

INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN BASS LEVIN

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

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INT: Today is September 23, 1998. My name is Mina Gobler, and I'm interviewing the Honorable Susan Bass Levin, the mayor of Cherry Hill, New Jersey. The interview is being conducted in Cherry Hill's municipal services building. Have you agreed to this recording?

SUSAN: Yes.

INT: Let's start from the beginning. Can you tell me when and where you were born?

SUSAN: I was born July 18, 1952 in Wilmington, Delaware.

INT: How did you get to Wilmington?

SUSAN: My parents were born and raised in Brooklyn, children of immigrants. They both attended college. My Dad graduated from City College as a chemical engineer in 1949, in the middle of a recession. There weren't many jobs for engineers. The only job he could get was with a company in Delaware, so they left Brooklyn. It was very traumatic. They felt they were moving to the deep South. So that's how I got there. I was born a few years later, although I moved to New Jersey from Delaware when I was about three, so I have only the slightest recollections of life in Delaware. It's more from pictures and stories.

INT: And what are your parents' names?

SUSAN: My Dad is Max Bass and my mother is Harriet Rubin Bass.

INT: So step back a minute. Do you have memories of your Bass grandparents?

SUSAN: My Bass grandfather died when my Dad was ten or eleven, so I never knew him at all. But his mother, whose name was Anna, I did know. She died when I was about twenty-three or twenty-four, so I certainly knew her as my grandmother through my growing up years. She lived in Brooklyn.

INT: Were there any holiday observances that you connect with that grandmother in Brooklyn?

SUSAN: Well, my mother's parents lived right around the corner from my Dad's mother, so holidays were often spent at both of their homes, mainly though at my maternal grandparents' home, with all my cousins. But we would always walk to my other grandmother's house and make sure that we visited with her. So she was certainly a part of holidays. And when we had holidays at our house, at my parents' house, she was there.

INT: What about your other grandparents, the Rubins?

SUSAN: They were a major part of my life. My grandfather died in 1988. He was ninety years old. My grandmother died about two or three years ago. My children knew their great-grandparents. Holidays were a very special part of my life and also my kids'.

INT: What was your favorite holiday?

SUSAN: I don't know that I had a favorite. My grandparents, on my mother's side, had three children, and they all had kids. They all lived in the New York metropolitan area-nine grandchildren within a six year age range, so holidays for me always involved lots of children. I was right in the middle, a few older and a few younger, boys and girls. I could decide that day what age, group or sex I wanted to play with. Holidays were very much a family exuberant kind of experience. I have very vivid memories of holidays at aunts' and uncles' and grandparents' houses and our house. We seemed to rotate them.

INT: How would you describe your grandparents, either set, in terms of how observant they were? How would you describe them?

SUSAN: On my mother's side, I would describe them as very observant. They went to synagogue weekly. They kept kosher. They kept the holidays. And their synagogue was an orthodox synagogue, but more in the sense of the sort of classical orthodox that I knew growing up, not as rigid an orthodoxy as you see today. My grandmother on my father's side, while she was certainly Jewish and viewed herself as that, she didn't lead...she didn't have a structured Jewish life. She had a very small life. To this day, I'm sort of amazed. She came here alone when she was twelve years old, no family here at all, which is a remarkable thing. And then she lived here for probably seventy years, but she barely learned English, didn't go to school, worked to support herself, was not really involved in the community. It always seemed to me, even as a child, such a lonely, closed-in existence, and then I would remind myself that somehow she got herself on a boat and came from Poland when she was twelve years old. It was just so startling a contrast to me that I never really understood, and as an adult I wish that I had known her better, known what motivated her. She was very foreign to me. When we were with her, she would talk to my Dad in Yiddish.

INT: And yet your father went to college. Where did he get that ambition?

SUSAN: My father has two brothers and also a much older half-brother and half-sister, because his father had a wife in Russia and two children in Russia. He came here with his two children. His first wife died in Russia. He came here and he met and married my grandmother, and they had three children. His first child, my Aunt Sonya, is probably twenty years older, maybe more, than my father, and served as a second mother to my father. She has sons that are my Dad's age, so maybe she's twenty-five years older. None of my Dad's siblings went to college. One went into the Navy, one went to technical school, and my Dad went to technical school, Brooklyn Tech, in New York, which now is a college prep school but then was a technical high school. My Dad says that his older sister, my aunt, was the one who persuaded him, encouraged him, to go to

college, and he didn't even think about going to college until he was a senior in high school, so he didn't have many of the college prep courses. He didn't have a [foreign] language, for example. He took that at the last year and applied for and was accepted to Brooklyn College, which was a free college at the time. He never could have gone had it not been free college. Went to Brooklyn College for two years. That's where he met my mother in an English class. And then he transferred to City College, because he was an engineering major and City had engineering. So that was how. He would say it was his older sister who pushed him and encouraged him and otherwise he never would have even thought about it.

INT: How much of your Jewishness do you trace back to your grandparents?

SUSAN: A significant amount. They really did set a Jewish tone and a family commitment and a sense of being Jewish, that that was a part of who I was. That I just am Jewish.

INT: Is there any example of a situation that sticks out in your mind?

SUSAN: I grew up in Northern New Jersey, in a small town that was predominately not Jewish, as contrasted to my parents who grew up in Brooklyn, surrounded by...everybody they knew was Jewish. So growing up, I certainly saw a secular world. Most of my friends observed the Christian holidays. And yet, I can close my eyes and see my grandparents' street in Brooklyn. I can see the apartment they lived in. I can smell the smells of the bakery where I used to walk with my grandfather to get rye bread. I can hear the sounds of my family around a holiday dinner table, and certainly, I think holidays probably more than any other thing, helped define my Jewishness because obviously, they were so different from Christian holidays. As a child, they were unique to me. I looked forward to them. I knew when they were coming. And I saw my grandparents every weekend, so every Sunday or every Saturday we did a trip to Brooklyn. It wasn't as though I only saw them on holidays. But to this day, I can see my grandfather singing the blessings, or Passover Seder. My grandfather and my uncles and my father sort of racing through the Passover story. But it was, and still remains, very special for me. I know that when I was bat mitzvahed, how important that was to my grandparents. So although they came from a very traditional background where girls-they probably never had thought of girls being bat mitzvahed, it was a very significant thing for them.

