INTERVIEW WITH ELLEN FRANKEL

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INT: I’m here with Ellen Frankel, Dr. Ellen Frankel, in the offices of Jewish Publications Society. We want to thank you very much for agreeing to be part of our oral history project.

ELLEN: I’m honored and flattered that I’m included.

INT: I guess what I’d like to do is start with your...not only your childhood but perhaps you want to introduce you via your parents, their parents, where your grandparents came from and how your parents met, so we know a little bit about your background.

ELLEN: All four of my grandparents are from Russia. Both of my grandfathers were tailors. They came over in the beginning years of this century. My paternal grandparents came from a little town in Russia called Azarutz, which was in Misnkgoberna, in the outskirts of Minsk, and came over here, I believe in 1915. My grandfather, I believe, was an orphan and was raised by an aunt. My grandmother, at a very early age, was a midwife in the old country. Sometimes I like to think that sort of the work I do as an editor is to midwife books, and sort of feel a connection that way. They came to New York City through Ellis Island, and for a little while owned a farm, which was very hard work. My grandmother apparently was a very hard worker and very skilled and she also continued, I think, doing her midwife work. I learned from my father, not too long ago, that she actually killed a rattlesnake with her bare hands when my father was young.

INT: Where was the farm?

ELLEN: The farm was somewhere in New York State, Upstate New York, but they eventually sold it and moved into Brooklyn. My maternal grandparents also came from Russia, in the Pale of Settlement. They came through Ellis Island as well and settled in the Lower East Side, around the Henry Street Settlement House. My grandfather lived there almost until the day he died, at the age of high eighties. We’re not quite sure. Because both of my grandparents were tailors, their work was seasonal, so apparently they were out of work a lot during the year. On both sides of the family, they were quite poor. My grandmother and grandfather on my father’s side had six children. My father was the oldest and the only boy, and then there were five girls. He was the only one who went to college. He went to City University and became an accountant. Actually, one of my youngest aunts also became a schoolteacher, so she went to college. I didn’t really know three out of my four grandparents. None of them learned English well, and that was a frustration for me that I really couldn’t talk with my grandparents.

My father’s parents spent every summer in the Catskills, in a kuchalane, in a little cottage in a community where they would have a very small apartment with a kitchen, and I would go up. My grandfather died when I was about eight or ten, but my father’s mother I knew until I was married. We would go up every summer and visit her, and sometimes I would go up into the hills around where she lived to collect blueberries in a tin pail. That’s a very vivid memory of mine.
We visited her every Sunday during most of my childhood, and for me, as a Yankee, as an American girl, I found their world very strange and pretty alienating. When I visited my grandmother on Sundays in an overheated apartment in Brooklyn, where all the adults were wearing sweaters, it was very difficult. The oldest generation would sit around my grandmother's kitchen table screaming in Yiddish and it always seems to me they were always shouting in Yiddish, and exchanging medicines. They would exchange tales of ills and exchange their bottles of medicines. The husbands would sit in the living room, which was simply in the same room as the kitchen but farther along, and either sleep, talk or watch sports. The women would talk about family and then all of the cousins—I have thirteen cousins on that side—

INT: This is your father's side.

ELLEN: My father's side. We would all be crowded into my grandmother’s bedroom, from age two months to age eighteen, and what I used to do was go through my grandmother’s button collection, her sewing kit. The male cousins would watch one sports game on TV and usually have two radios, one in each ear, listening to other games. So to me it was sort of the world of Phillip Roth. It was a world out of time. We were already living in New Jersey, so were considered sort of really out-of-towners. This was a world with very, very pronounced Brooklyn accents and orthodox—almost all my cousins were orthodox and still are, so when we used to come and visit from suburban New Jersey, it was like going to a different planet.

INT: This set of grandparents-did they speak English? Who was the one out of the four that spoke English?

ELLEN: None of them really spoke English. My father’s father died when I was very young, so my father’s mother spoke some English but not very well. I never really developed much of a relationship with her. Not even such a close relationship with my aunts and uncles on that side. What was interesting on that side of the family is that it was a very female culture. Not only did my grandfather die when I was a child, but of my five aunts, the husbands either didn’t come to these family gatherings...In one case the husband actually deserted his wife and left. In another two cases they were just anti-social men. There really was only two uncles out of the five uncles who were part of this family gathering, but it was a very female-centered world. The aunts talked to each other every day. They talked to my father, to this day, every day, and he was their brother, their pride and joy, but the men were just sort of out of the picture. When people married into the family they were sort of on the side. Even my mother, who was a woman, even having been in the family for fifty years is still sort of on the periphery in some ways. That was that family.

And on my mother’s side of the family, she only has a brother. Her parents came—they were cousins, second cousins. Her parents came to the Lower East Side and lived down in the Hester Street world. My grandmother also died when I was a child, of cancer, so I never knew her. The way my mother talks about her she was a very saintly woman, very pious, very giving, very charitable, and also very strong. Strong willed. She really wanted my mother to get ahead in life, although just like in my father’s family, my mother did not go to college and her brother did.
He got a Masters. He’s a physical therapist. And she, who is a very bright woman, never went to college. Anyway, my grandmother, her mother, died when I was very young. What she had done to make money-she used to make teddy bears at home, as a seamstress. But my grandfather lived until-like my grandmother on the other side-lived until I was an adult, and of all the four grandparents, the only one I had a real relationship with was my mother’s father. Ironically, my mother tells me that he wasn’t a very warm man and that his marriage with his wife was not a very happy one, but I was the oldest, the first grandchild, and he really loved me. And even though we couldn’t talk-he would point to the car...he used to visit us on all Jewish holidays and stay with us, and he would point to the machine, watch out for the machine, the car, and he would always tell me to be a schoolteacher because that was a good job for a woman. But he had very broken English and we hardly talked, but he would always bring me presents. And he was very devout. He would come to our house and he would pray three times a day, by himself. He would stand up by himself. At the Seders he would open the Haggadah and just go until he finished, regardless of what was going on at the table. So he kind of followed his own course. He wasn’t very communicative, but because he was very affectionate I felt a very special connection to him, and as I mentioned, he was also a tailor.

My mother lived in a tenement in the Lower East Side and grew up poor. For both my mother and my father, as first generation Americans, education was really important and that was impressed upon them in their families, but the girls didn’t get the education. It was the boys. And they all came out of orthodox households. However, they were ignorant orthodox Jews. In other words, they knew what to do. The men went to shul all the time. They had kosher homes. They observed the holidays. But I don’t think any of my grandparents studied beyond cheder. In other words, I think my grandfathers probably went to cheder until their bar mitzvah, my father went to cheder and yeshiva until his bar mitzvah, but there was no advanced learning in high school or college level. They didn’t study on their own. They didn’t study Talmud and other books. So they were observant Jews, but not very knowledgeable ones. When my parents grew up, they ended up becoming conservative Jews, but also did not really study Judaism seriously as adults or even as high school people.

Anyway, my parents grew up, they got married in 1948. Met right after the war. They moved to the Bronx. I was born in Manhattan, at Beth Israel Hospital. My parents moved to the Bronx into a small apartment until I was three and a half, and then they moved to Queens, to a garden apartment. My sister was born in 1954. I was born in 1951. We lived there until I was seven and a half. My father was an accountant who worked for Hudson Paper Company and then was transferred, when I was seven and a half, to a plant in Cartaret, New Jersey, so we moved to New Jersey, and I remember that my relatives almost sat Shiva—I’m saying that tongue-in-cheek—because we were moving into the country. We were moving to a sort of built up industrial northern New Jersey, but it was the country. So we moved to New Jersey, also into an apartment, a garden apartment, in 1958, and two years later bought our first home, the home I grew up in, in Metuchen, New Jersey. After we had been in New Jersey for just two and a half years, my father was laid off, although I only learned that in the last few years. I thought he was transferred back but my mother tells me he was laid off. Rather than go back to New York...we were pretty well
settled in New Jersey. It was a very nice place to grow up as kids. My father spent a little time trying to work for himself. He went into partnership with somebody. He tried a few things and they didn’t work for him and after a few years he went back to New York and went to work as the office manager/accountant for an envelope factory on Varik Street, near Houston, working for two brothers that he had grown up with. He did that until he retired. So he ended up, after moving to New Jersey, he ended up commuting for the last fifteen years of his working life, maybe more, twenty, back to New York, back to Manhattan every day.

INT: And he was doing what for them?

ELLEN: He was sort of an office manager/accountant. He also did everyone’s taxes. To this day, he does all of his sisters’ taxes. He does cousins’, nephews’ and nieces’ taxes. He’s a very generous man and he’s always doing things for other people, so he continues to do taxes but he’s retired. So that’s the outline of our migrations. I grew up in Metuchen from 1958, when I was in second grade, until I graduated from high school, and then a few years later my parents sold their home, the home I had grown up in, and now live in a retirement community in New Jersey, in Jamesburg, New Jersey.

INT: Did your mother work at all while you were growing up?

ELLEN: My mother worked part-time when I was growing up. She worked many years as the secretary of the rabbi at our synagogue. She did that many, many years, and then she started working part-time as a bookkeeper for a local merchant, a local jeweler, in my town, and did that until she finally retired not too long ago.

INT: What was the atmosphere like in your house as a child? Religious? Was it playful? Was it warm and loving, I would assume?

ELLEN: My parents are, by their own admission, my parents are not demonstrative. They are very reticent with both feelings and even with words. My home has always been filled with books, and I would say if I had to describe one characteristic I would say we have a very bookish home. My father’s passion and hobby, until very recently, was buying books, and all through my childhood he was constantly bringing books home. I took to it and loved it. My sister didn’t, and he used to bring home children’s books for her and when she said she didn’t want it he would say, “Well, I bought it for myself” and it was clearly...these were kids’ books. But I was always surrounded by books and my father continued to buy books, and in fact, when he went back to New York he was working down in the Village, and every lunch hour he would buy books, and my mother finally put her foot down because there were books not only in every room but in every closet, and she finally said, “No more books.” My memory-and I may be distorting this—but my memory is that what he started doing was he would go to the bookstore, usually the Strand in Lower Manhattan, he’d buy books during lunch hour, he’d bring them home in his attache case. He would then take the paper bag that the book was in and put it in the trunk of his car and then the book would sneak into the collection in the house and disappear among all the other
thousands. And then one day when my mother’s car was in the shop she borrowed his car, which he didn’t take to work because he took the train, and she opened the trunk and found all these paper bags, so she said, “Okay, just bring them in the front door.” But she got her revenge, sort of, when they finally sold the house and moved to an apartment. She said, “You could have 800 books. You have to sell all the rest. And if one new book comes in, one goes out.” So she now has control over the books. I hardly learned to use the library until graduate school because whatever I wanted to know, there were always books about every subject in my house.

INT: Was your father a voracious reader?

ELLEN: What’s interesting is...again, I thought, as children idolize and idealize their parents, and I was convinced that he had read every book in our house. I only found out again, as an adult, that he hadn’t. He told me he collects good titles. Some people collect coins or stamps. He collected good titles. He is a voracious reader, and to this day—my father just turned eighty—and he and my mother continue to take classes, to this day, in opera and history and computers and current events and psychology. And he continues to read. Again, we had a disagreement about taste when I was in college because at one point he gave up fiction. He just decided he didn’t want to read anymore fiction, so he reads non-fiction of all sorts. But he is a voracious reader.

INT: Do you attribute being...you’re a scholar of literature and you’re an author and a writer, and a storyteller.

ELLEN: And an editor.

INT: And an editor, excuse me. You’re editor-in-chief here. All with language, the love of language. Was that born inside of you? Was that, do you think, partially instilled in your family? Genetic?

ELLEN: Genetic, it’s hard to say. I don’t have, unlike some others, that I know of there are no scholars in my family. We do have some rabbis, although interestingly, we have no practicing rabbis. An uncle and a cousin have semicha from Yeshiva University, but they don’t have congregations and they’re not professors or teachers. I took to it. There’s something in my make-up. I’m a very curious person and I always have been. When I was growing up, not only did my father supply me with as many books as I wanted and just constantly giving me books, but we also belonged to an astronomy club and would spend many Friday nights at the...I remember when I was younger, with telescopes, going to astronomy club to look at the stars. At one point, when I was in my rebellious years in college, I accused him of making me into his son, which at that time I was mad, but in some ways he went against the current of the family tradition. Because he had no boys, I was the designated son in terms of the pattern of who was going to inherit the education and the scholarship. What’s interesting is I’m the only female on either side of my family ever to have a graduate degree. In some ways, sometimes what I like to talk about in my family is in some ways I pushed beyond...I pushed the envelope of my family tradition. The pattern and the expectation is that girls were to get married and have kids, were to be
competent people, competent adults, but not necessarily to excel in a kind of expertise, professional expertise. And my father nurtured that. As I’ve read, one of the things I’ve learned in acquiring Jewish books, is that often the more scholarly women of my generation and older— it’s changing now, but my generation and older usually they were children where there were no son. There were daughters. In fact, the first editor of the Jewish Publication Society, who never got the title but she functioned as the editor, was Henrietta Szold, who in her second career, in her mid-forties, started Hadassah. But her first career—actually, her second career was to be editor here. Her first career was to start one of the very first adult education evening schools for immigrants when she was a teenager. But she was the oldest of five girls, and her father, I think, passed his Torah on to her. And a number of the authors I’ve worked with are in a family where there are only daughters. So I think that my fortune was not to have brothers. I don’t know if my father would have been biased that way. He certainly tried to make my sister as bookish as me, so I don’t think it was a sexist bias. I took to it and she didn’t.

INT: Tell us a little bit about the Jewish values in your household, because you’re not only all of these things that you’ve mentioned but you sort of partition them off into a very Jewish view.

