

INTERVIEW WITH REBECCA ALPERT

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INT: Today is February 26, 1999. My name is Sally Benson Alsher and I'm here with Professor Rebecca T. Alpert, professor at the Department of Religion at Temple University. Rebecca, tell me where you were born and when.

REBECCA: I was born in Brooklyn, New York, in April 1950.

INT: Tell me about your grandparents, starting with your paternal. What do you remember about them?

REBECCA: My paternal grandparents were both deceased when I was born. I was named after my paternal grandmother. I knew almost nothing about them. My father was fairly quiet about his family, but I do know it was a large, blended family that came over from Russia. My father was born here in 1905 and he had a couple of siblings who were born here, so I would date their immigration around 1890, the late 1890's. They lived in Borough Park, Brooklyn. My grandfather was in the fur business. My grandmother was a tough cookie, as far as I know. She had a really mean face is what I remember from looking at her picture as a child.

My maternal grandparents-I also did not know my maternal grandfather. His name was Aaron Oser, and he immigrated also from Russia. He was not born here. His family came over when he was a child. He was part of a family business called Oser Brothers Printing, which was here in Philadelphia. He was a Philadelphia resident for all of his life. He died in the 1930's. My grandmother, my mother's mother, Lena Oser, was actually born here. She was raised in an orphanage in Cleveland, Ohio, Evansville, Indiana, and then later moved to Cleveland, Ohio, and then later to New York and then later married her husband, Aaron, and raised my mother and seven children here in Philadelphia. My mother was the youngest. I knew my grandmother as a child. She never worked outside the home. She was of German ancestry. She had kind of a reform bent, although was never involved in synagogue life in particular. She was actually a significant figure in my childhood.

INT: How?

REBECCA: She lived across the street from my family in Brooklyn for most of my early childhood. She died when I was thirteen. She used to talk to me a lot and pay a lot of attention to me, and she'd cook, bake cakes and just be there for me in a way that my parents generally weren't. She was a very special person in my life.

INT: What languages did she speak?

REBECCA: She spoke a little Yiddish, not much. She was born here and she spoke mostly English. She knew some German. She knew some German songs and things, but mostly she was

a native English speaker.

INT: Your mother was close to her?

REBECCA: My mother was close to her. My mother was the youngest child, and when my grandfather died, my mother was left caring for my grandmother and married relatively late in those days. My mother was thirty-five before she married, and lived with my grandmother in Philadelphia, and they subsequently moved. Two of my mother's sisters had moved to New York, to Brooklyn, and so my mother and grandmother moved to Brooklyn to live with one of those sisters, and that was how my mother met my father.

INT: How did she meet him?

REBECCA: My father's brother lived across the street from my mother's sister, and they were introduced. My father lived in California for most of his life. He had grown up in Brooklyn and didn't really finish school. He didn't have much of an aptitude for school and decided, actually in the early Thirties, that he wanted to move on. He was the youngest of about thirteen, I think, if you add up all these blended brothers and sisters. He picked up and he left and he moved actually to Pittsburgh for a while. He ran a dog kennel. This is in the Thirties. And then he moved to California, Southern California, and set up a fur business in Southern California. One of the very few things I knew about him was that he did very well. He made coats for movie stars. He lived out there until the war, World War II. He was drafted. He was in his early forties. He was stationed in Northern California, and when he came home, this woman that he had married many years before had left him for another man. She wasn't Jewish. Those were significant facts of my father's life. So he came back to Brooklyn, basically brokenhearted, and went back into his father's fur business, but I don't think he ever really emotionally recovered from that experience. He married my mother, one would say, on the rebound. He was forty-four and she was thirty-five. They had me almost immediately thereafter, nine months, nine days.

INT: What else do you remember about him?

REBECCA: What else do I remember about my father?

INT: Yes.

REBECCA: My father died when I was thirty-four. I was pregnant with my second child at that point. He was a fairly quiet man. In hindsight, he was fairly depressed most of the time. His business did not do terribly well. He was in business with two of his brothers. They cheated one another and didn't get along. Finally, his business went bankrupt. He started working for his nephew, and that was sort of a story of a guy who had first, a fair amount of money that he just left in California, and then a high quality of labor. He made bourgeois coats. He made Persian lamb coats for a middle-class constituency clientele. He didn't do fabulously but he did well. At least he was working-he was creating styles and models. I think he had some satisfaction from

