INTERVIEW WITH RELA MINTZ GEFFEN

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INT: ... on April 29, 1998. I am interviewing Professor Rela Mintz Geffen, who is professor of sociology at Gratz College, with the written permission of the interviewee. Let’s start with a simple thing, when and where you were born.

RELA: I was born in Troy, New York, in February of 1943. February 10, 1943.

INT: Tell me a little bit about your parents and grandparents, their background, where your parents specifically were born and when also.

RELA: My father was born in Kovno, Lithuania in 1902. He came with his parents to the United States in 1903 when he was less than a year old. My mother was born in New York in 1902. Her mother came from Russia with her grandparents. Her grandfather was called the Moscover Rov. He came from Moscow. His name was Widrowitz. Her name was Lisa Widrowitz. And my mother’s father’s name was Nathan Mintz. He came from a very large family that originally came from Poland, from Warsaw and before that from Brest-Litovsk, which I think is called Brisk, and descended from a family named Katzenellenbogen who were a very famous scholarly family. By my grandparents’ generation they were quite assimilated, although very involved in cultural Judaism in various ways. Very wealthy. They lived in Brooklyn in a mansion on President Street. My mother had a very privileged and assimilated childhood. She knew the Moscover Rov but she wasn’t very influenced by him. My grandmother lived the way her husband lived, which was the more assimilated way. I have many things that belonged to them, very beautiful pieces, even some chairs from their music room in the mansion. My grandfather was tragically killed in an automobile accident around 1917, when there weren’t very many cars. Everybody else walked away fine and he was killed. And their standard of living changed drastically.

After high school, my mother did a few college courses and she went to work at the Art Student’s League. She was very avant-garde. She was a flapper. She was very beautiful. One night she went to a party in New York and somebody told her there were rabbinical students there, and she said, in the manner she didn’t lose until she was ninety-three years old, “All rabbis are hypocrites,” and on the spot my father fell in love with her and the rest is history. They eloped, in fact. Nobody, to this day, knows exactly why.

INT: Your father was already ordained at that point?

RELA: No. My father was a student at the Jewish Theological Seminary at that time. I’ll get to his family in a minute. So my mother’s family was extremely interesting. Her father was one of seventeen children from two wives and one man, and they were very involved in Zionism and in cultural Judaism, as I said. So one of my great aunts and her husband were antique dealers in Warsaw, and in 1939, after extensive negotiations with Steven Kaiser, who was then the head of the Jewish Museum, the curator, they came to New York and were able to bring out, just before the
Nazis came in, I guess, their personal collection and all the contents of their antique business, almost all Judaica, to the United States. That became a core collection of the Jewish Museum in New York. It’s called the Mintz Collection. Of the pieces that were their private ones that they used or they gave to my parents, I now have half and my sister has half, but if you go to the Jewish Museum in New York, you’ll see Rose and Benjamin Mintz’s picture and almost all the items shown from Poland in the permanent exhibit are from the Mintz collection. That and the Danzig collection are the core collections of the Jewish Museum.

Another one of my mother’s uncles was a founder of Gedaira. He was the doctor for the Bilu, and they’re buried in Gedaira, and their home in Gedaira has been restored. It’s in a book called The Hundred Most Beautiful Houses in Israel. Interestingly enough, it was restored by another one of the descendants of the Mintzes, Edwin Brennglass, who died about a year-and-a-half ago and who was the publisher of the Los Angeles Jewish Journal. So that was the Mintz part. When I was growing up, I was almost unaware of them because we were so dominated by the Geffens, which is my father’s family. That’s why I wanted to mention my mother’s family first, because it turns out that they really were fascinating people and interesting in many ways. I do have the bechers, the wine cups, that belonged to my great-grandfather, the Moscover Rov. So I have some things of his. And I have Mintz things. Some of them are in an exhibit right now at the Museum of American Jewish History here. They have an America Holyland Exhibit going on and they have some of my Betzalel pieces.

INT: It’s interesting, because it’s a very, very large family, Mintz family, in Brooklyn. Benjamin Mintz is the father of the current rabbi at Lincoln Square Synagogue. I spoke with him a little. He’s a professor at Georgetown University.

RELA: Well, who knows for sure, but if they’re Mintzes who can track back to Katzenellenbogens and the whole thing about the Mintzes in the 1903 Jewish encyclopedia, so if they’re from that family then it’s the same family. And since there were seventeen children, who knows?

So now on to the Geffens. My Geffen grandparents came from Lithuania. They were impoverished. My grandfather was a great scholar. He had been in the Kovno Kollel. It was very unusual for a scholarly religious type to come. Most of the immigrants to the United States were those who had nothing to lose, either their Yiddishkeit or property. Those who were wealthy and those who were religious basically didn’t come until after the Second World War when they had to. So they came in 1902. He was really a rebel in a way. He had studied in the Slabodka Yeshiva and the Kovno Kollel. Yitzchok Elchonon was the sandek at his Bris. His older sister married Chaim Rabinovitz, who was the Rosh Yeshiva of Telz. It was a very scholarly family, and my grandmother’s family, named Rabinowitz, I think they were very successful businesspeople, so it must have been that they married her to a scholar, that kind of shidduch, although I don’t think it was a shidduch. In any case, they decided to come to the United States. They already had two young children and they came in 1903. First they went to New York to her relatives who were in business. She had a couple of brothers who had come to the United States. And my grandfather did not think about serving as a rabbi at that time, although I understand that the Seminary told him that if he
would get a secular bachelor's degree they would make him a professor of codes. (He didn’t have secular degrees.) But he couldn’t. By that time he had three young children and it was not to be. So eventually he decided to take a pulpit and he went as an orthodox rabbi—he wore a kapote and spoke Yiddish. He was born in 1870 and he died in 1970. My grandmother didn’t live quite as long and she did bear nine children and ran the shul and the house and consequently only lived to be eighty-two. So my grandfather, who was quite an amazing person—well, I guess my grandmother was just as amazing, they went to Canton, Ohio and he went to be the rabbi of an orthodox synagogue there. It was very cold. The family story is that my grandmother said, “For this I left Russia?” So they decided to try to find a warmer climate to go to, and a pulpit opened up in Atlanta, Georgia, and so in 1910 they left Canton, Ohio and they went to Atlanta, Georgia, and therefore (she had nine children but one died) the eight children had strong Southern accents. They grew up in Atlanta, Georgia. My father grew up in Atlanta, Georgia. Actually, he had his accent knocked out of him because when he went to the Seminary he had to take elocution. At that time it was a very important part of the course. And so he lost the regionalism. But my aunts and uncles to this day, and six of them are alive, the youngest being eighty-one and the oldest being ninety-two or ninety-three—my father would have been ninety-six now. My other aunt who died would have been ninety-nine. They all have heavy Southern accents.

So they went to Atlanta, Georgia and my grandfather was at a synagogue called Shearith Israel, which is still there. He then proceeded to become something like the chief rabbi of the southeastern United States. He wrote all the gittin for the United States, for the Southeast. Arthur Hertzberg once told me that when he was in the chaplaincy in Tennessee during the Second World War, he did all his gittin through my grandfather. There are all kinds of fabulous things that happened to them, but in the course of growing up in Atlanta, my father, when he graduated high school, was sent by his father, along with the father of the shochet who was named Moses Haddas, who ended up being a great classics professor—Moishe as he was known. He and my father were sent to New York to study in the Lower East Side to yeshiva after high school. They graduated when they were sixteen from Boys’ High in Atlanta. After a year they went to the Rosh Yeshiva. This was just before the founding of Y.U. Revel had not quite done it yet. They said, “We’d like to go to City College at night,” and he said no. So they went back to Atlanta and they went to Emory University. My grandparents were making $20 a week, so my grandfather went in his kapote to see the head of Emory. It was a Methodist university and his name was Bishop Candler. And he said, “How can my son go to your school?” And they arranged that since he was a clergy child he would not have to pay tuition. Since it was a Methodist school that was their provision.

INT: No matter which group.

RELA: That’s right. And then there was the problem of classes on Shabbos and he had to go but he didn’t have to write, take notes, and he didn’t have to take exams on Shabbat, and then there were the required religion classes and he had to go. The big family hard luck story was that they walked six miles there and six miles back because Emory was pretty far away from where they lived. Eventually, six of the eight children went to Emory. My aunts were the first women at Emory. The Emory alumni magazine always writes about them when they write about the families with the most
children in Emory and so forth.

My grandfather was a saver and we all are, and there are 55,000 pieces of his material in the American Jewish Historical Society. One day I met Abe Karp on the street, who’s a great historian of American Jewry, and he said, “Rela, I’m going to spend the summer studying with your grandfather.” I said, “What?” He was going to work in the archives on orthodox rabbinates in America in the early 1900’s.

INT: I think that’s particularly fascinating because we spent many years, obviously after that three years in Montgomery, and we spent a lot of time in the files.

RELA: There are a lot of connections with the Birmingham Community. Barry Mesch, who is to this day a close friend of mine, his father was the orthodox rabbi in Birmingham and so he had connections. There were certain families in every Southern town who were very connected. My grandfather did a lot of traveling and raising money for yeshiva and stuff. He was a Agudah rabbi but he was a Zionist, and he taught all his children every day, the sons and the daughters, and they all, except for the eldest daughter who went to Normal School, they all have graduate degrees. Remember, the youngest is eighty-one.

INT: That’s remarkable.

RELA: That’s quite remarkable, yes. My grandfather wrote a number of books. The most famous teshuva he ever wrote is called “Teshuva B’lnyan Coca-Cola,” in 1935. He hecshered Coca-Cola in general and then for Passover. The American Jewish Historical Society has been doing a series of ads that are vignettes in American Jewish History. One of the first ones they did was about my grandfather and Coca-Cola, and they have all his material in their archive. He said that he couldn’t stop the Jews from drinking this drink— all Coke syrup still comes from Atlanta—so he had to make it kosher. So he knew the formula for Coca-Cola and that was always a great source of interest. (And that’s why we don’t drink Pepsi in this house!) He never took money for writing teshuvos, but apparently the lawyer for Coca-Cola was a Jew and his name was Harold Hirsch, and he did underwrite some of my grandfather’s seforim, or they were dedicated to him. I saw that. He also heard my youngest aunt be the valedictorian at Girls’ High in Atlanta, and he gave her a Coca-Cola scholarship to the University of Georgia in Athens. So this poor girl who wanted to go to Emory—that’s why there were six of them and not seven—had to go to...she couldn’t turn it down. So she had to go to Athens. Here she was a young orthodox girl. How many Jews were there in Athens, Georgia at that point? She would come home on Shabbos. So there are all these great stories. When Moses Hadas and my father finished Emory in 1922, they went back to New York to study to be rabbis, but instead of going to Yitzchok Elchonon they went to the Jewish Theological Seminary.

INT: How did your grandfather deal with that?

RELA: That’s what the Yiddish papers used to ask him every time he came to New York. They’d say, “How do you feel about two of your sons being conservative rabbis?”
INT: Two?

RELA: Yes. I’m sure he wasn’t thrilled. On the other hand, at that time there was less differentiation between the movements, and the Seminary was a Litvak yeshiva and it was dominated...most of the faculty were people who were the sons of his classmates from the Kovno Kollel, like Louis Finkelstein’s father had studied with my grandfather. They were partners in study. So he felt comfortable from that perspective. And of course, it was a pretty traditional place at that point. Later, there were other interesting issues, one that came up in my life that had to do with my college graduation. In any case, they went to JTS and my father became a conservative rabbi. I think now that my grandfather was something of a rebel. And my grandmother. My grandmother never covered her head. She was a very strong presence. My grandfather left Europe when most of those who were frum did not. So there must have been a rebellious spirit in there. And my father became a devotee of Mordechai Kaplan’s, and was always an egalitarian and then fell madly in love with my mother. They’re extremely romantic. It’s not just the elopement. At his graduation...his name was Yoseph, and they never had English names or middle names. They called him Yossele, but in school...I mean he only spoke Yiddish and then went to school in Atlanta. I guess he went in Canton, Ohio, too. But he was called Joe, and apparently with a strong Southern accent. It sounded like Joel. So he changed it legally, and my mother was at his rabbinical school graduation in 1926 and in that graduation, when they announced his name, they announced it as Joel Sylvan Geffen, and her name was Sylvia. He took her name for his middle name. That was just the kind of romantic thing that he did. And then they eloped to Philadelphia to be married by Max D. Klein, Rabi Klein he was called, because my mother was impressed with him. He gave the baccalaureate that year at the Seminary.

INT: Why did they elope?

RELA: I don’t know. That’s the family secret story. But when they came here, they were married here and then they went to Atlantic City for a few days, but they spent their wedding night here in Philadelphia, and darned if my father didn’t find a hotel called The Sylvania. I drive past it all the time. It’s still in Center City, Philadelphia. and every time I drive past it I get a smile on my face, because I think of what a great romantic he was that he took her name, that he found a hotel that had her name in it. Think about it.

INT: My husband wouldn’t do that!

RELA: And this went on this way for fifty years, more than fifty years. That was a really nice thing.

INT: So your parents are both gone now?

RELA: Yes. But that’s how it happened that I was born in Troy, New York. My father’s first pulpit was in Harrisburg, 1926-1928. He founded Beth-El in Harrisburg and then he left Harrisburg for a variety of reasons and he went to Troy, New York. Upstate New York and upstate Pennsylvania were the breeding grounds of the conservative movement at that time, the founding congregations. And in upstate New York, in Albany and in Troy, in those areas, in Binghamton, in Rochester, there were
all of these very important congregations and also in Pennsylvania, in Scranton, in Wilkes-Barre, in Harrisburg. These were the mother synagogues. So my father was in Troy, New York for sixteen years. My sister grew up there.

INT: I was just going to get to ask you about siblings.

RELA: I have one sister. She’s thirteen years older than me. She was born in 1930.

INT: Her name is?

RELA: Her name is Lisa Geffen Schlesinger. Actually, Lisa Natanya Geffen Schlesinger. My grandfather’s name being Nathan and my grandmother’s name being Lisa, she got named for both of them. Actually, I think my mother was called Sylvia Natanavna Mintz in the Russian fashion, and then she named her daughter Lisa Natanya Geffen, and then my sister, when she gave up the Natanya and got married, named one of her daughters Nancy Helen and her Hebrew name is Natanya, so that was continued. So my sister grew up a congregation rabbi’s daughter in a small town, and when we moved to Manhattan she was fourteen-and-a-half, but I was a year-and-a-half so I have no memory of that at all. My father moved to Manhattan because he was recruited by Max Arzt who had been the rabbi in Scranton, who had gone to the Seminary and he recruited my father and their basic job was to found conservative congregations around the country. So they traveled constantly. They used to call my father the flying rabbi in the Forties. So on the one hand, I saw him more than my sister had, but on the other hand, he was also gone a lot on trips, but I didn’t have this rabbi’s daughter-in-a-small-town-problem. I was in Manhattan.

INT: He was more an administrative rabbi.

RELA: It was an advantage to be his daughter. I didn’t have any of the disadvantages. And my mother was in her glory being back in New York. She loved New York. We lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan on 82nd Street. I wish I had that apartment now. I went to public school, #9.

INT: I don’t know if we could go into it, but it must be a fascinating story how your mother came to fall in love with your father after the attitudes that she expressed.

