to have a son. And now I have thought about that all over again and I thought to myself what does it say about me, that my reaction to my father’s question was not that I want to be a doctor but that he wanted to have a son who would have been a doctor, and it says something about my whole way of looking at the world, which essentially assumed that these were things that men did.

INT: When you chose social work, when you decided you were going to school and you were taking up a certain course of study, for women at that time it was certainly on track.

PEPI: Yes. Between social work and teaching. The arts, I guess.

INT: But it’s interesting that your father said medicine. Was that something you talked about?

PEPI: Never. Never. That’s probably why I thought of it in terms of that he wanted a son, because it was something that...No idea. It was not something that I could ever remember having been interested in, and the sciences were certainly not a strong point for me. It was just extraordinarily unlikely, but I had been thinking about what it meant about me, that I would have assumed that this was a male thing.

INT: How many role models of female doctors-

PEPI: Well, there weren’t that many, though it’s interesting that my mother had a dentist who was somebody...I’m not sure if she actually knew her from Europe or she sort of gravitated toward her because she spoke Russian and she was trained in Europe, and it was a woman. That was, I guess...some of my aunts worked but not in professions. My mother’s sister was a nurse, which was about as far as one would go. No, I certainly didn’t know any women doctors.
INT: Tell me about Joel a little bit. You met at Habonim at the camp, and then what's the story of your courtship and marriage?

PEPI: Well, we kept seeing each other. Once he got out of the army we starting seeing each other regularly, and eventually realized...we spent two summers at camp together.

INT: Was his family background very similar?

PEPI: His family background? No, actually. His father had served in the Jewish Legion. Again, a Zionist background. His father had served in the Jewish Legion in 1917 and he was in Palestine until 1919, when he came back.

INT: Was his father born in the States?

PEPI: No. His parents came from Poland. His mother’s family actually. From Warsaw. His mother’s family was a much more highly educated family, certainly than mine, and I’d say more so than Joel’s father’s family. Joel’s father’s family was very, very sternly and strictly orthodox. I got to meet most of his father’s brothers. His father was one of five brothers. The Zionism had been such that two of the brothers and Joel’s grandparents, Joel’s father’s parents, went to Palestine in the Thirties to live. His uncles came back but his grandfather died there and so his grandmother was not about to leave there with her husband there. She stayed on and I’m not sure of where she stayed initially. Eventually, when I got to meet her, she was at a moshav zekanim (old-age home). I remember very clearly it was as you enter Jerusalem on derech Yaffo, it was before all the new roads were built, just opposite of where Binyonei Haumah are today, was this moshav zekanim. She was a marvelous old lady, just an extraordinary old lady about whom there are all sorts of lovely family stories. Her name was Malka.

INT: So his Zionist roots go very deep.

PEPI: Oh yes. And his mother also. His grandfather on his mother’s side-they came early in the century. They came around 1905, I believe, 1907. Someplace in there. He taught at a rather famous Yeshiva down on the lower east side called the Jacob Joseph School, and he was something of a scholar. He had two sons and two daughters, and all of them were well educated Hebraically. My mother-in-law, just in terms of the history of the thing, there was a famous educator called Heth Alef Friedland, who was at the Seminary, and he trained a group of teachers, and my mother-in-law was one of his students, which indicates a certain cachet. She was teaching Hebrew when she was about sixteen. In fact, there was a lovely incident when she had discovered at one point that Rose Halpern, who was in her day a very famous Zionist leader, she was president of Hadassah for many, many years and a member of the executive Jewish Agency for Palestine in the days when the state came into being...Rose Halpern had grown up as Rose Luria. Halpern was her married name. My mother-in-law had been her teacher, her Hebrew teacher, and my mother-in-law had gone to a shloshim for Maurice Samuel, who also was an awesome scholar, and she met Rose Halpern there, so she introduced herself and asked if she
remembered. And Rose Halpern, with enormous enthusiasm, as I’ve been told, dragged my mother-in-law around the room to tell everybody about this great Hebrew teacher that she had. My mother-in-law continued the process of education and self-education and was a teacher.

INT: Seems to be a little thread here.

PEPI: That was Joel’s side of the family.

INT: I know, but it’s interesting that it continues.

PEPI: In Joel’s family, his grandfather taught, his mother taught Jewish Hebraic stuff in some of the better Yeshivos in Borough Park, or day schools and Joel is a product of a day school education.

INT: And also you said his parents were more orthodox.

PEPI: I would not use the term orthodox. I’ll use the term observant. They kept a kosher home and they observed the holidays.

INT: Did they belong to a shul?

PEPI: They belonged to a shul. There were likely to go to shul but nonetheless, his father was a member in the local Farband, which was sort of labor Zionist offshoot. My mother-in-law was very, very active in Pioneer Women, which is today Na’amat. Again, labor Zionists. And Joel was in Habonim as was his younger brother. His younger brother lives in Israel and has since 1950.

INT: So when you two made a family, came together as a couple, got married in, you said, March of 1948, what kind of wedding? What was the compromise here or was there a compromise?

PEPI: No compromise. There was no need for a compromise.

INT: So tell me a little about the wedding.

PEPI: It was a big wedding with family on both sides and a lot of our friends. The place where it was held no longer exists. It burned down. It was called the Broadway Central Hotel. The Rabbi was a sort of cousin of my father’s, who was an orthodox rabbi, the same Rabbi who officiated at his funeral and has officiated at family events. Joel was still in school then. He was studying chemical engineering at Brooklyn Polytech.

INT: And you were still in school also?
PEPI: Yeah, but only for a couple of months. Joel had more than that to go. Joel graduated, I guess, in August of '49.

INT: Did you rent your apartment first?

PEPI: No, we lived with his parents.

INT: It must have been interesting for you. So now you're in a kosher home, a little bit more traditional. These were not issues?

PEPI: No. I had to remember not to use a fleishig knife. These were not things that were...they weren't literally foreign to me. We just didn't do them and I didn't see it as a problem. This is what they did and that was fine. It's not today's world where if somebody does something different it's horrendous.

INT: It wasn't an issue.

PEPI: We couldn't afford the apartment. This was after the war, and I remember Joel was making $105 a month from Uncle Sam plus his tuition, of course, and I got a job at the Jewish Agency for Palestine.

INT: And how'd the work come about?

PEPI: I guess I knew somebody who knew somebody kind of thing. That was also an interesting time, because this was-(end of tape 1, side 1) ...was still housing the Jewish Agency building.

INT: The Israeli consulate?

PEPI: The Israeli consulate was still housed in the Jewish Agency.

INT: Which was in the city? You went into the city?

PEPI: Oh yeah. That was sort of assumed. Hunter was in the city and we lived in...at that point we moved to Brooklyn where his parents lived, in Borough Park, which was not the Borough Park that you would know today. Though it always had an orthodox component, it was not what it is today. And I worked in sort of various slots at the Jewish Agency for, I guess, for just over a year because I went to work there in the early summer of '48 and then worked there until we left for Israel, which was October of '49.

INT: So a little over a year.

PEPI: Or was it November? No, it was November of '49, I think, because we traveled for a while and then we landed up in Israel.
INT: This decision to go to Israel was made immediately when you were married, it was always in development? Tell me about that.

PEPI: This was something that Joel had always expected to do. It was something that his father had dreamed of doing and it just didn’t pan out for him, but it was something he dreamed of doing. And Joel had expected always to do it. Initially, he was part of a Garin (start-up group) for a kibbutz at Gesher Achzib. A group of people from Habonim that settled at Gesher Achzib, which is in the North. It's about halfway between Nahariya and Rosh Hanikrah. There’s a Club Med at Achzib and this is up the hill from the Club Med at Achzib. Beautiful beach at Achzib. And a good many of our friends were in that Garin, and they made aliyah, I guess, right after the state, I suppose and maybe even before. I can’t remember. And they settled at Gesher Achzib and initially that was what we were planning on doing. But he had gotten his degree in chemical engineering and he wanted to work as a chemical engineer and the kibbutz was ready to go along with it, so I guess had he found a job in Haifa or something like that we would have landed up at the kibbutz, but as it turned out, he found a job in the military defense industry, which was located outside of Tel Aviv, so that put an end to the idea of living on a kibbutz. And when we first arrived we stayed with old friends of Joel’s parents until we found a room in Tel Aviv where we used to fight with the djukes (water bugs) who jumped in through the window. It was a large room. In the corner we had a little thing we cooked on and I think we were paying at that point 25 pounds a month for that one room. I think the woman under rent control was paying 5 pounds a month for the whole apartment, if I remember correctly. And it was limited to six months of our staying there, and these friends had to countersign that we would get out after six months.