his work, but when the business went under and he started doing piecework for his nephew who had started laying him off over the summers, I think all of that...and I was graduating from college. I think all of that sort of brought to bear on a serious depression, and he became seriously depressed and made a series of suicide attempts, I guess when I was in my early twenties. So the period from when I was in my twenties till his death when I was in my mid-thirties-he really was not there. He was hospitalized and we'd go visit him. There really wasn't much contact, so I really didn't know him as an adult, and certainly in my younger years he was sweet and kind. I grew up in a family that I guess today would be called working class in terms of its financial...My mother went back to work when I was eight years old because there really wasn't enough money coming in from my father's business, which was a terrible shame, a shame and an embarrassment for him. We didn't have a lot of money but we certainly had Jewish...it was a Jewish working class home, which meant there weren't all these middle-class pretensions. I got dancing lessons. We couldn't afford piano lessons, but I was sent to camp. I was sent to religious school at my own insistence. My parents were not at all involved in religious life. It was something that I wanted and asked for. My mother particularly went back to work in order to send me to summer camp and get me the lessons that she wanted me to have. It was very clear to her I was going to Brooklyn College and it was going to be free and I was going to be a teacher and I was going to get out of...move up the ladder in a way that she wasn't able to. My mother was very intellectually oriented. She went to Girls' High, which was something she was very, very proud of. She got a two-year scholarship to Temple and went to business school here, but then couldn't ever finish and had to support her mother, and wound up sort of living...basically living through me, wanting me to be something that she couldn't aspire to. My father, I think, had no aspirations. I never got any sense that he had any aspirations for me. You know, I should be a good human being. If I misbehaved, he had a pretty strong temper and I would fight a fair amount with him. I guess those are basic memories of my childhood. More I could give you if you ask for more.

INT: What was your most favorite moment?

REBECCA: My favorite moment as a child?

INT: Favorite memory?

REBECCA: I have very nice memories of doing crossword puzzles with my mother and spending time with her. I had a good relationship with my mother as a child. We used to talk a lot. I have very strong positive memories of that.

INT: What were some of the other values and ideas at home?

REBECCA: Education was probably the strongest value that I got, particularly from my mother. It was very important to do well in school. They liked it that I did well in school. I got a lot of pleasure out of doing well in school. There were certainly basics-you don't cheat, you don't steal, you don't lie. Sort of basic, Western ethics came through very, very clearly.

INT: So they weren't very spiritual in the sense that-

REBECCA: They were not at all spiritual. They weren't interested in...My father thought Judaism was stupid basically. He left it very clearly in his will that no Shiva should be observed for him. He thought all of those things were superstitious. My mother had some respect for Judaism, but it was very clear to them, particularly to my mother, that working class people were not welcome in synagogues, that synagogues were for people with money who could make contributions. The one thing my mother knew was that when I got involved in the synagogue, and I was talented and eager and interested, so I would be asked...it was a reform congregation. There were no bar and bat mitzvahs at that point, but I was asked to read from the Torah at a Friday night service. My mother knew that she was obligated to make a financial contribution to the synagogue because of that. Nobody told her, but this is something she both knew and resented. Sort of felt like you had to pay for honors. That was very clear to her that that was the message, and that if you didn't have nice enough clothing, you shouldn't show up on the holiday. So there was a lot of negative...I got a lot of negative messages. My mother's family...my mother had one sister whose husband was very orthodox-well, not very orthodox. He was brought up in a very strictly orthodox home, and he had some positive feelings left over from his orthodox upbringing, although he was...he was a butter-and-egg man. He was a food distributor to the Holland America Lines, and one of the things that he distributed was seafood, shellfish. There was no question. There was no kashrut in the home, but there was a sense of a real passion. He'd take that old Maxwell House Hagaddah and he'd just recite it. I have good Pesach memories from that part of the family. My parents just said that was what...it was very nice and they were perfectly happy that I found that meaningful and they liked it that I sang at the Seder and all those things.

INT: What were holidays like then?

REBECCA: Well, you know, Brooklyn schools-I had off. If I wanted to go to synagogue I would get on the bus and go to synagogue. There was no...my grandmother occasionally lit Shabbat candles. My mother would do that with me, but that was the only Shabbat observance. There was no special thing for Friday night. I didn't even know people observed Saturday. After all, it was a reform upbringing. The High Holy days-I went to synagogue. My parents didn't go. They dropped me off. I'd go, and they'd pick me up. So I didn't really have a spiritual life. But you got to remember that growing up in Brooklyn, there's just essence of Judaism. It's in the air that you breathe, and so there was a kind of a Jewish identity that I think people who grow up outside of New York or Jerusalem just don't really understand. It's just basic. It's very, very basic. My parents didn't have much of a sense of interest in Judaism. It was just around me.

INT: How did you get interested?