RELA: Actually, I do have one story about it. Clearly it was a great romance. One of the things that they loved about each other was that they were different. Obviously she took on Shabbat and kashrut. She always stayed a bit of a doubter, although...I mean these things became very natural to her, but on the other hand, she was always a bit of a skeptic when it came to ritual and religious matters. But she threw herself into being a rebbetzin in Harrisburg. One of the classic family stories about this is that one day...she was used to living very well. Remember, she came from a very affluent family, and even after my grandfather died they lived with a certain panache. Her parents had always had a box at the Metropolitan Opera. They had a subscription to the opera. And by the way, as soon as my parents moved back to New York, they immediately bought a subscription to the opera. That was who they were. She once told me that my grandparents...actually, I taped her before her death, but
she once told me that her parents went to synagogue once a year. They went to the Brooklyn Jewish Center for Kol Nidrei. Her father went in tails and her mother went in a long evening gown, and that was the once a year that they went. They had a nanny for each child. They had collie dogs. They had their own dog kennel outside of the house. They had a music room with a grand and a baby grand. I have two of the chairs from that room.

**INT:** That must have been a remarkable change, and especially to be a rebbetzin in a small town.

**RELA:** I have two stories about that. The first story is about Harrisburg and the second story is about her first trip to Atlanta to see how the in-laws lived. Actually, after the telegram arrived about the elopement, they got a summons to Atlanta and they got...from Atlantic City, I guess, they got on a Pennsylvania Railroad train and they took the train to Atlanta. I think they were there for one day and they left. As long as I’m on that, the Atlanta story is that my mother walked in and she saw silverware in the flowerpots and she was horrified. She could not imagine what was going on. I guess I have to explain that when you treif something up, which with all these eight children you would be doing this all the time, when there was some mistake in the kitchen then to kasher silverware you would wash it and then you would boil it and then you’d stick it in the earth. So they would stick it in the flowerpots. That’s just one of the stories.

What happened in Harrisburg was that she made their apartment very beautiful. She had that knack all her life of elegance. In fact, you see this bookcase? There’s another four of them there. They were made in Harrisburg, handmade in Harrisburg in 1926. So they lived beautifully, and I think the big thing was that they had a radio. Some members of the congregation didn’t have radios. She found women from the congregation rummaging through her linen closet, looking to see what she had. She went home to mother. She told me she picked up her stuff and she went home to Brooklyn to her mother, and her mother said to her, “Is there anything wrong between you and Joel?” And she said, “No.” And her mother said, “Pack up and go back.” And she did. So obviously, there were a lot of adjustments. But she threw herself into it and then, for instance, she started a young people’s group and she produced plays. I have her copy of the Dybbuk, that she produced a production on the Dybbuk with all the instructions that she wrote. Remember, she was very arty. That was her thing.

**INT:** Would Rabbi David Silver remember your parents?

**RELA:** I doubt it, because they were older.

**INT:** He’s ninety. He’s almost ninety-one.

**RELA:** Right. The same age. Actually, he might because my parents were back there over the years whenever there were anniversaries, so he might. But the senior Rabbi Silver, Rabbi David Silver’s father, Eliezer, was a colleague of my grandfather’s and that made it quite difficult for him to have his colleague from the Agudah’s son coming in and opening up this synagogue without a mechitza. It was quite something. And obviously, my father was very successful in founding and organizing
congregations. So Rabbi Arzt brought him to the Seminary and so when Dr. Arzt became Vice Chancellor, my father took on his title which was Director of the Department of Field Activities and Community Education. But what it really meant was that they went around the country and helped organize conservative synagogues. By doing this, they got to know all the baalei batim. My father has been taped extensively in the archives of the Seminary. There was somebody who visited him over a period of a year and taped him about building the movement and how they did it. But the consequence was that since they knew the ba’alei batim, they became troubleshooters. If there was a problem, if there was an installation, if there was a simcha, they would bring them down to speak. They would represent the Chancellor, who at that time was Louis Finkelstein. And there was a very gifted team around him of Max Arzt and Bernard Mandelbaum and Moshe Davis and Max Routtenberg and Bernard Siegal and Simon Greenberg and my father. I have a picture of them that my father always kept in his office and I have it in my office at Gratz now.

INT: I think they were giants.

RELAX: They were extraordinary, but since the baalei batim knew them, trusted them, referred to them as practically their best friends, that meant that these men were also extremely well-equipped to fundraise, so that by the Fifties, they turned into the fundraisers. But they were extraordinary fundraisers because they had founded the congregations who had been through the tzorus in finding rabbis and cantors, who had regular contact with these people, so they were very effective. And they believed, of course, in what they were doing. Believed very much and they were very good. In the 1950’s, the United Synagogue in New York particularly was getting stronger and so my father took on running the Metropolitan Region, in addition to this other job, for ten years. And then he also, sometime in the 1930’s, took over the National Federation of Jewish Men’s Clubs and became their advisor. That was also on the side. And so he did that until he died as well. And so he had a tremendous influence on the building of the conservative movement.

INT: What about your mother? Was she a home Mom?

RELAX: Yes. My mother was a Dr. Laura Schlessinger Mom. She never worked outside the home for pay. She did volunteer work. She created a gracious and beautiful home. She read voraciously. Because I was born so much after my sister, she had a young child at home for a very long period of time, and then my sister married when I was seven and then had children quickly, so she also became a very young grandmother. If I can go back to...what I did was they sent me to a bi-cultural nursery school called Bet Hayeled, that was founded in New York by Jewish educators for their children. I went there from the ages of three to eight. I think my mother accepted my going to a Jewish school because it was an excellent private school and it was very avant-garde and liberal. My sister had gone to Emma Willard, which was and still is an exceptional private school in Troy. So my mother obviously believed in high-class education. She thought this was high-class. But when I finished Bet Hayeled when I was eight years old...I never even remember a discussion about the possibility of my going to a day school. There was Ramaz. It was in Manhattan. I think my mother was very opposed to it. My father had gone to public school and I went to P.S. 9, which is on 82nd and West End-it was a great public school-for fourth, fifth and sixth grade, and then applied to
various schools for middle school. My Jewish education, formal Jewish education, continued after Bet Hayeled at the SAJ, which was Dr. Kaplan’s synagogue. Until then, my parents had gone to Bnai Jeshurun, which was Rabbi Israel Goldstein at the time. My sister went to Sunday school there and met my brother-in-law there when she was fifteen. So I’ve known my brother-in-law since I was two. However, the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, Dr. Kaplan’s synagogue, had an arrangement with Bet Hayeled, that kids who finished Bet Hayeled would go into Kitah Bet. So I went there and they had a great junior congregation, so my father used to take me there every Saturday/Shabbat morning. (end of tape)

With me, first of all, I think they realized they weren’t going to have another child so I became the focus of Jewish education and I don’t know, maybe I was the son in a way that I think my sister was not. Not that my mother didn’t have a lot to do with shaping me. She did, but my father had a great deal of personal time that he spent with me that he couldn’t when he was the congregational rabbi when my sister was growing up. Even though he traveled a lot, he was basically home on Shabbat and that makes all the difference in the world.

**INT:** I think also maybe times had changed in terms of the availability of Jewish education. Like you said, he himself went to public school but things were beginning in terms of Jewish education. It was growing.

**RELA:** But he didn’t send me to day school. They didn’t send me to day school. And there were all kinds of compromises in my childhood that I didn’t notice at the time because my parents didn’t fight. They just did it. But it’s clear there was a culture clash. For instance, my mother was very concerned that I be exposed to classical music, and she forced me to take piano lessons which I hated, and to practice. I think my sister liked it better than I did. But also, once a month, I was taken to a children’s concert with Leonard Bernstein in Carnegie Hall, and it was on Shabbat. And we took the bus. And I was allowed to buy a bust of a composer only and we’d come home. Now, we were Shabbat observant. We always used electricity, which was one of the ways in which my father rebelled against his father, I guess. We used electricity but basically, we didn’t cut, we didn’t write, we didn’t sew, we didn’t handle money. We were completely traditional on Shabbat, and yet once a month I went to this concert and bought a bust of the composer. And it wasn’t until I was pretty grown up that I even thought about it as a problem, which tells you how smoothly they did this thing.

**INT:** They must have talked about when you were asleep.

**RELA:** I don’t know. I never heard them fight. Never. So that, to me, was quite amazing. That’s just an example of the fact that there obviously were two cultural strands being fed into me. I was sent to a girls’ summer camp where we did horseback riding and dance. My horseback riding teacher was the same one I had in Central Park during the winter. This was obviously my mother’s world, and then there were in my father’s world things like going to shul with him every Shabbat. Sometimes my mother went and sometimes she didn’t.

So we went to the SAJ, and while they were doing other things like announcements, my
father would say Mussaf, because it was Dr. Kaplan. Mordechai Kaplan was the rabbi. Ira Eisenstein, his son-in-law, was the assistant rabbi. Jack Cohen, who later became the Hillel director and a professor of philosophy at Hebrew University was the principal of the Hebrew school. The teachers were people like David Mogilner, alav hashalom, and Paul Ritterband and Drora Wartman and Tziporah Jochsberger who taught us music. It was a fabulous place, and I remember walking to shul with him on Shabbat morning and we would pass Phillip Birnbaum on the street and he would tip his hat. Sometimes we would pass Rabbi Jung. He was walking to the Jewish Center. And there was this cordial relationship between my father and all of these people. I just took it as a matter of course that these were the people you passed on the street going to shul Shabbat morning. Because we were at the SAJ and it was completely egalitarian, I learned, when I was eleven and a half...Cantor Moshe Nathanson, who wrote Hava Nagilah, taught me trop and I was supposed to be bat mitzvah on Shabbat Chanukah and read from the Torah on Shabbat morning and the whole thing. Then my parents decided to move to the suburbs and we moved to Great Neck.

We got to Great Neck in 1956 and I didn’t find out until twenty-five years later that actually bat mitzvah had only been put in there at all in ’55, so I was actually one of the first b’nai mitzvah but I only felt demoted and cheated because it was moved to Friday night. I read a haftarah on Friday night and I gave a little dvar Torah. My parents had an oneg Shabbat that night and a big reception on Sunday so all the Seminary people could come, because they couldn’t come for Shabbat. It was a wonderful occasion. The only thing that marred it for me was that a lot of the Geffen family didn’t come. We were eighteen first cousins. There were eight children, eighteen first cousins. We lived all around the country and we traveled to everybody’s simchas, and we gave a simcha and they didn’t come. The ones in New York came. My aunt and uncle who live in New Rochelle came. My uncle who was a rabbi in Queens couldn’t come on Shabbat. He came on Sunday. But the ones from out of town did not come. I didn’t expect...I never expected my grandparents to come. There were even problems with other family bar mitzvahs. In New Rochelle, when my cousin was bar mitzvah in a conservative synagogue-with Rabbi Golovensky though, but it was a conservative synagogue, they actually got them to sit separately for that Shabbat morning so that my grandfather would come. They just separated the people at the door and they did it. It was amazing. They never could pull it off today. And I didn’t even realize how enraged I was until sometime in the 1970’s in Philadelphia, when we had the first Jewish feminist consciousness-raising group. (It was founded a year after Ezrat Nashim in New York.) It was called N’shei Chavil and when we talk about Philadelphia we’ll talk about it. One night our exercise was, “When did you first notice that you were treated differently?” Now you have to remember. I was brought up egalitarian. Beit Hayeled was an extremely permissive environment.

INT: Now I’m also thinking that you weren’t alive then during the time your father had a synagogue, because chances are his synagogue was not egalitarian at that time.

RELA: No, it wasn’t, but it was as egalitarian as it could be at that time. He was a completely egalitarian type. In fact, in his eighties he flew to Dallas to vote for women to be ordained. It was quite something. He made sure to get there for the vote, and it wasn’t easy for him. He had the weight of generations on him. He revered and adored his father. But then my grandfather was
unusual for his time. He taught his sons and his daughters every day. He obviously promoted their level of Jewish education and I still haven’t told you the story about my graduation.

INT: We’re skipping around.

RELA: That’s alright. We’re going in time. And so we’re up to my bat mitzvah. Basically what happened was I had repressed all this anger, and when we had this consciousness raising session and it came my turn, I became enraged and I started to tell them about how angry I was that we gave a bat mitzvah and they didn’t come. They all sent letters and gifts and my grandfather, who wrote poetry for simchas, very formalistic acrostics with a person’s name, wrote me a beautiful acrostic poem to be read. I wasn’t really angry at my grandparents. I understood them. But it was my aunts and uncles and cousins that I couldn’t understand.

INT: Did you think that it was an objection to the bat mitzvah?

RELA: They just didn’t think that a bat mitzvah was...they would come to my wedding but...It wasn’t that they wouldn’t travel for me but it was bat mitzvah. Who knew from bat mitzvah in 1956? I was so angry I just started screaming at that meeting. It all came back to me. I said, “I want to do something about it,” and sometime in the 1980’s I was at one of my first cousins’ daughter’s bat mitzvah, which they all came to. In this generation we all go to the bat mitzvahs. The same people. And they have orthodox bat mitzvahs. I went up to my uncle, who is now ninety-four-so he was in his eighties-and I said, “Uncle Louis, why didn’t you come to my bat mitzvah?” I had to confront somebody. And he looked at me like I was totally from another planet and he said, “What?” He said, “What are you talking about?” I said, “Uncle Louis, don’t you remember? I had a bat mitzvah and you didn’t come.” He said, “Well, it was right after the war. We were very poor.” I said, “No, no, no. You went to David Wilensky’s. You went to Stanley Raskas’. You went to St. Louis. You went to Minneapolis. You went to New Orleans.” That’s where they lived, in all these places. He got this sheepish look on his face and he said, “Well...” I said, “Do you know I was very hurt?” He said, “Really?” He said, “I’m sorry.” It may have been foolish but it was something I had to do. But my poor eighty-something-year-old uncle at that time, he didn’t know what hit him.

INT: Let me come back a bit because I think we had been talking about education and then we skipped a step in a way. So you went to which middle school again?

RELA: I went to P.S. 9. What happened was that I took the test for a bunch of different schools and interviewed for different private schools, including Fieldston in New York, which is the ethical culture school. Many Jewish children went there. But the school I really wanted to go to was called Hunter College High School for Girls and you would take the gifted children’s test for that. I was in something called the IGC class at P.S. 9, the Intellectually Gifted Children. Can you believe this? Would we do that today? So we were all together for fourth, fifth and sixth grades, the same group, and many of us were from the same Hebrew school class at the SAJ, and one of whom lives in Philadelphia and has done work for the American Jewish Committee, Dan Rottenberg. He’s a very fine writer. We were in the same class at P.S. 9 and at the SAJ Hebrew school, and we’re still friends.
So what happened was that two kids from my elementary school got into Hunter and I was one of them. I always loved taking tests, and my mother said everybody came out of that test looking green and I had a big smile on my face.

So I went to Hunter and I loved it, and continued at the SAJ for my religious school education until we moved to Great Neck. When I got to Great Neck I went to Great Neck North Junior High School and Senior High School, and Temple Israel of Great Neck. Rabbi Waxman was the rabbi. He’s my rabbi. Just celebrated the fiftieth year. And there was there a fabulous youth director named Harold Malitzky and he built a whole culture for a small elite group of students, and many of us are still friends today. And we lived more in the youth house and USY and LTF than we did in the public high school. So we were in Great Neck of the Fifties, which was really a gilded ghetto, but we were not of it in that we were part of this special peer group. I never went to Ramah because I found out they had classes and I refused to go. This became a big joke because I became the educational director of Ramah in the Poconos and later the education coordinator for all Ramah camps. I eventually switched off this fancy girls’ camp, Allegro, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where I had gone and my sister was also a counselor, and started to go in the summers to Massad when I was ten years old, and from the age of ten to fourteen I went to Massad and that is why I speak Hebrew. There’s no question. I suffered there a bit. I was persecuted for being a conservative rabbi’s daughter. I went to Massad Aleph. Almost all the students came from Flatbush and HILI. [Hebrew Institute of Long Island]

INT: What years were you there?

RELA: I was there from 1953 to 1957. I guess I was always a determined person. I was determined to excel there even though I had some social problems in the bunk, partially because of not coming from the yeshiva world and the rest of them did. So I learned Hebrew. I won every “ayin” prize I could win. It was a highly competitive camp. You got points for everything.