INT: So do you remember what that felt like going to Israel that first time?

PEPI: We felt very comfortable and very much at home there. A lot of people we knew. We were not coming to strangers.

INT: You knew a lot of people?

PEPI: We knew a lot of people.

INT: How about the leaving with your parents? Do you remember that being-

PEPI: I didn’t find any particular difficulty in leaving because it was exciting. It was something new. It was something you do. Of course I realized eventually that for my parents it was wrenching. My father never got there. My mother came to visit while we were there. But again, it was an enormously exciting time to be there. It was right after the state.

INT: One year.

PEPI: Right. It was right after the state. It was at the height of rationing-tzenna.
INT: The war had to be just ended. The war was eighteen months.

PEPI: The war had ended. The country was quiet as far as that goes, but there was very little and Joel got a job fairly soon for a very sort of legendary guy who had built up from nothing the Israeli defense industry during the days of the Haganah and after, whose name was Chaim Slavin, and he worked for Slavin for a while and then eventually went to work for...the government had laboratories in explosives. He worked there for a short while until he got involved in an explosion and then he went to work for the Ministry of Defense.

INT: He was okay? He wasn’t hurt?

PEPI: They were superficial. He might have had permanent hearing damage as a result of that but the others were superficial. And then he went to work for the military industries in their central office at Tel Aviv.

INT: And you got a job?

PEPI: I signed up for a social work course which ran for—it was run by the Ministry of Social Welfare and it was a nine month course. The first three months were all classroom and then six months were half and half of classroom and work.

INT: So how was your Hebrew when you got there?

PEPI: Well, my Hebrew was weak. I had taken Hebrew in high school. I had taken Hebrew in college. It meant that I had a lot of trouble dealing with people when they talked fast. But on the other hand, when I talked I was not likely to make too many grammatical errors because that I had beaten into me. So it was sort of simple, and fortunately, a good bit of the subject matter in the courses that I was taking, the language, the way of addressing things, was familiar to me, so I was able to understand even when I missed things.

INT: It sounds like it was a really difficult challenge. I know you were young but—

PEPI: I didn’t particularly...I didn’t see it as such.

INT: The way you’re talking about it, it doesn’t seem like it was such a struggle.

PEPI: It wasn’t. It was exciting. It was fun. It was interesting.

INT: A lot of your friends were there.

PEPI: Yeah, we had friends.

INT: As a support system.
PEPI: There was also an adult couple to whom we could turn where there were real problems.

INT: Joel's grandmother was also there.

PEPI: Yeah, but that...we would go to see her but she was in Jerusalem and we were in Tel Aviv and eventually Ramat Gan. I used to drop in to see her if I had to be in Jerusalem on business. But no. She did not serve in any way as a parent figure.

INT: You had other people.

PEPI: There was a family in Rishon LeTzion that we used to go visit, that we used to enjoy going to visit. There too, it was a friendship of my father-in-law's, going back to the Lower East Side and also the Jewish Legion, but there were young people there. The people that we knew in Herzaliya--their children were at Gesher Achzib.

INT: So you had a whole social network.

PEPI: There were a lot of people we knew and we were terribly busy. These were long working days. But my funny experience—you asked about Hebrew. I had to strain to understand it. The real tension was simply trying to understand, and by evening you couldn't get any Hebrew out of me. I couldn't speak Hebrew to save my soul. I was too tired. But one day, toward the end of a course, I remember I fell asleep in class and at the break all sorts of people gathered around me said, now you know Hebrew. And they said they all have gone through this. When there was this tension, you didn't fall asleep. It's when you relaxed...So the Hebrew came. A little slow but it came and you learned to express yourself in certain areas. I couldn't have held a political discussion but I could certainly talk about my work or go marketing. That was the vocabulary. But in the evenings we spoke English and we spoke English to our friends and we read what was then called the Palestine Post and so in certain respects, I didn't use the Hebrew for...and I didn't go to an Ulpan when we came. That sort of thing came a bit...well, they must have existed because when my brother-in-law and sister-in-law came about a year after we did, I remember my sister-in-law going to an Ulpan.

INT: Where did they end up living?

PEPI: They started out living with us. We had a one bedroom apartment. It was a little crowded.

INT: Joel's brother?

PEPI: Yes. They started out living with us and then when we left to go back to the States they stayed on in the apartment, but the mold was growing on the walls. It wasn't very well built. Many things weren't very well built in those days. And so they soon sold the apartment and they bought one of their own.
INT: Now when you finished the course, which was nine months-

PEPI: But I started working after three months.

INT: So you were in school and working?

PEPI: It was three days and three days. The working was essentially an apprenticeship.

INT: Then did you get a job after the nine months?

PEPI: Oh sure. It was run by the Ministry and they placed you.

INT: They placed you right away?

PEPI: Sure.

INT: So where was the job?

PEPI: I was in a town called Magdiel and Magdiel-how could I describe where Magdiel is? It was north and east, I guess, of Tel Aviv. Not far from Kvar Saba, I suppose. Sort of on what was called the little triangle, and it had a mabarah. It also had a shikun for Yemenites. The Yemenites had been there longer. A small Yemenite shikun.

INT: A mabarah I know is a transitional camp. A shikun?

PEPI: A shikun is actual ostensibly permanent housing.

INT: So you moved from one to the other?

PEPI: Not we. Not us. You mean they.

INT: No. People in the mabarah would go to the shikun?

PEPI: Well, they eventually, around the time we left, around the time I left the job, they had begun to build permanent housing and it was very, very minimal kind of permanent housing but it was being built and when I came back—I guess our first visit back to Israel after we left. Was it ten years later? It was 1960, I think, was the first time we actually came back to Israel. And we left Israel the beginning of '52. I was curious and we went back to Magdiel and I saw the shikun that had been built, the housing, and people had begun to add to them and there were refrigerators you could see through the doors and it was clear that people had begun to make a life for themselves there.

INT: Who was in the transit camp, in the mabarah?
PEPI: It was a mix. The Yemenites were actually in the shikun, a small group, and they were there. There was a mix of in the main, I guess, Iraqis and Romanians. Mixed. The Romanians were what they called hard-core cases that had come out, that they had let out, and the Iraqis had just started coming and I learned a heck of a lot, and it's too bad that there were things I hadn't learned before. But in many ways it was culture shock because it was a very different world view than this nice middle class Jewish girl from the Bronx.

INT: What was your job?

PEPI: I was a social worker.

INT: And your job was to do what?

PEPI: Everything. It was a kind of mix of what you call a municipal case worker, where you simply hand out money, and then you also handled special cases. I had an enormous case load. It was crazy.

INT: How old were you at the time?

PEPI: Twenty-three. It was only because I was twenty-three and I didn’t have enough sense to know that I couldn’t do this.

INT: What about language with this group of people?

PEPI: Well, Hebrew became the language.

INT: And they could minimally speak to you?

PEPI: I had two secretaries. One of them was a woman who could speak Polish and Russian, so you could sort of begin to communicate with some of the Romanians.

INT: Did your Yiddish come in there? Was Yiddish helpful?

PEPI: A little bit. Yeah, Yiddish came in a little bit. The Yemenites, of course, there was Hebrew. With them there was no problem. The Iraqis, I had another secretary who was an Egyptian, and even though the Arab dialect was different, he could help to bridge it. I didn’t have that much time to spend with people unfortunately. I remember going through my files, my case load, with my supervisor at some point. I think we went through two hundred names or something at one sitting, some crazy thing. All I remember is that when I left I was replaced by two and a half people. Again, I was too stupid to know that you have to complain so I didn’t.

INT: Well, it was your first job. Naive is a better word.
PEPI: Right.

INT: From what I’ve heard about the mabarah is nightmares.

PEPI: Some of them are really not...

INT: Tent cities.

PEPI: Well, in tents were better than what they also built, which were called pahonim, which were little metal structures, so that during the summer they turned into ovens. They were absolutely dreadful. Just awful. Oh, there are all sorts of stories. If you think the machinations and the religious secular thing started now...and of course things were given out on a political basis, so I was sort of the beyond and above politics and they couldn’t talk me into joining a political party, which they couldn’t quite understand but I refused. But the schools had been given over. The town school was run by Mizrachi, it seems to me, and then there was a Histadrut school and then there was also a Poalei Agudat Yisroel school. That was it. And the kids used to all...the parents tried to get the kids into the Histadrut school because the Histadrut school meant jobs. The Mizrachi school was the local one. So the Agudat Yisroel school sat empty. This was not so terrible during the spring, during the summer, because it didn’t rain. When you got to the rainy season and there just wasn’t enough room in the classrooms for the kids, I went to the guy from the Agudat Yisroel and asked if...you don’t have any students there, I said. Can’t they use the classroom? Well, ahin, aher, and back and forth and I’m doing this convincing and he finally agreed. So with great joy I leave. I finally got classroom space for kids. They don’t have to sit in the rain. A couple of days later I come back and aha, the kids are out in the rain and the classroom is...I go screaming down the road “what happened?” Do you have any Hebrew?