REBECCA: Actually, I had a fifth grade teacher, fourth and fifth grade teacher, who was a very religious, African-American woman, who loved me very much and said, "Why aren't you religious?" It spurred me on to ask my parents to send me to Hebrew school. It really did come

out of that. I was very entranced. I went to a reform...I went to Sukkot services at a reform synagogue, I guess when I was in fifth grade. I was very taken with them. I found that I liked the environment. I liked the...it felt holy. Spiritual wasn't a word people used really prior to the 1970's, so there was a kind of a holiness about it, a kind of an air of connecting to God. I always had a sense that, as a child particularly, that I could talk to God.

INT: Where did that come from?

REBECCA: Beats me. I really don't know. I don't know. I don't know if it was just in the environment of the synagogue or maybe it was my grandmother's influence, but if it was, it was purely subliminal, I could assure you. It wasn't a conscious thing. But prayer was something that just made sense to me. You have to talk to somebody, right? They didn't send kids to therapists back then. I didn't need one. I was just a good child. The summer camp that I went to was a camp that was sponsored by Federation in New York. They had Shabbat, which meant you wore white clothes, and they had tablecloths at dinner and you had chicken soup. So there was some...also, just a sense of connection there, a sense of comfort and belonging.

INT: What were holiday dinners like? Did they do dinners?

REBECCA: No. Pesach we went to my uncle, my aunt and uncle's house, so that was every year. I knew Passover was very special and there were always Seders, and his extended family and some of my Mom's extended family. But no, there were no special dinners for any other holidays.

INT: Did you have sisters and brothers?

REBECCA: I'm an only child.

INT: What about extended families who you felt maybe had an impact on your life.

REBECCA: I think my aunt and uncle certainly had an enormous impact on my childhood. They lived very, very close by. My mother had another sister who was married to a doctor who was my doctor as a child, and I enjoyed being in their home as well. I was close with them. My mother was the youngest, and so the children of her sisters were in their teens and college years when I was a kid, so a couple of them were actually significant to me as a child, although I wasn't close in age to any of them.

INT: What kinds of things did you do for fun when you were growing up?

REBECCA: In my early childhood, I used to play with figurines. I played with little statues of the presidents of the United States and baseball players, and had imaginative conversations with them. It was as close as I came to dolls. I used to also love baseball and I had a wonderful-from the time I was five until the time I was about eleven-had a great collection of baseball cards. I

REBECCA: I think it was just in the air.

INT: What were some of your goals or aspirations growing up?

REBECCA: I don't think I had very many. I think girls weren't really encouraged to have goals and aspirations. My mother wanted me to be a teacher. I didn't really have very much interest in doing that. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I had some lingering thought that maybe I'd want to be a rabbi, because I liked the job that my rabbi did. But I don't think that that was really...it was kind of on the side. I didn't know what I was going to do. I knew I was supposed to go to college and I don't think I thought much beyond that.

INT: Tell me a little bit more about your neighborhood. It was homogenous?

REBECCA: When I lived in Clinton Hill, it was mostly African-American. It was a working class neighborhood, near Pratt, Pratt College. The kids were nice, but there wasn't anybody much around me. They lived sort of far away actually. I lived very close to the school and a lot of the kids came from farther away.

INT: There was no discrimination. It was homogenous.

REBECCA: There was no anti-Semitism. There were a lot of Catholics that lived in the neighborhood and they sent their kids to Catholic school so I didn't really know them. But no. I never experienced anti-Semitism until I was thirteen years old, and I was on a trip. My camp had sponsored a trip West, and we camped out. It was very nice. It was definitely a highlight of my life, this summer going on a tiyul at some park. And one of the stops that we made was in Missouri, at a swimming pool, and we were not permitted...we were allowed in and then we were thrown out of the pool because they found out that it was a group of Jews. Somebody actually asked several of us if we had horns. It was really the first time that I had ever even...we had to get debriefed from this, because we were all New Yorkers. We just didn't get it. That was quite an eye-opening experience. I'm actually teaching my Holocaust course right now, and part of what we're focusing on is the early prohibitions against Jews in swimming pools, and it just kind of really hit a nerve when I was teaching it this month.

INT: Who were some of your other role models when you were young? Did you have any, besides this teacher?

REBECCA: The teacher was important. I had a cousin that I was close to. I don't know that she was really a role model, but she was a kind human being who had a good sense of humor and I admired her. She was nine years older than I was. It was very clear to my mother that I was...she wasn't so bright. She's a really nice person but she wasn't really bright. For my mother, being smart was really what you were supposed to do. And in high school I had a few teachers who were important to me. I had a Social Studies teacher in seventh grade who I wound up babysitting for, and she was a very, very fine person who also gave me an opportunity. I studied

about Israel and other sorts of things with her. And I had a geometry teacher in tenth grade and we became very close. She was a little bit older than my mother and just somebody for me to talk to.