INT: So they took pride in what you were doing in a Jewish way.

SUSAN: Absolutely. Very, very proud. I was very close to my maternal grandparents. Actually, to this day, as you can see, I sort of find it hard (voice choked up).

INT: (Pause) You told me about your Dad's education. What about your mother? What did she do?

SUSAN: My mother went to Brooklyn College and majored in biology, and realized midway through that she really didn't want to work in a lab. She wasn't going to go to medical school. So

as probably most women her age, she got her teaching certification and taught school for twenty-five years. She taught first for several years before I was born, and when I was born she stopped teaching until I was about ten years old. I had two brothers. When I was about ten or eleven she went back as a substitute teacher, and then she went back full time. She was initially certified to teach in junior high, junior high science, but when she went back after I was born she taught third and fourth grade and then became a learning disabilities consultant for the last several years that she taught. She had two older brothers. One, my Uncle Milt, served in the Army during World War II and when he came back...he had started college, I think, before he left and then he signed up, enlisted in the Army, much to my grandparents' fear. Came back and went back to school on the GI Bill and became a lawyer. My other uncle, Uncle Jerry, went to Cornell, to the veterinarian school, which was a state school. He became a veterinarian. According to family folklore he loved animals. He lived in the city so I never quite really understood this, but he's an animal cardiologist today. According to my Uncle Milt, my Uncle Jerry was at first rejected from Cornell, but that my older uncle, my Uncle Miltie, who's the lawyer, saw a sign that said they were looking for students so he showed this to my grandmother and my grandmother was very angry that he got rejected and so she got herself on a bus, went to Ithaca and started yelling at the dean as to why they didn't take my uncle in-was it because he was Jewish-and he got in. So you're never quite sure with these stories where the truth lies, but that's the story.

INT: It's wonderful family folklore.

SUSAN: I could see my grandmother doing it. I could definitely see her getting herself on a bus and telling the dean you better take her son. He was qualified.

INT: That's an interesting lesson for a woman, to see that kind of activism.

SUSAN: She was not educated. She didn't get past fourth or fifth grade. But education was very, very important to them. So my mother was the youngest of three. It was important to my grandparents that she go to college, so they clearly encouraged all three of their children.

INT: That was very forward thinking in those days.

SUSAN: Yes. New York is somewhat different because they had free college. It was free, so you didn't have that issue, but yes, it was forward thinking for a girl, to be sure.

INT: Have you felt some kind of strength through the line of women in your family?

SUSAN: Yes. My grandmother was very bright, although not educated. Very interested in current events. Always had an opinion on something. Very strong. Certainly from my grandmother to my mother to me, and I have two daughters, there is that kind of connection. My grandfather was the opposite, gentle, kind, warm, never a raised voice in all the time I ever knew him. Certainly proud and involved but we used to joke, he was the only mild-mannered person in our entire family.

INT: You told me that you have two younger brothers. What are their names and what's the difference in age between you?

SUSAN: Well, I'm forty-six. My brother Michael is forty-four. He's a dentist. He lives in Newtown, Connecticut. My brother Fred is forty-one. He's an attorney and lives in Manhattan.

INT: You alluded to the area in which you grew up. Where was that?

SUSAN: A town called Saddle Brook, which is in Bergen County, in the Northern part of New Jersey. It's about fifteen miles from the George Washington Bridge. When my parents moved to Delaware, they always knew they'd come back to the New York area and at some point my Dad got a job in New Jersey and we moved back. When my grandparents and relatives would come to visit when I was a kid, they would say they were going to the country. Saddle Brook was suburbia, quintessential suburbia, but to them it was the country. They probably still call it the country today.

INT: Did your family belong to a synagogue?

SUSAN: Yes. In fact, they and a group of their friends, about twenty-five families, started a synagogue. There were many towns around that had synagogues, but our particular town, which was a small town with only a handful of Jewish families, didn't have its own synagogue. So when I was just a kid, they started their own synagogue. For a while we had services in the local school and we actually had Sunday school in somebody's house. I started going to Sunday school when I was about three years old. But when I was probably about five or six, the group of them bought a bar and turned it into a synagogue, and that was the synagogue that I grew up in, probably between seventy-five and a hundred families. We always had a student rabbi from the Seminary. It was a Conservative synagogue, so we'd have a student rabbi who would be our rabbi for the year or two years. We had many different rabbis as I grew up.

INT: Did they have any kind of religious school aside from the Sunday school?

SUSAN: They had a Hebrew school. I went to Hebrew school three times a week, car pool. But my class-I had five or six kids in my Hebrew school class, and they were the same five or six kids from the time I started until the time I finished. They were like family members. I can probably name the five or six kids today, and I haven't seen them in some twenty years.

INT: What was it like to be a minority in your school?

SUSAN: It was sometimes a schizophrenic existence, because my family was involved in synagogue and I went to Hebrew school and I had a very Jewish existence there, but I had a very secular existence in school. I never had more than one, maybe two other Jewish kids in any class of mine. So for the most part, my friends, my day-to-day friends, were not Jewish. There were episodes in my childhood that were difficult, but they were episodic. But they did stand out. One

Halloween, I woke up to hearing my parents very upset because someone had soaped swastikas on our car. I'm not even sure I really knew what a swastika was at that point, but I had a general sense.

INT: It wasn't a smiley face.