INT: Minimal. You’ll have to translate.

PEPI: Okay. Because he looked at me with great anger and he said “Hem katvu et shem Hashem al haluach umachaku.” They wrote the name of God on the blackboard and erased it. So for that reason he put the kids out in the rain. So let us say that again, what goes around comes around. Nothing has changed. Nothing has changed. But it was obviously...where else in the world would a twenty-three year old have been given the kind of opportunity and experience that I had.

INT: So how long where you in the job?

PEPI: I was there for about a year, I guess. I would guess.

INT: So you would summarize it, looking back-

PEPI: It was probably, again, one of the more fulfilling and exciting things I ever did. I learned an enormous amount. Had I known at the end what I knew at the beginning, I would have done it differently, but it’s interesting. This whole to-do with the Yemenites and the Yemenite babies-we
had been told it was so, that Yemenite babies, after they were weaned, would begin to show signs of physical decline, and so they used to be sent to what was called a Bait Havra’ah, a kind of institution to build them up against this. And this is, of course, part of the background of what you might have read about. Children actually were in bad physical shape and were being sent to institutions. Whether or not the stories of their having been kidnaped and given to others, I can’t doubt this. But certainly I was involved in it. Of course, I also, when I say if I ever had any sense and knew at the end what I knew at the beginning...I’ll never forget that a patriarch looks like a patriarch. They’re beautiful people, the Yemenites. And he walked in with his beard there. We were sitting there and we were having a bargaining session because I had been informed that it was preferable, if possible, to get the parents to contribute to the upkeep of the child in the institution, simply so that they would feel that they were involved, and this was minimal. It was a pittance in relation to what it actually cost to maintain the child. And I’m an American so you tell me you do this—it’s a one price house. I don’t have this business of bargaining. And this guy is insisting he won’t do it. He can’t afford it and he won’t do it. And eventually, he looked at me and he says, look. In Taiman I had fourteen children and seven lived. He says here, the government wants all my children to live. Let the government pay for it. This, of course, is what I call culture gap, but on the other hand, if I’d had any sense and if I’d starting out by saying you got to pay a pound and we would have bargained, he would have come down to twenty-five, to the quarter of a pound that I wanted, and he would have felt that he won and I would have known that I won and everybody would have been happy. But I wasn’t smart enough.

INT: Well, you didn’t have the experience. You were very young too.

PEPI: Exactly. That’s what I’m saying. If I knew when I started what I knew when I left I probably would have done a better job.

INT: You were there in such a historical time in the country.

PEPI: It was a very exciting time.

INT: But the way you’re talking about it, what it sounds to me like, was that the idealism wasn’t clouded over. Like you had an idealism before you went and you got involved and you...did it turn out to be everything you expected it to be? Were there moments of thinking I shouldn’t be here, this isn’t what I wanted it to be?

PEPI: We once had a shaliach, one of the people coming...We once had a shaliach, I remember, who came to work with the kids in Habonim, and there was a group of people who had to sit-in a sense sat out the war and the period after what we call the state. They couldn’t get to Palestine and they’d been living together and planning to go and couldn’t get there and they somehow or other felt that they had given their lives for the cause and they were talking in this vein to the shaliach, how they were prepared to give their lives for and do for. And I’ll never forget. The shaliach said to them, if you’re going to Israel to give your life, to contribute, stay home. He said if you will be happy there and fulfilled in what you’re doing, then go. But don’t go with the idea
of some sort of martyrdom. That’s my answer to you with regard to what we were doing. I didn’t have any sense of martyrdom. It was exciting. It was fun. You had a sense of being able to start something and complete it. You had a sense of doing something that had meaning. So it’s not a matter of idealism. There are lots of ways in which the idealism was shattered. The corruption was there then. The stupidity was there then. I know somebody who literally broke his wrist banging on the desk of the Minister of Finance because he was...the inability to change. One of my favorite stories with early-this early kind of discovery that people aren’t what you think they’re going to be. The rainy season could be pretty messy in Israel and one night during the rainy season I was getting ready to go home and it was a really lousy night, and there was only...the community in which I worked, Magdiel at that time, was about a mile in from the main road, maybe a kilometer. I don’t remember. It was a fifteen, twenty minute walk, I guess, from the main road so it must have been about a mile. And there was one bus a day that came all the way into Magdiel in the morning and one in the evening. So if I missed the bus in the morning I had to walk and if I missed the bus in the evening I had to walk out to the main road, which on most days didn’t make that much difference to me. But during the height of the rainy season, I really preferred to be able to get a ride and catch the bus all the way. All right. So before I left I went into the municipality office and I spoke to the mayor or the associate mayor, I don’t know, and I said, look. The tents could take off tonight and will somebody please go down to the mabarah and make sure that everything is tied down and everything is all right with those people. And I went home feeling okay, there’s somebody going to watch out. In fact he said yes, there’s going to be a party here tonight and will somebody please go down to the mabarah and make sure that everything is tied down and everything is all right with those people. And I went home feeling okay, there’s somebody going to watch out. In fact he said yes, there’s going to be a party here tonight and somebody will get into a jeep and go down the road to the mabarah and check up. Fine. I come in the next morning. First thing I go in, nu, how did it go in the mabarah last night, and he looked at me dazed and glazed. Nobody had gone down. Nobody had gone to take a look. I mean these are human beings living down there. Nobody had gone. Well, there was a woman in town whom I absolutely adored at that time. She worked with me part time. She had a special kind of job of working with the people in the mabarah, and she used to kind of take care of me. She’d feed me because I’d forget to eat. That sort of thing. It’s hard to believe when you look at me now. And I said to her, Dina, are these the same people that went down to the boats to rescue people to bring them in? What’s happened to this country? It’s only about a year or two years ago. And Dina looked at me and she said, you’re right. But you know they’re very tired. It was all there. It was all starting there. So again, to ask the question of idealism-I was happy there. I was doing something that was meaningful.

INT: To you.

PEPI: That’s right.

INT: So for you it worked.

PEPI: Yes.

INT: And what about the coming home?
PEPI: Well, Joel was going back to school.

INT: You didn't have any children.

PEPI: At that time we had no children, and Joel had the opportunity-his employers were sending him back to the States to go back to school to get his Masters.

INT: Another transition.

PEPI: Well, it was a matter of coming back and that's relatively easy. And so he was going to be going to Columbia and I...there was an opening back at the Jewish Agency.

INT: Waiting for you.

PEPI: Waiting for me, kind of, and it was a good fit. I think I wrote this in that little-

INT: The bio we gave you.

PEPI: Yeah. The Israel students had formed an organization, mostly as a result of the problems with devaluation of the currency, and the consulate really didn't want them around rioting at the consulate, so they sort of placed this organization at the Jewish Agency, and in me they found somebody who could speak Hebrew, so I could communicate with these kids, who still remembered her way around the States, knew a little bit about Israel.

INT: A perfect fit.

PEPI: So it was a good fit.

INT: Where did you live when you returned?

PEPI: Actually, I think we stayed with my parents this time for a short while, but after that we got an apartment and we moved to Queens. We came back in early '52 and Margo was born in February of '53, and I guess I worked until about November or December. I quit at that point because Joel had winter break and then it really didn't pay me to go back after that, so I quit just before his winter break. And then I didn't work again until I started very much part-time teaching Hebrew school.

INT: You had Margo first, right?

PEPI: Yes.

INT: And then your second child was close by.
PEPI: Two years later, a son.

INT: I don’t know anybody but Margo.

PEPI: Well, they don’t live around here. And Margo doesn’t live here either but she works here.

INT: So you stayed in Queens?

PEPI: No. Margo was born in Queens. We lived in Queens for three years altogether and when Ron was about three months old or so I guess we moved to Brooklyn, because in Queens we had a one bedroom apartment and we moved to Brooklyn into a two bedroom apartment, and we stayed there for three years.

INT: Joel was still studying?

PEPI: No, no.

INT: How long was his program?