INT: So what other advice or people inspired you to become an active participant in the Jewish community as you did?

REBECCA: I guess...when I went to college, I decided to major in religion. I decided to major in religion. I think most people choose majors in college when they don't...in those days, when you weren't being forced to figure out what you wanted to do with the rest of your life immediately, which I think is an unfortunate circumstance in the contemporary world. You picked a major based on the course you liked the best, and I took a Hebrew Bible course with a man named Theodore Gaster, who's a brilliant Old Testament scholar, and really insightful and witty. I thought this would be a neat thing to study, so I took another-I took a couple of more religion courses and continued to like not just Jewish studies, but also studying about Hinduism and Buddhism and Confucianism and Islam. I just found that very interesting to me and I wanted to learn more about Christianity because I didn't actually have a lot of...My early childhood I didn't spend in a Jewish environment, but the other part of my childhood I did. (Tape shuts)

INT: You were talking about becoming a religion major. This was at Barnard?

REBECCA: This was at Barnard. I became a religion major, and then my junior year I decided to go to Israel and really learned that in Israel I was an American more than anything else. When you haven't traveled out of the United States, you discover how much of your identity is based on that. I was not really a Zionist. I wasn't brought up. I was brought up in a reform context, and Zionism just wasn't in the picture in the Sixties in reform synagogues. I found some of the passionate Zionism really off-putting. I was there in 1969 when everybody was...this was a period of intense xenophobia in Israel, and I was violently opposed to the Vietnam War, and there are all these guys carrying guns around. I didn't exactly fit in Israel. I liked the studies. There's a wonderful historian of Chinese religions and a really great guy who was doing apocrypha. I enjoyed my studies. I enjoyed a lot of the people I met, and I loved the country. I loved it physically. It's just a magnificent place. I loved the archeology. I loved taking archeology courses. So I was still very much enticed by the environment. It was clear to me that there was a lot of stuff I didn't like. There was also a lot that I did like. When I was in Israel, I actually got involved in a relationship with a man who wasn't Jewish, who really encouraged me to think about the rabbinate, who really started encouraging me to think about careers and what I wanted to do. It was that year-I guess it was 1970-when Sally Priesand...there was an article about her in Newsweek that said that they were going to ordain her as a rabbi. So a lot of those old thoughts sort of started to click together and I thought well, what do I want to do with this religion major? I want to ground it in my own tradition and I think I might be really happy doing that, going to rabbinical school.

The truth is, when I was a senior in high school, I went along with NFTY to Hebrew

Union College in Cincinnati on a trip, because they have these trips there. This was 1967, and they got in the front of the room and they said, "Okay, all the boys who are interested in going to rabbinical school should come with us at three o'clock. We're having a meeting." So I had not really good feelings about training as a reform rabbi. Some little things that Sally said in that article was very telling. She said, "I have to be the best. In order to make it, I have to be the best," and I thought that this is not a world I want to get into. I'm not a competitive...competition, you noticed, was not one of the values that came up in my childhood. I basically was focused much more on cooperative learning models and just being in the world. I didn't really want to compete and I didn't want to have to be the best. While I was in Israel, curiously enough, one of the other students there said, "Have you heard about the reconstructionist movement?" I had heard about it actually. My aunt and uncle subscribed to the reconstructionist magazine, but that was all I knew, was that there was this magazine. She said, "You might really find this very compatible." So I looked into it, and discovered that in fact it really was a lot what I was looking for. When I was back in New York, I started reading Kaplan. I thought-these ideas-these are really interesting ideas. These services-they were lively. It's not just organs and choirs and stuff. There's some real passion here. I didn't know it even existed. And so I got very, very interested in reconstructionism, and went to see Ira Eisenstein, who was the president of the movement at that point, and he picked up his own telephone, and I thought, this is the place I want to be. It just feels like home. I went to rabbinical school. I came down to Broad Street, and I liked the...

INT: How did you get from New York to here?

REBECCA: That's how I got from New York to here. I was finishing my senior year of college actually. The answer to that is I took the train. But when I was finishing up at Barnard, I wrote a senior thesis with a woman named Elaine Pagels, who was actually...a very prominent scholar of New Testament, and she encouraged me too to go into rabbinical school. And one of the things that I liked about-(end of tape 1, side 1) It was an exciting proposition to be able to not to have to choose, and again, I wasn't real observant. So that well, I'll get a Ph.D., I'll become a rabbi and then I'll figure out what I want to do with my life. And it also felt-it felt like I kind of was keeping a foot outside the Jewish world, and what appealed to me about Reconstructionism is the idea of living in two civilizations, and continuing to study other religions, because I was also very interested in that. So I graduated from college and moved to Philadelphia.