SUSAN: And I remember my parents being so upset because they kept saying it had to be somebody that knew us. We lived in a small town. Everybody knew we were Jewish. And I just couldn't understand that. Well, of course it was somebody that knew us. But they were so troubled, not just by the swastika but that somebody who knew us would do that. And they cleaned up the car. They didn't report it to the police or anything like that. And I remember them saying to me did I have any idea of who it might be. Was there anyone at school that I knew that it could be them. That was a very troubling incident that really stayed with me always, and to this day, on Halloween, I have this feeling when I wake up in the morning, this uneasiness, and I know that it's sort of traced back to that. It's gone in a minute or two, but there's an uneasiness about it. My friends all went to Catholic after school activities. They didn't know from Hebrew school. I could remember sometimes feeling strange carrying Hebrew books, because we brought our books to school. I got picked up from school to go to Hebrew school.

INT: Where did you get the strength to be different?

SUSAN: Well, I just was. I just am Jewish. I never thought about it. I was different and I knew that I was different. I never felt it in a bad way. I never felt that I had to deny it or hide it, or that I could. To this day, sometimes I see people in political life and you're not quite sure are they or aren't they, sometimes they are when it's convenient and they're not when it's not convenient. That's just not who I am. It would be like saying my name isn't Susan or I don't have two daughters.

INT: It's that integral a part of you.

SUSAN: It really truly is. And maybe part of that comes from being a minority in a small town, where everybody did know who you were.

INT: So you couldn't forget who you were.

SUSAN: I don't want to suggest that there was overwhelming prejudice or that I felt anti-Semitism at every moment, because for the most part I didn't.

INT: What happened when it came time to go out on dates?

SUSAN: Well, my parents always said we don't want you going out with people who aren't Jewish. On the other hand, we lived in a town where most people weren't Jewish, so it was a little hard to really maintain that, but that was so much a part of what they said to me that even

though in high school I dated boys that weren't Jewish, I always knew that it was just for fun. There was never any sense in my mind that it was anything more than that, which frankly is probably good for a high school kid, not to think that a relationship that you have is a long term relationship anyway. But I think that was a hard thing. They would say it and they meant it, but to live in that kind of town made it very difficult. They encouraged/forced me to join B'nai B'rith girls in a neighboring town when I was, I guess, in ninth grade. So I joined BBG and was very active in BBG and had a social community life through that as well. But that was clearly their doing, the initial joining. I would not have joined on my own. I had a very happy social life in my town. I had lots of friends, involved in school, so I didn't feel a need to find something else. But I think, as I look back, that was their way of trying to make sure that I was Jewish.

INT: Where did you go to school?

SUSAN: To college?

INT: No.

SUSAN: I went to Saddle Brook High School. It was the local high school in the town. There were maybe two hundred kids in my graduating class, most of whom I had known since I had been in elementary school. It was a four year high school so I went to high school there. Graduated in 1969.

INT: And where did you go from there?

SUSAN: I went to the University of Rochester in New York State. Majored in political science. Always had the plan of going to law school and I went to law school right from college. I took the law boards and went to George Washington Law School.

INT: When were you first aware that you wanted to be a lawyer?

SUSAN: It's sort of an odd thing. As a child, I read a lot and I used to read a lot of biographies. Whoever's biography I would read, I would want to be that person. I'd read about an aviator, and I'd want to be an aviator even though I had never flown. So these were not necessarily connected to what I had done or what my skills were. All these different careers sounded exciting to me. But through it all, through these ups and downs of I was going to be journalist and a diplomat, for whatever reason, I always sort of knew that I was going to be a lawyer. Part of it is that my parents always said, "Oh, you'd be a great lawyer." So I think that was there. I had an uncle who was a lawyer, and my mother's closest childhood friend, a woman, was a lawyer. Went all through grammar school with my mother, went to college with my mother, and then she went on to law school. She's now a judge in New York City. So I think somehow that permeated. But my brothers and I joke. I have one brother who's a lawyer and one brother who's a dentist, and we both joke and say well, Mom always said we should be a lawyer, a dentist, a lawyer. I don't know how she picked those careers but she did.

INT: So it just kind of happened.

SUSAN: Yes. And I suppose part of it was process of elimination. I didn't particularly like science so I didn't want to do anything science oriented. I knew that I wanted a career. My parents always said, to all of us, you need to have a career. And they also always said you have to have a goal. You can change your goal, but you have to have a goal. It's so interesting. I'm just reading now Phillip Roth's American Pastoral, which talks about a Jewish community, growing up, North Jersey, and part of it is his father who's an immigrant saying you have to have a goal. You have to be committed to something. Reading this, I can hear my parents speaking.

INT: They were right. You can always change, but if you don't have any idea of where you're going, then you wander. You're nowhere.

SUSAN: To them, to be driftless, without purpose, was an empty existence.

INT: What other values-that's one that you've identified-education. What other values would you say that your parents had?

SUSAN: Family. Being committed to your family. Taking care of your family and putting your family first. Putting family before self. I knew that I could always count on my parents. There was never a doubt about it. I knew that they would put their children before them. It wasn't even something you ever had to discuss. You just knew it. In fact, I saw, as my grandparents aged, how my parents cared for them and were committed to them, even in some very, very difficult times.

INT: So they really lived their lives in the way that...they didn't just talk the talk.

SUSAN: Absolutely. And in fact, they really imparted also a sense that you lived your life. You didn't talk the talk. And they often said you don't talk about what you're going to do. You just do something. They were very much, and still are, a unit in this. They had a plan, as they say, and made it work. And I also, I think, from them developed a sense of working hard, and that working hard was its own reward. And that things don't come easy and that that's not bad. If you want something, you strive for it, you plan for it, you work at it. You know that there are obstacles along the way and you deal with those obstacles as they come along.

INT: That's a very realistic game plan.

SUSAN: Yes. I never thought about it that way. But they are also very optimistic about life. Life has been good to my family.

INT: Have you had a lot of fun as a family?

SUSAN: Absolutely. We traveled a lot as a family. We did lots of things together and we still do.

My father just turned seventy and all of us met in New York for dinner. We had a big family dinner. And I've tried to do that with my kids as well.

INT: Tell me about your children.