ELLEN: Right. As I mentioned, my family was orthodox, at least my grandparents’ generation was orthodox. We became conservative Jews. When we moved to the suburbs, the town we lived in, Metuchen, New Jersey, had only one synagogue, which happened to be a conservative synagogue but it was the only one. All the Jews belonged to the same synagogue. It so happened that the rabbi of that synagogue was a very, very unusual rabbi, whose name is Hershel Matt, alav hasholom. I only learned actually later, after his death, what an exceptional man he was, but he was the primary influence on me in my Jewish spiritual development. I went to Hebrew school until I became bat mitzvah. Again, just like I took to books, I took to books both in the secular world, and I was a very studious girl in public school, but I also loved Hebrew school. I loved learning Hebrew and studying Bible. I learned when I was eleven...the cantor, who lived around the corner from me, offered to teach his kids how to read Torah and I asked if I could participate. So I learned to chant Torah when I was eleven. The irony is because of the conservative movement’s stand on women at that time, and we’re talking in the early Sixties, I participated in junior congregation. I read Torah. I led services. And when I became bat mitzvah, I lost my rights as a Jewish adult and was no longer permitted to do that. Adult women could not read Torah, count in the minyan or get an aliyah. So when I was younger I could do these things, and when I was thirteen I did a haftorah-no Torah reading-on a Friday night, and then from then on I was not allowed to read Torah. I didn’t read Torah for ten years. And I couldn’t lead services, etc. But I was encouraged as a kid, through the junior congregation program, to learn that and I loved it.

I also began teaching kids how to read haftorah chant when I was twelve. In other words, I started making money, as a twelve year old, teaching bar mitzvah lessons and bat mitzvah lessons. Then, after my bat mitzvah, I outgrew the Hebrew school. It only went up through eighth grade. My rabbi said to me, “I’ll teach you,” so he tutored me for a year, one-on-one, and after that he didn’t want to keep doing it because he felt that it wasn’t fair to me, so he encouraged me to go to the Jewish Theological Seminary, which has a high school program called the prozdor.
program, and so I went twice a week for three years, for sophomore, junior and senior year in high school, with his sons and two other boys, to JTS in the Upper West Side of Manhattan, which involved nine hours of commuting for five hours of class. I studied Bible and I studied Talmud and I studied Hebrew literature and prayer.

INT: And you did then when?

ELLEN: I did it on Wednesday afternoon. I took a 3:06 bus with these boys. One of our parents would pick us up at eight o’clock on Wednesday night when we were finished, so we got home at 9:30. And Sundays, I’d leave my house at 7:30 and we rode in with a professor at JTS, Joel Roth, and we’d leave at 7:30 and we’d be home at 2:00. So I did that every Sunday and every Wednesday.

INT: Throughout high school?

ELLEN: Throughout high school. And I just loved the stuff. I loved learning Bible. I loved learning the language of Bible and comparative Semitics. I loved the intellectual challenge of Talmud. That was during the school year. Again, my rabbi encouraged my parents to send me to camp, so I went to Camp Ramah once, one summer, and the head of the camp at the time was Chaim Potok, which was interesting, since I’m now working with him, but I was thirteen and he was an adult. And then I went another year to Camp Massad, which is out of business now, which was an orthodox Zionist camp. Both of them Hebrew speaking. And while most of my bunkmates cut classes, I went as a good girl because I loved it. I really loved studying. I only did that two summers and then I spent one more summer as a counselor at Camp Ramah. But all of this was voluntary and all of this was really out of love for learning this. I was also very awkward as a teenager. I was an egghead, a bookworm, didn’t quite fit into the social scene, so for me, also, it was a refuge, a place where I knew I had competence and really could excel.

At one point, our home, in terms of our Jewish observance, was a typical conservative home in the Fifties, Sixties and Seventies in America. We kept kosher at home, but when we ate out we didn’t. I had a rebellion. Again, I went through a religious phase when I was about fifteen. I think it was originally motivated because I didn’t want to go to high school dances and basketball games, so I became much more observant than my parents. I stopped writing, doing any homework. On Friday afternoon I would throw my books down and I wouldn’t pick them up until Saturday night. I stopped spending money. I didn’t go shopping. Although I had earlier, but when I was mid-teenager I had this rebellion. I also refused to go out to Chinese restaurants anymore. And my parents accommodated me and actually stopped taking the family out. And my mother, to this day, lights candles precisely when it says on the calendar the candle lighting time is, but they don’t necessarily observe strictly. They may do things...my mother does certain things halachically and other things not, so she won’t hire a gardener or somebody to do work on our house on a Shabbat, but she might, in fact, do something else that requires spending money. So I grew up in a house that had strict rules about some things and no rules about other things. Shabbos in our house was not the kind of Shabbos that I now practice in my home. My mother lit
candles. We sat down to a dinner but my father didn’t make kiddush, for instance, and we didn’t sing table songs and we didn’t study. We used to go to shul fairly regularly on Friday night, but I went by myself on Saturday mornings. And during the day, again, it wasn’t a day that was that different than other days. What started happening was my rabbi, because we had this close connection and he saw that he had a willing student, would invite me to his table, and I spent many, many Shabbat lunches at my rabbi’s table, enjoying the singing and also, after lunch, he would invite me to study Torah. And his three sons, who went to day school and had had enough Torah during the week, would go out and play basketball in their driveway, and the rabbi and I would study. So that, to me, I really got an extra family, sort of an extra home on Shabbat and holidays with Hershel Matt and his family.

INT: So you were sort of symbolically adopted as a second son for the second time.

ELLEN: In a way, yes. Hershel Matt and Gusteen Matt had a daughter who was the baby of the family, who today is the most observant of the four kids. She married an orthodox man and lives an observant life in Highland Park, New Jersey. But at the time, she was just a little girl. The three sons, one of whom now is a scholar named Danny Matt-(end of tape 1, side 1) I even had that kind of relationship, to a lesser extent, with my cantor as I mentioned. Not only did he teach me to read Hebrew, but he was around the corner from us, and again, I would be invited frequently to their house on Shabbat. I spent many times on Shabbat afternoon, for havdalah...the tune I learned for havdalah I learned from my cantor. He had a son and a daughter, and I wasn’t quite adopted. The irony with my cantor is that he taught me to read Torah when I was eleven and I have since gone on and I have taught many women to read Torah. Later on, after that, he became orthodox. His family made aliyah to Israel, and he no longer believed women should read Torah. I met up with him a couple of years ago in Jerusalem and I said, “You know, you can’t take it back. You taught me this. You gave me this gift. You taught me how to read Torah and I’ve passed it on to other women,” and he laughed. But the irony is that now he wouldn’t do it.

But I did gravitate, in some ways, to sort of father models, and even when I went to the prozdor program at JTS, the man who drove us in every Sunday was my Talmud teacher, named Joel Roth, and he also became a mentor and a person I turned to. I used to visit him when I came home from college, and if I had some issues to work through, identity issues in my life, I would often go pay him a visit. So there was something in me drawing me to sort of Jewish role models and rabbinic models for guidance and for inspiration and for a kind of parenting that I didn’t get. My father is a very quiet man and rather uncommunicative. Even though he gave me books, it was almost as if the books were the place of exchange, the medium of exchange between us. We didn’t talk and to this day we don’t talk much. We don’t share much in the way of emotional connection. So I think I was looking and found it with other, older men who gave it to me.

INT: But do you know why you resonated particularly with Judaic studies as opposed to another kind of academic experience?
ELLEN: That's an interesting question. One reason may be because of this overtone, because of this extra emotional component, that when I studied, I got also individual attention. Even though I excelled in public school and I was a very good student—I was valedictorian of both my junior high school and my senior high school—that was in a class setting and there were all kinds of other factors in school. For instance, because of the culture of America, again, in the Fifties and Sixties, a girl who excelled was ridiculed. I was often teased by boys and girls for being too smart, for wearing glasses, for getting awards, for being smarter than the boys and doing better. When I look back on it, I think my school experience was rather uncomfortable. The more I got praise from teachers, the more I was alienated and set apart from peers, especially once I reached puberty and there was the bar and bat mitzvah world that I traveled in, which was very difficult. But I was getting this very, very personal and private attention from these few men in my life, and I didn’t have male teachers for the most part in high school, and certainly not in the younger grades. But even when I did, I didn’t have much of a personal relationship with them, but I did with my rabbi and this Talmud teacher and my cantor. So I was getting goodies in addition to the pleasures of studying.

The other thing is, and I guess this is something maybe in my temperament or my character, there is something in me that lives in history is the only way I could put it. When I observe anything in Jewish life today, I often imagine what it was like in Biblical times or ancient times. I have a very long view. I have a connection to Judaism that is very, very long and deep. I feel rooted in belonging to Judaism and the Jewish community and tradition in a way that I don’t as an American. I love America and I love living in this country, but perhaps one way of maybe thinking about it, a way that links my psychological personal life with Judaism, is that I have always been apart, is the way I could put it. Because of my studiousness, my curiosity, my social awkwardness, I have always felt like an outsider. And I would bet this is true of a lot of...particularly of girls who are growing up excelling, are growing up and standing out and not fitting the cultural mold, despite feminism, which has a long way to go before there’s a sense of comfort, I think, in terms of competence for girls. And because I felt apart, because I felt an oddball, being a Jew is another way of being an oddball, and I think it was a sort of positive, an affirmative connection, that I took pride in being an outsider and being apart. There’s a literary critic, a Jewish literary critic, named Leslie Fiedler, who talks about the Jew as a marginal figure in American literature. I think that I chose marginality to a large extent to be different and to really have a place for myself that was distinctive. So I think that was a lot of the attraction.

INT: One other thing you mentioned about growing up and your father’s love of books—you were talking really about the observance of Shabbat and said you began to not...but you are a writer. When did the creative writer begin to emerge in your life?

ELLEN: Very early. I remember writing an epic poem about the circus when I was in fourth grade, and then I wrote another very long poem about punctuation when I was in seventh grade. I wasn’t aware of what an oddball I was until I hit adolescence, so that I used to write poetry and just write things. My teachers loved it and my peers thought I was just so odd. So I began writing at a very early age, although not really independently. I would write for class assignments. I don’t
think I was really writing on the side. There are some kids that I know that just write all the time. They have a diary and they just write short stories. I wasn’t really motivated that much to do it. I was very creative in making up stories. I put on plays when I was about seven for the neighborhood kids.

**INT:** All by yourself or you and your sister?

**ELLEN:** I would gather the neighborhood kids and we used a garage and put on plays. I made up songs. I was very imaginative in my play. I was not interested in dolls really, but I sort of made up stories for things. But I didn’t really start writing until high school on my own, and I wrote a lot of morbid poetry, really very sentimental and depressing poetry, and I also started writing songs when I was in high school, for the guitar. I did a lot of that. I was the editor-in-chief of the literary magazine in the high school. And then in college I also started writing prose, as well as poetry, and continued writing songs. I didn’t get very far. I tried to compete for prizes and didn’t win. I wasn’t very good at it. And it was mostly for me. I was quite depressed for much of my earlier life, and I think it was my way, just an outlet for those feelings. When I really began writing seriously was when we adopted our daughter. Before then, I went from college straight to graduate school because I didn’t know what else to do, and I figured since I had always liked school and studying, I would just keep going. I went to graduate school in Comparative Literature and I wrote a dissertation, but I was really on that track, although I didn’t fit. I didn’t like graduate school very much.

**INT:** Let me just backtrack a tiny bit. You went to the University of Michigan, and you started in?

**ELLEN:** 1969. I chose a program there at the University of Michigan called The Residential College, which was an experimental residential program, encouraging creativity and independent study. There were no grades. It was very much a self-governing board. I was on the executive committee there and making decisions about faculty and curriculum. And I was a Comparative Literature major and studied Latin American literature, Chinese literature, classical literature, French. Loved language and literature. I continued that love. And I was writing on my own, but again, not terribly seriously. I went to poetry readings a lot and read poetry a lot to other people who were writing poetry.

**INT:** When you say writing on your own, you were writing poetry still?

**ELLEN:** Mostly poetry, although I did do a kind of prose-poetic novel of sorts that I worked on a whole summer, which never went anywhere and wasn’t very good, looking back. But I did that on my own, and I hung out with...well, the other thing I did on my own, what I did in college, is I fell in with a group of film people, and that’s where, in fact, my major network of friends in college was, in film. I was the assistant director of a feature film which we did on weekends and off-hours. I made my own short films. I was the head of a film society. Saw lots and lots of movies, and thought for a while about doing that as a career, going into film. It didn’t work out. I
was discouraged very vigorously by my father in doing that. He was very nervous. He used the word, which is actually kind of funny because it’s kind of out of date, he used the word bohemian. He was very nervous that I would be bohemian and I was hanging out with people...many of my friends in college were gay, just at the beginning of the gay liberation movement. Anyway, he was very nervous that I was going to live a very erratic and eccentric life and not be secure. He wanted me to do something legitimate that would give me an income and a degree. So he really discouraged me, because I wanted to study film. He really discouraged that. And so I ended up going to graduate school.

The funny thing is I wanted to go to the University of Toronto graduate school and study with Marshall McCluen and continue studying somewhat oddball things, technology in media, and I also applied to Princeton and got into Princeton and said no to Princeton and yes to Toronto, and then the department head at Princeton said, “No one says no to Princeton,” and I said, “You gave me no money and I don’t like the curriculum.” He said, “You come, and you’ll write your own ticket.” And when I came home for my graduation party after college, my parents and all their friends sort of ganged up on me and said, “You have to go to Princeton. You cannot go to Toronto.” So I did. I changed my plans and I went to Princeton, which was not a mistake because the credential has served me very well in opening doors, and it’s a very prestigious degree. I didn’t like the experience because it was very conventional, very male. I didn’t have any female professors there. And also just very conservative, a very conservative place, and I had been used to being much more creative and free in studying, in writing papers, in choosing my way. It was clear to me that I was a misfit there.

INT: Did you go directly from Michigan to Princeton?