INT: I know. I hated it.

RELA: But I’ve always thrived in competitive environments, so I ended up doing well there. There are people who have followed me through my life at various stages, and one of them is Sarah Feinstein, who at that time was the head of the girls’ camp. It was called Kibbutz Hagalil. She now lives in Philadelphia and comes to the same minyan where I daven and it’s very nice. She is a Jewish educator and an expert in Bialik. And there were many people who sort of followed me through my life. The Kadushin family, Max Kadushin, the famous rabbinics professor at the Seminary, his son, who I knew as Chuck at camp, who was my...I don’t know if he was my swimming or tennis counselor, and I arrived at Columbia, to the joint program of Columbia and the Seminary, and walked in and I see him sitting there at Columbia. He was the advisor to the students. And I said, “Hi Chuck,” and I looked down and it said Professor Charles Kadushin. So there were people like that who followed me. David Mogilner was another. He was my teacher in fourth grade and then he became director of Ramah in the Poconos where I eventually-
INT: I went one year to Berkshires and we used to sing a song about all the different directors.

RELA: Right. Great Neck was not my mother’s natural habitat. She was not happy there. She didn’t drive. She was away from her beloved Manhattan. They lived there eight years. I was there six, from eighth grade through twelfth grade. It turned out to be very formative because of the experiences at Temple Israel. Academically, it was not so good for me. I was a much better student at Hunter. In Great Neck I got distracted with other things, and I was never as happy in school there as I had been in Manhattan.

INT: And your father was commuting to the Seminary?

RELA: My father commuted to the Seminary, but he wanted to own a home. My mother used to say he wanted to put his hands in mother earth. He wanted to have a garden. He liked that very much. It was a choice between White Plains and Great Neck and it was either going to be Rabbi Gelb or Rabbi Waxman, and we ended up in Great Neck. Those were interesting years. Meanwhile, my sister had married and had two young children and was living in Little Neck, in a garden apartment. She used to visit my mother every day with these two children born ten and a half months apart, and they are closer in age to me than my sister is. So my big claim to fame was that I was an aunt.

So my mother was active in the synagogue. always in anything that I was in school about, went about her intellectual stuff and arts stuff, and enjoyed also...she liked very much meeting the people who my father interacted with for the Seminary, not so much the academics or the Seminary administrators, although she liked them, but she wouldn’t have liked living around the Seminary and going to that minyan, but she liked the people in Great Neck, especially when he cultivated many, many major donors to the Seminary. Eventually he founded and was in charge of the Palm Beach Campaign at the Seminary, and they used to go for a month every winter and live in the Breakers, and she enjoyed those things very much. They were the people of the world she had grown up in. She was very comfortable with them. She enjoyed mixing with them. I think she enjoyed raising me, and she spent a lot of time on that and we did have a lot of adolescent mother-daughter clashes. Different values, different whatever. I think of myself much more as a product of the Upper West Side of Manhattan. In fact, when I was seventeen years old and graduated from high school...I had actually lived my high school years more in USY than anything else. I was very active. I became a regional officer and was on the national board for a number of years, and went to Israel with the second or third Israel Pilgrimage in 1959. I graduated in the first Hebrew high school graduating class at Temple Israel of Great Neck and then it was after my junior year, so I couldn’t have a year without Jewish education, so I used to commute into New York. The Seminary had mechina class.

INT: Which college were you in?

RELA: No, I was still in high school, in my senior year. I used to commute twice a week to the Seminary and go to class there. Between high school and college...I must say, my parents were in general very permissive parents, which I think is wonderful and I’m a permissive parent too, but they let me do something that today is more usual but then was very unusual. I went to Israel for a year
between high school and college when I was seventeen.

INT: Extremely unusual.

RELA: Especially for a girl. Machon l'Madrechay Chutz La'aretz, the Institute for Youth Leaders from Abroad. I went from USY and that was a very formative year for me. It was 1960-61.

INT: Where did you live?

RELA: I lived in Jerusalem half the time, on Kibbutz Sa'ad for three months, and then in a youth village and traveled in Europe for a month with three other people between the ages of seventeen and eighteen. That summer before I went was the first time I had ever been to Ramah. I went as a CIT to Ramah in Connecticut. I had a terrible experience for a variety of reasons, some of which were Ramah's fault and some of which were me. I went to see David Mogilner before I left for Israel, and I found my file in Ramah office so he wrote this down. It says “says she will go anywhere for the sake of the movement” so I was a “fabrente” conservative Jew, but I said to him-I remember-I said, “I have had ten-year-olds up to my...I must have older children and I cannot go back to that camp.” He said, “Fine, you’ll come to my camp,” which was the Poconos, and he gave me machon, which was then the oldest division, and that’s what I did when I came back from Israel. I had already been to Israel once for the summer. This was fairly unusual by 1960. When I went to Israel for the year, there were twelve people in the group from USY that were part of this bigger group of kids from youth movements from all over the country. Many of the people were older than me. The twelve of us became very close and some of us are still very close friends, and that was a wonderful thing.

What had happened to me...in that senior year when I was going to the Seminary, commuting in once or twice a week, I grew to love Morningside Heights, and until then my dream college had been Cornell, and I applied to schools before I went away to Israel. I did go up there and have an interview, but I decided I had to go to Columbia, and I ended up in the joint program of Columbia and the Seminary, and when I came back from Machon, I went into that program. It was a wonderful experience for me, and in four years...I came with fluent Hebrew and a strong Jewish studies background and I had done that mechina year. I did the joint program in four years. Many people still take five years to do it, mostly because of the Jewish studies, and I majored in Talmud at the Seminary and in sociology at Columbia, and thereby hangs another tale of what it meant to be one of the first three women Talmud majors at the Seminary and what happened to me because of that.

INT: Who were the other two?

RELA: One was my close friend from Great Neck who also went to Israel with me for the year and is now a Ph.D. in psychology, practicing in Chicago. Her name is Marlyn Grossman. The other was Tikvah Frymer Kensky, who is now a distinguished professor. She was a double major in Bible and Talmud. She was Tikvah Frymer then.

INT: I believe she spoke at the women’s conference in New York.
RELA: Probably. She now has a chair at the Divinity School at the University of Chicago. She taught at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College before that, and she is a feminist scholar. Her Ph.D. is from J.J. Finkelstein at Yale. She is extraordinary. It was quite, quite something. I loved Talmud. I always loved it. I wanted to be a professor of Talmud. There was no question about it. In 1965, when I graduated, I told them I wanted to go on in Talmud and they said, “Sorry, there is no way a woman can go on in Talmud,” and that was a very critical disillusioning moment for me. After all, remember, the Seminary was not only the place where I studied. It was the place where I grew up as a Seminary brat. It was where my father worked. It was where everybody always patted me on the head, where Professor Lieberman had a pet name for me. And all of a sudden they were saying “no” to me. (End of tape)

INT: This is session two with Rela Mintz Geffen, interviewed by Barbara Trainen Blank. It is June 2, 1998. We’re going to be talking about aspirations, your career and your life hopes as a child and adolescent, and your parents’ attitudes towards those issues, and also, for some reason they say towards non-Jews. Let’s start with your career aspirations.

RELA: I always had career aspirations. Actually, I can’t remember when I was a little girl what I wanted to be when I grew up but I knew that I wanted to do something. When I was an undergraduate, I fell in love with Talmud and sociology. At a certain point I decided that I liked Talmud the best, and I was one of the first three women Talmud majors at the Seminary. I had a wonderful teacher named David Weiss Halivni. We had a wonderful class, this Talmud major class. We were together for several years and we met every Sunday for three-and-a-half-hours straight with him. He was just a wonderful human being. He would meet me on the street on Broadway and he’d say, “Oh, you’re walking home alone?” And he’d walk me back to my apartment and tip his hat. He was very like that. If a student was cold he’d close the window. My favorite story is we decided that a three-and-a-half-hour class was very long without a break, and so we decided to have a break and we asked his permission to serve coffee and danish, and he said, “Yes, but on one condition.” And we said, “What’s the condition?” He said he had to pay for it because he was getting paid to teach during that time. This is a classic Halivni type thing. We called him Rav Weiss then. He later changed his name to David Weiss Halivni. I had always wanted to study Talmud, perhaps because it was forbidden. I never thought about that before but also because it was something that people in my family did. I didn’t know if I would like it or not.

In between high school and college I went for a year to Israel on machon le’madrichai chutz la’aretz, the Institute for Youth Leaders from Abroad, from USY. I was seventeen. It was actually quite something at that time, that single girls didn’t go at seventeen. And one of the things that happened there was there were twelve of us from USY and for one month of the year we got put together with the B’nai Akiva and Mizrachi kids to go to a seminar dati in Jerusalem, and the boys went off to yeshiva every day. There happened to have been a group of much more knowledgeable girls than boys in this particular group and we all wanted to study Gemara, and we were incensed that we couldn’t go to yeshiva. So the madrich for B’nai Akiva was Chaimka Druckman, who is now a member of the Knesset. But this was 1960, so that’s a long time ago. It was forty years ago. He was a young man and he said that he would teach us. So every day when the boys went off to yeshiva he
taught a class of girls Gemara, and that was the first time I ever studied Gemara. Anyway, when it came to different majors at the Seminary. Professor Halkin wanted me to major in history and Professor Sarna wanted me to major in Bible, and I really loved Gemara so that’s what I did.

INT: Were you thinking of a career?

RELA: Yes, I was. Well, not at the beginning but toward the end yes. And there were three of us. One of the others is a psychologist in Chicago now and the third one became a great Bible professor, Tikvah Frymer Kensky. She was a double major in Bible and Talmud. In any case, the sociology happened...I really had a thing for teachers. Maybe that’s why I became a teacher because at Columbia undergraduate they had very strong liberal arts requirements, which they still do, unlike many schools that have given them up. You had to take a social science. So I was debating. It was a toss-up between psychology and sociology. This is one of those stories and the rest is history. But at Columbia undergraduate you could only do experimental psychology and had to have your own rat. They didn’t have any clinical. It was all behavioral. So I didn’t want that, and that’s why I took sociology, and I had a fabulous teacher. His name was Hubert Gorman. I later found out that there were a couple of other students that had the same experience. They were totally turned on by him. Because of that, I went on in sociology, and the more I took it the more I liked it, but it was one of those really serendipitous things where if they had had clinical psych, I probably would have taken psych.

INT: I think that happened to a lot of people at Columbia.

RELA: You remember that?

INT: Yes.

RELA: But you do remember that it was all behavioral. In any case, they did a big favor to the sociology department by keeping it that way. So I really liked both of them very much, but all things considered, the Jewish studies were very important to me. I got married when I was a junior, at the end of my junior year. When I was a senior I went to Mrs. Sylvia Ettenberg, and I said, “I want to go on in Talmud.” She went to consult with faculty and she came back with the message that a woman could not go on in Talmud because there was no separate graduate school. I figured this out later. I couldn’t quite figure it out at the time. So the only way to go beyond undergraduate classes in Talmud was to sit in the rabbinical school classes, and they didn’t want any women doing that. This was 1965. This was not the Dark Ages. This was my movement, of whom I was a Seminary brat, rejecting me. I never got over it. I still haven’t gotten over it. Sylvia Ettenberg knows that. We discuss it every time I see her. It was an awful blow to me. And so my response was, “Okay, I’ll go on in sociology.” I didn’t know there’s very little you can do with sociology unless you have a Ph.D. Nobody bothered to tell me that. And the most ironic thing, speaking of careers and how little we knew...and I think some women are still like this today, if I love Talmud so much, wouldn’t it have been logical for somebody to say to me go to law school? If I had gone to Columbia Law School at that point, I would be rich today, among other things!
INT: Would you have liked it though?

RELA: I would have loved it. I loved Gemara. Why wouldn’t I love law? Why wasn’t that logical?

INT: I think the practice of law though is different. The study of law and the practice of law are two different things.

RELA: That was such a great time for it. There were almost no women in law school. They got jobs in all the best firms. I could have finished by the time Michael finished rabbinical school.

INT: I think then the career counseling for women was very weak.

RELA: Career counseling? What career counseling?!

INT: There was nothing.

RELA: And besides everything else, I didn’t know a single woman attorney. Maybe if I had, if I had had a single role model, it would have made a difference. I didn’t know one.

INT: But you yourself didn’t make that connection.

RELA: Not until later. All I knew was I enjoyed the sociology, so I thought, “Okay, I’ll go on in sociology.” And my now ex-husband said sure, go on, as long as it doesn’t cost us money. The first year I went part-time to Columbia. I got accepted to Columbia graduate school, which was unusual. They don’t like to take their own undergraduates, contrary to say Oxford where they only take their own undergraduates. The British system is different. And interestingly enough, my strongest mentor, who is named William S. Goode, who is still alive and is a very great professor, Sy Goode, who later married a friend of mine, Lennie Weitzman from USY, was my greatest mentor. I had done honors in sociology at Columbia and we had a junior honors seminar with only four people with him and I was absolutely his protegee and the day he found out that I got engaged he dropped me like a hot potato. That was another thing I lived through besides rejection by the Seminary. It was so wounding, and I didn’t understand it for years and years, and then I finally figured out by reading, because I began to read women studies articles, that it was because I had gotten engaged and he felt that that meant I would never finish a Ph.D. and it wasn’t worth investing in me anymore. And because I still know him and because I was so angry about it, about seven or eight years ago I actually confronted him. I said to my good friend from USY who eventually married him-I told her how upset I was and that I still got so angry every time I thought of it. I mean he did help me when we moved to Florida. He got me a fellowship at the University of Florida. Just his writing a letter for me was so powerful. But we lost that mentor thing. I went up to him and I said, “How could you have done this to me? I was so vulnerable.” And he got angry all over again and started screaming at me and he said...he said, “I did the right thing and those women—they disappointed me one after another.”

INT: He must have been burned.
RELA: Right. He really had been burned. So it was just amazing to me that he was still as upset about it as I was, but in his way. In any case, I decided to go on in sociology. By the second year I got a fellowship. The truth is, if I had been born a little bit later, I think I would have gone to rabbinical school, no question about it. It's obvious that those were the skills that I had, the talents. I had grown up in a rabbinical family and it was the natural thing. So basically, there ensued a tug-of-war where the Seminary kept saying to me, "Well, why don't you come back and do a Masters in education." You know, like be a good girl. That's what girls are supposed to do, get a Masters in education. And I said, "I don't want a Masters in education. I want a Masters in Talmud. If I can't have a Masters in Talmud I'm not studying there at all." But the truth was I missed it very much. So I got this fellowship that Paul Lazarsfeld, the great sociologist, got through the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. At that time that's what it was called. He got it through the Congress to train sociologists in education. I got that, and it was a doctoral fellowship. It would have taken me through the Ph.D., but my husband was in rabbinical school and the timing didn't work out exactly right. So I decided that I would finish a Masters degree, then go with him to Israel for a year, which was '67-'68, which turned out to be a great year to be in Israel, and that was his "junior" year which was really his fourth year. It didn't pay to go back to finish the Ph.D., I don't think, at that point in his fifth year and then wherever he applied for jobs I would apply for graduate school.

INT: So your Masters was at Columbia?