SUSAN: Lisa is twenty-two. She'll be twenty-three in December. She was a political science major at the University of Vermont. She graduated college in '96. She actually graduated a year early because she wanted to work on the presidential campaign, and she knew that she wasn't likely to get much support for dropping out of school to work on the campaign, so she took extra classes and went to school in the summer and graduated in May of '96 and got a job working in Chicago that summer on the presidential convention. (End of tape 1, side 1) ...got a job in the White House, and she works for Thurgood Marshall, Junior, who's the cabinet secretary, and basically is a liaison between cabinet members and the White House.

INT: That's very exciting.

SUSAN: It's very exciting. She went to China this past spring on the president's trip to China, because her job really involves anytime cabinet members have events or trips or speeches or activities with the president or the vice-president, she's involved in the planning and the setup and the arrangements. So it's been very exciting. She's talking about applying to law school and was home over the weekend writing an essay. But she's, knock wood, doing very well and seems to enjoy her life.

INT: This is your older daughter.

SUSAN: My older daughter. My younger daughter, Amy, is nineteen and she's a sophomore at Harvard. She's an applied mathematics major.

INT: It sounds like it comes from your father.

SUSAN: Yes. We say that she skipped a generation. And she's always been a very good student, but always interested in math and science. But both my kids are big readers. She's enjoying herself at Harvard.

INT: That's a wonderful town.

SUSAN: It's a great place.

INT: They go there and never come back.

SUSAN: I do pinch myself though sometimes. I'm very proud of Lisa and everything that she's done. I have one daughter who works in the White House and another daughter who's a sophomore at Harvard, and I often think back to my grandparents, who were immigrants, who

barely spoke the language, were not educated at all. While they clearly valued education and pushed for their children to be educated, I don't think they ever could have imagined that a great-grandchild of theirs would be at Harvard and one would be working at the White House.

INT: It's remarkable. What is their memory of or connection with their grandparents, with your parents or with their father's parents?

SUSAN: Well, with my parents, in some ways it's probably very similar to mine. We certainly do all the holidays together, because my brothers-one is in Connecticut, one is in New York and I'm here. My parents are the central place. We tend to meet there, but we do go to each other's homes. So we've spent all the holidays with them. And my parents are very much involved in their lives, back and forth and travel, and even now, my parents see my daughter Lisa in Washington. They go to Boston to see Amy. They certainly have a very close relationship. And I think Amy had modeled herself, in many ways, on my father. He was a business executive. She wanted to get an MBA. I do think that that's in part her model. On the paternal side, they never knew their grandfather. He died when their father was very young, so they only knew their grandmother, who died about ten years ago. So they had involvement with her when they were young, and she was very warm and kind and caring. I think they felt that and knew that. But unfortunately for them, she's been dead and so they haven't had that kind of one-on-one connection.

INT: How active have they been Jewishly? How do they identify themselves?

SUSAN: Well, they both went to Hebrew school. They were both bat mitzvahed. Lisa, my older daughter, went all the way through to confirmation. Amy chose not to, and I really had it be her choice. We live in Cherry Hill, very different than my growing up existence and certainly they've grown up in a Jewish world. Many of their friends are Jewish and it is much more a part just of the fabric of their every day life. They don't think of themselves as being different. They certainly think of themselves as Jewish, but not different. And they continue to come home for holidays and they certainly feel that that's important, and I think just as for me it's holidays and family and religion are sort of all combined into one. I don't think they could separate it, just as I couldn't separate it.

INT: Do they identify themselves with you in any way?

SUSAN: I think so. We're very close. We really do talk a lot. I think both of them feel pretty comfortable sharing their thoughts with me. Certainly my older daughter Lisa is traveling in the same circles that I do.

INT: You can talk shop talk.

SUSAN: Right. But I think that they feel as though it is part of the continuum, that they are part of the continuum.

INT: Tell me about your first job.

SUSAN: First job out of law school or my very first job?

INT: Well, whichever one.

SUSAN: My very first job was a counselor at a day camp, a day camp that I had gone to for years. I'm not sure that really counts. And then in high school I worked part time in a drugstore. But my real first job was when I finished law school. I clerked for a year for a federal judge in Washington, D.C. Clerking is a fairly common thing after law school, and I clerked for Judge Phillip Nichols, who was from Boston but had been appointed to the bench by Lyndon Johnson. I was his law clerk for a year. It was a wonderful job. He was a wonderful mentor. I learned a lot about the law from him. I actually had my first child-Lisa was born that year. I did enjoy that, but I thought that I might want to be a tax lawyer, which is why I took that clerkship. But after clerking there I realized that that was really too limiting for me. I didn't really want to do tax all the time. So after my clerkship I went to a large Washington, D.C. law firm, two hundred and some lawyers, Covington and Burling. They only had a handful of women at the time.

INT: And you had a baby?

SUSAN: I had a baby.

INT: How did you ever manage that?

SUSAN: With difficulty. It was a very busy, harried existence, and after two years at the firm I went to the partner that I worked for and said I would like to work part time. No one had worked part time. This was 1977 or '78. It just wasn't part of their "gestalt," as they say. And they really had to analyze and discuss this. And my part time, understand, was I would work 8:30 to 3:30, five days a week, which in those days, I thought, if I could get that, that would be great. But Lisa was about two years old, I had just had a miscarriage. I wanted to have another baby and I knew that I just could not continue that pace. So after all sorts of meetings they finally agreed. I stayed at the firm another year or so and then Amy was born and we moved to New Jersey. I always wanted to come back home. That was my plan. And when I moved to New Jersey I stayed home for a while. I didn't practice for a while. And then when I did, I started my own law firm here, so that I had the freedom and flexibility, and since I didn't have many clients in the beginning, I had days that were really mine. And my kids were young, nursery school and elementary school, and my practice continued to build.

INT: What type of practice was it?