ELLEN: I went directly. And in fact, I was a Comparative Literature major, and when I wrote my dissertation on Edgar Allen Poe and Charles Baudelaire, my advisor, my thesis advisor, when he read it said, “You know, this reads more like a novel,” and I said, “Thank you,” and he said, “That wasn’t meant as a compliment.” That was sort of emblematic. I really didn’t fit the mold. I was a little bit too eccentric and too interested in not being oriented towards scholarship. I got the clear message in graduate school that the only worthwhile career for a Princeton Ph.D. was to teach literature at another Ivy League, or at least another prestigious university. And I discovered in graduate school that I loved teaching adults. While I was a graduate student, not only did I teach undergraduate classes for a fellowship, but I also started and taught a class for the personnel at Princeton. I had an army colonel and nurses and secretaries, and I taught a writing class for them. I told my professors what I wanted to do with my career was adult education, and they looked at me like I was nuts. Why throw away a Princeton degree on that? And I even had an indication before I finished that I was not going to follow that career, and I didn’t. I got married in graduate school to a fellow student, someone getting a Ph.D. in English literature, who did fit the mold much better. He’s a year older than I, so he finished his degree one year before me and went on the national job market and got the job.

INT: The academic job?
ELLEN: The academic job. And I made a decision for two reasons not to apply nationally. One was I think that even then I kind of knew I didn’t...this was not for me. But also, I saw other two-career couples, two Ph.D. couples apply independently, and then they ended up living a continent apart, and most of those marriages didn’t survive. So if we were going to get married it was kind of foolish for us to live two thousand miles away from each other. So I never went on the national job market and I never really pursued an academic career.

INT: Your husband’s name is different from yours?

ELLEN: Right. My husband’s name is Herb Levine. I met him my first or second month in graduate school. He’s from Boston. What’s interesting about his family in terms of Jewish background, he comes from a family that is very Jewishly educated. His grandparents also, with one exception, are from Europe, from either Russia, from a small town called Meretch, and one from the Austrio-Hungarian Empire, from Vienna. But my husband’s father’s family really were interested in learning, in secular learning and Jewish learning, and my in-laws themselves started going to Hebrew school when they were twelve. They met when they were twelve. And they went through Hebrew high school and Hebrew college in Boston, and are both fluent in Hebrew and are very, very educated Jewishly, and come out of sort of the Haskala, the enlightenment movement. And my husband followed suit. He and his brother went to Hebrew school and Hebrew high school and Hebrew college, and grew up in a house, in sort of a Judaic-Hebraic house. One of the joys of marrying into that family is to really encounter this kind of Hebraist family, with people who really are knowledgeable Jews. In terms of observance, my husband’s experience and mine are very similar. We both grew up in conservative families and have very similar backgrounds in terms of observance.

INT: So you were how old when you got married?

ELLEN: I was twenty-four, which was pretty young those days. And my mother was twenty-four when she got married, which is interesting. We were both the same age. I was twenty-four and my husband was twenty-five, and we got married in the synagogue where I grew up and my Talmud teacher did the ceremony.

INT: And the rabbi?

ELLEN: By then, the rabbi that I grew up with already had left. He went to Princeton. We had similar trajectories. There was a new rabbi of that synagogue and this other rabbi—the Talmud teacher was also a rabbi. I don’t know why at the time I didn’t ask my original rabbi to marry us. As I said, it was only sort of later I realized how close the connection had been. At that time, I think, there may have been some...not estrangement, but just we were out of touch. So this other rabbi married us. The wedding reception was in my backyard. It was very small, very simple.

INT: We talked about much of your growing up in earlier years, and you talked a little bit about the awkwardness in being a teenager and being a very bright female. Can we talk a little bit more
about your close friends growing up, either childhood or high school or college, and perhaps a little larger circle of friends, so we can understand you in that context as well?

ELLEN: That's somewhat hard. My memory...as I mentioned, we moved when I was a young girl, so I lost whatever friends I had as a young girl. We moved to this town, this small town. My friends, by and large, until late adolescence, were often my Hebrew school friends. I went to Hebrew school three days a week until I was fourteen, and then I went off to New York, but I would see these kids three days a week. We often went to different public schools, but we would hang out together, and because classes were so tiny, I also saw them on Saturdays at junior congregation. So this was a group of kids I saw four days a week in small groups, and there was a lot of time kind of kibbitzing and schmoozing and hanging around, and I was also active in the Jewish youth group in my synagogue. So that was kind of my peer group.

The real divide in terms of my social life really was the bar and bat mitzvah year, and I'm sure that's true of an awful lot of Jewish kids, particularly growing up in the Sixties. There was this whole circle and circuit of socializing on a much more intense level than just going to Hebrew school or just going to birthday parties. All of a sudden we were expected to be able to dance, to be with adults, the parents of the bar mitzvah, and for me, it was almost, I would say, a traumatic transition. I was not ready to grow up that fast socially. That year was a very difficult year and I felt very much excluded and alienated and awkward. After that time of going to these parties, I became much more of a loner. I didn't have such close friends. I did have a few friends that I would hang out with in school, but my memory of that period is sort of spending much of my time alone. Sundays were taken up with going to New York, and I wasn't that close with the people in my class in New York because I only saw them in class. Most of them lived in the New York area. And then on weekends and on Shabbat I would spend with my rabbi and his family or the cantor. So I ended up not spending a lot of social time really in high school. And when I got to college it changed dramatically because then I came into this peer group.

I started out in college going to Hillel, and did that for only one semester. Hillel, at the time—it's now changed—Hillel has changed dramatically, but at that time it was a very weak Hillel, and there were freshman girls and graduate student men. I ate there every day because of kashrut, and it turns out the girls—and I don't know why—mostly male students did not go except these older students who were kind of looking for someone to feed them. They were somewhat awkward guys. Anyway, after a semester I just found it unpleasant and I dropped out of Hillel for the rest of my time in college. College was a time when I withdrew from Judaism. The only thing I did Jewish in college was to continue to teach bar mitzvah lessons and Hebrew school for spending money, so I maintained a connection with the Jewish community that way, but I did not do anything Jewish as a student on campus.

INT: You said you started in?

ELLEN: '69.
INT: So in 1969 there were extremely political views, especially in Michigan.

ELLEN: Absolutely.

INT: Were you a hippie? Were you doing all of that stuff?

ELLEN: I was a hippie. The interesting thing is that in about ’67, when the Vietnam War was heating up and there were all these protests...my father, to this day, is very conservative politically. He’s a Jew who votes Republican. He was always very conservative, and I had a rebellion against him in high school that was more of a social rebellion than a political one. In other words, I first became a radical to join in with the more popular, cool kids in high school before intellectually I had adopted and embraced their philosophy and their politics. And then eventually I sort of grabbed on to the politics as part of the calling card, part of the entry exam, to be part of this culture. So I started experimenting with all kinds of counter cultural things when I was in high school.

Then I went to college and I became more radicalized and became very active politically and went to every protest I could go to—every march, every rally. And I deliberately wanted some credentials as a radical. Finally, after going to enough of them, of course I finally got myself arrested because if you go long enough that’s going to happen. Again, the irony is that I was arrested in a sit-in that was agitating for a college bookstore—here’s an irony for you. There was no college bookstore at Michigan at the time. All the bookstores were privately owned, and most of the property they were in was owned by one of the vice-presidents at Michigan. It was sort of a...I won’t say necessarily corruption, but it was a little conflict of interest. And we took over a building and sat in, and I was such a good girl that I left the sit-in to go to an evening class, because I didn’t want to miss class, and then came back to the sit-in. Eventually, in the middle of the night, the police came and took us off to jail. Eventually we were tried and convicted.

INT: Convicted of?

ELLEN: Convicted of a statute that was called contention. Subsequently, it was taken off the books and the whole statute was thrown out and the case was expunged. So the record was expunged and so ultimately it ended up not being anything. I don’t have a record anymore. But it was very upsetting to my parents obviously, and very upsetting to me. But again, when I got out of jail the next morning I called a rabbi, this Talmud teacher, to ask him what I should do, should I tell my parents. And I was really so frightened and rattled by the experience that I actually withdrew from politics pretty much from then on. I did not go to the big march on Washington in 1969, the National Moratorium, because I was so frightened that I would get arrested again and my parents were so upset and so agitated. As I mentioned, to be really honest, my political conviction was on fairly shallow grounding. It really was not something I came to intellectually and philosophically, but more it was what everyone was saying and doing and I really wanted to belong, and that was the culture that I wanted to belong to.
So I would say that my experience in college was really trying on various identities, to shed this persona I had had of being a loner and an outsider. I really wanted to be an insider. I went to a college program...this program I went to was one of the most radical groups on campus, it was a place where artsy types and political types went. So it was an exceptional experience for me for those four years of belonging, being in the majority culture as opposed to the minority. But then when I went to graduate school again, where there were Jewish students in my program, but my husband and I, it turned out, were the only observant ones and then one other joined. So once again, I fell back into the outsider position, for instance, not going to department cocktail parties because they were on Friday nights, and also taking the classical language exam in Hebrew, not in Latin or Greek. So my four years of college were kind of a capsule, a time capsule, when I was a different person trying on a different identity, and then I resumed, I returned, to what I had been before.

INT: I'm just thinking historically about your age. Most of the people that I knew didn’t even go directly into a doctoral program or medical school or law school at that time, so that was still very...it was counterculture in a way to go immediately into...Did you find that?

ELLEN: It was interesting. I didn’t know what I wanted to do, and there’s a dimension of my personality that is timid, or was afraid of risk. I think I’ve changed since then, but my whole family...my family character, if you can talk about a composite character that is sort of inculcated into a family by the patterns of those who come before you, my own family on both sides has been a family living in a very narrow perimeter of experience. As I mentioned, the women in the family really never ventured far from home. To this day, my three surviving aunts all live in Brooklyn. Their children, with a few exceptions, live either in Brooklyn or live in the New York area with only one exception. No, that’s not true, a couple of exceptions but most of them, most of my cousins live in the New York area still. So the pattern in my family has been really to kind of stay where you are and not really venture into new ground, new territory. And I think that I brought that risk averse mind set with me into my later life, into my college life, and when it came time to figure out what to do, there were a couple of times when I thought about it...I remember going to the post office when I was eighteen and getting a Peace Corps application to go to Africa or Asia, and my mother saw it and she said, “Throw that out immediately.” And I did. And I remember wanting to spend the summer working for a black liberation newspaper in Harlem, which was really only two blocks from the Jewish Theological Seminary. And I told that to my parents and they said, “Absolutely not,” and I didn’t. I wanted to apply to Antioch and Bard and other kinds of-(end of tape 1, side 2)

I wanted to go to Toronto. I wanted to perhaps pursue a career in film and go to NYU maybe. In my freshman year in college I came for Thanksgiving and announced that I was going to drop out, take some time off. And every time I ever voiced anything like this, my parents said no and I didn’t buck. So one of the reasons perhaps that I did fall over this absolutely straight line track is that whether it’s character, temperament, family background, there was in me a fear of fighting against the family will. I really was a good girl all along, even though I was a radical, even though I went to protest marches and did other things. (Mechanical difficulty on tape) It was
basically out of sight, out of mind. When I brought anything challenging to their attention, they would put their foot down and oppose me and I didn’t protest. I didn’t really say, “Well, I’m doing it anyway.” That was true through graduate school. I never really did ever do something that they expressly forbade me to do.

INT: Were you married while you were still in graduate school?

ELLEN: Yes. We got married in 1975, and that was after my second year of graduate school, and then we continued—we stayed in Princeton another couple of years and then moved to Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

INT: So that must have made graduate school fun. You could study with somebody.

ELLEN: Yeah. Again, we lived in a small apartment. In fact, it was so small that I was given the...actually, I moved in with my husband before we were married, and he had a roommate, so there was just the two bedroom apartment, so I set up my study, my office, in the pantry, in the kitchen, which was unheated. For the shelves where you would put cans I had my books, and I had a little desk and I would hide out in the pantry writing my papers. But we helped each other study for exams and we read poetry together. We were very much sort of monks together as we went through graduate school.

INT: Did you know at that time though that you still wanted to write, or was it more of the academic scholar route?

ELLEN: It was the academic scholarly route. I don’t think I had much confidence in my ability to write. As I said, I had tried. In Michigan, there’s a prestigious prize called the Hopper Award, and I had competed for that and hadn’t come close to getting anything. And I just had this sense that I was not going to be successful as a writer, so I stopped. I really stopped for all through graduate school. I was only doing academic work. And as I said, my studious streak really fed on study. I took unusual paper topics. I’m a real intellectual, down to my fingertips and toes, and enjoyed doing papers on a poet and a philosopher together. I studied Ludwig Vikenstein, for instance. I loved that. And I’d bring in a linguist or I’d bring in some other...or an artistic person. So I enjoyed making unusual and creative connections between the straight and narrow curriculum of a literature major in a graduate school at Princeton and trying to bring something creative into it. In fact, I even took a film class when I was there, but my department head said, “Sure, you can write your own ticket as long as you take all the courses we require of you. Then you can add anything else on top of that.” And I found that was just too much. But I really did abandon any thought of doing creative writing while I was in graduate school.

INT: Tell me about using Hebrew as your second language. Did you have to study again or were you that proficient already that you were able to do that?

ELLEN: It was pretty much a reading exam. Because I was in Comp Lit, I had to take...well, I
guess in general, literature, I had to have two modern languages and a classical language. So I had French. I studied French all through junior high, high school and college, so French I had no problem with. I studied Spanish enough to pass a reading exam. And then I went for Hebrew. I had a fine proficiency in reading, and they gave us a passage from the Bible. I can manage my way through that. To this day I am not proficient in modern Hebrew. I cannot pick up a contemporary novel and read it. I can’t read an unvocalized newspaper. But my Biblical Hebrew was fairly solid and my liturgical Hebrew, prayer book, is fairly solid, and my religious vocabulary is pretty sufficient to do that.

INT: And you said that by the time you were back in graduate school you had come closer to your Jewish roots and you were always very observant?

ELLEN: No. In fact, my husband and I wrote an article together which came out right after we left Princeton called “Chavurah and the Ivory Tower.” There’s an interesting story about that. As I said, I sort of moved away from Judaism, and my husband did the same. He went to Harvard, and he also was not involved really in Jewish things when he was there.