INT: Were there women doing that at that time?

REBECCA: There was woman at RRC. She was Sandy Sasso. She's two years ahead of me. And there was another woman in my class. That was it.

INT: How did that sit with you?

REBECCA: It was fine. I liked being with the guys. I liked them. They were neat people. It probably helped a lot that I got married to one of my fellow students immediately, because it took the pressure off. I wasn't an object anymore. I was kind of...I was taken, and so I was less

dangerous. We got involved, Joel and I got involved. He had been in rabbinical school for two years already. One year he spent in Israel as a rabbinical student, and then one year he was doing a preparatory program, so we were in the same class. We hit it off, and decided, I guess around December of the first year, to get married the following summer. So I spent my rabbinical school experience basically as a married person, and I was really one of the boys. My classmates and I got along great.

INT: ??? involved with someone unusual, going to rabbinical school?

REBECCA: Sally had started it, and there was somebody a couple of years ahead of me. There were a couple of people who started at the same time I did-one other person at Hebrew Union College. And the school is small. No, I didn't think it was particularly unusual. There was an article. Barnard graduates get interviewed when they're finished, and so I was one of the five people in the New York Times, about decisions we made about what to do after college. I realized that other people thought it was strange. Pioneers don't think they're pioneers. They just think they're doing what they want to do. I felt very grateful that there was an opportunity, and I also felt...it was very clear to me that if it weren't for the women's movement that was happening around me. But there was no way-and I spent a lot of time in rabbinical school investigating the history of women in the rabbinate, to see if there were others. It turned out there were a lot of women who went to rabbinical school, who went to Hebrew Union College. They decided that they would ordain women in the first wave of the women's movement in 1922, but the board of governors refused to actually ordain them. So there were a good two dozen women who went through rabbinical school, just like Sally, but they came out at a time when the dean would say to them, "Dear, don't you think you should find a nice husband and get married and stop this nonsense?" And they did, except for a couple of them who actually...well, some of them married rabbis and then when their husbands died, they became the rabbis. So there were historical precedents, and actually I did some work on one of them, whose name was Tehilla Lichtenstein. I wrote some significant papers about her, and was very much discouraged from doing my doctoral dissertation about her and wound up doing it about her husband and his movement. My advisor said to me, "You don't want to work on a woman." It wasn't just Franklin. Franklin actually probably would have let me do whatever I wanted, but I was working with Bert Korn. I was working with a man named Jerry Sloyan. There are a bunch of really, really wonderful men who were great advisors for me, but they were very afraid of this women's thing. They said, "You're going to get typecast. You're not going to find a job. You're going to get stuck in this narrow thing. Don't do it." Little did they know-they didn't have the foresight, but that were the careers of most of my contemporaries, and also my own, eventually.

INT: Tell me a bit more about rabbinical school. What was that like for you?

REBECCA: I loved rabbinical school because it was new. We were the first classes. We challenged a lot of traditional, educational ideas. We had classes in people's homes. We had a collegial environment. The faculty was all trying to figure this out. We were trying to figure it out. And I met some really wonderful people along the way.

INT: Like who?

REBECCA: Ira Eisenstein and later his wife, Judith. They were just...I still see Ira. I take my kids to visit him. He's an honest guy with a real sense of humor, and a healthy skepticism, which I really appreciated. Ivan Caine was my Bible teacher. He was a character and I just appreciated him from a distance, but he wasn't a man who liked to get close to particularly the women students, but I believe the students in general. He's a real interesting guy with interesting ideas, not all of which I agreed with. Arthur Gilbert was our first dean and he was a really wonderful human being. And my fellow students were pretty interesting characters. Lee Friedlander has been now for years the rabbi out on Long Island, and Arnie Rachlis is out in California. His wife was my best friend all through rabbinical school. It was really nice to have her. She was a very important influence on me and I on her, collegially. She was really smart and we spent a lot of time thinking about ideas to help me form my dissertation. I had a good experience. My marriage was really solid. Joel is a wonderful supporter and a kind, thoughtful human being. We went through a lot when his father was sick and then my father was sick. We went through a lot of tzorus together too.

INT: This was during rabbinical school?

REBECCA: It was during rabbinical school, yes.

INT: How did your parents feel about you becoming a rabbi?