SUSAN: It was a general practice, real estate, small business. No criminal at all. But my office was in Cherry Hill, small little office, so I could go in for an hour and if I needed to be at their school or pick them up I could do that too. It was a very flexible arrangement. But I'm the type of

person that gets involved in all sorts of things, so I became involved in the Chamber of Commerce. I became involved in a fledgling organization called The New Jersey Association of Women Business Owners, because I viewed my law practice as being my business, and eventually became the state president of that organization. So I certainly kept busy. We belong to a synagogue here. While Cherry Hill was very different than the town I grew up in, it was suburbia, and in some ways every suburban town has certain unifying characteristics.

INT: Aside from the fire house.

SUSAN: Right.

INT: So what happened next?

SUSAN: Well, my kids continued to do well in school and grow up here, and in 1985, there were three seats open on the town council here. The Democratic party was looking for three new faces. Their polls had told them that they needed to bring in new people and they wanted a balance—a person from the west side of town, preferably Italian, male; a senior citizen; and a Jewish woman from the east side of town. That was me. I didn't know this then, but basically their polling had identified these profile candidates as making up the best ticket. So they must have asked everybody they knew and my name came up. They asked if I wanted to run. I had never attended a political party meeting. If I'd been asked I would have said I was a Democrat, but that was more generic. I liked John Kennedy when I was in third grade so that's...I ran. I won. Served on council for two and a half years and then the mayor's seat opened up, and I decided in 1987 to run for mayor. And I really mark my true political involvement as then.

INT: What made you decide to run for mayor?

SUSAN: There was an open seat. I liked what I was doing on council but I felt as though I really couldn't do much. The form of government here is that it's an executive branch, so the mayor runs things. And I felt if I was going to stay in politics, I needed to get more done. I needed to do more than just go to a meeting and make a speech. I was more of a hands-on kind of person. So when it became clear that there was a possibility for it, I decided that I would run and see if I liked it.

INT: How did you go about organizing a campaign staff? What was your philosophy and how did you engage people?

SUSAN: Basically, I called everybody that I knew, everybody that I had ever car pooled with, that I had met in any organization, and asked them to help. There was a Democratic party here, so there was a framework. However, that party, the local organization, was very involved in a state senate race. The incumbent mayor was running for state senate. Basically, they sort of put their energies there and figured I was sort of along for the ride. And I didn't really know much, so I figured if I was in this though, I was in this to win. I remember we used to have meetings every

Tuesday at five o'clock with my sort of ragtag group of volunteers, and we sometimes laugh about this because we hardly knew what we were doing. But we'd go through...everybody had a different job. Somebody was in charge of arranging coffees at people's homes and someone was in charge of the lawn signs and every week we'd meet and do these reports. And we won. Sometimes now we look back and say how did we ever win that? But we did. And many of those people are still involved with me today.

INT: What was your platform?

SUSAN: Well, I was running also with seven council people. We ran as a team. I think that our platform was more about personality. This is who we are. All of the people had been involved in the community, and we really did try and sell that, that we were community people involved in charitable organizations and community organizations, and that we would make decisions based on what was best for the community.

INT: So you were asking people to trust the integrity of you and your team.

SUSAN: Yes. Of who we were. We shook a lot of hands, knocked on lots of doors, had events every single night at somebody's house. That was a major way we campaigned. We had coffees, sometimes two or three a night, and people would invite their friends to come meet us. Then come election day, we had what was called a GOTV-Get Out The Vote effort, where we really did earmark who we wanted to come out to vote. Very much old style, city ward politics. And to this day when we run local campaigns, we know who we can count on to vote. They got the calls. That's how we do it. That first election was a great, great election.

INT: What happened when you realized that you had won and now you were going to have to do the job?

SUSAN: The first year was a very tough year. First of all, although I had been involved, I didn't know that much. I didn't really know much about the day-to-day runnings of a government, and I certainly didn't know much about how you fix a road or how you prepare a budget or an affordable housing plan, and that's what you do as mayor. There was just such a big difference between being an executive branch versus legislative branch. In the legislative branch you can talk about issues and write bills. Executive branch, they want you to get the job done. They want you to pick up their trash and they want to make sure that there's economic development. It's sort of who I am and I took to it immediately. I really did enjoy it. But I had to learn a lot and learn a lot quickly, and learn a lot about technical things. And I had never been a technical person. I was definitely a right side of the brain person, and I had to learn to make the left side of my brain work. And I did, and I actually found it very enjoyable and sort of have often wondered, if I were twenty-five years younger, maybe I would have been a math major. I had to just...I'm the type-if I went into a meeting with some people that were going to talk to me about water pollution control, I wanted to know as much as they did, even if I was only one page ahead in the book, so I did a lot of work that first year. And there were a lot of crises that first year. But somehow we

made it through. I've been reelected twice since then, and gotten involved in politics on a state level and a national level. My kids were growing up through those years and I made a decision that I did not want to run for an office that would take me away from them, so I didn't want to go to Washington. I didn't even want to go to Trenton. The state legislature meets twice a week and they meet basically from five o'clock until ten o'clock.

INT: I almost think of the struggles that you had for those first few years with your baby, trying to balance the law and a family.

SUSAN: Right. It's not easy. I grew up in a family where I never once thought that being a girl was anything different. It just wasn't part of it. Now, my brothers were raised to be committed to family too, but I just never thought it was different, and I can remember going through college and as a senior someone saying to me...inviting me to a consciousness raising group and I thought whatever for? Why would somebody waste their time doing that? And it wasn't until I had a child of my own that it hit me, and it just hit me.

INT: You needed a wife.

SUSAN: It's very hard to balance. And I didn't want to give up that time with my children. I just didn't want to give that up. I wanted to be involved in their lives. In 1997 there was a governor's race here in New Jersey and many people encouraged me to run. It was my youngest daughter's last year in high school. Now, it's not as though she needed me to drive her places but I wanted to be able to go to the awards dinners and to go to the events with her.

INT: You needed that.

SUSAN: I wanted it. It wasn't about her. But it was what I wanted and it had been how I raised my kids. It was important to me because it made me feel good. So I think that the balancing act is difficult. I think every woman has to answer it and deal with it in her own way. I think it's very much a personal thing. Sometimes people ask me for advice and I say I don't even know that I could give advice. I've tried probably every sort of different permutation that exists and some days it works and some days it doesn't.