INT: He went there as an undergrad.

ELLEN: His undergraduate work. And when we met with each other, we began...our second date was his making me a Friday night dinner at his apartment, although he made chopped liver which I hate. We returned to Judaism together, as a couple. We began by sharing Friday night meals while we were still dating. Then we began adding reading aloud after the dinner. We would read some Jewish book aloud, usually a novel or some stories. But we still went ahead the next day and went flea-marketing or shopping. The rest of the day was Saturday. And then we added another piece. We found another couple, another English graduate student and her husband, who was a reform rabbi, and we began studying Saturday afternoons. We began studying Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers, together, as a foursome. And as the days grew shorter we threw in havdalah. And then we realized we were missing the middle piece, which was the Saturday morning piece, and we went looking and found a minyan at the Princeton Hillel, run by this wonderful couple Ed and Meryl Feld, who to this day are good friends of ours. It was a minyan, a Chavurah, which we didn’t even know about, sitting around in a circle. This was in 1974. And we were sitting around in a circle and I got to read Torah and lead services for the first time in ten years. We loved it. We also were embraced by this very intimate community.

INT: Jewish community.

ELLEN: Jewish community of peers, and wonderful people, unlike the graduate students who were peers and they were friends but we didn’t have that experience in common, that spiritual and religious background in common. By the time we plugged that last piece in, we had a twenty-four hour Shabbat, and it was through that...It took a year from lighting the candles and eating to having a twenty-four hour Shabbat from candles through havdalah. That was really our reentry, and through that experience we learned about something called the National Chavurah Summer
Institute, which goes on to this very day. It’s one week a year in the summer. It’s next week. A group of Jews from infancy to eighty get together on a college campus to study for the week, study Jewish texts and Jewish subjects, to pray, to celebrate, to do culture, to argue and to be together as a community. 1980 was the first year it happened, and we were there for that first year, so we came back to Judaism in ’74-’75, continued in a very small scale, and when this came up we started going and we went for seventeen years in a row. That became our real community. Even when we were living in Lancaster and plugged into the mainstream community there, this Chavurah world, which I don’t know how familiar you are with what that is—maybe we’ll talk about it when we resume—that world became our community. It’s kind of a national community of independent fellowships. Chavurah comes from chaver, friend, a fellowship. Little pockets of kind of do-it-yourself grassroots egalitarian Judaism all over the country that would get together, and we’re sort of connected. We have a whole network of friends through that, and that became our final reentry and reconnection to something that was who we were, both as secular people coming out of the Sixties as well as Jews. So maybe that’s where we’ll stop. (Tape shuts)

**INT:** This is a continuation of our interview with Dr. Ellen Frankel in the offices of Jewish Publication Society. Thank you again. I guess we were going to pick up today with your early professional life. Can you tell us a little bit about what you hoped to do initially with your doctorate and what you did?

**ELLEN:** I think I mentioned last time that I was in a graduate program of Comparative Literature in an Ivy League institution, in which really the goal of getting the doctorate was to get an academic position at another academic institution, preferably Ivy League or very high caliber. And I discovered in the course of graduate school that that probably wasn’t the route I was going to go, and was not given encouragement by my professors to pursue alternate paths. I began realizing that by departing from that course, that I was going to really be bucking the kind of ethos of the place. So when I finished—I finished a year after my husband. My husband got his Ph.D. in English Literature at Princeton in 1977 and applied all over the country. The job he took was at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. I still had a year to go. I had my dissertation to go.

**INT:** ???

**ELLEN:** Well, initially it was English Literature and he was actually working on William Butler Yeates, the Irish poet, and then later did work both on the Bible as well as Walt Whitman, the American poet. Anyway, he got a job at Franklin and Marshall College, which is a small liberal arts college about seventy-five miles west of Philadelphia. We moved there after spending a summer touring the British Isles as a kind of delayed honeymoon. We moved to this small town and I spent the next year writing my dissertation.

Now on a personal note, within a few days of our arrival in Lancaster, I had to have emergency surgery which was to have a great effect on my life. I developed something called
Pelvic Inflammatory Disease and had to have an emergency hysterectomy. I was twenty-six years old and we had been married for two years. For whatever reason, I needed to really push ahead and get myself on a career track and sort of not be paralyzed or somehow overcome by this tragedy. So I immediately started teaching at Franklin and Marshall part time, still wearing kind of a hospital gown and still with stitches in, in my living room, just a few weeks after getting out of the hospital, and doing my dissertation at the same time, ten hours a day, six days a week. So I kind of buried myself in work and managed to finish my dissertation in record time. I really began in the fall of that year, of 1977, and I got my degree in May. I pretty much wrote the dissertation in four months. I did it on Edgar Allen Poe and Charles Baudelaire.

In the course of that year, as I said, I was teaching freshman composition and beginning to integrate myself into the Jewish life of the community. I made a decision during that year not to go on the national job market for the following year because my husband was on a tenure track and it was pretty clear that the chances of my getting a tenure track position nearby were slim, and to put myself on the market and to get a job in Wisconsin or Texas or California, and then have to sort of put the marriage under stress by deciding were we going to live apart, was he going to give up his position, even though I was a...I was a sort of feminist. I was hardly a radical feminist, but I made a decision at that point that I was married. My lot, at least for the time being, was going to be in the same town as my husband. So I never went on the job market, not that year and not ever.

Instead, I started teaching part-time. For the first year, living there, I taught freshman composition part-time. The next year I got a full time position in Philadelphia at Drexel University teaching writing, research skills and introduction to literature. For the next number of years I taught courses like that, linguistics, grammar, kind of service courses in English departments at Franklin and Marshall, at Millersville University which is next door. The Drexel job was just a one year job that I commuted to. But I was teaching night school, summer school, part time day school and then I began to cobble together a part-time career, which is actually very typical of women with my training who follow their spouse and find themselves in communities where they don’t have a full time job opportunity for their specialization. I know a lot of women like that. So I was not only teaching at a college level, I taught night school to business people. I started my own little business called The Write Angle, teaching writing to business people and high school teachers and administrators. I taught creative writing to high school kids. I did a lot of things dealing with writing, and most of it was self-initiated, whether it was giving a lecture at the local Y or drumming up business with the local school districts. I traveled all over Pennsylvania, took some seminars to improve my skills. So I did that a lot of the time.

I also got involved in the Jewish community because it’s a small community of only 2000 Jews, 800 Jewish families. They need every trained person they can get, and because I had such really solid training as a kid, I got to use those skills. I started teaching Sunday school, Hebrew school. I got involved in Hadassah doing book reviews. Got involved with other people in other synagogues. At some point when we had kids, a little later on, we were very involved in the Jewish day school, which was a very tiny Jewish day school, and I headed the PTO for two years
and then one year I was the Judaic principal. So I became very, very involved in the community. Was the principal of the afternoon Hebrew school at the conservative synagogue. But that came a little bit later. Basically, for the first couple of years in Lancaster, I was teaching and trying to make a home for myself felt very awkward in the academic community because I was a faculty wife, and sort of at the transition period between the faculty wife position, being teased and going to the president’s house and being involved in potluck suppers and things like that versus a real sense that spouses of faculty members have their own life and you don’t have to play a role. I was caught in between in the late Seventies. So after a while, I became friendly with a lot of the other faculty members, but I didn’t feel I belonged and gravitated more toward the Jewish community. And that was for the first couple of years.

When I had my hysterectomy, my husband and I put our names down to adopt in Lancaster, but it’s a very, very Protestant conservative area, the heart of Amish country and the Mennonites, and we were put on a waiting list. Because of the law, which is true in most places in the country, the biological parents can specify religion. So it took us a long time to find a baby whose parents didn’t care that we were Jews. It took a while. So when we adopted our daughter in 1981, the very beginning of 1981, then my life changed again. So I would say between ’77 and the end of 1980, I had a part time career, mostly of teaching in all sorts of different settings, and our social life really revolved around the synagogue and the Jewish community and the rabbis. We became friendly with the rabbis in town. I just sort of fit into that world. But all that time I felt like an oddball. I was an intellectual. I had a Ph.D. Most of the women that I came in contact with were not like me, did not have advanced degrees, were not necessarily career women or if they were, they tended to be maybe teachers or therapists, and they were professionals in their own way. Many of them didn’t work. I just sort of felt kind of strange, really like I didn’t belong there, and it was a small town. Also, a very conservative town. The town took on the coloration of its larger culture.

At the end of 1980, our daughter was born, at the very end of December of 1980. We got our call to come get her when we were in Florida on vacation with my in-laws. We flew home and she was eight days old when we got her. At that point, I became convinced that I really didn’t want to work as hard as I had been working in terms of hustling jobs all over the place, and it was then that I began to write, really for the first time since high school, or since college. I started writing when my daughter was five weeks old, and we brought in a college student to babysit a couple of hours a day, and it was then that I started writing. I didn’t have a burning story to tell. I wrote a long poem for kids then. By the end of that semester, by the end of that spring, my husband got a grant to do some research and writing at Brandeis University, and so we decided since we had a baby and not much money, we decided to live for a year with my in-laws in Boston, which was wonderful. Absolutely wonderful to have grandparents there. Boston is great.

At that point, I didn’t know quite what to do and I said, “Well, maybe I’ll go look for yet another freshman composition job up in the Boston area.” And my husband said, “I got a grant. Let’s say that you have a grant. You can have a five-year grant, and spend a couple of years and see where your writing leads you.” So we went up there, moved in, and I started writing from the
day we got there. Our daughter was in day care four hours a day and I just started writing a story I had heard from a family friend. From that moment on, I basically wrote every day for the next ten years. For many of those years, I wrote... when my daughter was very little, I wrote four hours a day. When she got to the awkward age of nursery school and she only was in nursery school for two and a half hours and I had to carpool, some months and months I wrote forty-five minutes a day. Over the next seven years I wrote several novels. None of them were published.

INT: Did you try?

ELLEN: Oh yes. I tried very hard.

INT: Did you have an agent?

ELLEN: I went through a few agents but they weren’t very effective. The irony, and it’s actually very telling, is that the first novel I wrote was a Holocaust novel. I had heard the story from a friend and also incorporated a family story, and I wrote it over a three year period seven times, seven drafts. In between one of the drafts, I dashed off a little book for Jewish preteens about growing up as a liberal American Jew, called “Choosing to be Chosen,” and that, which I dashed off, was published. The novel that I slaved over for three years was not. So that was an interesting sign to me that my talents, my vision, my heart, was really in writing for and about Jews. Even though this was a novel and it was a Jewish subject, I didn’t have any training and probably just didn’t have the talent for it. After I tried unsuccessfully to publish that, I then started a second novel which was a Middle Eastern spy thriller set in Jerusalem and Rome, involving the Palestinians. Again, I wrote that over the course of a couple of years, seven times again. I came close, but in publishing you get an A or an F. You don’t get a B+. I had some interesting nibbles from some important publishers, but ultimately didn’t get a contract. And again, while I was writing that I wrote a small book in between, my only non-Jewish book that was published. It was about George Washington and the Constitutional Convention for Bantam. That again was a very small effort and it didn’t take me that long.

But all this time I was writing, and I kind of felt like I had a secret life. I don’t know if you know the story “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,” if you ever read that, from high school. That’s sort of the way I was. I would get up in the morning... I loved, and I still love, to write. There is nothing that makes me sort of feel more whole-hearted than writing. There’s an interesting writer-psychologist of sorts whose name is Chickzen Mahallie, who wrote a book called “Flow,” in which he claims a flow is when you’re doing exactly what you do best and you’re kind of transported. That’s the way I am with writing. When I’m writing I’m somewhere else and in fact, it got me into trouble because when my daughter was two-and-a-half, I was writing full time, really was writing all day long. This is just before she went off to nursery school and so she was in day care. I was writing four or five hours a day, and I would sit down at the computer-I was just learning computers-and I wouldn’t stand up again until it was time to pick her up. I didn’t realize that I didn’t eat lunch, I didn’t stand up, and eventually I began to find it harder and harder to straighten out at the end of it because I was hunched over the
keyboard. Also, I had a two-and-a-half year old who was pretty solid, and I was schlepping her all over the place. The combination, I think, of sitting kind of tensed up in a chair writing and lifting this heavy kid meant that I ended up spending a summer on my back with a herniated disc, and eventually had emergency surgery with a ruptured disc. And I began to pay more attention at that point to this compulsion I have to write and to be in a trance.

So I wrote every day, and I would then shut down the computer and then go off to my life as a suburban Mom, picking up my daughter, take her to the playground or a playgroup, running a PTA event, running a raffle, hanging out with friends with their kids, shopping, gardening. I had two lives, and very few people knew about my secret life as a writer. And I had very little to show for it. I did publish my first book in 1985, so I was twenty-five years old. Then I published another book in '87 and then another one in '89. By the time my third book came out, which was a collection of Jewish tales told in modern English, that was when I sort of...that was my coming out party, and that’s just when we left Lancaster. We had two sabbaticals. We had the first sabbatical when my daughter was born, was just an infant, and then the second sabbatical was in 1986.

What happened when my daughter was about four-as soon as we adopted our daughter we put our names down for a second child. The public agency we worked through made it kind of clear to us after a while that it unlikely we would get a healthy white newborn as a second child. There were plenty of couples who had no children and they would give preference to those who were childless, which is only fair. After considering some options we decided, with a lot of encouragement verging on pressure from the public agency, to consider an older child. But for us, I think older meant six months. We got a call when our daughter was four-and-a-half that there was a three-and-a-half year old little boy living in New York who was in a hard-to-place category, whose father, whose birth father, specified a Jewish placement. So it was sort of the other side of the coin. Just as we had trouble initially finding a baby because of the preference for Christian homes, here this child had come to us because of the preference for a Jewish home. And we began visiting him in his foster placement and we adopted him. We brought him home not that long after, when our daughter was just about to turn five and he was three and a half. So all of a sudden, I had two little kids rather than a baby and a child. So even though they’re sixteen months apart, they sort of came together. We did have our daughter for four and a half years as an only child before we had our son, so it’s not like I was overwhelmed with two in diapers. That’s another story altogether, but I was foolish to believe that if we started with a three and a half year old I would skip the hard part and go right into having a speaking, walking, more self-sufficient child. Nothing could have been farther from the truth.