RELA: Yes, but that's the way we used to do it in those days. We used to follow our spouses. What happened was that because of this fellowship at Columbia, working at the Bureau of Applied Social Research, the students were divided into two categories. There were the theoreticians, who worked, who were apprenticed to Robert Merton or whoever, or Professor O'Day or Sy Goode, and then there were the ones who were doing survey research and they tended to work at the Bureau. So I started to work at the Bureau and I was very comfortable there. I've had this great luck of having certain mentors follow me through my life and cross over. Just as an aside—it took me many years to figure out that I could cross over and integrate Jewish studies and sociology. At that point, it was one or the other to me, but I did have figures who followed me from one place to the other, and one of them was Charles Kadushin, who was also a Seminary brat—his father was a very great professor—who had been my tennis or swimming counselor at Massad, which is where I learned to speak Hebrew, by the way, because I never went to day school. When I walked into Columbia the first day for advisement, he turned out to be the advisor to all the students in the undergraduate joint program with the Seminary. And I said, "Hi Chuck," and looked down and there was this sign that said "Professor Charles Kadushin." He also was my methods teacher when I was a junior in college and he was at the Bureau at that time. And Paul Ritterband, who had been my teacher at the SAJ in third grade or fourth grade, decided after rabbinical school to do a doctorate at Columbia in sociology, and he was writing his dissertation under Chuck Kadushin's supervision. I coded the surveys for his dissertation, so here was this irony of the crossover. Because of the Seminary-Columbia nexus that was so powerful, where even though I didn't, in my head, connect Jewish studies and sociology, I had people who were not...well, as it happens, Ritterband was studying the Jews. He was studying the brain drain of Israeli academics to the United States. I coded these 2,000 Hebrew questionnaires. I got a lot of practical experience in survey research there. And at Columbia I was specializing in
sociology of religion and education. It fit together with my other interests.

I did a Masters essay on an organization I had been active in for five or six years, that I enjoyed being part of very much. This is another aspect of who I am, and maybe it relates to being an Aquarius. We like to change the world and make it a better place. It was called The Panel of Americans, and it was an intergroup relations technique. In New York, at that time, a Protestant, a Catholic, a Jew, a Negro and a Puerto Rican would stand up in front of the group and each talk about themselves and then take questions from the audience. I was introduced to this by a rabbinical student when I was a freshman. This very good-looking, dashing rabbinical student, every undergraduate’s dream, came up to me in the Seminary cafeteria one day and said, “I’d like to talk to you about something really important to me.” And I thought, “Oh my God, this is it.” And it turned out it was The Panel of Americans, and that’s how I got involved in it and I got to know people at Union Theological Seminary who were involved in it. It was the first time that I ever really had close friends who weren’t Jewish and who were from different groups. Naturally, the men were studying to be Protestant ministers, many of them. It was the first time that I had a close black friend and I invited her home for Seder. Anyway, I got very involved as a panelist and we were trained by the National Training Laboratories people in Washington and NTL was very popular at that time. So I decided to do my Masters essay on the panelists, not the panel as an institution. And it turned out that they were the people who were most impacted, because you could go to a school or some group once or twice, but the panelists were changed dramatically because they interacted all the time and became a chevrah of a kind, a social circle. That’s what I did my Masters essay on.

INT: Let me stop you a second because they’re asking about first jobs and things. The Bureau—was that a paid thing or that was part of your Masters program?

RELA: No. I had this wonderful fellowship. It was, at that time, a lot of money. It was $4000 a year tax-free, plus I got a dependency allowance for Michael because I had earned more teaching Hebrew school the year before than he had. At the beginning of my career, actual jobs were being a counselor at Camp Ramah in the Poconos, which is how I met my ex-husband, and that was for a couple of summers. It began a long saga that went through my whole career, ending up in my being educational director of Ramah in the Poconos for five years and eventually a camp professor and coordinating education for all of the Ramah camps. But it stared with my being a CIT before I went on Machon in 1960, and then in ’62 and ’63 being a counselor in Ramah in the Poconos. So that was my first real job and then teaching Hebrew school, which I did...well, actually, when I came back from Machon we had an obligation for two years to give service to our movements. I had gone from USY so I was a youth leader, and one of the years it was in Riverdale where David Wolf Silverman was, at that time, the rabbi. Later on, in 1969, I taught in the Prozdor of the Seminary. I taught Talmud. I found out later that it actually took a vote of the Seminary faculty, the rabbinical school faculty, to okay my teaching rabbinics in the high school! They okayed me. They okayed Judy Hauptman, who had come in ’67. Joel Roth was the chairman of the high school Talmud department. I found out much later that they thought they had only approved me for Mishnah. I was actually teaching Gemara.
So you can tell from this that I went back to Jewish studies, which I’ll get to in a minute. So my jobs were teaching Hebrew school and I taught in New Rochelle, which had a wonderful school, and we had this car that used to go from the Seminary three days a week. There was a rabbinical student named Eddie Feldheim, I think, who used to drive the car. Helene Tigay was then Helene Zubkoff. She was also teaching there. We had a group of very excellent teachers. So we used to go to New Rochelle to teach, and then I got this job at the Prozdor, which was much better. During the week I would go out to Queens, to Rego Park Jewish Center, and I would teach in the branch, and on Sunday I taught at JTS. That was in Michael’s senior year, which was 1969-70.

INT: By that point you had completed your Masters degree.

RELA: Yes. I finished the Masters in 1967, writing the Masters essay, and then we went off to Israel for a year. Well, here I am going off to Israel for a year and it was driving me crazy that I wasn’t doing Jewish studies, and I knew that I could go to the Hebrew University for a whole year. So I went back to talk to the people at the Seminary and they said okay, but what changed was Judy Hauptman came. She convinced-not Halivni but Professor Moshe Zucker to go to bat for her. And he fought for her and she got permission-I think the two years did make a difference too in consciousness-to do a Masters in Talmud and to sit in rabbinical school classes, but she also sat in this Talmud majors class that I had been in that continued year after year. And so they said to me, “Okay, you’ll do a Masters in education but you can minor in Talmud.” That was their compromise. But the rubric would be a Masters in education but they gave me a way to do Talmud. I said, “But I don’t want to write another Masters essay. I have so many. I don’t need another degree.” And at that time, you had to write Masters essay in Hebrew, which I could have done but that wasn’t the point. Finishing the degree didn’t matter that much to me but I did want to be in a framework so I could go to the Hebrew University. So they said okay, we’re transferring all your credits from the Hebrew University. As it happens, I ended up finishing all the credits for the Masters, but I still owed them-I owed Joe Lukinsky-a comprehensive in education and a Masters thesis. Mrs. Ettenberg said, “Well, someday you’ll write something in sociology about the Jews.” It must have been the first time somebody mentioned that to me, the crossover, and we’ll translate it into Hebrew and we’ll give you the degree.

INT: There were many, many Jewish sociologists-

RELA: But they weren’t sociologists of Jews or the American Jewish Community. And with good reason. In Israel, Shmuel Eisenstadt, who ran the show at the Hebrew University, adamantly argued that there was no such thing. He would not permit it. And in fact, it was only last summer, 1997, that for the first time at the World Congress of Jewish Studies, the section that should have been called sociology wasn’t called just demography and it was called Sociology of the Jews. Look how long that took. He chased out all kinds of people like Amitai Etzioni, really great people, because he was so dominant and he argued that there was no such thing as sociology of the Jews. That was coming from that end. And in America, they would say, “Don’t study the Jews, you’ll never get a job.” And the first person who actually studied the Jews and “got away with it” was Marshall Sklare, who did a dissertation at Columbia on Conservative Judaism as an American religious movement. He did
teach only in Jewish institutions actually, and even some of my colleagues who were just a little older than me or around my age, didn’t do their dissertations on the Jews. They studied something else and then they switched over. Like Willy Helmreich, I think, studied Puerto Ricans. They were all advised in the same direction by their Jewish professors. It was really a shame!

INT: And also insecurity, I think, at that point too.

RELA: Yes. These were the kinds of people who on the side, once a year, would do a free study for the American Jewish Committee to sort of pay of their Jewish guilt. There was a man at Princeton like that named Marvin Bressler. They were secularists. They were assimilationists to a large extent. I don’t think Nathan Glazer was an assimilationist, or Irving Lewis Horowitz. It’s interesting. They became presidents of the American Sociological Association. They were major figures. Robert Merton was a major assimilationist. His name was Moskowitz. When he was at Temple, he changed it to Robert Kingsley Merton. Robert K. Merton was Jewish. And then at Columbia, it was “in” to be Jewish.

So I went to Israel for junior year and did not work that year. We had saved all our money, our wedding money and from working and everything, and that year at the Hebrew University I took all courses that transferred back to the Seminary because I had finished at Columbia as far as I was going to go there. So I took everything I always wanted to take in my life like archeology. I took a graduate education seminar with Seymour Fox. I took Talmud with Professor Urbach. I was shocked to discover that I could not get into Professor Abrahamson’s class at the Hebrew University. He was a family friend. He invited me for dinner to his home but he said, “Sorry, we daven at the end of the class.” It was all male. Can you imagine at the Hebrew University this bastion of German secularism? The Talmud department was like a place apart. So I couldn’t be in that class. I took a wonderful class with a South African who had gone on aliyah, Simon Herman, who was studying Jewish identity. He had been trained by Kurt Lewin at the Behavioral Sciences Institute, and that was a wonderful experience, and a wonderful course with Moshe Davis that was in his home, that was really for the rabbinical students, and a course with Professor Simone. Ernst Simone, that was also at the Seminary, in which he talked about Buber, Heschel and Rosensweig, and he had known them all. It was a wonderful, wonderful year. It was the year after the ’67 war and there was a sense of triumphalism.

INT: Who did you have for archeology?

RELA: Ussishkin. Professor Ussishkin, who is a great archeologist today. He was very young then. I took courses that were taught both in Hebrew and in English because my Hebrew was completely fluent. It was a wonderful, wonderful experience. The following summer (1968) we stayed on Ramah’s seminar in the summer for campers, and I got pregnant in Chavat Hanoar Hatzioni, the Israeli Goldstein Youth Village. (I do everything in a patriotic fashion.) I came back to America and went back to taking courses at the Seminary. Slid right back into the Talmud majors class. I never sat in Talmud classes in the rabbinical school, but went into the Talmud majors class, which was then taught by Professor Zucker, which was a whole different style for me from Halivni, and I was
pregnant. Professor and Mrs. Zucker never had any children, and as I became more and more pregnant he became more and more nervous that I was going to go into labor in his class, so he asked me not to come to class until after the baby was born. I discovered that I was a Seminary legend when I was walking around the quadrangle one day behind a student who was telling the story about me without my name. That year was the year of the fire, the horrible Seminary fire. We watched the library burn. It was a terrible, terrible thing. Thousands of people came to help save books. And then the job I got that year, for twenty hours a week, was being what was called the “bindery girl.” I was the bindery girl and I did that twenty hours a week, working in the prefab, and I also taught in the Prozdor. So those were the jobs that I had Michael’s senior year and I was pregnant. And I was taking a course load at the Seminary on that Masters that I never finished, but actually enabled me to get a principal’s license when I got to Philadelphia because I had enough courses past the B.A. in Jewish Studies that were helpful to me to qualify for the certification. I enjoyed very much working at the Seminary but I was very focused on going into sociology and finishing a Ph.D. in sociology. I was definitely before my time. When I got to the University of Florida, which is where we ended up, Michael’s first Hillel position...everyplace he applied to Hillel I applied in sociology, and Professor Goode did write letters for me and that was a big help. The week that we decided together that we were going to go to Florida, I got an acceptance with a graduate assistantship from the University of Florida.

INT: Was the field heavily male at that point, the sociology field?

RELA: All Ph.D.’s were heavily male at that point. Most of the graduate courses that I was in I was one of the very few women, and certainly at the University of Florida even more so. There was another problem, and that was that...and Uri was born on Shabbat Hagadah. I was telling you about Professor Zucker and the story. I may as well give the story on the record. It’s a great story. The first thing that happened was...the Seminary still has in some of its classrooms these old-fashioned chair desks, where the desk sort of goes around the front. I outgrew the chair around my sixth month, and so Professor Zucker gave me his chair, because his was the only chair that wasn’t like that in the room. And then I used to sit with the Gemara bounced on my stomach and it would bounce up and down when he would kick. Anyway, Professor Zucker became more and more nervous. It was a fabulous class. I think seven out of the fourteen people in it went on to become Jewish studies professors. It was Reuven Kimmelman and Judy Hauptman and Al Baumgarten and others. He was getting more and more nervous. He was so scared. This was the class that met from seven to ten at night. He was so afraid I was going to go into labor. And so around my seventh month he asked me to stay after class and he asked me if I would stop coming to class and he assured me that I would still be able to take the exam and that he wouldn’t penalize me for it. Would I please not come to class anymore. Meanwhile, I was still schlepping on the F train or the A train out to Queens to teach in Rego Park. Sometime in my eighth month, I think it was, Michael Menitoff and Michael Monson started switching off teaching for me, going out there for me, because it became difficult. It was a subway trip and it was very crowded but I kept teaching the Sunday class. I never missed a Sunday class in fact, because Uri was born on Shabbat Hagadah, and then there was Pesach vacation. My mother used to come watch Uri.
We lived in a little colony at 3111 Broadway, which was called the Julliard Apartments but now it's Manhattan School of Music, not Julliard. There were eight or ten rabbinical school couples living in that building and we were very close. Many of us still are to this day. Marcia and Jim Lebow, Michael and Cindy Greenbaum, Benjy and Judy Segal and Jane and Jerry Epstein. Some of us had been to Israel together in '67-'68. It was very, very nice. We all taught Hebrew school. All the women were studying and "juggling." The norm was dual career in a very special way. It was an elitist group ahead of its time. There's no question about that. We would go to the Seminary synagogue on Shabbat, which was separate seating, and yet there was this latent feminism that was definitely around, and at Columbia it was starting even more forcefully. But the very end of the 1960's was dominated with the riots and they happened mostly in the year that we were in Israel and we got these reports on tapes that people would send us about what was going on. So we were very involved with the civil rights movement. And of course Professor Heschel was at the Seminary then and he was a leading figure in it. We were involved in interfaith to some extent. There were all kinds of things that would then follow me through my life, but as far as the career trajectory, the work that I did in sociology was mainly at the Bureau of Applied Social Research, and then I worked on different people's studies to earn money. I learned to work on the computer very early on. Chuck Kadushin taught us in the early 1960's. Columbia was one of the first places that had computers, so that I was never afraid of computers. So, Michael had to go to a Hillel that was considered a "hardship" position because he didn't go into the chaplaincy. It was the Vietnam War. They wanted him at Michigan but they said that wasn't a hardship, so it was between Norman, Oklahoma; Carbondale, Illinois; and Gainesville, Florida. We went down to Gainesville, Florida and we really liked it. So we went there and I got a graduate assistantship.

So when Uri was ten weeks old we moved to Florida. Michael (Rabbi Michael A. Monson) became the Hillel director. He was the only rabbi in town. I went into this quarter system, where I had three seminars a semester. I had a ten-week-old. I was teaching the freshman introduction to the social scientists. After the first year, I won a university fellowship and I didn't have to do anything to get the money, but the first year I did have to teach. Of course, Michael was busy all the time because students lived at night, and interestingly enough, he thought of me as a kind of deviant. My parents had always taught me I could do anything, and I didn't know that I was a feminist but I was! But what happened in the years between 1969 and 1972 was that I turned into a role model. By '72, all of Michael's students at Hillel wanted to meet me, wanted to see what I was like, how I was managing, and suddenly, I became this desirable role model. In '69 I wasn't exactly a liability, but I was strange. So I can exactly track it.

The other thing was that I had to do something radical career-wise, in that I had been studying religion and education. Remember, even though I had switched from the Seminary to Columbia, I was still doing religion and education, which, by the way, I'm still doing today if you think about it. But when I got to Florida I discovered that in their graduate sociology department, they were big on South American studies because of where they're located, they were big on rural sociology because of where they were located, but they did not have a specialization for the Ph.D. in either religion or education, so I had to switch gears completely, not only from a very highly structured and ideological program at Columbia built around structural functionalism and that was like a religion,
to a different viewpoint, but also, I had to shift gears in terms of content. So I had to pick areas of concentration. I already had the Masters. So I picked the family and urban studies.