INT: Well, would you say that you have any values or that you have a vision or something that motivates you, that you bring to public office. What vision do you have or plan?

SUSAN: I think...well, I guess I couple of things. One is that I'm certainly somebody that likes to solve problems. I think that it's important that government look for solutions. Therefore, I'm sort of willing to make tough decisions. I don't run away from them. I know sometimes they work, sometimes they don't, but I do think you have to make a decision, and that probably goes back to what my parents would say. You have to have a goal. And I know that sometimes you make mistakes and you need to be prepared to stand up and say I made a mistake and I'm going to try it differently. There have been times in my public life that I've had to say that, that I thought this

would work but it didn't. But I think also, for me, holding office is a public service, and my parents were very much involved in community activities. They certainly communicated to all of us that that was important, that you had a responsibility to give back. And again, their sense-and I say this to my kids-you've got to decide how you give back. It's different for everybody. But that was important, that we had been fortunate and we had an obligation. I see government, for me at least, as being that. Not everybody sees it like that. And I guess third, I also see part of my job as mayor is to reach out to people in the community. I go to Filipino events and Greek-American events and all sorts of...

INT: What's the message that you bring to them?

SUSAN: That we're all part of a community together, that we're all in this together. And I really do try to go to as many different types of events like this as possible. I think that it's important that we preserve our unique cultural heritage, whatever that might be, and I think it's easy for it to get lost. So I think that it's important for people who hold public office to go to these events and applaud them. But I also think it's important that we all feel connected. And part of that too for me involves doing a lot with young kids. Schools don't come under the jurisdiction of mayor. They're totally separate. But I often visit schools in Cherry Hill and other places too. Last year I volunteered in Camden City. I had a third grade class that I went to once a week. I think that it's important for kids of all ages to know that people who hold public office care about them. So every third grade in Cherry Hill has a tour of Cherry Hill as part of their curriculum. They get a tour of the municipal building, and I make sure that I'm here when they have the tour. They crowd into my office and I say to them, "Okay, this is your time to have a press conference. You could ask me any question you want." So by now, most of the third grade teachers know that so they prep their kids and they have their little white pieces of paper and they ask me questions. It's interesting. Oftentimes a Jewish child will ask me what my religion is, and it's almost always a Jewish child who asks me this. I'm never quite sure-do they already know I'm Jewish or are they just curious. They might have seen me at an event, so I don't know necessarily. But I kind of noticed that. I have people who visit me from all over and they bring me little things, and so I might have...I remember I had gotten a visit from an Israeli team delegation, and I had for a while-they gave me some flags that I had out. So that period of time, when the third graders came, the kids would say, "Oh, I see an Israeli flag there." They would pick it out. And they kind of look around my office, all the kids do, and pick out things. I have something on my wall that has Hebrew letters and oftentimes the kids will point that out. So it is something of interest to them. They do notice that. They're too young to know what a Jewish name is.

INT: So it sounds like the message that you give people is there are qualities, there are experiences, there's a background that you have that is unique to you and to a particular group to which you belong, and cherish that, but on the other hand, you are part of the larger community and own that as well.

SUSAN: Absolutely.

INT: Is that a Jewish message in a sense?

SUSAN: I think so. I think it is certainly a Jews in America message, and that's the only experience I have.

INT: That's how it sounded to me.

SUSAN: For example, many times when I go to different cultural events, the annual Agora or Columbus Day, which is sponsored by the Sons of Italy, I will say at the end of my remarks-I will say something like "and as my people would say, Mazel Tov." I often start my remarks with a word from Greek or Italian or something they know, so I try and bring it together. I remember one time somebody, a Jewish person said to me, "You know, what I really like about you is that you're not afraid to be Jewish." This was about five or six years ago. I sort of thought well, that's who I am. I didn't realize at the time that he was a survivor. I only came to know him afterwards. And he said, "No, you don't talk about being Jewish or American-Jewish, but it is just part of what you do." I can still remember being so...I just didn't understand what he was saying to me at the time. I've since come to know him better and know who he is. It's made me think a bit about it. I think, again, it goes back to how I was raised but also being raised as a minority, but also wanting people to know who I am.

INT: You're comfortable sharing that part of yourself with other people.

SUSAN: Yes. I've always believed that you've got to sort of take me as I am. I'm not going to be any different. You can change a little bit here or there-

INT: But you have to make yourself known in order for people to be able to take you or leave you that way.

SUSAN: Right. That's true.

INT: I wonder if that's a women's trait.

SUSAN: It could be. Somebody asked me, an African-American woman asked me, what I thought the best training for me was for being in politics. I thought for a few minutes and I said raising kids, because when you raise kids, you have to learn to do everything and you have to learn patience and understand why you're saying what you're saying and think about both the short term and the long term impacts of things. You can't ever run away from your decisions because they're just there. I said it really just off the cuff. It wasn't anything I had analyzed up until that point, but I do think that's so true. As much as today, 1998, here I am, a Jewish woman, law school...I've certainly come a long way from my immigrant grandparents, and yet they came here struggling and balancing and working and different issues, similar approaches.

INT: I just want to examine a little bit this church and state separation and how much you feel is

legitimate to bring from your religion into your job as a public officer.

SUSAN: Well, for me the religion sort of crosses over into the sort of ethnic-cultural. I would never ask anybody to say prayers, but I should also say that as a public official I've gone to services of just about every denomination. I think that that's important. I do feel very strongly that it is important that the church, synagogue, not be involved in education or government. I don't think, frankly, that our religious leaders should be making policy statements. But I think that to the extent that religion is part of a community life, it's important to participate in it. Certainly I've been to more church services in the past couple of years than most Jews, I would guess.

INT: Have there been any conflicts between your official duties and your religion?