INT: Because of the rigors of adopting a child that age?

ELLEN: Because of who he was. Because he was a hard-to-place child with lots and lots of troubles and problems and a lot of bad history in his life. He had a very rough start in life and he carried with him, to this day-he’s sixteen now-he brought with him a lot of problems and we didn’t know at the time, both because we were naive and because-(end of tape 2, side 1) ...so they
didn’t encourage us to share problems. We kind of adopted him, in a way, a lot of it through our Jewish experience and background and beliefs. We believed we were doing a mitzvah and we were. We believed that if you give a child enough love you can overcome anything. We believed that we were bringing this child into the Jewish community and he had started as the son of a Jewish father. We were bringing him back. In fact, we gave him the Hebrew name of Moshe, Moses, which was a name in the family but he really responded later on when he was a little older, to the Passover story, that he was being adopted back into his people after being with somebody else, because his foster placement had been a Christian home.

So we had this little fairy tale, in a sense, of what we were doing and how exciting it was and how inspiring it was, and we got a lot of praise from people, except our families, who felt we were kind of nuts. They were very nervous about what we were getting into. One of the other books I have written that’s in my closet is an autobiography/memoir about raising this child. The story is not over and I need to write it over again from the perspective of now. That has been the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life. It makes getting a Ph.D. really feel like a piece of cake. It’s been very, very challenging, very hard for our marriage, for our family. And again, that’s a long saga, but has really had a fundamental impact on me, who I am, what turns my life has taken.

Just to pick up the chronology, what happened was we decided to go...not long after we adopted our son, my husband got another sabbatical, and he said, “Where do you want to go?” And I said, “I’ll go anywhere where I don’t have to deal with snowsuits,” because my son also came as a very hyperactive kid with attention deficit, and I had spent the winter fighting him into and out of snowsuits. So we went to Gainesville, Florida. One of the great draws besides the weather was we knew the rabbi there and really liked him, and knew that we would be coming to a Jewish community that would be a good place for us to settle into, because it’s hard going to a new community. It proved to be a wonderful year. There was one synagogue in town. We started going every week, became very close to the family of the rabbi, and it was a real idyllic year. We lived in an apartment and I wrote every day, pretty much all day. My daughter was in first grade and our son went to the synagogue nursery school, and my husband wrote most of the day. We did a lot of nature stuff. And it was a really lovely experience and the Jewish community really proved to be our focus while we were there and we didn’t feel lonely at all.

We came back and then came a real dividing moment in our life. We went to a bar mitzvah of a friend in Philadelphia, in the neighborhood that I now live in, Mt. Airy, and while we were there and just before that, we got into a conversation with friends about what is your ideal Jewish community. And I began describing it, and I realized while I was describing it that it had no relationship to where I was living, and that I was very lonely and felt very isolated living these two lives and having a secret life as an intellectual, writer, Jew who was interested in education, and then having the public life of a small town suburban Jew. And so I said to my husband that weekend, while we were in Mt. Airy, I said, “I want to move.” And we decided to move. Neither of us had work in Philadelphia but we decided to move, and we picked up our family in 1989 and moved to Mt. Airy, into an integrated neighborhood. Again, our parents were
pretty nervous for us. We had grown up in white suburbs.

INT: Why the suburbs of Philadelphia?

ELLEN: Well, because all the years that we have been going to this Chavurah institute every summer, year after year, I was aware that that was the only week of the year that I felt integrated as a Jew, where I felt stimulated and connected with peers and was appreciated for who I was. As I went every year, I began to learn that a lot of the people that I liked the best and wanted to spend time with lived in this little neighborhood outside of Philadelphia called Mt. Airy, and we would occasionally go visit. It was just the kind of ideal Jewish community I had been looking for. So since it wasn’t that far from Lancaster and since my husband could then commute back—it was seventy-five miles—we decided that’s where we wanted to be. We thought about living halfway, but then we would be in the middle of nowhere. The other thing is I wanted to live in a Jewish community that would feed me, and having spent twelve years in Lancaster, I realized that there was not a critical mass of Jews like me, like us, that would...we were constantly giving. We were teaching. We were leading services. We were creating events. We were helping to be leaders in the community, and we weren’t getting anything back. Plus, because of our son’s special needs...what happened after a while, he was unable to sit in synagogue, and there weren’t any other kids...again, this was a small town where Saturday morning services were just not well attended. There were no peers for them to play with and there was no day care or any kind of babysitting. And we soon started taking turns. One of us would stay home with the kids and one would go to services. We also had no one to share Shabbat with. People weren’t into it. They were into soccer or shopping or movies. So we spent our Shabbat isolated in our house with this very difficult kid to boot. So I said to my husband, “I want to be in a community where I can eat meals at other people’s houses and have hospitality in mine. I can share holidays. I can study. I can do all kinds of things in a really full Jewish way.” And this was the place to go, and I just realized we needed a city and this kind of neighborhood, and we also needed support services for our son. He basically stayed in a school one year at a time, and then he went to another. He was kicked out of almost every school he went to. We needed more doctors. We needed psychologists. We needed more options for schooling for him. So we moved, enrolled our daughter in Solomon Schechter in Elkins Park, the Forman Center. Found a school for our son which he lasted in for a year. And began integrating ourselves into this new Jewish community, which didn’t take that long.

My husband began commuting back and forth to Lancaster two or three days a week, depending on his teaching schedule, but he was off summers and he was off winter break. And I picked up my...logged on to my computer and started writing again. A good friend of mine who had lived in Manhattan when I was living in Lancaster named Betsy Teutsch had approached me years before about writing a book together on Jewish symbols. She’s a calligrapher artist. And I said, you know, we were states apart, but now we were neighbors. And for the next two years, we wrote a book together and we talked every day on the phone and went walking and we discussed Jewish symbols. So that was another project that happened because of the neighborhood. We moved into this minyan that we davened in which was very comfortable and exciting. Wonderful
spirit, wonderful music. And I really felt at home in many ways, although the entry into an integrated neighborhood initially was very frightening. It was really, really scary. But we really did fit right in.

A few years later, after writing for a couple of years, this job at JPS came up and I applied. I had no qualifications. What I had done for the previous few months—I had been writing, of course making almost no money at all, and when the five years were up from my husband’s pretend grant, he said to me, “Well, take one more five year grant and then we can decide. If it’s still not working, you’ll do something else.” So I had published a few books and I was teaching adult education for the synagogue and doing some other kinds of consulting and then this job came up. I had been doing editing for a little organization called the B’nai B’rith Book Club, which actually went defunct. So I spent a few months doing that, and then when the job came up I went for an interview and I had never worked for a single day in publishing. What I had were pieces. I had a piece called graduate degree, which had taught me to do research, had taught me to write fast and competently, had taught me to be disciplined. I had another piece called writing consultant and writing teacher which taught me how to write and craft books and prose. I had another piece called Jewish educator and self-taught Jew, because one of the things we did in Lancaster is my husband ran the Hillel at the college as a volunteer. They had no paid position and particularly before we had kids, we spent Friday nights, Saturday, Sunday, Monday at the Hillel, teaching, sponsoring speakers, having meals and really being integrated into the Jewish student life as well. So I had that Jewish piece, plus I had my background as a younger person. Every year I did something to increase my Jewish education, usually by teaching. So I had that piece. And I had my love of learning. I had kids, so I was interested in children’s books. I had my community activities. And this job put it all together. I wasn’t their first choice. They were looking for someone who had credentials that were more orthodox, that sort of more fit the profile of who they thought should be the editor-in-chief. But for various reasons, their first picks didn’t work out and they came to me and said, “You’re it.”

INT: This was what year?

ELLEN: This was 1991. We had been in Philadelphia since 1989, the summer. And I had to hit the ground running. My very first day in publishing was as the editor-in-chief of a publishing house. So I learned on the job. I called everyone I knew to be mentors to me and I asked them point blank. I said, “What do I need to know, or how do I ask specific questions, how do I manage time? How do I manage people? What do I do with the seventy-five manuscripts that have accumulated in the year-and-a-half there was no editor? How do I relate to a board? How do I file papers?” I had not really worked in an office except for summer jobs. So I just asked everyone and got lots of good advice and took it. Read lots of books about...again, about filing. I read a whole book about filing. Read books about management, finance, publishing obviously, editing, book production and loved it. I loved the learning. It was really very exciting, and I loved the Jewish content of the learning. And that’s what I’ve done for the last seven and a half years.

When I was interviewed, Chaim Potok, who is the chair of the editorial committee and
was himself the editor here between 1966 and 1974, said to me at the interview...he said to me, 
"You know, if you take this job you’re not going to be able to write." And I said, “I know,” and 
for the first three years I did not write. I had just finished the book called “The Encyclopedia of 
Jewish Symbols” with Betsy Teutsch, and I didn’t write. I was too busy learning and editing and 
doing all kinds of things. I found that after three years I couldn’t stand it, that having written 
every day for the previous ten and then taking a three-year hiatus, that I missed it much too much. 
I had an internal experience when I was writing that was unduplicated in any other place in my 
life. So I began to write again, and have since published a number of books that I’ve written 
before work, after work, on Sundays-took one sabbatical of a summer-because I really need to 
write and I really love to write, in addition to which, one of the reasons I wanted to go to work 
full-time is, as I mentioned, raising my son has proven so tough that I really needed to get out of 
the house and I really needed to have a world outside of the family and outside of the house. So 
being in an office was very helpful to me, to be really busy and to be challenged with all sorts of 
intellectual and social tasks. So in a nutshell, that’s basically what I’ve been doing. I work 
probably fifty, fifty-five hours a week.

INT: Just here?

ELLEN: Just here. That’s what I do now, because I started as the editor-in-chief and in the last 
eight months, I’ve also assumed the job of the executive here. I’m doing two full time jobs, 
which won’t go on forever but right now I am, so I’m working about fifty-five hours, fifty-five, 
sometimes sixty, and I’ve written books all along and I also travel all over the country speaking 
and teaching. So my life is very, very full with the kind of intellectual tasks that I love-editing, 
writing and teaching.

INT: Can you talk a tiny bit about the Jewish Publication Society/

ELLEN: It’s a hundred and ten years old. It was started in 1888 by a group of Jewish 
intellectuals, Jewish men mostly, who when they came to this country-most of them were 
German Jews-and when they came to this country in the nineteenth century, mid-nineteenth 
century, they discovered that the next generation of American Jews was not going to know the 
languages to read Jewish books. The new Yankee Jews didn’t know Yiddish, German, Russian, 
Hebrew, so they couldn’t read ancient literature and they couldn’t read contemporary literature. 
There was no Jewish literature in English. So it really was begun to provide translations of 
Jewish books for the new generation of American Jews, and to support and encourage new books 
written by Jews.

The mission really hasn’t changed since then, and what’s interesting and inspiring for me, 
but also a cautionary tale, is that the very first editor was Henrietta Szold, the one who’s sitting 
on my wall, whom I look at every day. She never got the title editor. She was the eldest of five 
daughters of a very learned Jew in Baltimore, and her father kind of designated her as the 
surrogate son and passed on his Torah to her. As a teenager, she started one of the very first adult 
schools, night schools for immigrants, in the United States. Not for Jews, just all immigrants.
That was her first career. And then she came to Philadelphia. The family moved and she became the editor here, although she was called the secretary of the Jewish Publications Society at an annual salary of $1000. She edited, proofread, translated books from German, from French. She did everything, and worked herself to the bone, but was pretty much the only woman involved and never got the title, and she then went on...she moved to New York, to Manhattan, and did an entire rabbinic training, with the agreement that she would not apply for ordination. So she did everything but get ordained as a woman rabbi, because they didn’t do it then. She did that for about twenty-six years until she fell in love with a younger man, Louis Ginsberg, one of the great professors and scholars, and then he jilted her. She had a nervous breakdown, went to Israel and came back and started Hadassah, and that was her third career. And then when she was seventy-five, she became the head of youth aliya in Israel, bringing a lot of Jewish kids out of the Holocaust, and that was her fourth career that she did until she was eighty-three. So she’s an incredible role model for me.

So JPS really is one of the oldest publishers of Jewish books in English in the world. Its bread and butter, the heart of what it does, is the Bible. It was the first really authoritative translation in English of the Jewish Bible, in 1917, and then they did it again in 1985. That’s kind of the core of what we do, but we publish books, all kinds of books, about Jewish topics and one of my special interests is books by, for and about Jewish women. Since I’ve been here, that’s been a very important concern and we’ve published a number of books from that world. I’m also interested in thinking about mainstreaming Jewish women’s concerns, so that instead of only having books that are kind of on the margins, just like you have women’s studies departments in colleges, every author who writes a book for JPS, I at least bring up the subject of gender neutral language, both in terms of pronouns, the he or she, and in terms of G-d language and in terms of women’s concerns. Some of my authors, some of the authors, won’t budge. If they’re very, very traditional they want to talk about G-d as He. They are not interested in that. But at least I want them to think about it. Sometimes they do it in a footnote. They’ll say, “Everyone should understand that this is generic.” But that’s one thing I want to do. In our kid’s list, I want to make sure that when we do books about famous Jews or we do books about history, that girls and women are part of the landscape. So that’s one way that I bring my being a woman into my work life as well.

INT: Are you a part of a publishing world that I think of as New York or are you totally separate from that? Do you get a “Publisher’s Weekly” every week?