PEPI: His program was just over a year, something like that. By the time he graduated Margo was born, but it was something over a year, I think, that he went to school, because he was also working. He was working and going to school, otherwise we wouldn’t have eaten. We moved to Brooklyn. After Ron was born we moved to Brooklyn, into the two bedroom apartment, and when Ron was about three and Margo about five we came to this area. We moved to Swarthmore.

INT: Because of a job?

PEPI: Because of Joel’s job. Joel got a job at the Franklin Institute, at the laboratories at that time.

INT: And you relocated here.

PEPI: So we relocated here.

INT: What kind of Jewish household did you establish as a young couple? Not in Israel so much, but when you came back here and had the children. What are your memories of that?

PEPI: We did not observe kashrut. We certainly were aware of holidays. Shul, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Seder. Chanukah. The other holidays sort of fell by the wayside.

INT: You joined a synagogue? When you say shul Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur-
PEPI: In New York you didn’t really need to join a synagogue. You’d buy a ticket for Yomtov if that was what you wanted and actually, when we lived in Queens and then in Brooklyn, when Margo was little, Joel went without me because somebody had to stay home with the kids. It was...or he would go to his parents. Whatever there were locals ones or he would go to his parents’ place. His parents were involved with synagogue in Borough Park, a conservative synagogue in Borough Park, which was an anomaly, or today is an anomaly. I don’t even know if it still exists. But I guess when Margo when fairly little is when we both made a conscious decision. He grew up with candles lit in the house on Friday night. I did not, but we both decided that what I sort of got with mother’s milk, these kids have to get through tactile experiences, so I started lighting candles on Friday night, but that was really the only recognition of Shabbat. But again, I would say that in those days, 95% of our friends were Jews. The neighborhood was Jewish, whatever that may mean.

INT: This was in New York still?

PEPI: This was in New York. Swarthmore became a real shock.

INT: That must have been an interesting transition. Why did you choose it?

PEPI: We fell into Swarthmore. We had come down here to find a place to live. We had one weekend in which to do it. We certainly were...New Yorkers don’t buy a house. New Yorkers live in apartments. We had actually put down a deposit up in Elkins Park in Linwood Gardens, and where we had been placed in a certain courtyard by what is knows as facial psychology, a guy told us we’d be very happy with people just like us by which he meant New York Jews. And then we heard of a house that was for rent in Swarthmore on a month to month basis, and I took a look at that house with the trees around it and I flipped. Joel told me I was out of my mind and it would cost a fortune to heat, which it didn’t, and we thought, well, since it’s on a month to month basis this really gives us time to look around. And so we moved in there and we landed up staying in that house for a year, by which time we were comfortable in the town. We knew there were no Jews there to speak of, though we had become involved in a local synagogue already.

INT: In Swarthmore?

PEPI: Not in Swarthmore, no.

INT: Where?

PEPI: Actually in Springfield. There was a new synagogue which had just been built and we were there for a few years.

INT: That had to take a conscious decision to go and join a synagogue, which was really not part of your-
PEPI: But it was certainly part of Joel’s.

INT: Why did you decide to do that?

PEPI: Because living in the suburbs, living outside of New York City, is just different and you have to make, take conscious steps-

INT: To find a community.

PEPI: It wasn’t so much community as to make a statement about being Jewish.

INT: Did you find any of this difficult or strange or was this sort of a general progression?

PEPI: What I found funny when we first moved there was that I suddenly began feeling a kinship with our father Abraham. It was as if...there were people-it would seem that there were people who had lived next door to where we did live in Swarthmore, and they were Jews but had never belonged to a synagogue, and all of the church-going people that we knew could not understand them. It made much more sense to them that we belonged to a synagogue. It made much more sense to them that we did something about holidays.

INT: Your non-Jewish friends.

PEPI: That’s right. And there was also this feeling that they felt I should know all sorts of things, which in those days I didn’t, about the Bible, about all kinds of things because it was...and I’m not quite sure if they quite knew what Jewish meant outside of the Israelites.

INT: But when you came to Philadelphia, you really didn’t have a social network, correct?

PEPI: Yes. Well actually, as it turned out...the way we found the house that we rented that first year-Joel did have a very old friend who lived in Springfield, Delaware County, and he was actually the one who invited Joel to come down for the job at the Institute, and this was someone where you’re talking about family friend. These two had known each other since Joel’s birth.

INT: Did you have all three children now?

PEPI: No.

INT: You had two young children, five and-

PEPI: Three and five.

INT: And now you’re in this totally new environment for yourself, suburbia, non-Jewish neighbors, two young children.
PEPI: The people who lived on the block who were extremely giving. The people from whom we rented the house had gone around and told all their friends to come call on us.

INT: So did you find it easy to make a social-

PEPI: It didn’t take that long. It’s always easy to make that social transition when you’ve got young children.

INT: There’s something in common with the other people.

PEPI: Not only that’s in common. You suddenly find yourself going to school with them. You have places where you meet, in addition to which there were several people on the block who made a real...in those days it was the thing you did. You came to call. You invited. You made real efforts and there was one woman in particular-

INT: The religious issue, the being Jewish-you don’t remember that being in the forefront for you?

PEPI: It was not. For a long time it was not. I did my thing, they did theirs. The place where it arises most, of course, is at Christmas. That’s where the problem really focuses, and so what I started doing was to invite the kids’ friends for candle lighting.

INT: For Hanukkah.

PEPI: And then if the kids wanted to go look at other kids Christmas trees they could go do it.

INT: So did you find any conflict with the kids and your kids?

PEPI: It’s interesting that I do not remember the kids complaining or asking for it. I may be wrong and it would be interesting to ask them.

INT: But in your home, Jewishly, when the kids were growing up-Friday night lighting candles and holidays.

PEPI: And holidays, particularly, as I say, Passover. Initially we would go to New York for Passover and then...actually it was the year that I was pregnant with Dan so Dan was born in October of ’61, so I guess it was the spring of ’61 when my mother-in-law was not well, and so I found myself making the Seder.

INT: It was your first year?

PEPI: It was my first time. And then for a couple of years she went back to doing it, and then after that I did it all the time.
INT: You said you joined a synagogue down there.

PEPI: We joined a synagogue.

INT: And what did you do at the synagogue?

PEPI: Nothing much really. Nothing much. When it came time for the kids to start their Jewish education, when Margo, I guess, was six or seven—even though we belonged to the synagogue—

INT: It was a Conservative synagogue?

PEPI: Yes. There was a schulie and I took her there. It was a very nice and very warm experience, and some people that we knew actually—there was Habonim connection there, people that we met and are still friendly with and lived in Broomall, were sending their kids to the schulie, so we decided to do that. We decided to do that and things were going all right. It was a pain in the neck because they were located all the way down City Line Avenue and in fact there was one year when I brought the kids to Akiba because Akiba was renting—for a number of years Akiba rented space to the schulie on Sunday mornings.

INT: So she went to the schulie?

PEPI: They both did. Margo and Ron both went to the schulie.

INT: So they didn’t go to this synagogue supplementary school?

PEPI: No. And eventually I became disappointed. What I discovered is that it’s not only that there were things they didn’t know, but they thought it was funny that they didn’t know them and that bothered me. And so at that point—

INT: There were things who didn’t know, the kids?

PEPI: The teachers.

INT: Oh, the teachers didn’t know.

PEPI: And it bothered me because I don’t mind people not knowing things. I just don’t like it when they think it’s funny that they don’t know it.

INT: The teachers thought it was funny.

PEPI: Yes. So I pulled out. I pulled the kids in the following year, and by that time I think we had made the decision to switch over to Ohev Shalom in Wallingford, and there—I think we made the decision before we knew who the rabbi was. We made that...that was it. That’s sort of falling
into place. I joined Hadassah at some point and Hadassah used to meet at Ohev Shalom, which in those days was in Chester, not in Wallingford.

INT: Do you remember the reason for joining Hadassah?

PEPI: Yes actually. I came back from Israel with a very, very high opinion of Hadassah and what they do. The fact that they essentially stay out of Israeli politics I thought was important, but that they also really did a marvelous job and that what they set out to do they really did. I suppose Na'ama or Pioneer Women did to. I just didn't like the politicization of it. So I came back with...when we were growing up in Habonim you sort of sneered at Hadassah, but that is something I had real turn around about in Israel and I came back with enormous respect for what they did. So I guess it was through somebody that I met at Margo's school, whatever, I joined the local Hadassah group. (End of tape 1, side 2)

INT: So we were at living in suburbia. You had two children or three children?

PEPI: The third one didn't come along until 1961.

INT: And you joined Ohev Shalom. Kids were in public school. You were a little active in Hadassah. I guess I'm just trying to get a sense of where the Jewish pieces fit into your life.