INT: They did have that?

RELA: Yes. And these turned out to be fateful, because the family turned out to mesh with the religion and education very well, and there was no way to study women. There was no women’s studies. Women could only be studied under the rubric of the family, but gender roles turned out to be a major, so that’s the one I did for the rest of my life, and it turned out that urban studies served me very well because in 1976, when we moved to Philadelphia, David Mogilner, who was the head of Ramah in the Poconos and of the whole Ramah Movement, introduced me at camp in the summer to Daniel Elazer, a great professor of political science who was then doing a study of the future of the synagogue in America. He needed someone to do survey research. The survey research training came in very handy too. Everything sort of started to come together. Dan wanted to do this study of synagogues in America. He needed someone who could design a survey that would be sent to all the synagogues. David introduced me to him and I have now been working with him for twenty-two years, and I’m the director of studies of his center in Philadelphia. It’s called the Center for Jewish Community Studies. In Israel it’s called the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

Between ’69 and ’72, it was a gestation period. We lived in Gainesville. I went to school full-time and then wrote the dissertation. In the summers, two summers, we led Israel Pilgrimage for USY. Did it with a fourteen-month-old and a twenty-something-month-old. Went to Hillel directors’ conferences and the Hillel seminar for top college students at Camp B’nai B’rith at the end of the summer for several years. That also contributed to the development of my feminism. There were no women Hillel directors. But it turned out that the wives of Hillel directors were spectacular people. We started our own consciousness-raising group. We would meet while the men were meeting. It turned into this incredible group. There was Esther Ticktin. There was Rachel Adler, who’s now a great theologian. There was me. There were several others. Rachel, at that time, was writing “The Women Who Wasn’t There: Halacha and the Jewish Woman,” which turned out to be an article that got Moshe Meiselman so angry that he wrote a whole book contra it. There was Danny Leifer and Myra Leifer. There was Dick Israel and Sherry. Sherry Israel was part of it. There was Dick Levy and Carol, his wife. She’s phenomenal. She had been an actress, a cabaret singer, and he is now the first Hillel director ever to become president of a major rabbinic association. He’s the first non-pulpit president of the CCAR. There was Yechiel Pupko and his first wife. Not only did we meet as women regularly, and this was over a period of years and sometimes we were together for ten days in the summer and sometimes for three or four days at Hillel directors’ conferences, but sometimes we also met as couples. We did couples’ group stuff based around the tea group things that I had been trained in from the National Training Laboratory so many years before. And plus, we were on the campus. The campus, ’69-72 in Florida, was the equivalent of five years before in New York. We were constantly bailing kids out of jail in St. Petersburg and Michael was doing problem pregnancy counseling. Abortion counseling was illegal in Florida.

So in Gainesville my career was “incubating.” I wanted to have everything done by the time
I was thirty. I would have all my children born, finish the Ph.D. and be ready to live my life. That was the goal. I pretty much did it. When we went to Gainesville I was twenty-six. I taught, and then I also taught in Hebrew school because as long as I was there and a resource it seemed awful not to do that. Another couple arrived the same time we did, Barry and Caryl Mesch, who was the first full-time Jewish studies professor, and she and I both taught. Barry had been a year ahead of me in the joint program, so I knew him. They ended up staying in Gainesville for seventeen years, but we were only there three years. During the three years I finished the Ph.D., or I almost finished the Ph.D. I finished all the work for the dissertation. It still had not occurred to me that I could combine sociology and Jewish studies. I was still in my head running back and forth between the Seminary and Columbia in a schizophrenic way. I was either doing my Jewish thing or the sociology thing. The feminism was getting much more active. Social action in general was very important to both Michael and to me. Uri was very little and I had a babysitter for him, plus he went to a nursery school after a while, so that I was free for half-days. I needed time to go to the library in addition to time to go to class. The quarter system took a while to get used to, having to produce three papers in ten weeks.

I was fortunate in finding a man to chair my dissertation committee who was quite wonderful. I had an option of doing my dissertation on research for someone else who had a lot of money on epidemiology and I chose instead to do my own thing and to study women. The germ of the idea was one day Michael said, “Mordecai Kaplan invented the bat mitzvah because he had four daughters.” The conceptualization of the dissertation was the relationship between female achievement and coming from all female sibling families. It had nothing to do with the Jews. It was just the idea that if there was a conflict between traditional gender role definitions. It wasn’t called that then-and the American dream for upward mobility for your children, if you had a daughter-only family, you’d be much more likely to allow, encourage or push one of the daughters-this was the theory-to “achieve in a masculine way”. Achievement was defined as a masculine characteristic at that time, and therefore, if I did a survey of achieving women, however we define that, a disproportionate number of them should come from all-female sibling families. That was the theory. My professors thought I was crazy. Nobody there was studying women. I had to do it under the rubric of the family. I went back to New York for some reason, maybe to visit my parents. I took my questionnaire into the Bureau of Applied Social Research to show it to them, to ask them what they thought of it. Everybody was doing women! There was a lag in Florida, a cultural lag. I was convinced that it would work. Well, when I sent out the survey in 1971, and I sent it to 800 women, hand-addressed the envelopes, did the stamps and return stamps—pretty commemoratives—everything to up the response rate. The professor said nobody would send it back and I’d better build in a conventional birth order study so that would work if the other didn’t. So I did that too. And I got something like a 60% response rate and women wrote reams and sent articles, and it was incredible because nobody had ever asked them before. It was the very beginning of feminism and women’s studies. I didn’t know I was a pioneer but I tapped into something, and I had to find a population that I had access to and that wouldn’t cost me too much money. I spent hundreds of dollars on the dissertation, which at that time was a big deal, and basically what I did was I took women in...originally it was supposed to be physics, chemistry, sociology and psychology, 200 each, who had Ph.D.’s in their field and were teaching with at least the rank of assistant professor. That was my definition of achiever. I discovered that there weren’t 200 women physicists with Ph.D.’s in the whole United States, so I
gave up on physicists and I did chemistry and biology. I used the directories to sample from, and then I discovered that the sample was getting screwed up by the nuns. There were 90 nuns. I had to get rid of the nuns because I figured that the dynamic was different there. So what I did was I added a criterion which was that where they were teaching they had to have a graduate department in their field, so it knocked out all the small Catholic colleges and most of the nuns. In any case, it turned out to work. If I had known then what I know now, if I had believed in myself more, if I had the support system, if I wasn’t in Florida, I would have written Hennig and Jardim’s book “The Managerial Women,” which had as its main finding my dissertation theory.

INT: Are you quoted in there or they didn’t even know it was you?

RELA: We were doing it at the same time. I ended up writing one journal article from it and then leaving it. The other thing that happened that was interesting was that it turned out that many of the women in psychology and sociology were Jewish, so I ended up writing a chapter on the Jews in the dissertation. About a month before I was to defend, a woman in Israel wrote a piece in which she claimed the opposite from what I found on Israeli women, and I quickly had to come up with an explanation why it worked in American and not in Israel, and I said it was a majority-minority phenomenon, that the pressure was much greater in America to produce an achieving child, so that in Israel if your child is a truck driver or...a bus driver or whatever, the important thing was being in the Jewish state and the nobility of work and there wasn’t this same push that you had to be a doctor, a lawyer or an Indian chief as there was in America, and therefore the whole achievement thing was different. Later on I met the woman who had done it. I think her name was Dalia and she was killed in an automobile accident about ten years ago. I think she was at Ben Gurion University, and she told me that I shouldn’t have worried at all, that she had a terrible sample. And she took away all my fears.

So when we came to Philadelphia—at that point, Michael got the job as director of Hillel at Penn and I was pregnant with Ami, and there was a lot of pressure on me to finish. We moved back to Philadelphia. I had finished all of the work for the dissertation but the writing. We moved in August, it was the hayfever season. I was pregnant. Uri was three. I got a job at Penn with Sam Klausner, a professor in the sociology department, who I didn’t even realize at the time was studying the Jews. He had a research institute called The Center for Research on the Acts of Man. It was three full days a week and I was writing a chapter a week on the dissertation. I would send it by express mail or whatever passed for that to my chairman in Gainesville. He would send another chapter back to me red-penciled. Because of this quarter system I had to be done by December. I had to defend in November.

Well, suffice it to say that I got it done. Ami was due in February, and we actually all went down to Gainesville. Sam Klausner was wonderful. He let me work on it on work time. He wanted me to finish too. I flew down to defend and then in December, Michael and I flew down to Gainesville for the mid-year graduation, which was on Shabbat, and actually Michael gave a prayer at it because he had been like the university chaplain. So for me, it was almost like a Seminary graduation because when I graduated from the Seminary, my grandfather gave the benediction. When
Michael got his Masters my father did. I was used to having members of my family at my graduation. It was very personalized. And here we were at the University of Florida and it was the mid-year but there were still thousands of people, and Michael gave the invocation or benediction, which was very nice. My parents flew down too and we stayed with friends and we walked over for the graduation. In February, Ami was born and I was also thirty in February, so I managed somehow to do all the preparing for life as I had planned to do.

So Sam Klausner was very instrumental then in what happened in my career because he became, at that point, a full professor in the sociology department at Penn. He helped me get a course at Penn, the freshman seminar that I taught, and I enjoyed that very much. But there just weren’t many academic jobs open in Philadelphia. At the time that I went to Sam’s center, I had an offer, or at least a teaser, at I think it was LaSalle, one of the Catholic schools. I didn’t even consider it. If I had done that, it would have turned out very well probably, but it didn’t occur to me at that time that that was appropriate for me.

And then, the next big change in my career, was that partially from working with Sam, I realized that you could be a sociologist and study the Jews. Maybe it had been “cooking” for a while. It sounds crazy that somebody intelligent wouldn’t figure this out before, that I could be a sociologist of the Jews and stop compartmentalizing my head. But there wasn’t really a field before. There was Marshall Sklare. There were no full-time positions. Sam was somebody who had his full-time position at Penn based on other things. When I arrived at his center, he was completing a study of the Jews in Wynnewfield, and whether Har Zion should move or not, which caused a tremendous controversy in the community but it also enabled me to see that there was such a thing as studying the Jews and doing viable projects on it. Of course, I knew about Sklare’s Lakeville studies, but there just wasn’t that much in the study of conservative Judaism. Around that time, Sklare came out with his first reader in the sociology of the Jews. There were no texts. There was the work on discrimination-the Jews had disproportionately participated in sponsoring it, the ADL, the AJC, the American Jewish Congress had all sponsored a great deal of research into assimilation, into discrimination, into prejudice. Those were not the things that I was particularly interested in. I was interested in religion, education, family.

Then in 1975, the president of Gratz, whose name was Danny Isaacman, invited me to teach a one-semester course in Sociology of the American Jewish Community, and I had to prepare that course. I worked for Sam Klausner for three years and then the project I was working on came to an end and his center kind of went into hiatus, and I was between for a year. I had five part-time jobs. One of them was teaching this course at Gratz. It took me a long time to put together that first course, and I loved doing it. And Danny Isaacman took a shine to me and he decided he was going to create a full time job for me at Gratz. So by 1976, the principals had been people such as Elsie Chomsky and then Daniel Isaacman, who was then the president, and Howard Bogot, who was the assistant to the president and then Sholom Handelman, who was the registrar, and then me. I was the last principal. It was called SOOP-School of Observation and Practice. I also taught in the high school and in the college. I was called “instructor,” not “assistant professor,” even though I had a doctorate. That was the first gender roles redress I had to do. All the men who had doctorates were immediately
called "assistant professor" and the women were called "instructor." So I became the first women assistant, associate and full professor at Gratz, first woman dean. And then I proceeded, as I was doing all of this, to fight to get the other women's titles correct, like Nora Levin and Diane King. They were all instructor. Elsie Chomsky had been an instructor.

INT: The school is essentially named for a woman.

RELA: No. It was named for her brother. That's a mistake. Hyman Gratz. So it was a battle there, and it was a battle with the faculty. After all, sociology was sociology. Since when is that Jewish studies? I was just beginning to think of it as Jewish studies myself. There was a lot of resistance, but Daniel Isaacman really wanted me to make this and he was wonderful. He was very supportive. So I taught at Gratz, ran SOOP, and that's also when Rabbi David Mogilner, who had gone on aliyah, came back to Philadelphia to save Ramah in the Poconos. He called up one day and said, "I want you and Michael to come to my camp this summer. I'm assembling this top management team and I want you to be Rosh Chinuch, educational director," and I said, "I don't know how to be an educational director," and he said, "I'll help you." And that's how I became the educational director of Ramah in the Poconos. That was my summer job. Michael was a supervisor in the mador, which was the counselor training program, and we were able to take the children in the summer and we had a summer home, because we didn't have much money. And he was the Hillel director at Penn so he had the summers off. That's what we did for five summers in a row.

RELA: In 1976-78, I began to teach more and more college courses. Danny Isaacman was a very smart man and he said to me, "You have a strong background in rabbinics." He said, "You can't really have enough courses in sociology, why don't you start to teach the calendar and the life cycle. Take over those two classes," which was sort of basic Judaism. They were development of Halacha courses. Well, that was perfect for me and it turned out to mesh beautifully with the sociology, because the life cycle and the family go together so well. So all these things were coming together. Again, I continued to work with Dan Elazar, which started with the synagogue study and over a period of six or seven years we produced three major articles that were published, one on the role of women in the synagogue, one on the changing role of the rabbi in the American Jewish community and one on the Chavurah.

INT: Was he in Philly or is he in Israel?

RELA: He lives in Israel but he travels back and forth a great deal. He became an ongoing factor in my life and in my professional development, and it worked out very well because these articles-one of them was in Midstream, one was in Modern Judaism, which is Steve Katz's journal, which had just started at that time, and one was in the Jewish Journal of Sociology which comes out of Britain. And so these were very good publications for me.

I was at Gratz, and Gratz was not the greatest place to be academically. I didn't have chevrah. I didn't have anybody else in my field. Even in terms of the burgeoning of Jewish studies, the Hebrew colleges became declassé. It was very difficult. So I kind of decided that I had to make Gratz
a better place, that this is where I was based and I just did my thing. Eventually, to make a long story short—and I think one of the proudest things in my life—was that the Association for Jewish Studies, which by then had grown to over 1000 members...well, one day I got a call from Ruth Weiss, who was president. She was the outgoing president so she was chairing the nominating committee, and I had been on the board of that association quite early on because of all the social scientists, many of the people who were active felt comfortable with me because they knew that I was really a Jewish studies person too. This hybrid thing that had been such a problem, you see, turned out to be an advantage. And she said, “How do you feel about working on the program?” I had been on the program committee. She said, “Bob Seltzer really doesn’t want to do it anymore so for a year would you like to do it with him.” Bob Seltzer last year was president of the association along with David Berger.

INT: David Berger from YU? He’s a great teacher.

RELA: Yes. So is Bob Seltzer. He’s a great Jewish historian. So she said to me, “Would you work on the program?” And I was greatly honored and I said, “Yes.” And then two weeks later she called back and she said, “You know, he really doesn’t want to do it at all. How do you feel about being vice-president?” Well, I have to tell you that I was triply marginalized. I was a woman, I was a social scientist and I was at a Hebrew college, and that was an extraordinary thing. And I did it for three years. That was a tremendous experience for me and it helped me a great deal. I met people from all over the country, from all different fields. It was an enormous job. And Gratz was supportive to me. I was the academic dean by then. They let me use the secretary for some of her time, but basically it was to their advantage that the AJS annual meetings were running out of Gratz because Gratz was on the return address for all kinds of things. It put them on the map in a way that was very useful. And I did do it, as I say, for three years. And then I was the membership vice president for two years after that.