ELLEN: It’s interesting. When JPS began in 1888, it was the only Jewish show in town. There really were no other people publishing Jewish books. In World War II and then certainly more after the war, university presses decided they would start publishing books of Jewish content that were more scholarly. Then commercial publishers decided that Jewish books would sell and would be of interest. And then new Jewish publishing houses sprang up, both associated with movements like the various branches of Judaism, as well as private, separate houses, and so all of a sudden JPS found itself in a market flooded with Judaica. So in terms of New York, we straddle a number of worlds. There are some of our books that can compete, although we don’t
have the marketing clout, but they could compete in book stores with books published by Harper Collins or Simon and Schuster or Random or Schocken, but what we’re missing is the big machine of the commercial world. We’re missing the advertising dollars, the marketing dollars, the big advances. So that’s one problem.

On the other hand, we’re in the university press world. In fact, we’re an associate member of the American Association of University Presses, and since we’re non-profit and some of our books are scholarly, and the editorial community that I work with mostly are scholars who approve of the books based on their intellectual rigor and value. We also compete in the Jewish world with other educational houses, trying to get books into Hebrew schools or Jewish libraries. So we move in a number of worlds. We have liabilities in each one of them, but our strength is that we’re a non-profit, so we can accept donations. The chief strength is that we’re non-denominational.

INT: What does that mean? It confuses me because it’s a Jewish publishing house.

ELLEN: Within Judaism. In other words, if you’re attached to the reform movement, conservative or orthodox, you have an agenda and you are okay about excluding certain segments of the Jewish community. If you’re a commercial house, you may in fact want to be a secular publisher, not be overly religious. But we really want to be an umbrella for everybody, and it’s very tough, given the climate today, because there’s so much divisiveness in the Jewish community. It’s really tough.

Our Bible, the English translation of our Bible called the Tanach, the Hebrew name, which came out in ’85, was composed...the translation took place over a thirty year period with a committee of reform, orthodox, conservative and secular Jews, sitting around a table, agreeing together about the translation. You couldn’t do that now. It would be utterly impossible to do that now, because you would not get orthodox Jews to sit down at the same table with liberal Jews. But that’s the goal, to try to figure out how to publish books for all Jews. Now that may mean that instead of having every book appeal or be kosher for everyone, we may have to have some books that are kosher for some and not for others, but personally, my editorial vision is to expand to the right and to the left, to really think about how can we be the Jewish publisher of the whole community, because we are non-profit and we accept money from the community, and we publish books for the long haul.

INT: When you say community, you don’t mean the Philadelphia community? You mean the national or-

ELLEN: International. I have a number of goals, and one goal is to speak for and to appeal to all Jews. Another is to build bridges, build bridges abroad, especially to Israel, and build bridges to the past by translating and framing old texts with new concerns and trying to figure out how to make them accessible. That’s really what I’m hoping to do.
INT: It’s a large order. So you’re here for the long haul. You’re not planning on leaving any time?

ELLEN: Well, it’s hard to say. When I was interviewed for the job seven years ago, I was asked that. At the time I said I could imagine spending the rest of my working life here. It’s been rough. Like all Jewish organizations there is a lot of politics because different people have different reasons they’re involved in the Society, and there’s a board of trustees and people get on boards for a whole variety of reasons. And there are financial challenges. I don’t know. As I said, right now it’s an interesting crossroads for me because I’m the acting executive in addition to being the editor. I don’t know whether the board will appoint me to remain the executive long term, and I think I’d like to be. If not, I think I very well may think about moving on.

INT: Who has sort of the final say, the executive or the editor-in-chief?

ELLEN: The Society has a charter, has by-laws, and it was created from the very beginning as a two-headed monster. There’s an executive, sometimes called the executive vice-president, the publisher. It’s unclear what the term is. That person is in charge of the administration, finances, personnel, operating. The editor-in-chief basically chooses the books and makes sure they’re published, and the content also. Is in charge of the publishing of the books. Who’s in charge? It’s not always so clear. When I had a colleague, there was considerable friction, and that’s true of all publishing houses. You have a publisher and then you have the editors, and the publisher is the bottom line person and the editor is supposed to be the creative person. We’re small, and I’m enjoying both. I can’t do both because I don’t have enough hours in my day, but I think there could be a new structure that would minimize the friction.

INT: You have had and still have many professions in your professional life. Is there one or a few mentors in particular that have been important or instrumental?

ELLEN: The question was about mentors. Well, because I wear many hats I’ve had many different kinds of mentors. I mentioned, the last time we spoke, about the rabbi of my community as being a mentor in terms of spiritual development and love of Judaism. Another mentor has been Chaim Potok, who because he was the editor here, because he is a writer and because he’s a very smart person has been a great mentor for me, teaching me everything from the craft of editing to the business of publishing to political skills to how to run a good meeting, and just understanding Jewish books and Jewish learning. So he’s been an important influence.

Another one of my mentors is a woman in New York named Jane Eisay, who herself was the assistant...went from the bottom to the next to the top position at Yale University Press and then moved into the commercial world in New York and has been there ever since and is now the editor-in-chief of Harcourt Brace. I met her because she was on the board of trustees when I got here and I began going into New York regularly with a list of questions. She used to laugh. I came in with my agenda, my little list of questions, and she taught me really the nuts and bolts of publishing, everything from how to price books and how to figure out how much they’re going to
cost and how to plan a list, and just has been a tremendous asset as a problem solver. At some point, and she and I disagree—we're not sure—she became my editor, and when I published my book—I wrote and published the book “The Five Books of Miriam,” she was the editor on that book, so she went from being a board member, a colleague, and then added to that being an editor, and eventually, through that process, which was wonderful—it was really a wonderful process—she became a friend. (End of tape 2, side 2)

INT: Interview with Dr. Ellen Frankel.

ELLEN: We were talking about mentors. I don’t know if you want me to finish that up.

INT: Please.

ELLEN: Besides those two people I mentioned, Chaim Potok and Jane Eisay, I’ve had a lot of other people who’ve been influential and role models for me in a variety of dimensions. Working with the board of trustees with people who are very high-powered, successful people, particularly women...on our executive committee there are three women judges who are very impressive people. In fact, one of them took me to the Supreme Court at one point because she’s a member of the American Association of Women Judges, where I got to meet Sandra Day O’Conner and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. There are other people on the board who run businesses, who are very successful lawyers or academics, presidents of colleges. Normally, had I not been in this job, I wouldn’t meet people probably in those roles, and it’s been very useful for me and very enlightening for me to just watch how they do their jobs, how they present themselves in public, how they carry a meeting, how they handle power. So those are also people who have been inspiring.

And then there are other people who are more spiritually mentors for me. I’ve been very influenced by Zalman Schachter Sholom as a religious teacher. There are other rabbis who have influenced me. I would say that I’ve been very, very fortunate, and in many ways because of the job I have, that I get to meet writers and teachers, academics, scholars, translators, poets, editors, agents, as well as philanthropists, who all go together, whose work together produces Jewish literature. So I have found a lot of that incredibly inspiring.

I’m inspired sometimes by the books themselves, when a book comes to my desk that represents a real story. Often the story of how a book came to be is as dramatic as what’s inside it, so I have had Holocaust memoirs and other things that are incredibly dramatic. Other books are a person’s life work, or it may be just something that just shows tremendous expertise in a certain area or a wonderful gift of writing. So in some ways, the writers behind the books...I have not met all the writers of the books that I acquire, so I don’t even know the people who wrote them. I know them only from correspondence and telephone calls and the book. So they also have been part of who and what has inspired me.

INT: Do most people come to you through agents or not necessarily?
ELLEN: No. In fact, because of the strange position we occupy in between many different publishing worlds, as I mentioned, we don’t have the money to attract name talent who come with agents and big advances and subrights deals and movies, etc. Most of the time they come unsolicited. I get several hundred submissions a year, and we probably end up publishing five or six of them out of the several hundred. They go to scholars to be evaluated. Sometimes I work with an author, and then sometimes I’ll go and ask somebody to write a book, but very few of them come with agents. Some do, but not a whole bunch.

INT: So is that desk the slush pile? They all come on your desk, these two hundred manuscripts?

ELLEN: More. Well, we have a children’s editor. He gets a lot. And then I get all the adult books. It averages about three hundred a year. Because I’m now doing two full-time jobs, I actually have an assistant who’s in Germany now, a young woman from Germany getting a Ph.D. in Jewish studies. I’ve given her the slush pile. So she’s now the first line of defense, and she flags things that are of interest. The truth is that I have to do a lot of triage, and one of the most important...if I’ve learned anything in being an executive and an editor-in-chief, is the fine art of triage, learning how to make decisions fast, learning how to accept the fact that I’m going to make mistakes, but that if I don’t make a decision nothing happens, learning how to trust my instincts and how to give up the possibility of a success or a find in order to move forward. Also, learning to trust other people to make the judgements with me. So I make decisions very fast and I’m aware that somebody may have spent ten years on a book and it comes to my desk and I dispose of it very quickly, and it’s not fair. It’s not. But I also know that...I now sort of know the personality of the list we publish, the kinds of books we do, which ones are going to go, and have to go through so many hoops to get a book accepted. What I tell authors all the time is I can say no but I can’t say yes.

INT: It has to be approved by the board?

ELLEN: It has to meet a number of tests. It has to go first through me. Then it has to go some ways into my filter of books, the kinds of books that I decide we’re going to publish. Then it goes to Chaim Potok and it has to go through his approval. Then it may go to a scholarly reader if it’s a scholarly book to see if it’s done well. Then it goes to an editorial committee which meets twice a year. It has to pass the test of financial liability. If it doesn’t meet that, it has to have enough fundraising behind it to support it, so a book could fail because it’s too expensive. It has to pass the marketing department’s assessment that it can be marketed and it makes sense. The business manager. So by the time a book...some books have taken two years to go from the first time I’ve learned about it until they’re actually under contract, let alone published. So it’s a very long process, and a lot of writers get frustrated with JPS, because if you go to a trade house, an editor is usually told you can spend up to X number of dollars without needing approval. You’re hired to be an acquisitions editor. You buy the books that make sense to you and that’s what you’re here for. JPS has a very, very cumbersome structure, both because it’s kind of a community trust and therefore it’s got to make sense for the whole community, and because it’s a very old institution. It’s kind of got a lot of bureaucratic trappings to it. I’ve learned how to work
within that system, but I’ve been very frustrated along the way.

**INT:** When it’s called non-profit, does that mean that Federation helps support you or it just has to do with the way you operate?

**ELLEN:** It’s a 501c3. Non-profit simply means that if we have a surplus, the money gets plowed back and no one gets it in a dividend or whatever, and it also means we can accept charitable contributions and we don’t pay taxes. So that’s all it means. We do have an ongoing grant from what used to be called the National Foundation for Jewish Culture. It’s now called the Fund for Cultural Preservation. But that’s another non-profit. We don’t get community funds from Federation. We don’t get community funds from other sorts of general contributions. We do accept and solicit funds from individuals. So a lot of our books, if you open up the front page, will say, “This book was made possible through a generous grant from...,” and an individual can give money, just like they give a plaque in a synagogue, in honor of an occasion, in memory of someone. A family foundation can give money. Sometimes there are other foundations that give money. We can co-sponsor a book with something like the Jewish Theological Seminary or the Museum of the Diaspora. So we sometimes do partnerships and sometimes people just give us money for a specific project and then we publish it.

**INT:** Do you actually make money?

**ELLEN:** It depends on what year. This year we are actually projecting a surplus, but it’s the first time in a decade. The publishing operation, at best, can break even but usually loses money, because some of the books...we have books that we refer to in-house as mission books, books that really contribute to Jewish culture, to Jewish literacy, but don’t have the kind of market in terms of volume, or are really expensive and we can’t expect the consumer to pay what it cost. For instance, when you publish a book that’s a translation from Hebrew or Russian or French, it could cost ten, fifteen thousand dollars to translate it, and if we only do 2000 copies of the book, that means there’s an extra five dollar charge for every book, just for the translation, before we talk about paper and printing and binding and typesetting and copy-editing. And then when you have to mark up a price because you have to give a discount to the bookstore, that five dollars translates into maybe twenty or twenty-five dollars extra we would have to charge, just because it’s a translation. Well, a reader, a buyer, couldn’t care less that JPS had to pay that extra step. It’s not their problem. So those are the kinds of projects we take on that a commercial publisher wouldn’t do unless they could sell twenty-five or fifty thousand copies, so you could spread that cost over a large, large print run. But we have this difficult challenge of publishing books that will only sell a few thousand, but that may cost what a commercial publisher would pay to do twenty-five thousand or a hundred thousand copies. That shortfall between what it costs per books and what people will pay is what we need from fundraising.

**INT:** So JPS is so concerned about the issue of commitment to Jewish heritage and Jewish education and community.
ELLEN: The initial mission statement in 1888 used the word “an educational association.” It was envisioned not as a business but as a community association to really perpetuate literature and learning. And one of our goals is really to convince people that we’re a worthwhile institution to support, because many people just consider us a publisher. Why would you give...you wouldn’t give Random House money. So to say why would you give JPS money to publish products that they could then turn around and sell? Well, the reason is that some of those products will never break even. And the same thing with our kids’ books. Some of our kids’ books do awfully well. A lot of them...when we do, let’s say, biographies of people like Marc Chagall or Singer or Elie Weisel, and we do them in hardback. They may sell a couple of thousand copies, but that won’t break even. Or what if we do a young adult novel on a Jewish theme that is not a hot, sexy topic, but one that gives you a snapshot of Jewish history a hundred years ago. The teachers love us. The Jewish teachers love us. The librarians love us. But the books will not pay for themselves. So the hard part about who we are is doing things on a mission basis and then figuring out how to pay for it.

INT: Can you briefly describe a typical day for you? It might include your writer’s life, your publishing executive life and obviously your personal, community...

ELLEN: A typical day-

INT: It sounds impossible to achieve all the things that you do. And you’ve had adversity and challenge.