REBECCA: My father was kind of out of it at that point. He didn't really have much of a reaction. My mother was curious. She thought it was a really interesting idea. She said she had no idea where it came from. She really didn't understand, but she learned a little bit. She started going to services with me a little bit. She got interested and a little bit of involved. She was proud of me. She liked my being in the rabbinate. I think it felt good to her. I think she was, like I say, skeptical about what it meant, and certainly...when I decided to go to Barnard and not Brooklyn College, that was a stretch for my mother. It wasn't very expensive back then. It wasn't like I was really...you know, I had gotten a Regents Scholarship and it was really inexpensive. I think they asked \$1600 tuition, \$400 of which was covered and I lived home, so it cost them \$1200. It was a stretch for my parents, but it wasn't out of the ball park. Living at home really made a difference.

INT: What did your mother do?

REBECCA: My mother was the assistant office manager in an industrial laundry.

INT: So she was proud of you.

REBECCA: Yes.

INT: And she didn't think that it was unusual?

REBECCA: I think that she really didn't. She wasn't involved in the Jewish world terribly much. I think she sort of saw that this women's movement was making a lot of changes for women, and I really was in a very nice position.

INT: You were living here and she was still there?

REBECCA: I moved after college. I moved making the decision I was going to be a rabbi. So I made the decision when I was in New York.

INT: But you lived here and they were still in New York?

REBECCA: Yes.

INT: Your Mom continued to live in New York?

REBECCA: My mother lived in Brooklyn until she became ill with cancer. Well, she became ill with cancer in the early Eighties and then we moved her down here, I guess the last year and a half, before I came back to Philly. And they're buried here.

INT: How were you received as a Jewish woman in rabbinical school?

REBECCA: At the rabbinical school, it was fine. It really was fine. I blended in. I fit in. The woman I was in class with was more of a sore thumb because she was single, and kind of sexualized a little bit, more than I was, I think.

INT: Were there any stresses or strains then?

REBECCA: In rabbinical school, as far as being a woman? No. Joel was really terrific. He did half the housework. He always did half the housework, sometimes even more than half the housework. And also being married gave me a certain sense of stability and we both made some money. It was a fairly comfortable time.

INT: And what happened next?

REBECCA: After rabbinical school? I went on to finish my doctorate. I took another year and a half. We took a job working at Temple Judea. He was the assistant rabbi at Temple Judea. We lived in the Bromley House, up in 69th and Old York Road. I was teaching for a little bit at Rutgers in Camden. Frank Littell got me a position part-time teaching at Rutgers in Camden. I did actually some work for KI, working as a part-time rabbi for the inbound town services. And the rabbinical school said, "Hey, wouldn't you like to come here and work as the part-time director of student services?" Actually, it was called student affairs at that point. "We need more staff, and here you are and you are an exemplary graduate," and had won whatever award there were to win at graduation. I didn't want to do it yet, because I had just gotten out. Being an

administrator with people that you were in school with is a little awkward, but Ira Eisenstein said to me, "You know, the postman only rings once." So I took the job, and I was sort of finishing up my dissertation and trying to decide if I wanted an academic career or a rabbinical career. I was doing a little bit of everything, and finally settled on really wanting to stay at the rabbinical school and make changes there, be involved in the process of growing that institution. It felt really like a good decision to me. It was a part-time job, and I thought, well, this is fine. I was twenty-seven. I wanted to have a family. So we started the process of trying to get pregnant, and it actually wound up taking four years. During that time of having this infertility problem, I was doing a little bit part-time rabbi stuff, a little bit teaching stuff and a little bit of the rabbinical school. Of course, then when I got pregnant, the job at the rabbinical school became full-time. Isn't that the way it works? So again, that was a new president. His name was Ira Silverman. He had a really interesting vision for the college. He wanted to move it out to the suburbs and change things. I wanted to be part of that. I was excited by it. So I worked full-time. I went back to work six weeks after my daughter was born and worked until the day...actually, I delivered my daughter on Yom Kippur, and I did services that night, and the next morning had a baby.

INT: What's been your involvement throughout this period with the Jewish community?

REBECCA: Throughout which period?

INT: This educational period.

REBECCA: When I was a rabbinical student?

INT: Yes.

REBECCA: I worked at the Y. I like working with older people, and I taught a lot down at Perlman-Daroff Campus at the Y. That was lots of fun. While we were students, Joel worked at Main Line Reform, and had led the youth group and we did a lot of that together. I enjoyed that work also. And I taught at Temple. I was pretty involved in my graduate program, and I had a teaching assistantship. So I did a lot at Temple University. There was a thing called the Jewish Free University that Joel was also involved with, and I did some teaching for that, and Makom. I used to do services at this drop-in center in the Seventies in Philadelphia. I did weekends at different congregations around the country, reconstructionist congregations. I got very involved in the reconstructionist movement. I used to go to the national conventions. I enjoyed, again, building a movement. It was a very exciting process.

INT: So it wasn't difficult then to get a teaching job after your dissertation?