Meanwhile, I was also active in the women’s caucus of the AJS and I’m still on the steering committee and I’m on the editorial board of Lilith magazine and of Shema and the Jewish Political Studies Review. I was also active in the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry. And as time went on I was the secretary-treasurer when Egon Mayer was the president, then I was vice-president and then eventually I became president. Now I am editing the ASSJ Journal, Contemporary Jewry. (end of tape)

The other major thing that happened to me sometime around 1980 was that David Blumenthal, who had been a rabbinical student when I was an undergraduate at the Seminary, and who had been a friend of mine, was the program chair of the Association for Jewish Studies. which was then very small, a nascent organization. There were no Jewish studies professors trained in America and in ’48, Louis Finkelstein looked around and said, “We got to start training American-born professors of Jewish studies.” So this organization was quite small still at that time, in the late 1960’s and the ’70’s. Even in the end of the ’70’s. And one day he called me up and he said, “I’m the program chair and I want you to come and give a paper at our conference in Boston in December.” So I went to Boston to the Association for Jewish Studies. And he said, “You can write
about anything you want." And I said, "But I won't know anybody there" and this and that and he said, "You come." And as they say again, the rest is history. I went to the AJS. I walked in the first day and I felt like I had come home. I always went to big sociology conventions. I was very lost in them. Although I do want to tell you about-I think it was 1976-that I did a paper in front of Marshall Sklare for the first time and that changed me too. So I did a paper on this new study that I was working on which the American Jewish Committee, Yehuda Rosenman, had commissioned me to do, called Jewish Campus Life. It was a cooperative study between Hillel and the AJC and to this day is the only national study of Jewish college students. It came out in the early 1980's.

The vast majority of the members of the AJS had gone to the Seminary and I was at the Seminary for a period of nine years. And I knew the people who had been there when I came and who had just come when I left, and that's who the Ph.D.'s were. That was the path then because there was no Jewish studies on the college campus. And then they would go into a Ph.D. someplace else. And the Talmud background stood me in good stead, and then I spoke Hebrew fluently. I was a social scientist whom they knew and respected, and they felt that I was grounded in Jewish studies. And it was just at that point that a whole group came together, of social scientists who were actually grounded in Jewish studies. It was a new generation who were very different from that previous group who were assimilationists, who were Yiddishists, who were secularists and who had sort of paid off their Jewish thing once a year by doing a study. And so these were people like Chaim Waxman, Egon Mayer, Mervin Verbit, Sam Heilman came along just about that time. He did his doctorate at Penn on Young Israel of Wynnewfield. Sam Klausner was one of the leaders of the group. He's older. He's now in his seventies. He came more and more to identify with that part of the work that he was doing, even though he was still studying energy and environment and religion generally and all kinds of other things. At the same time as I discovered the AJS, I discovered that there was an association of social scientists who studied the Jews called the Association for the Sociological Study of Jewry which has since changed its name to the Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry. When Sam Klausner was the president of it, they started a journal called Contemporary Jewry.

So I started going to the Association for Jewish Studies regularly, even though there were very few women and very few social scientists. I felt so comfortable there that I decided I was going to try to make social science more acceptable there, and get the social scientists to come. Meanwhile, I became active in the ASSJ. The first time I ever gave a paper for them, they were piggybacked on a meeting of the Eastern Sociological Society in Philadelphia. And I gave a paper called—it was a play on "The Reluctant Debutante"—"The Case of the Reluctant Exogamists: Jewish Women and Intermarriage." In the course of researching the lectures for the first time I taught sociology of the American Jewish Community. I got angrier and angrier as I read the intermarriage literature, which was just beginning then, because it was all about men and the rates of male exogamy were much higher than female. But they never praised women for not marrying out and they blamed women for Jewish men marrying out. If they mentioned women at all, it was to say, "Well, the men are marrying out because they hate their mothers" or something like that, or, "They feel like it's incest. They love their mothers." And I got angrier and angrier and I said, "No, there are structural reasons why this is going on," and I wrote this think piece called "The Case of the Reluctant Exogamist", which Susan
Weidman Schneider, years later in her book *Jewish and Female*, published in its entirety. When I got there I suddenly realized that Sklare was sitting in the audience, and I had just met him and I was scared to death. And I gave this paper and I waited to see what he would say because after all, it was a think piece. And he came up to me afterwards and he said that was a very good paper and he really was very supportive, and he was supportive to me after that and really had a very big influence on me. I’m now very close to his widow Rose. We’re good friends and we speak very regularly. She lives in Boston, of course, and he was in Brandeis at that time. He had been at the American Jewish Committee, at YU, and then he went to Brandeis. He was really the grand-daddy of the field.

So now, what was coming together was studying the Jewish family, studying gender roles in the Jewish family, seeing myself as a sociologist of religion again, but in the meanwhile I was always doing education things too. First of all, a professor is an educator. Second of all, I was doing this Ramah stuff on the side and things went so well at the Poconos that they asked me to coordinate education for all the Ramah camps. I tried to work out a curriculum for all the camps and have the curriculum written during the winter and have standards for the teachers. So that was a fun thing I was doing on the side. And I was trying to publish and of course I had two young children. Michael was at Hillel so I didn’t have rebbetzin type responsibilities very much or at all really.

I always studied myself in one way or another. I come from an all-female sibling family. I was in a prototype of a dual career family and we lived in Center City so we could walk to Hillel on Shabbat, and started this Chavurah minyan in Center City, Philadelphia, and it was filled with dual career families and I got very interested in the dynamics of dual-career and two-job families. And so the next thing I studied after Jewish campus life—obviously I was interested in college students—the next thing that I studied was Jewish career women, single and married. Again, it was a study for the American Jewish Committee but for a different department. This was for Irving Levine and the study is called “Jewish Women on the Way Up.” It was the study of 1,000 Jewish career women, and it was done with the cooperation of Lilith, who put the survey into their magazine in addition to handing it out to achieving working women. That turned out to be a very interesting study as well. All of this began to launch me on the lecture circuit.

**INT:** What year was this?

**RELA:** Sometime in the late Seventies I began doing lectures for $35, $50, $100 and I like to travel very much and my husband didn’t, and he basically said, “I don’t mind if you travel but we really don’t have much money for this,” so I figured out that if I could give lectures I would get to travel to where the lectures were. He helped me do a mailing for some synagogues and I began to do scholar-in-residence weekends at synagogues. And the Conservative rabbis trusted me. They knew me. Many of them had gone to school with me and my topics suddenly became hot. The family, the future of the family. People were interested in the Jewish birth rate, fertility, women’s stuff. The changing role of Jewish women. That’s another thing that happened at that time.

In the Seventies, Ezrat Nashim was founded, the first Jewish feminist consciousness-raising group in New York. There was a national conference of Jewish women, a network conference, which
I didn’t go to. I know exactly when it was because Ami was due that month. It was in February of ‘73. They came back to Philadelphia, the women who had been to it, and had a meeting at the Y, and out of that came three groups in Philadelphia, one of which I was a part of and which persisted for four or five years, and we named it N’shei Chavil, a play on a Women of Valor, militant women. That group was very important to me and to my life and developing as a Jewish feminist and beginning to write about the Jewish feminist movement. Again, the spark for what I was interested in researching and writing about came from things that I was living through and that I saw around me, and then I used sociology as a way to look at them in a neutral fashion. Everything came together. That survey research training at the Bureau that I had early on was very helpful. The work in the family, the political science that I had taken because of urban studies in my work with Dan, the education...education was sort of latent for a while, although the fact that I had degrees in education was what enabled me to be principal of SOOP and the Education Director at Ramah.


RELA: I was saying that I moved to Philadelphia in 1972, and in the time in Gainesville, Florida between ’69 and ’72. So when we got to Gainesville, Florida in 1969 and my former husband was the Hillel director there, I was different from everybody else who was there. I was somebody pursuing a career and an advanced degree, with a young child and so forth. By the time we left in 1972, I was a role model who all the other students wanted to find out how I was doing it, so some time in there there was a shift in the role of women in American society in general, between ’69 and ’72.

INT: Is that specifically Jewish women?

RELA: Well, Jewish women began a little bit later than that. That is, I would say, that’s not the first round of changes of roles of Jewish women, but this particular cycle of change was obviously given impetus by the general feminist movement, and there were women who were Jewish and who were very strong feminists and active in the feminist movement, like Betty Freidan, Gloria Steinem and Shulamith Firestone and all these types of people, but they detached themselves from their Judaism pretty much. And then there were the people who were very, very caring about their Judaism, and it was core to their being, but they weren’t so interested in feminism. So what happened somewhere in the mid 1970’s was the development of a group of women who cared about both, that is they were very connected to their Jewish core and they were very learned, knowledgeable and active, particularly in the conservative movement, and they cared a lot about being feminists too. And they were not of a compartmentalizing mode. They were those who wanted to integrate their personalities. Let me put it that way. And so the first signs of this that we saw were around 1975, when two things happened.

There was a Jewish feminist consciousness-raising group started in New York-I may be off a year on the date. It was a group of ten women who started studying together. They were around the Seminary-Columbia nexus, and they took the name Ezrat Nashim, which is a play on words. It means “the help of women” and also the women’s section in the synagogue, in the traditional synagogue.
They were a very small group, but they were spectacular women. So they started studying and after a year of studying...and what they studied was Talmudic portions that have to do with women. By the end of the year they were radicalized, and the second year they became a consciousness-raising group, as we used to call it then. And by the third year they had become an activist group, actively lobbying, especially within the Conservative movement, for change with regard to the status of women and they actually published a manifesto, which reads something like a communist manifesto in its ringing tones. You know, “For two thousand years, one-half the Jewish people have been disenfranchised”...that kind of thing. And they called for ten different things, and the shocking thing is that I think eight of them have happened. Understanding Jewish law the way they did, the fundamental thing that they called for was for women and men to be equally obligated to the positive time-bound commandments, which is the beginning of everything else being equal in Judaism. They went on to be extraordinarily...almost echad-echad, one-by-one. But at that time, they were part of helping to organize the first Jewish women’s national conference, which was organized by a network that was a student organization. It was in New York. I missed it.

**INT:** That was ’73? It was the twenty-fifth anniversary this year.

**RELA:** That’s right. I went to it. So I have the years off. The conference was first. Then they must have started around ’74, ’73 or ’74. I’m off two years.

**INT:** I know Arlene Agus.

**RELA:** Right. Arlene is one of the ten women. But I didn’t go to that conference because I was in my seventh month of pregnancy with my son, with Ami. He was born in February of 1973, so that’s exactly right. That’s when it was. I date the conference from then. The women who went to that conference. It was across the movements and there were quite a few women who went from Philadelphia and South Jersey, and when they came back...I want to bring it to the Philadelphia dimension now—they organized a meeting at what’s now called the Gershman Y, at Broad and Pine, and they reported out and something like 200 women turned out to hear them. They never expected it. And at the end they had a sign-up list to start groups in Philadelphia that would be like Ezrat Nashim. So Ezrat Nashim had started a year before the conference, so Ezrat Nashim must have started in ’72, and the conference was in ’73, and then in the spring of ’73 they organized—it was three or four groups in Philadelphia. And one of them, that I was a part of, actually persisted for five years, or maybe even a little longer. It also had a very interesting group of women in it who had an impact on Philadelphia Jewry and we did exactly what Ezrat Nashim did. The first year we studied. The second year we did consciousness-raising. And then we became an action-oriented group. Actually, we started doing action-oriented things a little before that, because right around that time, because of the work of Ezrat Nashim and all the other forces on the Conservative movement, there was a great debate going on over counting women in the minyan. Aliyot for women had been approved through a responsum in 1956, when Rabbi Aaron Blumenthal was chair of the law committee, but it had not been mainstreamed. In fact, I did a study in the early Seventies for the Women’s League Outlook, checking how many congregations actually had aliyot for women, and it was fewer than 10% of conservative synagogues, and many of them were with conditions like only
if they’re bat mitzvah. It was very special occasions. Or do women count in a minyan? Yes, when there are ten men too. It was very equivocal. So I think it was in ’75 that the law committee was considering the issue of counting women in the minyan.

INT: Were they also talking about ordination then, or that came later?

RELA: No. That was ten years later. They had meetings of the law committee at the Seminary, and before those meetings of the law committee, there was a rabbinical assembly convention at the Concord. Ezrat Nashim went to the Concord and picketed. They had been trained with the civil rights movements. They did a classic civil rights action. They went to the Concord, the picketed the rabbis, asked to be heard the way the young leadership had at the CJF, when they went to Boston, in ’68 or ’69. But the smart thing they did there, with Steve Cohen and Jim Sleeper and all those people, was they invited them in. Here they didn’t. They refused to let them speak. So they called a meeting of all the rebbetzins. There was this huge ornate lobby of the Concord, a grand lobby. And they called a meeting of the rabbis’ wives, and they all came. Of course, they had called the press and they read out the manifesto. I still have the article from the New York Post that says: Ten Religious Feminists Confront the Rabbis. They asked Paula Hyman, who was one of the women, who later became the first woman dean of the Seminary-College and later a chaired professor at Yale-they asked her why she did it, what was her impetus, and she said, “Well, my professors at Columbia keep asking me why I turn into a different person on Friday night.” She couldn’t compartmentalize. She didn’t want to. Another member of the group was Judy Hauptman. She came in in the second year. She helped teach Talmud to the group. She became the first woman Ph.D. in Talmud. Another one was Ann Lerner, who became Vice Chancellor of the Seminary. These women just...they did beautifully.

In Philadelphia we took the name N’shei Chavil, again, a play on words of a Women of Valor, but it also means women of strength, might. It’s a militant metaphor, literally. And this group persisted, and we met every week for years. We alternated living rooms of people. We did many, many different things in Philadelphia. We went around to different synagogues-wherever rabbis and congregations were debating the status of women. If they needed someone to debate, we would go. So we did a lot of public speaking. Then Susie Segel Wall, who’s now married to Steve Cohen-she’s part of the same family as Benjie Siegel, who’s the head of the conservative Bet Medrash in Jerusalem. Her brother David is a professor at Ben Gurion. Anyway, Susie was then a librarian. Now she’s a Jewish educator with a doctorate. She worked on children’s books and stories, like Ms. magazine have these non-sexist children’s stories. So we worked on the books and getting stuff done for the schools. For instance, I noticed I used to read United Synagogue books about the holidays to my children. So the mother and the grandmother and the little girl were always carrying platters from the kitchen in the pictures, and the boys and the uncles and the grandfathers were always sitting at the table davening. She worked on that area. Barbara Lissy—that’s a Philadelphia name and Philadelphia family-she was working at Federation at that time. She came to one of our meetings one night. She said, “The Young Men’s Service Committee,” which was the top leadership group in Federation,” is ready to have four women come into the group and go through the training and be placed as observers on Federation boards, but they can’t be called members. Can we have some people to do it?” Barbara was one of the ones who did it. I did it and there were two other women.
We went through the course. They kept wanting to put our pictures in the *Exponent* to show that it was a “with-it,” integrated group. Alan Molod was the president at the time. But the name was Young Men’s Service Committee. I refused. I said, “Will you say I’m a member?” And they said, “No, we’ll call you an active participant.” I said, “No.” So we had this ongoing thing. A year later a new president came in named Jim Rosenstein, who’s now an officer at the Federation, and he changed the name to the Leadership Development Committee. Within five years, Barbara Lissy was the first woman chair of it. So once things changed, you see they began to change very quickly. But this was an example of where the four of us went, we sat through the training, we were all placed on Federation boards and it was a breakthrough in the Philadelphia Federation.