ELLEN: Most women’s lives don’t follow straight paths. When my kids were younger, it was very tough because of the challenges, particularly of my son. We’re now in a different place, but my typical day might begin...in the last eight months I’ve been coming into the office at 8:00. Let’s go back a year before I had this really impossible job. I get up at 6:00, take a 7:15 train with my daughter, who goes to school at Friends Select, into the city. Sometimes will do work on the train, whether it’s editing a manuscript or reading something. Get into town at 8:00, and then when I was writing “The Five Books of Miriam,” for instance, I would go to a restaurant with my laptop. I knew where all the outlets were, and if I could find my table near the outlet I would go there or else I would go the next place. I’d plug in and log on, and I’d write from a quarter to eight until nine on “The Five Books of Miriam.” Then I’d save my disk, save my files, come into the office until 5:30. A typical office day includes a little bit of editing, a lot of problem solving with staff members, a lot of correspondence on E-mail, snail mail, telephone, meetings ranging from picking a title to picking a jacket design to discussing the marketing of a book to talking with authors or with agents or with scholars. I’ll take a manuscript to lunch almost every day, and I’ll go to a restaurant where there’s good light and I’ll do correspondence or editing at lunch. So basically, I’m in gear, in high gear-I call it my laser beam mode, from 8:00 until 5:30 I am on, and push really through in a very focused way. Take the train home. Often will work on the train, and depending on my energy level I may write after dinner, let’s say from 8:00 to 10:00.

INT: Are you still cooking dinner for the family?
ELLEN: Mostly my husband does the cooking and does the laundry. He does more than half the share of housework, keeping the house going. What might also happen in the course of the day-I might get a call from a congregation in California or Wisconsin or something, asking me to come to be a scholar-in-residence, so I’m doing a little bit of that as well. Sometimes I don’t come into the office. I go to New York and I meet-in a typical day I might meet with an editor, with someone in publishing publicity, Publisher’s Weekly or the editor of the New York Times Book Review. I might meet with an author to talk about a new book. I might meet with a foundation to ask for money. So I usually have three or four appointments when I go to New York. Or I might go to a convention and combine going to a conference, a scholarly conference on Jewish subjects with meeting with a board member for a parlor meeting to raise money, or meeting with some other publishing interest in that city and promoting JPS at the same time.

So it is a very full, very high profile, fast pace life. I like it very much. And it’s exhausting and sometimes...my husband laughs at me because come Shabbat-we observe Shabbat and come Shabbat, I sleep an awful lot on Shabbat, and when I take a vacation during the year, I sleep. I don’t do much except to collapse. I sort of save up my fatigue and then collapse and get back into gear. I don’t always want to work this hard. Sometimes I entertain fantasies of what would it be like to be a writer, a writer and sort of a teacher/speaker, and not do the office job. I don’t think I could make enough money. I once said that to Chaim Potok—that’s what he does. He is a full time writer and speaker. And he said to me, “Keep your day job, darling.” That’s what he said to me. He writes full-time. He doesn’t have a day job. His day job is his writing. But there are very few writers who can do that. You can do it if you’re willing to live in poverty and you don’t have kids to send to college, or if you’re one of the few lucky people who can write so successfully that you get a lot of money. But it doesn’t happen to most. So for the time being, meaning maybe for the next ten to fifteen years, I will probably continue to have a day job and write and speak, because that’s what I need to do.

INT: And what about Sundays, personal time? Are you a jogger or do you go to the Art Museum?

ELLEN: No. I’m pretty boring. Well, right now I’m writing a book so this past Sunday I put in six, seven hours of writing. Writing is both a passion, a hobby, and an avocation. I read a lot. I go to the gym a couple of times a week with a friend. I’m in a women’s group. I go to shul every Shabbos.

INT: What kind of a women’s group?

ELLEN: It’s a group of...there are five of us. Five women in our forties who get together every three weeks to talk about raising kids and our marriages and a lot about our work life. We’re all Jewish. Most of us are in fairly high-powered positions of responsibility, so we do share a lot of stories and problems about the pressures we have in our work and some of the problems that come our way. And that’s a really important piece of my social life. Also, I have been, until very recently, in a writer’s group. Just three women who met together. We’re actually just now
disintegrating because of distance, but it started in Lancaster and it really went on for fifteen years. We would read to each other as we were writing and because of distance now and my really insane pace of life, it’s fallen apart. But I’ve enjoyed those kinds of support networks as well. I think we need to wind down. I don’t know if there’s another series of questions or other things you wanted to cover.

INT: Yes. I don’t know that it has to be terribly time consuming. (End of tape 3, side 1)

Tape 3, side 2-blank

INT: This is the third meeting with Dr. Ellen Frankel at the office. I was wondering if perhaps...the role of the storyteller and possibly leading into “The Five Books of Miriam.”

ELLEN: The way that my storytelling career came about was through serendipity mostly. As a child, I spent a lot of time with stories, reading stories, and then when I had kids I began reading stories to my children, and then I got a contract for a book collecting and retelling traditional Jewish stories, and read through thousands of Jewish stories, almost all in English already from other collections, with the purpose of choosing representative stories that cover the whole tradition and retelling them in modern English that was idiomatic-no thees and thous, etc., that was gender neutral, that reflected the Sephardic and the Ashkenazic tradition, and really was mostly good stories. I collected, out of the three or four thousand, I selected three hundred and I rewrote them. I was just learning some computer programs-this was in the mid Eighties-and I erased almost the entire manuscript by accident. So I had to retype it all. So I recreated what I had written and then, at the end of each day of writing, I would go to the dinner table and my kids, who were then about six and seven and then seven and eight, began asking me every day, “What story did you write today?” And I told them stories. And between retyping everything and telling it then at dinner again, by the time I finished the book I had memorized pretty much three hundred stories, and began first informally telling them at...I mentioned I went to the National Summer Chavurah Institute, so on Friday nights I would gather together people and tell stories there, and then people began inviting me to their synagogues, to their Chavurot, and that’s how my career began as a storyteller, and I have traveled all over the United States telling stories in all kinds of settings, old age homes, museums, elementary schools, synagogues, women’s groups, men’s groups, college campuses.

There are a couple of things I like about it. One is that no matter what the age of the listener, everyone turns into a kid listening to stories, and for me, it’s very exciting to literally watch faces in front of me be transformed into children. Everyone’s face, whether it’s a five-year-old or an eighty-five year old, looks the same. There’s a kind of wide-eyed eagerness to know what happens next. There are certain stories I know when I get to a certain point everyone is going to gasp, everyone is going to heave a sigh of relief, everyone is going to cry, so that’s one thing.

The second thing is what I began to realize through storytelling is that a great deal of
Jewish tradition is transmitted through folk culture, some of it through stories, some through lullabies and songs, some through rituals, superstitions, artifacts. And it was really through my encounter with stories, folk tales, that I began to become involved in what I have come to call the folk Torah. There is, in our tradition, a notion that there is a written Torah and an oral Torah, the written Torah being primarily the Five Books of Moses, and the oral Torah has traditionally been the oral interpretations through rabbinic tradition, the Mishnah, the Talmud, the questions and answers called responsa, and the codes. But those are all written by men and by elite men, by the rabbis. And I began discovering through folk tales and then my next book was about Jewish symbols, so through that medium, and through all sorts of other folk ways, that that’s how a good part of Jewish tradition has been transmitted and much of it through women, whether it’s a Bubby talking to her grandchildren and teaching them values, whether it’s a cookbook in which the introduction to the cookbook talks about what makes a Jewish home, whether it’s a parent, a mother, teaching her daughter to cook or teaching her children through example or through moral lessons or whether it’s in the home and that there are things made and passed down that sort of carry Jewish value. Those are just as important as the rabbinic teachings. So I began to discover there was not only top-down Judaism but there was bottom-up Judaism. And that really has been my evolution and my mission, if I want to call it that, as a teacher. That I am very interested in teaching lay people, teaching the rank and file Jews about folk Torah, and teaching them to value it as an essential part of Jewish tradition, that it’s not just because your rabbi says so or because somebody has got a degree or a title that makes that person a Jewish transmitter of culture.

So from there, having spent about seven or eight years teaching and learning the folk Torah through folk tales, symbols and related things, I gave a speech. It was a reconstructionist rabbinical college Jewish women’s project, called, I guess, JEWISP, Jewish Women’s Studies Project. I was invited to speak to the annual event where they were honoring Debra Ber Moses of Ariel Theater, and what I spoke about were Jewish symbols about women. In the course of talking about it, I began developing some of the things I just mentioned. When I finished the talk, I sent it to a friend of mine who is an editor at Putnam. She’s a friend, colleague and mentor. She read it. She claims that she suggested that I write a book, and I claim that I suggested. We’re not sure who suggested it first, but out of that correspondence came a contract to write a book about reading the Torah through a women’s eyes.

My first idea was to do an anthology, and I wrote to about 175 Jewish women across the country. I gathered lists from other people who had written books like it and friends and other networks, so I approached about 175 women. I said, “Send me your responses to Torah-poems, songs, Midrash, commentary, interpretation.” And what I got back convinced me I couldn’t do an anthology, for two reasons. One, a lot of what I got was not very high quality. People weren’t trained or it wasn’t well written or it was trite. That was one reason. And the second reason, even more compelling, was that even though there are fifty-four portions of the Torah, many of them have been ignored by Jewish feminists because they don’t seem to invite a feminist or a woman’s response. Almost the entire book of Leviticus, most of Numbers and Deuteronomy, and about half of Exodus I got almost no material. Of course I got a tremendous amount of material about Genesis, because that’s where the stories are. And Exodus has the stories of Miriam at the
beginning. So I realized I couldn’t do a book about the Torah cycle if there were huge holes. So I scrapped that idea and went on to write a draft of my commentary on the Torah. When I finished it, I did send it to my editor who was not thrilled, and I also gave it to a couple of women friends of mine, one of whom said to me, “You know, you start out in one position talking about a particular portion—by the time you get to the end of the page you’ve already contradicted yourself. You can’t do that.”

And I realized that there’s not just one me. There’s not just one reader when I read the Torah. In fact, nobody is single-minded. You bring many different selves to the Torah. You bring a traditionalist and a radical, a rebel. You bring somebody who is perhaps scholarly and another person who is naive. You bring a modern person and an old-fashioned person. So there are many selves, many eyes, many perspectives. And through a conversation with my husband—both of us are trained in literature, in secular literature—and in secular literature there are genres, there are models, in which you have many voices. Some modernist fiction, whether it’s Faulkner, whether it’s Dickens—there are just a lot of different models where you have more than one narrator. So out of that emerged the format for “The Five Books of Miriam,” which was to come up with a chorus of voices. I think there are eighteen voices in the book, each one reflecting a different approach to Torah. I chose these voices as allegorical figures, so that Rachel, for instance, who in Jewish tradition is called the mother, Rochel Imainu—she was the one who died in childbirth and according to Jewish legend, tradition—and she’s buried outside the cave where the other six matriarchs and patriarchs are, and she’s buried on a roadway, because she died en route. So she’s the one who weeps for her children in exile. So she, in the book, is Mother Rachel, who is the voice of compassion. I have Lillith, who is the rebel, because in Jewish tradition she is really the upstart who challenged Adam. I have Deena, who stands for the victim, because she is the victim of a rape, and she therefore stands for the voice of women who have been victimized. Bruria, who’s the only woman in the Talmud quoted for her legal opinions, is the scholar, the historian. So I chose people who in tradition have a particular role, and they stand for that approach to the Torah. I also wanted to give the ancient rabbis a voice because I honor them very much, so when the rabbis talk, they present traditional Midrash, or traditional legal rulings. I have our bubbas, and they throw in a lot of Yiddish wisdom. Our mothers basically are our first line of questioning and answering in our lives, so they’re just basically—that’s mostly my voice. And our daughters are the ones who ask the questions and that provoke or evoke answers in every case, which is a traditional way of reading. In fact, in the traditional commentaries in the Torah, you don’t get the question. You only get the answer, so it’s like Jeopardy. They give you the answer and then you have to puzzle out what led to that answer, and I have the daughters tell you. They don’t play the guessing game. They tell you the question. And at the back of the book I include all the sources, whether it’s traditional text or modern scholarship. In fact, I have another voice called the sages in our own day, who are feminist scholars and thinkers, whether it’s archeologists, historians, theologians, poets.

What I did in the book was I summoned together all of the material that I have learned and gathered over many, many years—folktales, symbols, Midrash, some of my own ideas, things I’ve learned from other women who are credited in the back, and I also made a decision to donate
10% of my royalties every time I get paid to some Jewish women’s cause or institution, because really I built on all those who came before, and since my original idea was to have an anthology and it didn’t work, I really did want to acknowledge the people before me, so I have given to the Jewish Women’s Studies Project, to Bat Kol, which is a new feminist yeshiva which has just started, to American Jewish Committee’s project on women, Jewish Women’s Center. Those are the ones I’ve given to so far, just to also encourage other women to go on with their work.

So that’s what I’ve done in that book and out of that has resulted a lot of invitations to speak, because feminism is scary to a lot of people, men and women. A lot of people don’t know and think of feminism in a very narrow sense that it probably carried in the Sixties, whether it’s bra burning or very strident...the vanguard of feminism really had to fight a lot of resistance and tended to be somewhat aggressive and antagonistic. My feminism is much milder, and I think I’ve been faulted probably by some feminists as being too soft...(Mechanical problem with tape)...of patriarchal tradition, but I’m interested only in expanding the conversation and not excluding what came before. So I’m safer than some, and therefore I’ve been invited to synagogues to speak. Primarily synagogues, although I’ve also been invited by women’s groups, Jewish women’s groups. I’ve taught. I’ve taught for the reform movement a lot, and was welcomed by the reform movement more than any other...(Mechanical problem with tape)...largely out of the midrashic tradition, out of the tradition of legend and interpretation and folk ways, not out of the legal tradition. The conservative movement has been much slower to invite me, and of course I have not been invited by the orthodox movement for this subject. I have spoken at orthodox settings as a storyteller and on the symbols, but not on this. Not yet. So that’s basically where I’ve spoken.