PEPI: At that stage, interestingly enough, not a lot. We were never synagogue goers except for maybe high holidays but not really. Not synagogue goers. We joined Ohev Shalom because we found ourselves going there for all sorts of things. I went there for the Hadassah meetings and if there would have been other kind of community things, Ohev Shalom was very much the central community kind of thing. And then Lou Kaplan, who was the Rabbi there, who came there around the same time we joined, at some point he asked me if I wanted to teach and I said I'd never done such a thing.

INT: Teacher?

PEPI: To teach in the school.

INT: Teach Hebrew there or-

PEPI: Well yes. Hebrew plus whatever. But Hebrew. And I sort of agreed out of sheer ignorance. Dan was just under a year old when I started doing this, so this was 1962.

INT: Was there ever any conflict for you of being home with the children and not working? You have to put it in the context of the time, I know, but-

PEPI: At that point, there were these bunches of ladies that would get together for play with the kids. The kids used to play in the backyard but women would get together and talk or you'd get
together for lunch or you'd bring the kids or whatever, and at that stage, the people I knew had not even started going back to work, going back to school. Early on, I would say sometime I guess toward the end of the Sixties is when people started peeling off and going back to school. Everybody stayed home with the kids.

INT: I just wondered if even though it wasn't vogue to go out to work, if you felt there was any difficulty.

PEPI: I never felt it. It's interesting because I guess everybody in the group of women that I knew were college graduates. I don't know if any of them had professions in particular, though they may have, but it's not what we talked about. But people at that point were staying home with kids and seemed comfortable with it. It was, I guess, as the kids began to grow up and people were not needed at home in the same way that people began to think of other things. So my initial going to teach was only—I was teaching, I think, an hour and a half in the middle of the week and an hour and a half on Sunday. It was quite easy.

INT: And the two other kids were in the school.

PEPI: The two older kids...I guess Margo must have been going there already, and I had a woman who was a cleaning woman but whom the kids loved and who was very good with them and so I simply arranged that she would come in and instead of coming early in the morning and finishing in the early afternoon, she would come in later in the day and stay through until I got home from teaching. And so Dan was taken care of.

INT: So what did you start teaching?

PEPI: I started teaching, I guess, Hebrew language. It was a disaster. It was horrible. I was awful. There was no doubt about it, and I certainly couldn't control these ninth graders. Ninth graders I was given, and I remember at the end of the first year Lou coming in to kind of...I guess he must have come in a few times during the course of the year to see what I was doing there, and I must have taught other things as well. I really can't remember what else I taught except the Hebrew, and God knows, telling me to teach prayer would have been ridiculous, but I don't think they did. I remember that the kids were expected to learn the prayers by going to junior congregations and there was a very large and active one there at that time. Dave Twersky, who also taught at Akiba, ran the Hebrew school. He was orthodox, and then there was me and then there was Lou Kaplan, who is a Conservative Rabbi with a strongly Reconstructionist bent. It was an interesting time. Again, I learned a lot from the job, but when Lou got finished with me after that first, shall we say, evaluation, I looked at him and I said, "Lou, are you sure you want me to continue teaching?" To my great surprise he said yes. In the course of time, the-

INT: Well, you stuck it out so there must have been something about it you-

PEPI: I probably came to enjoy it. Lou was, in many ways, a very good mentor. For one thing, he
provided me with books. He provided me with things to read so that I did a lot of learning on the job. Eventually, I don't remember exactly when but it was early on, I started going to Gratz and I started going there in the evenings, and as much as anything else because I didn’t want to lose my Hebrew because I was afraid if I didn’t have the opportunity I would totally lose it. So I started simply taking courses at Gratz.

INT: Hebrew courses?


INT: Because you wanted to hold on to that. What were your connections after these years with the Habonim people or Israel?

PEPI: Well, Israel there was a constant connection of writing people and being in touch with people who were there, and of course Joel’s brother who was there.

INT: Was it your thought that you’ll stay here for a while and go back.

PEPI: When we first came back we really thought we’d be returning to Israel, but that faded. There was no doubt after a while that that was not going to happen. And initially, for various reasons, Joel broke off relations with the people who sent us here and we didn’t have the money to do it on own. It would just be too expensive to do that. We had a little bit of money left there from the sale of the apartment, but buying enough stuff and shipping all that stuff...so initially there was sort of looking around would there be a job that would ship him there, but that didn’t happen, and slowly but surely...

INT: And the Habonim people-

PEPI: The Habonim people-there are a few around here, but the connection was not with Habonim, it was simply they became friends and that was it.

INT: So would you say Ohev Shalom and the synagogue became your Jewish connection?

PEPI: Kind of.

INT: Where you went for Jewish sustenance?

PEPI: I don’t know. To some degree, yes. To some degree. But again, the close friends, despite the fact the people we lived among and the people that Joel worked among were not Jewish, the people who became our friends-well, initially they weren’t. Eventually they were Jews. Initially we had a lot of non-Jewish friends. Certainly the women I hung out with at Swarthmore-nobody was Jewish.
INT: Did you join up with any other organizations that were involved with Jewish causes?

PEPI: I joined the League of Women Voters for a while but I sort of found them deadly.

INT: So how did your teaching career develop? You got through that first year of the ninth graders. You survived.

PEPI: I survived is about all you can say. I don’t know. It kept growing. The number of hours kept growing certainly. Someplace I even have a kind of record of my work career. Eventually, Lou and I began teaching the older kids, and that was really where I landed up being. There was a what they called a confirmation and then post-confirmation class, and we sort of shared it, he and I. By that time, I had gone to Gratz quite a bit and had gotten a lot of self-education. I had begun to develop a style of my own and it seemed to, I guess, work, because I know the kids would want to come for the class, so from that point of view, I guess-I guess the fact that our home was both emotionally and intellectually Jewish rubbed off to some degree on the kids, that many of the books we read, that so much of the conversation would have to do with that, that the kids could certainly never suggest that I didn’t take Jewish studies seriously. So from that point of view I would guess that certain attitudes would be developed.

INT: Tell me about the kids growing up, with their Jewish education.

PEPI: They went to the Hebrew school and they went to Junior Congregation. Margo, for a short while, was going to the high school in Wilmington and that was a sort of drag of getting her there. There was one other kid who went and so the other parent would drive them down on Sunday morning and I would, after work, drive down to Wilmington and pick them up and bring them back, but it worked out.

INT: And why did you choose that? Why did she go there?

PEPI: Because the high school supposedly had a more intensive Hebrew program. It was a Gratz extension in Wilmington. I’m not sure that it actually did but...And maybe she also wanted to get out from under in that it’s no fun for kids to have Mama teaching in the school, which my kids all landed up doing. I was all of their teacher at some point.

INT: Did you ever feel there was any conflict in the home, that they rejected, they didn’t want to go to school, their friends in the high school were non-Jews. Were you worried about their Jewish identification?

PEPI: Well, that’s where Galil came in. The kids all went to Galil. That was very important. I know that as Margo got older certainly, and it was true of Dan as well, less so of Ron, their lives were really divided into two spheres. One was the Swarthmore school and whatever friendships there were there and the other was Habonim and their friends from Galil. Dan’s closest friends to this day are his friends that he made when he was at Galil. They’re a remarkable group of young
people. Now they’re in the middle thirties, but I’ve never forgotten. There have been incredible occasions where these kids really came into being with... one of the kids in the group’s brother OD’d and there were something like five or six of this chevra who turned up at the funeral, who were there. Dan was very sick at one point. He was in Boston and there were a bunch of kids from Habonim who were up in Boston and those people came to see him in the hospital every day. These people were there for each other in a way that I find just incredible.

INT: But they had no trouble that their summer friends were different than their winter friends?

PEPI: In some cases they actually were summer friends only and in some cases they saw them during the year.

INT: Did they go to Habonim during the year?

PEPI: Yeah, or they would go for these social events. Margo never learned to drive until she was a full adult because we were a one car family, and she obviously was not going to be given that car on the weekend because that would have meant that we didn’t have it, so she would come home after school and nag that we’d have an early dinner. We would light the candles and then she would take the 7:16 train and take herself off to Mount Airy, Chestnut Hill, wherever the heck it was that her friends were, and she would reappear Saturday night in time to go to bed and go to Hebrew school the next day.

INT: So there never seemed to be a conflict.

PEPI: It wasn’t a conflict. It was two worlds.

INT: But they could balance the two worlds.

PEPI: And again, Margo’s two closest friends, one of whom lives in Israel, one of whom lives in this country, go back to those days.

INT: High school, did the kids go to Swarthmore?