REBECCA: Oh yeah. It was impossible. In the mid-Seventies, it really...I had an offer out in Colorado to teach five courses a semester and run the Jewish studies program, and there was no job for my husband there, and I said, "Well, I don't think so." I had the part-time thing at Rutgers in Camden, but that wasn't going to turn into a full-time job unless I really did a lot of

politicking, and it just didn't look like it was going to happen. And it wasn't a total choice, like oh, I have this perfect faculty job. That's what I had. (Tape shuts)

INT: We were talking about your experiences in the Eighties, rabbinical school. What were you enjoying the most and about your involvement in the Jewish community at that point?

REBECCA: After rabbinical school?

INT: Yes.

REBECCA: Well, I was mostly involved in the reconstructionist synagogue. I like community. I like doing services. I like being involved. I guess part of what my job was at the rabbinical college was to go out to congregations around the country and meet with them and get them started. So I'd take High Holiday pulpits. I worked at a synagogue in Plantation, Florida. That was very exciting. I was their High Holiday rabbi for years. I was involved a little bit with New York congregations, both in Manhattan and on Long Island. I was involved getting the Denver congregation moving. I had a little bit of work of Evanston, a little bit of work in Southern California. I had a great time going around the Jewish community and talking about whatever it was I felt like talking about, and then also listening to their issues and problems and trying to help them get going as congregations. I felt that I was good at that role.

INT: How were you able to advance over the years? It seems sort of not easy for-

REBECCA: I certainly didn't have any trouble in the Reconstructionist movement. I always saw myself as a big fish in a little pond. There weren't too many...I was deeply committed to Kaplan's ideas and to the ideas of the reconstructionist movement, and I was deeply committed to getting it going. There was really a sense that I had in the late Seventies and the early Eighties. This was something that was very exciting and really had possibility, and my talents were recognized. Ira Silverman was very much willing to listen to me and elevate my position from being the director of student affairs to the dean of students. I felt very good about the role that I played in that structure, in organizing the school.

INT: So you became a rabbi. You finished your dissertation. There seems to be a lot, though, between the stretch from the Eighties coming to the Nineties. When you look at the Nineties, there's this prolific writer and your affiliation with Temple. So how did that happen?

REBECCA: The job at the rabbinical school and raising small children was time-consuming and fulfilling, but I did manage to do writing. I was encouraged by particularly Jacob Staub, who was a colleague of mine. I had been instrumental in bringing him back to Philadelphia, on to the faculty of the rabbinical college. We started writing together. We published a book-an introduction to reconstructionism, called Exploring Judaism, which was a very exciting process. And there were other people around who sort of entered the universe, like Arthur Waskow and Judith Plaskow. There were just people who were doing exciting things, and I felt stimulated by

them and by Jacob to do some writing and make my own contribution. I mostly wrote for the reconstructionists, and then a little bit through Arthur's connections to New Menorah and things like that. I was writing within the movement contacts, but I really kept one finger in the Academy, where I used to go sometimes to the American Academy of Religion readings and deliver papers, and worked on publishing. My whole dissertation wasn't published, but pieces of it got published. Jack was a wonderful editor of my work, and I really developed a confidence in my writing and so began to do a fair amount of writing.

INT: Did you develop enemies, or people you would consider who-

REBECCA: I developed so many. I don't know that... probably the only real enemy it turned out that I had in the Jewish world was Art Green, who took over from Ira Silverman as the president of the rabbinical college. It was an enormous change in my life obviously in that period of time. It was around 1985, when my son was about a year old and my mother was dying. I was in the process of bringing myself to come out as a lesbian, even though I had had, all through my earlier childhood, experiences of very strong closeness to women and attachments to women. I also had attachments to men. I wasn't really quite sure what it meant, but there was something in the air that made me want to explore those connections further. I had been involved...I had actually, over the course of my marriage, gotten involved with relationships with women that were very engaging. Some of them were sexual, some of them were not, but they were certainly central to my life. My husband was aware of them and he basically knew what was going on, but there was a piece that I just felt-it didn't feel right to me. It didn't feel fair to me, to my young children, that I was living this other life and trying to live my one life and the other life, and I thought if I have to give up one of them, it's going to be the more traditional, suburban marriage life that I just wasn't really terribly well-suited for. And part of it was we moved to a bigger house, and I just didn't feel at home. I didn't feel right. There was something that just didn't feel right. I had gotten involved with my current partner. We became very, very close and she was working at the rabbinical college. I just found that my life was unsupportable and I really had to make a change. And the process of going through our divorce while my mother was dying and the children was pretty intense. It was Art Green who had pushed me out of the rabbinical school at that point. I should have left. It was a good time for me to leave. I had been there ten years, made my mark. The place was going under his direction in ways that I wasn't very happy with. He leveraged me out. So Art Green basically leveraged me out because I was feeling very vulnerable at that point, between my mother's death and being a little uncomfortable coming out as a lesbian. My ex-husband was very helpful and kind and sweet, but there were all these crazy rumors floating around. Actually, at the same time, another rabbi had been having an affair with the secretary in a neighboring synagogue, and so there were just all these inflated, confused rumors like Joel was having an affair with this rabbi and I...I don't even want to tell you. It was really hard, and I was feeling very vulnerable and like I should just leave the Jewish community. It really wasn't a comfortable place for me.