INT: It is a fascinating, fascinating... (Mechanical problem with tape)

ELLEN: ...very hard to know. One thing about books that’s both frustrating and kind of interesting is that you don’t know who’s reading. It came out in the fall of ’96. By the fall of ’97 it had sold ten thousand in hardback, which is a lot for a Jewish book. Putnam did the hardback and Harper in San Francisco, Harper Collins did the paperback, and that came out a year ago. I don’t know what the sales are, but I know they’ve been very vigorous, probably over ten thousand of those. All I have is anecdotal evidence. I spoke in Houston a year ago at the Jewish Book...(Mechanical problem with tape) I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of a work called the Tzena U’rena. (Mechanical problem with tape) So it was a whole grab bag of material, of folk material. (Mechanical problem with tape) ...languages, because it really serves that function of transmitting the whole culture. I gather, until recently when women are more educated, a woman in the community—there was a name for her. She was called the Fitzerogen, or the Zugerker, who was literate, would read the Tzena U’rena to women on Shabbos afternoon, and would be the designated reader and would read it, so they would get their Torah for the week. So that was really my inspiration in doing it and I think one of the reasons it’s popular is that I really wanted it to have a classic feel. (Mechanical problem with tape) ...materials, so most of the time each passage is based on a verse, approved text, and that’s another Jewish method. I tried to use a Jewish method of teaching and commentary, and make it feel (Mechanical problem with tape).
INT: So you did an incredibly engaging (Mechanical problem with tape)

ELLEN: ...very gratifying to me. I’ve been told by quite a number of people that their rabbi will quote from it frequently when (Mechanical problem with tape). I emptied my hard drive of my head onto the page. The other thing that I find utterly surprising and very rewarding is that a number of people who have bought it have told me they’ve read it straight through like a novel. (Mechanical problem with tape) ...in folktales, and I organized them by life cycle, so there’s a section called Beginnings, there’s (Mechanical problem with tape) and chose selections for each of those sections. (Mechanical problem with tape) ...wants to use Caravagio and Michelangelo and DeVinci and (Mechanical problem with tape).

INT: You have so many (Mechanical problem with tape).

ELLEN: ...as a Hadassah woman for most of her adult life, my father in the synagogue board. When we lived in Lancaster, PA for those ten years, I was very active in communal affairs. Belonged to a conservative synagogue and an orthodox synagogue and a Chavurah. Was the head of my daughter’s PTO in the day school for a couple of years. Did other kinds of voluntary service in the community. When we moved to Philadelphia we joined the neighborhood conservative synagogue and I was appointed to the board almost immediately and I lasted a few meetings and then resigned because I really don’t like going to board meetings, which is ironic because now, working at a non-profit, I go to board meetings all the time as a staff person. But I didn’t like the process of board meetings and meetings in general and the interesting thing is that when we spent a year on sabbatical in Gainesville, Florida, it was the first year in many that there were no meetings, and I loved it. So I do belong to a minyan within a conservative synagogue and I go to shul pretty much every Shabbat in the mornings, occasionally on Friday nights. All holidays. But other than that, I’m fairly inactive in terms of volunteer work. I’m not on the board. I’m not on committees. I don’t do volunteer work within the synagogue. My husband does some. He’s involved in something called the hospitality network in my shul, helping homeless families. But I’m basically fairly private. In the more general community of whether it’s Federation or JCCs or whatever, I’m also not active. And I guess the reason for that both is temperamental, in that I really appreciate and cherish privacy and alone time, and I don’t get a lot of it, but also, I have many lives. When I’m not at work in my office or representing JPS, I’m either writing or speaking or teaching, and I find that that pretty much fills up all my spare time, plus I have a family. That’s pretty much all I want right now. I suppose that might change when my kids go off, but I tend to doubt it. I’ve finally accepted the fact that some people give through communal service and others give in other ways. I don’t think I’m so much of a public personality in terms of the community structure.

INT: (Mechanical problem with tape)

ELLEN: I would say in many ways they’re different. My religious life is, as I mentioned, going to synagogue, connecting with a community, participating...the volunteering I do is reading Torah, leading services, on occasion giving a D’var Torah, so that’s the kind of community
service I do in the context of religious life. I study. I haven't in a while but for a long time I
studied every week. I studied Talmud every week with a friend. Those are all pretty much
religious activities. My spiritual life sometimes happens in the synagogue when I go under my
tallit to daven. Sometimes I'm there communing in a spiritual way. As odd as it's going to sound,
a lot of my spiritual life happens through Buddhism. I am not a Bu-Jew or a Jew-Bu, as they're
called. I don't practice. I don't go to retreats or an Ashram or study formally, certainly not
publicly, but what I have found, beginning way back in college, was that when I read the writings
of Buddhist teachers, there is a kind of approach to living and to balancing internally that I don't
find in Judaism, that gives me the kind of serenity and equilibrium that I don't get any other
(Mechanical problem with tape) actually given the stresses of my life, that often when I'm the
most in need of centering and most in need of spiritual solace, where I go is to a Buddhist text,
not necessarily to a Jewish one. (Mechanical problem with tape) ...to kabbalah and mysticism for
personal practice, and I find that meditation-I've been a total bust at meditation. I think it's
because I have a very hectic mind, very frantic mind, and I am almost unable to quiet it. When I
start meditating I just go (Mechanical problem with tape)...Natalie Goldberg was writing “Down
the Bones” a long time ago. I haven't read anything else. (Mechanical problem with tape) ...my
studies informally with Reb Zalman, that I've mentioned (Mechanical problem with tape).

INT: ...It's hard.

ELLEN: That is very hard. I don't know if I can actually say. One achievement I'm very proud
of are my kids. (Mechanical problem with tape) special people, and that's been a real
achievement, though sometimes I think I didn't do a great job but generally I'm pretty happy
about it. And my writing, I guess. I'm very proud of what I've written. And I'm very proud of
what I've built here, at JPS. (Mechanical problem with tape)...Disappointments? Well, I might
say the same thing I considered an achievement is also a disappointment, that some things about
the way I raised my kids I would have done differently had I been more skilled. If I knew then
what I know now I would have done differently. I made a lot of mistakes as a parent.

INT: Anything you care to share?

ELLEN: Well, my son, who as I mentioned is a special needs kid, was very challenging and I
wasn't always up to the challenge. In fact, I wasn't often up to the challenge. I should have asked
for help earlier. My husband and I should have asked for help. And we just made a lot of
mistakes. One child psychiatrist we went to who's Italian said to us at one point-he said, "You
know, you Jewish parents-you think too much." We got good advice but we didn't believe it,
about how to parent a kid like my son. We kept on insisting on doing it like our parents had done
it, and that stubbornness and that inflexibility was really harmful. So that's one thing that I'm
disappointed about, that I really wish I had done a better job. Similarly or a part of that, our
daughter got short shrift as we struggled over our son, and I wish I had been more aware and
more attentive to her needs. They're turning out to be really great people and I think that they will
work out what they need to work out, but that's a disappointment.
ELLEN: It’s attention deficit. He has something called Pervasive Developmental Disorder. Basically, he’s got developmental deficits and things that haven’t turned out right. He’s also been described as having autistic tendencies, so that his relationship with people, his interpersonal skills, are quite limited and defective, so that he’s had lots and lots of problems with other kids, with peers, with adults, with authority figures, getting along, in school. He went to lots of schools. And he has problems learning and he’s got the frustrating problem of being very, very smart and being very limited in his verbal skills, so that he can speak at a college level but he can read at a fifth grade level. He can talk about all sorts of subjects but he doesn’t know the months of the year in order yet, and he’s sixteen and a half. He can hold his own on the computer with the best of them, but he can’t spell five letter words. So he’s got this mixture of tremendous talents and tremendous deficits, plus, on top of that, this interpersonal problem and impulsiveness and a hair-trigger temper. And so he’s going to have a really hard road getting a job, keeping a job, learning the rules, the unwritten rules of society and obeying them. So those are his challenges. But he’s gotten a lot of skills. He’s gone to really wonderful schools. He has wonderful teachers. He had a lot of therapy. I think he’s got a good head start, he’s got a leg up, but it’s going to be tough for him.

I have other personal disappointments in my life. My marriage—I don’t feel that comfortable going into it but I had a hard time struggling through that. Right now it’s in a very good place, but it went through...that was also a very hard road. The other part that actually comes out of that is that because of certain things that my husband did, we ended up having to leave behind some communities. (Mechanical problem with tape) I would say that that’s probably all. I didn’t turn out to be a college teacher as I had trained to be in graduate school, but I’m not disappointed about that. I didn’t write scholarly articles and I’m not disappointed. There were certain roads not taken, and I really don’t regret them. I really don’t.

INT: (Mechanical problem with tape)

ELLEN: I carry in my purse a little book of sayings. (Mechanical problem with tape) A lot of the strength has come from adopting (Mechanical problem with tape). The source of strength is not even necessarily from a person... (Mechanical problem with tape)...live in a very, very long time span. (Mechanical problem with tape) between the various segments of the Jewish community or intolerance in the Jewish community. I think back at the year zero, the time of the Roman occupation of Israel and how Jews were fighting with each other. Everything has happened before. There is nothing new under the sun. So one of the ways I’ve derived strength is just to understand that nothing is new and that if I look back for a pattern I’ll find it, and I’ll also find a way out of the pattern.

When I talked about the long view, one of the sources of strength may be...of that wisdom, is a little book, a little collection of rabbinic sayings from the Talmud, actually from the Mishnah, called Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers. (Mechanical problem with tape)...on my
wall that Betsy Teutsch did for me actually, that says, “Ayzehu Michubud, Hamichabed et Habriyot, Who is honored? The one who honors others.” So that’s my motto in the office, that whether it’s a secretary or whoever I’m talking to, I need to honor, not just because they have a title or because they’re on the board or they’re my boss or whatever. And there are lots of sayings like that. “Don’t separate yourself from the community.” “Who is happy? The one who is happy with his or her lot.” “Who is a hero? The person who conquers his or her urges or compulsions.” And there are lots of these. They may sound like cliches, but I’ve learned that those are the rules of the game that make you come out on the other end serene and content.

The other piece that I’ve learned through the Buddhist tradition (Mechanical problem with tape)...Pirkei Avot. It says, “Don’t judge another until you stand in his shoes.” If you can practice empathy and always see things from the other person’s point of view, that’s a real great way to manage your own anger and feelings of resentment. (Mechanical problem with tape) and bitterness, is really to understand that wherever another person is, they have a reason for getting there and you’re not that much different from them. So that’s the source of my strength. It really is (Mechanical problem with tape) and collecting principles of living that really are all about being centered.

(Mechanical problem with tape) Heschel-I suppose if I go all the way back, I read a lot of Heschel in college. One of the sayings from Heschel that I really treasured and has become-(end of tape 4, side 1) One of the teachings of Heschel that really has become part of my philosophy of life is a saying or something he said, “We live and act according to the image of man we cherish.” I would say now I would translate that according to the image of the human being we cherish, but that each one of us forms in our own minds an image of what human beings are, and of course in the Bible it says human beings were created in the image of G-d, so whatever image of human beings we have is also our image of G-d. It works the other way around, because we project that back just like it’s supposed to be projected down. And I’ve discovered that if in fact you treat people meanly and you don’t think much of other people, well, we live and act according to that image, and we lower ourselves and we to some extent diminish ourselves by acting toward other people in that way, and that can’t help but make that your image of yourself. So that’s kind of what I’ve evolved over the years. I’ve also had off and on over twenty years of therapy, so maybe, to be very frank, I would say that one of the places I’ve derived my strength also, through these adversities, is finding healers, psychological healers, who have helped me understand myself and also to take back what I was blaming the rest of the world for.

I think the most valuable lesson I’ve learned from all these different years of therapy and different therapists is that if you take responsibility for problems and attitudes and difficulties that you project on to other people, then you really feel much stronger and more powerful. (Mechanical problem with tape)...who made me do this or this person made me mad or if only so and so had done this differently or this is the person...it’s because of this person that I’m miserable-I’ve learned that the more I just take that back for myself, and then understand that every choice I make is a conscious choice, I really do feel more powerful. It doesn’t always work, but more and more I’ve really discovered that I really need not...I need to understand that mostly
it’s not about me personally. When I stopped taking things personally, when I realized other people have their stuff, I’m able to understand where my boundaries end, and that’s given me a lot of strength.

**INT:** (Mechanical problem with tape) What would you hope, since nobody knows. What would you like to accomplish still?

**ELLEN:** I think I still have a lot to do here. I do have some visions and dreams about JPS and what it can contribute to Jewish literature and literacy. I think I’d like to do a lot of that here. I’d like to write more books, not so much because I have something that I’m dying to say. It’s not that I have a message, but first of all, I love to write. I just love it as an activity, and it’s through writing that I learn what I want to say, and it’s also through writing that I continue my own education. Each time I take on a project I have to learn a lot, so I look forward to taking on new projects and solving new problems through writing. So I do want to write more. I do want to teach more. Teaching really feeds me. And I do want to do more here. There are other things. I’d love to travel. I really have not seen much of the world. I go to Israel a lot now, but I really haven’t been to Europe, not to mention Asia and Africa and South American and Australia. So I’d like to travel, both representing JPS and as a Jewish teacher, but also just for pleasure.

I don’t know what the next stage is. I’m enjoying business, and one of the things that has been a surprise to me is that I spend a lot of time in teaching and writing, and I’m discovering I really like the business world, so that’s another piece—that I want to develop my business skills and leadership skills. I want to keep evolving as a human being, even though I’m pretty happy where I am now. I’ve got a lot more development, spiritually and psychologically, so I think I want to move in that direction. I suppose—and I hope I’m not deluding myself—I suppose I could come to the place where I also want to serve more, where I feel comfortable enough and confident enough that I could be on a board or several boards, or involved communally in a way that I’m contributing that way and don’t feel so much of the tendency in me to really want to be alone. I feel terrible about it, but I know that sometimes my kids and my husband are upset, that when I have a holiday or some time, I will go hole up and write. Talk about balance—that’s something I have to struggle with. (End of interview)