PEPI: Yeah.

INT: They didn’t go to Akiba?

PEPI: No. That’s something else that’s changed in my own way of thinking. I had a great commitment to the very idea of a public school. That’s what I grew up in. I’m a child of immigrants. This is what the public schools did. I went through my entire schooling in public school. No, my kids all went to...Margo went to the Parkway Program when it first started because they had slots for suburban kids, and so she left Swarthmore in the middle of tenth grade and went to the Parkway Program and graduated from the Parkway Program, which was again, a
very interesting program, but no, whatever Jewish education they had was in the...

INT: Supplementary. You taught at Akiba?

PEPI: I didn't teach at Akiba until 1979.

INT: And how did that develop?

PEPI: Well, I continued to teach at Hebrew school, as I say, until I took a look one day and one of my ex-students was president of the Men's Club and I decided it was time to stop.

INT: A young president.

PEPI: Yes, he was admittedly a young president but still...I guess I had been at the Hebrew school for about fifteen years or something like that. I began to think of doing something else and I started looking around, not necessarily for something Jewish, and then somebody told me there was an opening at the Museum of American Jewish History. I went over there and at that time a guy called Avi Deckter was the director and there was very little staff there then, and Avi came and watched me teach an adult group actually. By that time I was also doing some adult teaching at the synagogue. And he hired me. So I worked there I guess from '77, someplace around the fall of '77, until, I think, July of '79. By that time, Avi had been not renewed, shall we say, and they hired someone who, as I was getting ready to go off on vacation, fired me.

INT: You were teaching classes there?

PEPI: No, no. I was doing... there were a couple of people who were doing exhibits and there was Avi and a secretary.

INT: Was it in the same place that it is now?

PEPI: Oh sure.

INT: It's always been in that place.

PEPI: Yeah, yeah. And I was sort of doing everything else. I was doing publicity. I was doing education.

INT: And the children were out of the house now?

PEPI: Dan was still home. I said I went to work there in '79 so it was just around the time that Dan left.

INT: So basically you didn't start working somewhat more full-time until the kids were out of
the house?

PEPI: No, it was not. It was '77. Dan was still home. I didn’t start working full-time until Dan...

INT: You did the Hebrew school but you stayed home mostly with the children.

PEPI: But I did not work full-time while Dan was still home. He was about sixteen.

INT: It sounds like when you doing the Hebrew school you were self-educating yourself.

PEPI: Well, between Gratz-

INT: And your own studies. In what areas? Was there something special? Was it Bible, was it Jewish history?

PEPI: It was a mix. I guess the thing that eventually began to stick to me more than anything else in an area you might call Rabbinic thought. Essentially, what are Jewish concepts and where do they come from.

INT: The ritual and the synagogue activities never really became a speciality?

PEPI: Never spoke to me and never became a speciality. The only way in which I could suggest that they spoke is in the ways in which they projected Jewish thought or Jewish mind set.

INT: Your kids had bar and bat mitzvahs?

PEPI: Sure.

INT: You observed the ritual with them.

PEPI: Oh yes. But again, it was unfortunately it was not what I think it should have been. They didn’t learn trop. They were given a tape and they sang what they did. This is not what I call...it’s worthwhile, since you actually learn the trop and can do it, you learn the skill, but this was...

INT: So you left the museum-

PEPI: And then purely by chance again, a neighbor of ours was a rather famous scholar. His name was Judah Goldin. Joel met Judah on the train station one morning and Joel told him my sad tale and Judah said, “Oh, I’ve gotten a call about a job at Akiba.” So I called Judah to ask him about it and I said can I use your name? And he said sure. Well, that’s an open sesame if you use Judah Goldin’s name. So I called Akiba. In fact what was funny was that two years earlier I had called and had told them...but at this point they said yes, and essentially there was need of a teacher and this was literally erev Labor Day. School was opening and there was no curriculum.
That was in addition to everything else. Sort of across the board, the inevitable ninth grade and a
couple of others as well, but there were...I mean I wasn’t quite as green as I had been and there
were a lot of people at Akiba who were there to help, and the most important person I guess at
Akiba was Menachem Gundersheimer, who really helped to teach me the materials and what we
were doing. I guess the person who had the greatest influence on me in terms of wanting to be
involved in Jewish education was a person at Gratz who’s been dead for many years. He was a
marvelous...he was a scholar, a real scholar. His field was medieval Jewish history, Jewish
thought. His name was Samuel Kurland. He was known as Doc Kurland. He used to stand there
in the classroom chewing on a cigar, and eventually I asked him if we could do an independent
study. I did an independent study with him at Gratz and also with Nora Levin at one point. The
independent study meant that he gave me materials to read and we would meet for lunch and we
would talk about what I had read and then he would talk about his own dreams. He was an old
Labor Zionist and a marvelous, marvelous man.

INT: He had an impact on you.

PEPI: Yeah. Very few people have had as much impact as me.

INT: And when was that? What years were that?

PEPI: I’m trying to remember. The credits sort of accreted and eventually they sort of said to
me...I mean at one point Elazer Goldman said why don’t you take the entrance exams? I took the
entrance exam and that was fine.

INT: But you did get a degree there.

PEPI: Yeah, sure. And then eventually somebody said to me, you know, you have enough credits
for a degree so all right, so I got a degree. I’m trying to remember. I guess it must have been
some time in the Seventies, I would guess. And the same with Nora.

INT: Tell about your kids. I only know Margo. What kind of Jewish homes have they
established?

PEPI: Margo has a very Jewish home. Again, it’s not kashrut. It’s not that. It’s awareness. It’s
caring. It’s culture. It’s candle lighting. It’s singing. It’s all kinds of things that turn it into...

INT: Does she have children?

PEPI: She’s got Molly, who is three and a half. Margo’s Jewish stuff came-there’s quite a bit of
it. She went to Hampshire College. I don’t know if you know anything about Hampshire. It’s a
very interesting school. It was known as sort of being avant garde in its time. In fact she just told
me that they’re having a reunion, I guess it’s a twenty year reunion. She and a group of friends at
Hampshire-this is the kind of thing you could do there-got a grant. I think they got one from the
Ford Foundation actually, after they wrote the proposal. They wrote one of the very early Holocaust curriculums for teaching in college. They had all kinds of people who helped them. Raoul Hillberg came down from the University of Vermont and worked with them and Ben Halpern from Brandies. There were others. They worked up a very interesting curriculum which ended with, for those who worked on it or was it after the first semester? They did it and then it was actually...they created it and then it was actually done for either a semester or a year. I don’t remember. And they took a trip to Eastern Europe. That is they took a trip to the camps. So this was a long time ago. This was not just now. And then she went to Israel for a semester and stayed for two years.

INT: I was going to ask you about the kids going to Israel. Was that her first trip?

PEPI: No. She had gone and stayed with my brother-in-law and sister-in-law when she was about thirteen, fourteen, or something like that. She stayed for two years, a year of which she spent at the Hebrew University. And then she came back and still had to finish at Hampshire, but for Hampshire you need to write a senior thesis and she was doing something on the minorities treaties after World War I and particularly on Louis Marshall, and all the materials were in New York, mostly at the offices, I think, of the American Jewish Committee, so she spent most of time in New York. Her last semester at Hampshire was really spent in New York. And then she got some jobs in some Jewish organizations. I think she worked for something called Jackie, which was the equivalent of-what the devil is it here-not Hillel, the extension of Hillel, on campus.

INT: Jewish campus activities?

PEPI: Yeah, right. Jackie was the New York equivalent thereof. She worked for them for a while. Then she went back to school.

INT: So she had a pretty strong Jewish connection.

PEPI: Oh yeah. And she did her Masters in American Jewish History with Paula Hyman at Columbia. And then she worked at the Jewish Museum. In fact, she had two stints at the Jewish Museum, separated by another job, before she finally came here to run this place. Yeah, she’s got-

INT: So that really frames her, the Jewish piece. And the guys?

PEPI: This is true of her husband as well. Her husband spent five years on a kibbutz in Israel, working for Jewish organizations in New York. It’s not quite as true with the boys. My older son, it’s very interesting, he went to Wesleyan after high school. He got the same Jewish education that the other kids did. His married life has not worked out particularly well. He went to Wesleyan, married a girl that he met there after he was graduated. He went to work for labor unions and eventually, out of this labor union background, he went to the Harvard Business
School because he was very much convinced, as he is to this day, that you need to learn the skills. So he got his MBA. By that time he was divorced and then remarried. He went to work for Lazard Freres, which is a small but very powerful investment house in New York. After several years at Lazard Freres, where he and one of the partners had developed a business with labor union clients, he and the partner left Lazard Freres and set up their own little boutique firm where their clients were in the main labor unions.