SUSAN: Not for me. There have been a few. Like once we scheduled this big township event on Shavuos. We didn't realize it was Shavuos when we scheduled it. By the time we scheduled it we had all this publicity out and we couldn't cancel it. (End of tape 1, side 2)

INT: This is tape 2 of an interview with Susan Bass Levin. We were talking about being Jewish and being a public official. Can we continue with that?

SUSAN: I'm involved in state and national politics, so I've campaigned for other people, Jim Florio, Bob Torecelli, Bill Clinton, and being Jewish and a woman-it's sort of interesting because many times when you campaign for people, they ask you to go to events for them and speak on their behalf. Well, I can always count on if it's a women's event or a Jewish event, I'm the first on their list. And if it's a Jewish women's event, for sure they ask me. But it has enabled me, with some of these big campaigns, perhaps to have a forum before large groups that I might not otherwise have if I was sort of white, Irish male in New Jersey. I certainly do see that. Particularly non-Jewish politicians think well, she's Jewish and so we should send a Jewish person there. When sometimes they do debates before Jewish groups, I'm invited to be in the audience as a friendly face. A group that might not even know me. I think well, you could just have any shill sit there. What do you need me for? But it's part of the ethnic politics that we certainly have in this country.

INT: Are you comfortable being a token?

SUSAN: Well, it's interesting. In the Florio campaign for governor, which was '93, which was when I was first really getting started in state politics, I found that it was a great way for me to get all over the state. By '97, the gubernatorial campaign here, when I was asked sometime to speak strictly on women's issues, I made it clear that while I would speak on the issue part of it, what I would not do was be the female whipping boy, and by that I mean-remember, the Democratic candidate was running against a woman, Christine Todd Whitman, and so one of their strategies was to have women attack her, and I would not do that. I said right from the beginning-I will talk about issues but I will not go negative and I will not be your attack dog. And

in the four years intervening, I was much more comfortable with myself and I had a better understanding, quite frankly, of state politics and of how campaigns were run and I set my own limits. I just said I won't do that. There weren't always happy with me but it was important to me that I could define my role in a campaign.

INT: So you felt strongly enough about what you believed that you stated what your limits were.

SUSAN: Yes. I felt very strongly. I had a few screaming arguments about it but I just felt very strongly and knew that I was only going to do what I was comfortable with. So in that sense, like everything else, you learn and you develop over time a sense of what you're comfortable with, what works, particularly in a campaign setting where everything is coming at you all at once. In the second campaign, you know a lot more than you do in the first campaign. But one of the things I found, for example, when the President had an event at the White House this year for the fiftieth anniversary of Israel. It was a big event at the White House, and Jewish leaders were invited, Jewish leaders from every organization were invited. And a handful of elected officials were invited, people who were Jewish, so I fit into that category. And to be able to see that and be a part of that was just a wonderful experience. And to look around and see, all together at the White House, Jewish leaders of every Jewish organization, it was a pretty impressive sight. That was a good experience.

INT: So what would you say were the special qualities or talents that you've brought to your job?

SUSAN: I'm a doer. I like to get things down. I'm very hands-on. I'm very involved in things. A newspaper article was written about me, and it was all politics, but there was one little paragraph about me as a person and it said that I have two daughters and that I am deeply involved in their lives. My children saw this and they were hooting and saying, "I can't believe they know how nosy you are." Well, it's certainly true about my involvement with them, but it's also true about things I do. When I get involved with something, I like to get to the bottom of it. And I guess I also try to be fair. I know that things aren't always in balance, and I do think that part of my responsibility as an elected official, as a representative of people, is to try and bring some fairness to government and how it works, some sense of what's right and wrong. And I do tend to see things in terms of right and wrong, and sometimes that's good but sometimes people will criticize me and say well, you're very much a black and white kind of person. I think that sometimes makes decisions easier.

INT: At least you know what your values are. What have you learned about yourself?

SUSAN: I've learned that I can learn, that I can continue to learn new things, even things that I thought were really too complicated for me, outside what I knew or what I cared about. I've learned that. And I've learned also, and I'm sort of still learning, how important it is to build consensus, to bring people into decision making and to get other people's ideas and input and to sort of make it all work. That takes time and patience, being willing to talk to lots of people. It

can sometime be very wearing, but it's a really critical part, I think, of government. And it's something I've worked on over time. I think finally I've learned the value of patience. Not one of my strong attributes, but I work on it a lot.

INT: What has been the most difficult thing for you and how have you overcome it?

SUSAN: In government, the most difficult thing is that there's so much to be done and clearly not enough money to do it. You really have to develop priorities and you have to know that you can't do everything at once. You can't even do all the good things at once. That's hard for someone who wants to do things and is optimistic. I do believe that government has a job to do, that it shouldn't do any more than its job but that it should do its job well. So that's been tough. Being a public figure, I've sort of talked mainly about the good stuff-it's hard many times. Your life is not your own. There are certain restaurants that I don't go to for dinner with my kids because I know that if I go there for dinner, everybody is going to want to talk to me and I don't want to be rude to them but I want to enjoy dinner with my kids. So those are the kinds of things. You don't have a private life, and you have to recognize that.

INT: How about people criticizing you?

SUSAN: That's clearly part of it. Partisan criticism can be just plain stupid and I think government would be better if we could leave that partisan bickering aside. Yeah, we're going to disagree on certain things and we should, but just because I say yes, for somebody to say no without any basis, to this day I think...I can't quite understand that. And for myself, I try not to engage in that part, which is why I'll disagree on an issue and when I disagree I will, but not merely for the sake of arguing. But the hard part of criticism is more sort of a personal criticism. They don't like what you're doing. It's not easy. But that's part of what I was talking about with consensus. When you realize that sometimes people do have valid complaints, and it's better...I have learned-this is one thing I've learned-it's better to address them. It's better to deal with it head-on, to understand what the person's complaint is and why it is, and you know what? If they're right or if they have a good point, to adjust to it and be able to respond.

INT: That's tough.

SUSAN: It's tough. Some days I do it much better than others. Some days I mutter.