**INT:** Is Federation more conservative than in New York?

**RELA:** Conservative with a small “c?”

**INT:** Yes.

**RELA:** I don’t know, but they were very concerned about anything that would affect fundraising. The fundraising wisdom was that women keep their husbands from giving, that women are selfish, that women don’t give. They would call and ask for the husband and if he wasn’t home they wouldn’t say why they were calling. They would say, “We’ll call back.” Getting Beth Zion, our local conservative synagogue on 18th and Spruce, to go egalitarian was a big fight. I was the Friday night speaker at the Oneg Shabbat, and they called up on Friday and they said, “We’d like your husband to sit on the bimah,” and I said, “Why?” And they said, “Because you’re speaking. Do you want to be one of the hostesses?” I said, “What?” I said, “I’m speaking so he should sit on the bimah?” This was an example. This was in a conservative synagogue where I felt very comfortable. I knew the turf. I felt I could...I would never go into an orthodox synagogue and try to change something. I wouldn’t go into a strange reform congregation and say why am I not doing this or that, but I felt this was my “home turf.” I went on Succot with my son Uri, who’s now thirty. He was then three years old. They stood up to have the lulav procession. When I was little I had always walked with my father in the lulav procession. My former husband was the rabbi at Penn Hillel—he wasn’t there, so I was alone with this three-and-a-half year old. I was pregnant with Ami. So I handed Uri this big lulav and ethrog to walk around the procession, and I then said, “This is ridiculous, I’m going to walk with him.” There were no women walking in the lulav procession. There was no reason why women shouldn’t walk in the lulav procession. So I got up, I had my lulav and I walked with Uri. I held the lulav and he held the etrog box, and by the end of the procession, the second or third time around, another woman had joined us. At the end of the procession that morning, Rabbi Reuben Magil, who was the rabbi then, said, “I would like to say that this is the nicest lulav procession we’ve ever had.” It was a very affirming statement for him to make.

On the other hand, the week after the congregation of the board of Beth Zion voted to give aliypot to women on request—this was after many debates and votes sometime in the mid-to-late Seventies. I went to shul and I was so excited that they had passed it, so I walked up to the gabbai and I said, “May I please have an aliyah,” because it wasn’t going to be automatic. You had to
request it. And he said, "No." I went back to my seat and I started crying, which I never did about things like that. I was tough by then. But it was like that we fought for years and we got it, and this guy just said no. And what I realized afterwards, looking at it in my sociological way, is that if you change a rule but you don’t change the people who are enforcing the structure—if you don’t change the structure then nothing changes. It’s not enough to officially change the rule. You have to change the informal system. In this case, the longtime gabbai rishon, the head gabbai who gave out the honors, had voted against it. And he carried the little cards to give out for aliyyot. Well, there was a wonderful man named Leo Corona, who has since died, who was the president of the synagogue. He saw what happened. From that Shabbat on, for the next three or four years that he was president, until that gabbai somehow left. He kept back three of the aliyah cards, and he made sure that several women had aliyyot every week. The gabbai wouldn’t leave if a woman came up. He just wouldn’t give out any aliyyot to women. So sometimes it’s not quite as simple as just getting the rule changed.

INT: It’s a rule in a synagogue. Obviously, it’s not a total law in that sense.

RELA: But there’s a wonderful Jewish expression, a minhag brecht a din, which means a custom can be more powerful than a law. And the force of local custom is very powerful, and especially if it’s the same people. A woman named Annette Daum, who was one of the first women who was a president of a reform synagogue (She unfortunately died, I think of breast cancer, quite young.) told this great story. She went to the UAHC (Union of American Hebrew Congregations) biannual, and they have regalia lines. She was standing in the synagogue president line waiting and she finally got to the front of the line. The woman who was personing the line looked up and said, “Oh dear, you’re in the wrong line. The sisterhood presidents are over there.” Do you see? It’s the same kind of thing in a different way. People at all different levels are used to a certain structure. Here’s a story about something where the American Jewish Committee was very instrumental in changing something in Philadelphia. A fight went on throughout the Seventies about two things. One was the Locust Club and the other was the major gifts in the Federation. I’ll start with the Locust Club.

The Locust Club was founded by Jews when they were kicked out of the Union League. It’s a Jewish businessmen’s club. Sometime by the mid 1900’s, 1950’s or whatever, they started letting in non-Jewish men, but not Jewish women. So like the Racquet Club and the Union League and other places, and still, all the Jewish country clubs, as far as I know, women could not be members. So it was decided, both by the American Jewish Committee, which had a committee on the status of women, and by the JCRC, to which, at that point, I was a community delegate (I was a community delegate for six years, and it all happened during that time) Jim Rosenstein from the Young Men’s Service Committee, who had become president of the Leadership Development Committee, was also on the board, a community delegate to the JCRC at that time. We were put on the nominating committee, and we made deals to try to get more women nominated, and there were also issues we wanted raised. We traded off. We wanted younger people. We wanted women. We wanted singles. There were all kinds of things that we were trying to do, and to their credit, they put us on the nominating committee, which is one of those structural things that makes these things happen. Usually, we’d go to nominating committees and they’d say, “Oh, well we don’t know anybody like that.” That was another kind of thing that N’shei Chavil and Ezrat Nashim did. They created lists of
qualified women, and made people aware of them, so they couldn’t say, “Well, we didn’t know of any to interview.” We had an ongoing fight about the Locust Club and how it would be best to get them to change their rules to allow women to be members. There’s a whole network in there of people who are major givers to the Jewish community, who were very important to Federation, and they really didn’t want to cross them. I don’t want to say the names of the people. But to the JCRC’s credit and the American Jewish Committee, they persisted with it, so finally the JCRC actually passed a resolution, and normally, I know, resolutions are not a big deal. In this case, they were. There were three things. Number one, that the JCRC called on every Jewish institution in the community that held its board meetings at the Locust Club to pull them out. That was a very big deal, because lots of groups (I was on the JPS board at that time) and board meetings were all there. At that time, Muriel Berman was the chairman of the board. She pulled out the Board Meetings. And Norma Furst was on that board.

The second thing was that if any qualified woman was denied membership and fought, the JCRC would provide legal support, and that it would be publicized. The whole thing would be publicized. And they sent an article to the Jewish Exponent to publicize the decision. The article appeared with all the things in it on page 79 on an inside column, but they did publish it. There was so much flak about it that I understand that a very big giver, who shall remain nameless, went into the allocations hearings the next year (the JCRC is almost a wholly-owned subsidiary of Federation, and funded by them) and wanted to cut the allocation drastically because of this. It took a few more years, but the embarrassment got to be such...and also, there was a younger group coming up in the Locust Club, and they eventually voted to change. By the way, not only was it that women couldn’t be members, but they had two dining rooms. There was a downstairs dining room in the basement and if you came in at lunchtime with a woman in your group, you had to eat in that dining room. If the first woman president of the JCRC came in with a group, they all had to eat downstairs, because they said that women were doing shopping and they would interfere with business in the dining room. This is in the middle of the Seventies. This is not the Middle Ages. So by the end of the Seventies, the board of the Locust Club voted to change their policy. First they did away with the dining room rule and then they voted to admit women as members. That was a major achievement.

There was actually a third piece, which was that Murray Friedman commissioned me to do a study on the status of the Jewish women in Jewish organizational life in Philadelphia. It was part of the bicentennial. It came out in ’76 and we did it again in ’86. That was also very important because it got a lot of publicity and it showed that there weren’t women on Federation boards. We did boards. You couldn’t do the organizations themselves. We surveyed the regional boards of organizations and of Federation agency boards. These were consciousness-raising activities that let people recognize publicy matters that had been private before.

INT: Was there a big difference between ’76 and ’86?

RELA: In terms of officers of boards and members of boards, yes. In terms of executive directors, no. There are twenty-seven, I think, Federation agencies in Philadelphia. Until this year—either last year or this year—there was never more than one woman executive director. There’s really a glass
ceiling that’s very serious.

INT: Are there women at lower levels who might apply for those jobs and they’re just not getting it?

RELA: Yes. There are now women who are heads of JCCs but not the overall exec, although at the moment, there is an overall exec who’s a woman. There are women at the next level. Women head day care centers, like Paley day care center. But the head of Federation day care is a man. It’s that kind of thing. Yes, there’s been progress but much more progress in the volunteer sphere, partly because they rotate much more often. You get a good person in a professional position and they stay for twenty years. That’s a piece of it.

INT: I shouldn’t say this for the record, but probably more status often in being a Jewish volunteer than there is in being a Jewish professional.

RELA: What I’m saying is that rhetoric is important too. There was a point, for example, where there was a woman from N’shei Chavil named Phyllis Miller working for the Exponent and editing something called the Friday Forum. This is before Inside magazine. They let her take over an issue and we did a whole issue on women. When that kind of thing started to happen, that was part of changing the rhetoric in the community and the pictures that people looked at. For instance, it was a big thing getting them to change the way they labeled the pictures in the Exponent. You’d see a picture of twenty women and it was all mens’ names. Mrs. Joe Blow. And on the stationery. I had a big debate at one Hadassah board meeting here, of the chapter, about that. They insisted it had to be uniform. I said, “Let it each woman say how she wants it, so if she wants to be Mrs. Joe Blow, fine. If she doesn’t, fine.” “No, it has to be uniform.” That was the big thing. But then there was a breakthrough because the president of Federation had a wife who had a different name, and they started always putting their name, so then it became an “in” thing to do that. And then they said, “Well, so it doesn’t have to be uniform.” All of a sudden, things didn’t have to be uniform.

INT: The battle is still going on in Harrisburg, I can tell you that.

RELA: Right. So these things that sound very little and silly are really major. So then the other one that’s quite interesting is the question of the Major Gifts Dinner at Federation, which happened once a year. It came to be known at the Annenberg Dinner some years later than that. At that time, it was any man who gave $2000 for the year to Federation was invited to the Major Gifts Dinner-no women allowed. The only woman who had ever been invited by 1975 was Rosaline Feinstein, who had given a million dollars.

INT: She was really the center, right?

RELA: Right. So she had given a million dollars, she was invited to the dinner. Federation kept saying they were going to change it, that a woman who gave that amount of money-whether she gave it through the women’s division or not. but she gave it-would also be invited to the dinner. We’re
not talking about spouses now. We’re talking about women who gave in their own right. They claimed they had changed it. Susan Weinberg, who is now married to Paul Jaffe, who was a president of the American Jewish Committee chapter-she wasn’t yet president then—was a big giver, and we did a classic civil rights action, the way we had been trained. I sat on one end of the phone and listened while she made a phone call on the other extension, to Federation. She said she wanted to make a major gift and that she wanted to attend the Major Gifts Dinner, and they didn’t connect her to the Major Gifts department. They connected her to the women’s division. She said she wanted to make a gift, which she did, and they told her that she couldn’t go to the Major Gifts Dinner. (I was just reminding her of this. We were at the Shiva minyan for Nancy Ferst last week and we were talking about this. She had completely forgotten it. She called her husband over to hear the story because she said, “Look what I did in my youth—I was really a radical.”) So I overheard the whole conversation and what had happened, and afterwards—I don’t know if it was Murray Friedman who called up but somebody called, a Vice President of Federation, and said, “Listen, a very big donor just called and this is what she was told.” And then—we really had guts, I must say—this was this committee on the status of women—I think Emily Sunstein might have been in at the beginning of it too, but you’ve got to give Murray Friedman a lot of credit for doing this. We actually said to the Federation that if they didn’t change this policy, we were going to release a story to the press (like the Locust Club thing—they released it to the Inquirer too). I think Murray still has my copy of the last dinner menu and it says in big letters on the bottom “Only men may attend the Major Gifts Dinner.” Well, they said, “Okay, we’re going to change it.” And we still didn’t hear anything or see anything. So we said, “Well, we’re going to send this to the papers,” and they said, “Well, what do you want us to do? How can we prove to you that we’ve changed?” See, they hadn’t changed the structure. It was the same thing. At the top, they had given lip service to it, but they hadn’t told the line people that when the phone calls came in, they should say, “Yes, you’re eligible to go to the Major Gifts Dinner.” We said, “Well, we want a story on the front page of the Exponent with a headline that says Major Gifts Dinner Open to Men and Women”, and sure enough, they printed it the next week. (End of tape)

Oh, I know what we said we were going to do. The dinner speaker was Jacqueline Levine, the first woman president of the New York UJA. She was coming in to be the speaker, and we said we were going to call her up and tell her that if she was a giver she wouldn’t be allowed to go to the dinner, and we said, “She won’t come.”

INT: I don’t think it was true in New York. I’m pretty sure it wasn’t.

RELA: That’s right. But anyway, this is what happened. It was very slow and there were heartbreaking moments. Still, just as in New York, a fairly small group of women to begin with, but women who really cared and who were involved in Jewish education and in Federation—they weren’t people who were anti-establishment, not in the community. They came from within the community and were very responsible. As a matter of fact, I remember writing a letter to the editor at one point about the Major Gifts Dinner, to the Exponent, and saying that when we were in Gainesville, Florida, we pulled an annual UJA fundraiser from the Gainesville Country Club because they wouldn’t let in blacks. I said, “Can I do any less for myself?” And I heard later from somebody who was there-
when they got the letter at the *Exponent* and they said, “Well, should we print this?” And somebody said, “You have to print it—that’s not a from a kook. That’s from Rela Monson.” That was my name at the time. So it was that kind of thing. The women who were involved were solid citizens.

**INT:** I think that’s how most revolutions really are, in a sense.

**RELA:** It was really an evolution. We never felt like it was going fast enough. Here are some other kinds of things that we did. We’d help train all the *mohelim* in Philadelphia—at that time it was Rabbi Shoulson and the crew around him—that they should include mothers. Not only to have *simchat bat* be a big thing, but at the ceremonies for boys, that the mothers would be in the room, that the mothers’ names would be used along with the fathers’ names. This was all going on in the Seventies too. There was this impact on life cycle ritual. So it was not only getting women on the bimah (I have a wonderful little children’s book called *Ima on the Bimah*) but it was changing the religious school curricula, it was getting the synagogue bulletins and the newspapers to put women’s names in, it was getting women elected to positions, not just doing the work. Very often, the men would be chair of this or that. The wives would do all the work and the men would sit on the bimah—or whatever it would happen to be, or would get the plaque.

**INT:** We had a little incident that Mrs. Lankin and I discussed just this past week. There were twins born, a boy and a girl, and there was a *sholom zachor* and today is the *bris*, which I missed. So far, there’s nothing for the girl. I said to her, I’m not the great egalitarian, but it’s like the Middle Ages. It was crazy.

**RELA:** I can’t believe that that happened this year because...well, thirty years ago, (because one of these children is now a doctor in her own right) there were twins born in this community to an orthodox couple, and I remember somebody coming home from that bris saying to me, “You know, there was this whole *bris* for the little boy, and they just shut the little girl up in another room and closed the door.” Not that she knew—she grew up fine, but the point is that thought was shocking then, but now, when it’s normative in the orthodox community to have welcoming ceremonies for baby girls...

**INT:** He is a BT (*Ba’al Teshuvah*) and had become very fanatical in some ways. She’s more traditional, small “t,” I guess.

**RELA:** So you’d name her in the shul and you have kiddish in the synagogue in her honor.

**INT:** Well, the mother was very sick so maybe they will do a kiddish later on. She had toxemia. I’m wondering whether we should talk a little bit about how you perceive now, what battles do you think remain to be fought?

**RELA:** I’d also like to just do five minutes on Jewish women in Jewish Studies, in academe, because that was the other half of my life, in the professional sphere, and while I was fighting for all these family changes and synagogue changes, together with men, by the way. I always believed in
working with men and that that was the most effective way to fight. Within academe, within Jewish Studies, there were not very many women. Jewish Studies wasn’t so developed until after the Second World War, but the main path for Jewish studies, for getting Ph.D.s in Jewish Studies, was to go to rabbinical school to get the grounding in text, and then go and do a Ph.D. someplace. That was until the Seminary and YU started giving Ph.D.s, and then you could go straight through there, in their graduate schools, without going through rabbinical school, but that was a pretty late development. So there was Brandeis, there was Yale, there was Harvard, but women didn’t have the text grounding. Rochel Adler, who was important and still is an important Jewish feminist, at that time wrote this article called “The Jew Who Wasn’t There: Halacha and the Jewish Woman,” an article which made Moshe Meiselman, the nephew of Rabbi Solevechick, so angry that he wrote a whole book in response to a five-page article. She said she wanted to have a poster made—“I wanted to go to Yeshiva but I flunked the physical.”