INT: That's an interesting connection to your own life.

PEPI: And then he left the partnership and he now works for the Steelworkers, and he has a little girl who is seven, but she lives with her mother up in Boston.

INT: Was his wife Jewish?

PEPI: No. The first one was. The succeeding one was not.

INT: But the child is not being raised Jewish now.

PEPI: No. Her mother doesn't know anything about it. There's an awareness, but I'm not quite sure what she makes of this. They lit Chanukah candles but the Christmas tree is in the corner. I have no idea what it all means or what she's making of it.

INT: But the Jewish identity or Jewish connection for him seems like it's not very pervasive.

PEPI: It's not very pervasive. On the other hand, he certainly makes contributions to Jewish causes and that sort of thing. It's not what you can call a part of his life. Dan, our youngest, went to Brown. He spent a year in Israel on what they call Habonim workshop in Israel. That was right after high school. He took a delayed entry into college. And as I say, he has very good friends that still grow out of his Galil experience. He went to Brown. When he got out of Brown he had some rather interesting jobs around the Boston area. His work has generally sort of revolved around welfare reform and programs, and then he went to the Kennedy School at Harvard and he got his Masters there and now is working, and has been really since he got out of the Kennedy School, working in New York in a research firm that does long-term studies on welfare programs and that sort of thing, and he does a lot of writing for them. He married a very impressive young woman who is Jewish and they have a little boy called Joshua and there's another on the way, so we have three grandchildren and a fourth on the way. The sense I have is that they are trying very hard to create some sort of Jewish home. They've talked about candle lighting Friday night. They were concerned about Chanukah and making Chanukah a positive experience in a Christmas world, so when they started talking about it it just struck me so funny because considering where Dan grew up, when he's talking about the pervasiveness of Christmas, and I wanted to say Dan, where were you all these years? The pervasiveness of Christmas was all you ever knew. So clearly there is a connection. I have a sneaking suspicion he may eventually find himself if not in a day school, then at least a synagogue day care center, which he is not in right now because they
don’t take them this young. And he lives in Brooklyn, in a marvelous neighborhood in Brooklyn, and they’re doing fine. So that’s the three kids. Great kids and three grandkids.

INT: And right now you’re doing what in your life?

PEPI: What am I doing? I do a little bit of volunteer work still at CAJE. I had worked there for a year after I finished for Akiba.

INT: How long were you at Akiba? I don’t think we established that.

PEPI: I was at Akiba, I guess, from ’79 to ’91.

INT: It was satisfying for you?

PEPI: Very. Very. In many, many ways. I always feel extremely fortunate that... I had two opportunities to go back. One was at the museum after so many years of not really working full-time. Teaching Hebrew school is not full time. And then at Akiba. People don’t often have that many opportunities at a new start as I did and I feel very lucky. Akiba and I eventually seemed to work out as a good fit and again, my sense...I probably would have been a better teacher had I taken a few education courses which I never took, but I guess my style fit and it seemed to have worked for me and for if not all then some of my students certainly, and I have a feeling that... people have told me that I’ve done a decent job in what I did there. It was a very positive experience and certainly changed my mind about the value of day school. But it was a different world.

INT: Right. The times were different.

PEPI: The times were very different. In retrospect, if I had it to do over again, I probably would send my kids to a day school, but that’s only in retrospect.

INT: Well, I guess a question could be, given today’s environment, society, what would your recommendation be for young Jewish families in order to keep a strong Jewish identity?

PEPI: Day school. I don’t see anything else except day school and summer camps, which certainly with my kids were the most important things.

INT: And the Israel trip I guess we could add in there. How do you feel about that?

PEPI: Not for Jewish necessarily. Ron spent the summer in Israel when he was thirteen and it was not a particularly good experience. A poor program, but that’s...and it was not particularly an experience. Margo lived in Israel for a couple of years. I don’t think that’s what made her Jewish at all.
INT: How do you define Jewish?

PEPI: How do I define it? Caring about the future, caring about what happens to Jews, caring about what happens to Jewish thoughts. To some degree, seeing the world through Jewish eyes. All of that. I don’t think the Israel thing particularly did that. I may be wrong. One would have to ask her how she feels about that. In general, I know kids come back from Israel all het-up with the experience.

INT: You think it could be a piece of a bigger picture?

PEPI: I’m not convinced-

INT: But you feel strongly about the day school as the all-encompassing way of building a strong foundation.

PEPI: I think the day school for knowledge and the summer camp for the socializing, emotional...Israel would be a very much a third down on the list for me.

INT: This is a hard question, I think, but if you had to choose a career again, and it’s always strange when we look back on our lives because all the knowledge, I think, as women in our age category, a lot of what happens to us we think happens by accident. You said that a lot. You said this happened by accident.

PEPI: Oh yeah.

INT: Women today I think choose more carefully and think about the career goal. An interesting question, but knowing and having worked in different areas, if you could choose today a career, what do you think that might be?

PEPI: I don’t know. I’ve often thought would I have enjoyed going into a more scholarly pursuit of Judaica, and my sense keeps being that I’m not a scholar. I’m a dilettante. I love taking advantage of other people’s scholarship. I don’t have the, I guess the patience, the real interest in doing the nitty-gritty of what you call scholarship. I don’t know. Maybe I would have felt differently when I was younger. That might have been one thing. And the other would have been to become more skilled in areas of education so that I could have gone ahead with it more than I did and be able to do things more effectively. That’s based on, I guess, that which I have known thus far. But I think having grown up when I did and certainly there are enough women my age who have had careers and have done things, so I don’t know if it’s me or where I came from or the period during which I lived. I’m not sure what kinds of things are what you can call generational or what kinds of things are individual and what kinds of things are out of what I came from and what kinds of things are just me. It’s very hard to generalize, and I would probably need...that was one of the reasons I asked you when you said you were going to tape and it was going to be archived, whether anything was going to be done with this, because I’d be
very curious. This is a selective group. Clearly each of the woman you have chosen will have been somebody who has, if you will, accomplished something. To what degree did they have a sense of having overcome? To what degree was this the natural thing to do? And to what degree did they fall into it?

INT: In other words, you place yourself-

PEPI: The last.

INT: When you dedicated I don't know how many years to Jewish education, and you're seen in the community as a contributor to Jewish education both for adults and for young people, and again, it was a journey that evolved as opposed to maybe consciously set out upon, but it fits and you stayed there.

PEPI: Yes. That's fair. But there are others who prepared themselves in a much more rigid fashion for what they were doing.

INT: Do you have any thoughts or any comments on what needs to be done in the world of Jewish education to get people into that arena?

PEPI: I've really given thought to that. It's interesting. As I sat there at Penn, the class I'm sitting in now is very much—it's an undergraduate course. Most of the kids are freshman and sophomores, I think. I think almost all come out of a yeshiva background, and they are superbly prepared. I don't know how many of the kids sitting in that room are taking the course because they really want to learn something or because they think it's a gut course because they know it all, so it's just easy to do. I think some of them will find themselves surprised.

INT: Which course are you taking?

PEPI: It's a course in the development of the Hagaddah. I've never done it and why not? But I see kids...now how many of those are going to stay and participate in Jewish education? I really don't know. There's one kid who went to Akiba who's orthodox. I think he's a senior now. He said he took a year off and went to Israel. I think he's a chemistry major. He's taking this class. I don't know how many of these see themselves as Jewish studies majors and how many see themselves as...

INT: Does that concern you? Are you worried about the future? Everyone's talking about the future of the Jewish community and the continuity.

PEPI: Sure, though some people define them more hopefully than others. The intermarriage thing is scary in terms of future. There's no doubt about it. Whether or not it's the price of freedom—I'm not a hundred percent sure. We certainly have...and now the situation historically...It happened in Spain. It happened with the Greeks. It's happened to us many times,
but it’s a very powerful culture out there. Of course, as the country becomes more Balkanized maybe we will too, and I’m not sure if that’s good but there we are. All the negatives. So I don’t know. The other thing, and this of course is really what bothers me about this dependence on- (end of tape 2, side 1) Jews elsewhere in the world don’t share a history. The Bible is not the history one shares. We don’t really share a culture. It’s interesting. I have a good friend who lives in Israel. We went to schulle together. We’ve known each other since we’re twelve to fourteen years old. She’s been living in Israel since 1970. She has four kids, two of whom live in Israel, one lives in England and one lives in the States, with commensurate grandchildren for each of these places. I had an idea about something and I wrote to her and I said help me think about it. E-mail is great stuff. And I said I was interested in what Americans do with Hagaddah and the degree to which family Hagaddot have come up and pieces are added and they’re ideological in their approach. All kinds of Hagaddot. In Israel you would see this on kibbutzim. And I said to what degree in families do people put together their own ritual. And when she wrote back to me, I could see-she said and it was clear from what she wrote that she didn’t know what I was talking about.