INT: How has being a woman helped or hindered you?

SUSAN: Well, hindered me in that New Jersey Democratic politics is clearly a man's game. That may be true of all politics. I'm just narrowing it. And it has been for a long time, and since it is very much of a network statewide now, it's not easy to break in. I think in many ways it's harder being a woman. However, there aren't that many women involved so being a woman has helped me in terms of having visibility that I might not have if I were just one of the crowd. So in some ways, much like being Jewish, I don't spend a lot of time thinking about if it helped me or hurt

me because it is and I can't change it. And I wouldn't change it if I could.

INT: Do you have any advice or warning to give to your daughters or your successors as they become involved in the Jewish community or involved in the political community?

SUSAN: I think that it's important to be involved. I think it's harder and harder for people to do it because of time, economics, the public nature of things. I think more and more people want to just sort of go back to their own little niche. It's safer. And I understand that but I think that if we leave the public life to people who don't have good values, or as one of my friends says, don't have good politics, then we'll just make it worse and we leave the public world to people who would destroy it. And there are a lot of them. So I strongly encourage young people, my daughters included, to be involved, whether it's public office or community service. I just think that we have a responsibility and I think that it's important to also search out people who share your views. And to go back to kind of being a woman in politics, there's a whole network of women in politics and this crosses party lines. We see each other at events or spend time together, and there's clearly a connection. The same thing often about being Jewish. There's just an ability to share. I met Allison Schwartz for breakfast a few weeks back. We've been at many of the same events over time, but never really knew each other.

INT: She's a congressperson from Philadelphia.

SUSAN: A state senator from Philadelphia.

INT: Yes.

SUSAN: But we never really have gotten to know each other, and we met for breakfast and just instantly clicked. I think that it doesn't have to be about sex and it doesn't have to be about religion, but it has to be about a shared view of the world, that you're in government to make things better, that you're doing what you're doing because you believe in it and that you're willing to try your best. I think that when you find people like that, it makes it easier, because some days in politics you think, "what am I doing in this?" This is just such a crazy world. I can remember my grandfather-my grandparents celebrated their seventieth anniversary in August, 1988, and right after that my grandfather had a stroke and was in a coma for seven weeks. This was in 1988. He never came out of the coma. He died three days before Lisa's bat mitzvah. I remember going to visit him in the hospital and my grandmother was there, not really yet dealing with the fact that he was in a coma. And he was ninety-something years old. He had led a wonderful, wonderful life. But he was going to die, and my grandmother pulled me up to him and said, "Joe, Joe, Susie is here. Susie is here." Now, people don't call me Susie. And she turned to me and she said he was always so proud of you. And while they certainly, and everyone in my family has that connection through the generations, to understand-for me, at least-that you carry that forward. What I am and who I am traces back to them and will trace through to my daughters and their daughters, and so for me, kind of what I do each day isn't just about each day.

INT: That's very powerful.

SUSAN: And just to sort of bring the Jewishness into it, he died just a few days before my daughter's bat mitzvah. And of course the rabbi says you go on. What do I do? My grandmother said to me on the day of my grandfather's funeral, "You must have that bat mitzvah. Your grandfather would not want to hear anything about this. You must have that bat mitzvah." Of course we had the bat mitzvah.

INT: The longer you have people like that, the harder it is to lose them.

SUSAN: I certainly understood nobody would want to be in a coma and as I said, he had lived a wonderful life, but it was still a loss for me. A very personal, selfish kind of thing. You kind of believe people could just go on forever. My daughter's Torah portion was about Joseph and the coat of many colors. My grandfather's name was Joseph and he was a tailor. I never bought a coat until I was in my twenties. He made every coat I ever owned. I didn't even know how to buy a winter coat. I remember the first time I had to go buy a winter coat.

INT: So you were literally protected by him all of those years. Wonderful metaphor.

SUSAN: So in her bat mitzvah, her passage was about Joseph and his coat of many colors and after he died she actually changed a few of the lines.

INT: It's a wonderful heritage that you got and that you're passing along. Well, what are you going to do next? What would you like to do next?

SUSAN: Well, I would like to run for statewide office, maybe US Senator, maybe governor.

INT: Why not?

SUSAN: See what opens up. But I would like to. My kids are now grown. I'm sort of ready for the next stage. I'm looking at it, talking to people, planning down the road.

INT: I'm sorry I can't vote for you. Is there anything else that you would like us to include in this oral history that we have not as yet addressed?

SUSAN: I think the only thing I just want to mention briefly are my two trips to Israel. My first trip actually was with Bob Torecelli, who's a United States Senator, and it was a whirlwind trip. We went to Jerusalem, the Golan Heights by army helicopter, Gaza, where we met with Arafat, Cairo, Luxor, Damascus, Tel Aviv and then ultimately finishing up in Jerusalem, meeting with Netanyahu. That was my first trip to Israel.

INT: When was this?

SUSAN: This was 1997. Just last year. I had had several trips planned before that but they didn't happen. Planned one with my whole family but for one reason or another each got canceled. And while that was hardly a trip to Israel, because it was so much-it was clearly a melange of experiences from the Middle East-what stands out most to me though was Damascus, Syria, where there are only 100 Jews left in all of Syria. It was once a thriving Jewish community actually, from the destruction of the first Temple. And I went to visit two closed synagogues. One was on a site where there had been a synagogue for 3000 years. I brought home a tallit that has Syrian letters. I came home from that trip and was talking with both my kids about it and they said, "Well, we should go to Israel." And I said I've been saying that. We just couldn't...their schedules. That summer, the three of us, my two daughters and I, went to Israel for two weeks. We went to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and the Golan Heights and the Galilee, Dead Sea, Masada-the trip to Israel. That was an absolutely incredible experience for all of us. We learned a lot about history and the repeated nature of history. But I think, for the three of us, as American Jews, it was a wonderful, wonderful experience. So I can't wait to go back.

INT: Okay. Thank you very, very much. (End of interview)