So there was Brandeis, there was Yale, there was Harvard, but women didn’t have the text grounding. Rochel Adler, who was important and still is an important Jewish feminist, at that time wrote this article called “The Jew Who Wasn’t There: Halacha and the Jewish Woman,” an article which made Moshe Meiselman, the nephew of Rabbi Solevechick, so angry that he wrote a whole book in response to a five-page article. She said she wanted to have a poster made—“I wanted to go to Yeshiva but I flunked the physical.” One of the major changes, of course, in American and world Jewish life, is the high level of Jewish education of Jewish women. We almost take it for granted now, but that was not the case. It was very hard. Unless you went to Flatbush Yeshiva or Ramaz, there was really almost no place for women to study Talmud. I, myself, had the experience I told you about, at JTS, in the mid-Sixties, and Judy Hauptman, who was the first woman Ph.D. in Talmud finished at the Seminary in the late Seventies. It took her ten years to get from the Masters to the Doctorate. It could have even been as late as 1980.

INT: I think it was.

RELA: Although it was before women were ordained as Conservative rabbis, which is about twelve years ago. So I think it was the beginning of the Eighties. Now, as I said, we take it for granted. So women, if they went into being professors of Jewish Studies at all, were in literature or in history, because they could go to Columbia and study with people like Professor Baron in history, Gladys Rosen, is an example, and Naomi Cohen, who are American Jewish historians. They were able to do it. In literature, you could do it. The first woman Ph.D. in Talmud from the Hebrew University didn’t finish until the Nineties or the very late Eighties. So it was very hard to get the preparation and to get someone who would teach you, to go beyond that, to do the advanced work. And the general universities didn’t do Ph.D.s in Talmud or midrash. Judah Goldin was at Yale, but that’s one person, so it was very, very difficult. Tikvah Frymer-Kensky did the doctorate in Bible with J.J. Finkelstein at Yale. It was essentially Yale and Wolfson at Harvard and then Twersky came to Harvard but he didn’t have too many women students. So it was very difficult. I was, of course, in sociology, which was considered peripheral to Jewish Studies anyway.

The Association for Jewish Studies, which is the organization of all the Jewish professors in the United States and Canada, meets once a year in Boston. It’s not that old an organization. It just had its twenty-fifth anniversary, and there were very few women there in the beginning. They weren’t in the core power group, which was really an “old boys” network made up of the Seminary and Brandeis and Harvard graduates. And very often what would happen is a man would graduate from Seminary Rabbinical School and then he’d go do a Ph.D. at Brandeis, so it was an interlocking direct route. Sometime in the mid 1970’s, somebody invited me to come who was the program chairman of the AJS, and I discovered that I was very comfortable there.
INT: This, I think, we had actually talked about.

RELA: And by now, women still feel unequal in the AJS but it’s much, much improved. In Philadelphia, when I came to Gratz all the women were called instructors. I would say that the status of women in academia in general in the United States was problematic, but improved fairly quickly in the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties. In Jewish Studies it has taken longer, partially because the core fields of classics are among the hardest fields to break into, and because the yeshiva system for men is still so much more...in most yeshivos, women do not learn what men learn, and the grounding in text is not the same. You really do need that kind of grounding in text to do a lot of the core fields of Jewish Studies.

INT: You have now more adult Jewish education.

RELA: That’s right.

INT: So people catch up, I guess, but it’s-

RELA: It’s difficult.

INT: It’s hard. If you have it from childhood it’s a lot better.

RELA: So you asked me where do we go from here?

INT: What are some of the issues? I’m assuming that the N’shei Chavil is disbanded?

RELA: Yes. N’shei Chavil was disbanded by 1980. The women in it stayed friends and some moved away from Philadelphia. Phyllis Miller moved to Los Angeles, where she became part of an egalitarian minyan and became very active in producing things in Hollywood, particularly, most recently, promoting safe sex in the media and if you saw the film “Pretty Woman” she’s the one who got them to put in the scene where she used condoms. Anyway, her daughter was recently bat mitzvah. That was one of them. Susan Siegel Wall went on aliyah. She had a doctorate in education and I’m sure she’ll do major education things in Israel. She’s working for Ramah at the moment in Israel. Barbara Lissy became one of the first and still, one of the very few women heads of a major Jewish organization, which is Sports for Israel. She’s been doing that now for, I think, thirteen years, and she still lives in Philadelphia. She also did become president of Leadership Development Committee at Federation. That was before she became a professional, working for the Jewish community. Shoshana Silberman was in it for a while. She also got a doctorate in education and now works at the Auerbach CAJE, and has edited a Hagaddah that sold some incredible number, like 100,000 copies, and a siddur for the United Synagogue. It was a very interesting group, and many of the people went on to do interesting things. It did cross the movements. I can remember when one of the orthodox women in the group, who has since gone on to live in Israel, got very upset because she suddenly said, “You know, maybe I should be wearing tzitzit.” She started to take the positive time-bound commandments very seriously, and especially the personal ones that you can make a
decision to do or not to do, like wearing a tallit. Here we were worried about wearing a tallit and she was worrying about wearing tzitzit day to day. Her name is Lisa Gornish, and the Gornish family is an old Philadelphian orthodox family also. As I say, she went on aliya. So the group was a mix. It was certainly a wonderful experience for all of us.

The future. The cutting edge in terms of religion appears to be more theological and philosophical and has to do with conceptions of God and things like that, which have never particularly been my bailiwick, and they were the last things to be tackled, is what to do about the feminine aspects of God. That is a question that was raised in an important piece that was written by Cynthia Ozick in an issue of Lilith many years ago on “Is the right question theological,” and she essentially said, “No, the right question is sociological, not theological.” Suzannah Heschel said you’re wrong—the right question is theological. So there’s a debate and we see now in liturgy the fights in the siddurim. In the Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist movements, the congregation was “neutered” ten, fifteen, twenty years ago. In other words, human beings—we say God of our ancestors and we don’t say our fathers. The prayer for the congregation, which is one of the most sexist prayers in the siddur—“May the One Who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, bless the...” In fact, the English translation is worse than the Hebrew. The Silverman translation, the Conservative movement one, is “Bless the people of this congregation, them, their wives,” so the women aren’t even people, aside from the fact that the kahal, the unit, the congregational unit, does not include the women, and if you’re not a wife you’re not in there at all. If you’re not a wife or a daughter—if you’re an independent women—you’re not in there at all. So aside from putting in the matriarchs in Sim Sholom, the Conservative movement’s siddur says “May the One Who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, bless the people of this congregation, (or the members of this congregation,) them, their children, and all,” so the women are now in with the members. They’re part of the people. That prayer is kind of symbolic because it doesn’t have the name God in it, it’s not one that’s difficult to change. It’s the formula of “May the One Who blessed,” which along with “Our Father, who art in Heaven,” Avinu Shebashamavim, or Yehi Ratzon—there are certain formulas that are much easier to change than the beracha formula, which is much more difficult. So that was done a long time ago.

Now, what to do with God? This is a big issue. Everybody agrees that God isn’t male or female and that God has feminine-masculine aspects and that it’s all anthropomorphism to do this. Still, it’s very hard to change the conventions, and alternating male and female for God is very jarring because Judaism was so monotheistic and anti-goddesses that it just jars any traditional Jew to hear God be “she,” because it immediately brings goddesses to mind. So there’s a lot of effort that had been put into liturgy and finding an alternative set of words for God, just putting in God instead of He, or Sovereign instead of Lord, which is...you don’t want to say king and queen, right? But then you have liturgy where it’s really, really difficult. I know they’ve been struggling with the new version of Sim Sholom. What do you do with something like Avinu Malkeinu—Our Father, Our King? That section is a beloved part of the liturgy. You’re going to change it to Imanu, Malcatainu? It’s very difficult.

This is all connected to another piece, which has to do with the question of covenant and are
women part of the covenant. You read the Sinai story carefully and you see it says “Don’t go near a woman for three days,” so that means that all the items were addressed to men. Judith Plaskow wrote a whole book called Standing Again at Sinai. She’s a philosopher and she’s raising the question “Are women in the covenant or are they not?” I don’t happen to agree with her that they’re not. I think that women are in the covenant, but this kind of question about the fundamental personhood of women and the fundamental Jewishness of women—it’s harder to deal with than standing on the bimah. Of course, one of the questions that I get asked a lot and that I have thought about a lot is “why is it that it was so important to women to be on the bimah?” After all, there were many areas to fight in. Why was the synagogue fight so important to so many women who didn’t even necessarily go to synagogue that often? And my theory about that is that it has to do with this fundamental personhood citizenship matter, that if you’re a “real” citizen of the Jewish people, there are certain things that you can do. Since we know that any Jewish man over the age of thirteen, no matter what his mental capacity or personal characteristics, will, in most places in the world, if they need a tenth for a minyan, be dragged in off the street. (We know there are places where they’ll check if he observes commandments for honors. Not to count him in the minyan, though.) And you could have a woman who is the greatest scholar and it wouldn’t make any difference. It was this biological determinism that was...it’s seen as denying personhood which, especially in America, is very jarring. This issue of fundamental equality is coming out in many ways in the different movements. In other words, I’m saying this isn’t a finished process. Let’s take orthodoxy, for instance, the tremendous impact of the Jewish feminist movement on life cycle rituals. Most of my family is orthodox. None of my female first cousins had a bat mitzvah, except one who was ten years younger than me. All their daughters had big, fancy bat mitzvahs with beautiful invitations and rabbis paying honor to them and them giving divrei Torah. Whatever they did—they may not have done everything that the boys did—they were paid attention to for coming of age Jewishly. And certainly, they’re getting a much better Jewish education than their mothers and grandmothers did. I would say that in most areas, there’s tremendous impact. Study, life cycle rituals.

INT: Even on boards of synagogues, you’re seeing more women as presidents.

RELA: Absolutely. Let’s take the agunah issue, to give you a cutting edge issue. There are issues in Jewish law. There are women who maybe do or don’t think that a woman should sit on a court, a rabbinic court, but in fact, they realize that there is a fundamental inequality in Jewish law when it comes to divorce, and it affects many more women today because the divorce rate is higher. The rabbis have just sat on their hands. Now, we have a rabbi with stature and guts and he’s trying to do something about it and he’s being vilified by his colleagues. I just heard him in Israel. There was a day conference on agunah in Israel, and I was very impressed. Justice Elon spoke, and then Rabbi Rackman spoke.

INT: He’s an incredible man. He always has been.

RELA: But Justice Elon—there is no greater expert in mishpat ivri, in Jewish law—that is civil law. He said that this is evil. We can’t have it. So on the one hand in the orthodox community, all the way on the left you have Blu Greenberg saying “Where there’s a rabbinic will there’s a halachic way,”
and on the other end you have people saying “If a woman is asking this question, she’s not one of ours. We don’t have to satisfy her.” I even knew a male Hillel director, orthodox, who took Sabbatical and was going to Israel to study issues of women in Jewish law. Being on the campus he had been somewhat radicalized. The men at the yeshiva, the Roshei Yeshiva where he went to study said to him, “Why do you want to study that?” And there is this bifurcation in the Jewish world between what’s going on in Israel and what’s going on in the rest of the world. It’s very, very serious because the orthodox rabbis in Israel are the only orthodox rabbis in the world in super leadership positions who don’t get a general education. You can’t be the chief rabbi of England if you don’t have a doctorate, or of France. Israel is the only place where you don’t have to have any general higher education or exposure to the Western humanities in any way. This makes for a very different outlook. It’s part of the problem. So I think that all of this affects so-called women’s issues, (which I think are really human issues) and the status of Jewish women. It affects Jewish unity in many different ways, because Jewish law now affects Jews all over the world in a stronger way than it did fifty years ago. That radicalizes traditional women because it’s davka those women who care the most about the tradition who are the most hurt by the law.

INT: I know people who just didn’t get a “get.”

RELA: You don’t get a divorce or you leave the community or you get married by a different rabbi or whatever. It’s the women who are the most tied to Jewish law who are disenfranchised the most. And that is a terrible thing. Rabbi Rackman said, “It gives Torah a terrible reputation. It’s not a good way to get people involved in a voluntaristic society, to be Torah-true, if you want to call it that.” So on the one hand, there are these very practical issues still to be dealt with that affect the way people live their lives, and more and more Jews realize that even if they don’t believe in it, Jewish law can affect their lives. With communications and travel the way it is, you don’t know who your child is going to fall in love with, who they’re going to want to marry, where they’re going to live—anything. American Jews don’t realize it because we tend to be very parochial—this is something I learned from Dan Elazar, but a very large proportion of the Jews in the world are controlled in matters of family law by Orthodox chief rabbinites, in Britain, in France, in South Africa, in Israel. So when you had 5% of the Jews in the world in Israel—then Palestine—it didn’t make much difference, but when there are 40%...And then when you add in the European ones and the others, the effect of Jewish law is magnified. I really fault any rabbi who does not preach regularly on Jewish law and its meaning and its impact. I think that if Jews from all the movements realize how big an effect Jewish law could have on their lives, particularly women, they would be able to organize to put pressure on rabbis, and rabbis do respond to pressure. Right now, they’re only responding to pressure looking over their shoulders to their right, because the pressure isn’t coming from the left. Modern Orthodoxy was a “dinosaur,” and in the last two years we finally have begun to see a revolt, and the beginnings of the reformulation of modern Orthodoxy, and rulings related to women are the barometer. So all of a sudden, Avi Weiss in Riverdale and whoever the rabbi is in Lincoln Square now, have hired—

INT: Mintz. Adam Mintz.
REL: Adam Mintz. They have hired women to be, in effect, assistant rabbis, even though they're not called rabbi. And Rabbi Riskin in Israel has helped with training toanot, Orthodox women who are skilled in Jewish law and who are trained to go into court with women when they go to the religious courts. And all of a sudden, you see these things. There are two new organizations that were founded in the last few years by the people who got scared, because they felt the right wing was really taking over in a big way. Yeshiva University was under siege. Rabbi Lamm was under siege. There seems to be the beginning of fighting back on this, and many of the issues have to do with women. Can women sing in public? What can women wear? And I've noticed that my students, my younger women students and friends, and my children and so forth, they take for granted what we had to fight for, which is what happens. That's good. That means we were a success. I still cry at every simchat bat. But they assume many things, and then they discover that there are parts of the world that haven't changed that much. I think that we have to be ever-vigilant. There is also this business of women not doing well professionally in the Jewish community. The glass ceiling is very real. It's harder to crack. Once you admit a women to rabbinical school, she's a rabbi. Not everybody may accept her, but she'll function in the community. To be the head, to be the exec of a Federation in a major city- we haven't seen it. There's a woman in Connecticut, in Hartford or New Haven, Cindy Chazan (who has since gone to work for the Wexner Foundation). There's a woman in Las Vegas, Ronnie Levine. There are a couple of mid-size cities that now have women execs.

INT: There was in Allentown but she left.

REL: It's tough. So there are areas that need to be worked on that are very philosophical and theological and liturgical, and then there are arenas that are pragmatic in terms of every day Jewish law and the way they affect individuals and their family life, many of which have to do with women, and then there are the issues that are more similar to the general social action issues of the society, which have to do with getting ahead in the various professional and lay leadership roles in the community. (End of tape)