INT: She didn’t understand what you were getting at.

PEPI: She said maybe it’s because we don’t have time. We have a Seder every year obviously, and they use a Hagaddah, but they don’t write their own.

INT: Maybe they don’t make as much out of the Seder and the ritual as we need to here.

PEPI: Well, these are people I know. I’ve sat at a Seder. I went to a Seder at her house once. They did the Seder from beginning to end. Her husband comes from an orthodox background originally and one of her kids, even though he hates the orthodox with a passion, spent a year in a yeshiva. No. These are knowledgeable people. These are not ignoramuses.

INT: But they don’t need to take this event and recreate it. It is what it is.

PEPI: That’s right. Now, are they too busy with other things? But that’s what I mean. We don’t share a history. We share a Hagaddah but we don’t share the Hagaddah.

INT: Or maybe our need to in the United States to put more meaning and more spirituality into an event because they might have more of that there because it’s pervasive in their culture.

PEPI: But it’s very different.

INT: So where do we find common ground?

PEPI: Here we are, two people who shared an education, because we went through mittlschulle together, continued and went into Habonim together, spent time together until they made aliyah, and now when I write to her-what is it now? Twenty-five years or so after her aliyah.
INT: As soon as you talk about common history as a people, you just look at common history as two women.

PEPI: Exactly. But we don’t share a history any longer. Certainly the history of our families is not the same. So unless we find something here, forget about this business of sending our kids there. If they stay there, they’ll begin to share that history. They come back here, they have nothing to share. They didn’t sit through four wars.

INT: This is such an emotional issue and you’re so...I see you as being so emotionally invested in Jewish things and the future, what we were just talking about. Do you have people in your life that you are able to share this with?

PEPI: Sure.

INT: You found that your social group is impassioned about all this also?

PEPI: Sure. Some are totally unsuccessful. They care very much for themselves. They thought they were doing something with their kids but they didn’t, and so their kids have married out. They have non-Jewish little grandchildren. It doesn’t make any difference if the mother is Jewish or not. They’re non-Jewish little grandchildren.

INT: They’re being raised non-Jewish.

PEPI: They’re not necessarily being raised Christian.

INT: They’re being raised nothing?

PEPI: Yes. Like most Americans.

INT: So advice or suggestions or if you had to leave a message?

PEPI: I think that you’ve got to do things at home. You’ve got to do things at...you got to make sure the kids get the education. You got to make sure they have...it’s got to be positive. You can’t spend your life talking about the Holocaust because nobody wants to be Jewish because there was a Holocaust. Why should anybody want to be Jewish so he should be killed? What kind of foolishness is that?

INT: Building positive memories, doing things in the family.

PEPI: Yes. And educationally. Not stopping when they’re thirteen, because that’s childish, so you come away with a childish view, which again, is not worth too much. An education that ends at the age of thirteen for Jews is as good as an education that ends for non-Jews at the age of thirteen.
INT: You’re teaching a class here, aren’t you? Is it just women in the building?

PEPI: No. An hour every other week. They’re very bright women.

INT: A lot of these women—they haven’t had a lot of education so this is-

PEPI: Oh, they’ve had education.

INT: I mean Jewish education.

PEPI: No, many of them do not. Or they went to Hebrew school but not much more than that.

INT: So you’re offering the opportunity we just talked about of not stopping at thirteen. Right now you’re offering them the opportunity to study. Because you told me about that course that you’re teaching and you were pretty excited about it.

PEPI: It’s interesting to see how they respond and in some cases, it’s just an eye-opener for them, that it’s not childish stuff.

INT: So you’re continuing to learn on your own and then teach?

PEPI: Yes.

INT: I guess I feel that we’re winding down, but I want to make sure-

PEPI: Believe it or not, we’ve been at it for almost three hours.

INT: I want to make sure that you feel that you’ve said everything that you really wanted to say.

PEPI: I don’t know.

INT: The one question I didn’t ask you was about the name Pepi.

PEPI: Where did that come from? My Yiddish name is Pesya. The family just called me Pepi since infancy, and for a long time I thought I had to be Paula, and then I realized that I barely respond to Paula and it’s silly, and so I’m Pepi except on my checks.

INT: Some of the questions here talk about advice or warnings that you might offer to young women coming up today.

PEPI: I’m not wise enough to offer advice.

INT: You’re very wise. But I guess as we end, if you feel that there’s anything...and we can
always again, after you review the tape, you may want to add to it. We can always get back together.

PEPI: Well, I think we sort of covered the major sections, if you will, of my life. Parents, early years, war years, Israel.

INT: It feels very much that your work became also just integrated with your Jewish life and again, you say by happenstance or whatever, that you were fulfilling both needs, learning and teaching and working.

PEPI: The fun of teaching is learning.

INT: Did you find things changed in your house as you learned more? Did you start doing more rituals or understanding the Seder more or going to the service more or anything like that?

PEPI: Certainly understanding them yes, but doing more? Not really. We’d never been synagogue goers. The whole issue of what is called spirituality, and I’m not quite sure what the devil it is, and if it’s simply that people don’t want to say God, I don’t know. Touch-feely religious expression does not speak to me. If you listened at all, you realize the intellectual aspects speak to me. The emotion—I don’t relate emotionally to ritual, to prayer. I relate to being with Jews.

INT: Do you think there’s a spiritual moment in your life that you could share or talk about?

PEPI: As I say, I think I’ve mentioned them. What I talked about when I was there on November 29th. It is the sharing with other Jews of a moment. That moment can take place in the synagogue. It might. But it’s just as likely, as far as I’m concerned, to take place elsewhere. And it’s not particularly tied to ritual. It’s tied to sharing.

INT: Community.

PEPI: The community, right. So the kinds of things that are high on the agenda today, let’s say Heschel vs. Kaplan. I sort of lean on Kaplan, and what’s fascinating is that his seminary probably leans on Heschel. That’s my sense of things, but if you want to speak of that as a kind of dichotomy of American Jewish thought, as Heschel and Kaplan. When I read Kaplan I understood it, because that’s where I was coming from.

INT: So it touched a chord for you.

PEPI: Very much so. The other stuff doesn’t though, though I certainly have to accept that this is something that people want and people need. Is it because I, in a sense, had it in the family and in all sorts of places where it expressed itself? But it was, again, it’s events, it’s people. I remember Sedarim very, very warmly, but that’s because the family was together, because I was with
people whom I loved and who I knew loved me. But the other just has never really spoken to me.

INT: But you found those places that do speak to you.

PEPI: Oh sure. Unquestionably.

INT: And you seem to be searching, continuing to search for...or maybe not search. That’s a difficult work. Maybe seek them in study, in more courses.

PEPI: Yes. And I find a kind of positive sort of view of what Judaism stands for, a kind of independence of thought which...I find it an admirable thought system in many, many ways, which is not necessarily what you’re talking about when you’re talking about spirituality. I see Saul Wachs doing his thing, and listening to Saul Wachs daven is one of the more beautiful experiences one could live through.

INT: Yeah. I’ve experienced that too.

PEPI: But that’s because he does it with simplicity, because you could understand every word, because his voice is very lovely and because he’s there with people who are responsive to what he’s doing, and because you can feel his sincerity.

INT: You’re bringing up something that I didn’t think to ask you before and I’ll do it briefly because it’s getting late. As a woman, did you feel that there were areas that were closed to you in Judaism?

PEPI: You’d have to want to enter them in order to feel that they’re closed.

INT: So where you went to, the places you went to, you didn’t feel any resistance? Zionist movement?

PEPI: Should women be called to the Torah? Sure. Did it take a long time? Sure.

INT: But personally for you, was it ever-

PEPI: But since this feeling of...you have to want it. I’ll never forget. There was a woman who was in the congregation at Ohev Shalom who used to come to morning minyan every day and they never counted her until, of course, things changed. She wanted to be counted in the minyan, as well she should have.

INT: But personally for you that was not-

PEPI: I didn’t come to the minyan every morning. You have to want to get in before you could feel that you’re locked out.
INT: Well, the places that you entered you obviously were able to express yourself, in the Zionist movement, the education and all.

PEPI: All of them.

INT: You have been wonderful. I thank you. (End of interview)