INT: Where did you get support from the Jewish community?

REBECCA: I got support from other faculty members, but they weren't really willing to stick their neck out. I got support certainly from the other lesbians, although Green had not allowed me to come out. Part of his condition for my staying for a final year was that I not say anything to anybody. So it wasn't that easy to get support. The truth is, people generally were perfectly nice about it and a lot of people said they already knew and that it certainly didn't change the way they looked at me. But I really felt like I needed to get out of the Jewish community. I have very strong pro-Palestinian feelings that are now perfectly okay, but in the mid-Eighties they were very, very controversial. I think I had more trouble coming out in favor of a two-state solution in terms of animosity than I did with being a lesbian. People were kind of getting used to this. I wasn't the pioneer in that sense. There were quite a number of women who came out before I did.

INT: What motivated you to-

REBECCA: Part of it was them. Part of it was that there were people...I had always said if I want to be a rabbi, I can't be a lesbian. They're not compatible. And then there was a part of me that said, well, if I want to be a lesbian, I really shouldn't be a rabbi, and that was the part of me, I think, that pushed me out of the community. But I was watching people do both, and feel comfortable with both, and I sort of needed to find my place in that picture. And I found my place through writing. The first thing that I did...what made it so hard with Art-and I felt like he was my enemy-was the stifling of my voice. When I left, the first thing I did was publish an article in *Twice Blessed*, which was the first volume of gay and lesbian writings, that actually my partner-the person who became my partner-Christie Balka, was one of the editors on, and I wrote an article about Leviticus and what it means. I really found my voice. I had done some good writing before. The first book was good writing. But I wrote a series of essays-one about the Book of Ruth that somebody asked me for for an anthology. I wound up being sort of the lesbian who got anthologized in a lot of Jewish volumes. And I put that stuff together and sent a book proposal to Columbia and they were very interested in it.

That was how I wound up writing my major book to date, which is about Jewish lesbians and the transformation of tradition, called *Like Bread on the Seder Plate*. And it really dealt with those conflicts and ambivalences, not just mine but those that I saw historically and made, I think, a lot of suggestions for healing some of those wounds. I found myself quite comfortable not working in the Jewish community. I felt like a lot of the stresses and the strains on my life were gone. Nobody cared if I kept kosher. Nobody cared if I observed Shabbat. Thinking about my growing up, that really wasn't what my Judaism was. My Judaism was a very...it was a personal spirituality and it was a very strong intellectual commitment. I loved studying Jewish texts. Actually, I hadn't thought about this until somebody the other day pointed it out to me, but that's another thing that women are completely kept away from, and that, to me, felt like the core, really the center of my Jewish studies was to write and teach and learn. So I guess I did that as an avocation, and got more involved in political things Jewishly, because if I weren't accountable in the Jewish community, nobody was going to tell me not to support Palestinian causes, and nobody was going to tell me not to perform intermarriages, which I thought was really the

right...I do it because I think it's the right thing to do, and nobody was going to tell me no, you can't do gay weddings. Nobody was going to tell me those kinds of things, because I wasn't beholden to anybody in the Jewish community for my livelihood. Actually, it was one of the reasons that originally the rabbinical college required Ph.D.'s, was that Ira Eisenstein wasn't that sure that it was such a good idea to draw a livelihood from the Jewish community and try to live in it.

So I really found myself much more comfortable on the margins of the Jewish community, and teaching ultimately-I mean, it took me a while to get here to Temple. I came to Temple right away, but it took me a while to get into the academic position. I was running a program for adults going back to school, which also felt like a good...that was a job that I got when I left RRC. And it was a good stopping place. It was an administrative job. It wasn't a terribly demanding job. I could do a lot of writing. I could do a lot of political work. I stayed involved in that way in the Jewish community. I joined a synagogue. We were members of Mishkan Sholom, which was very, very nice. We didn't want to belong to a gay synagogue because that wasn't my focus, but I wanted to belong to a reconstructionist synagogue that was open to gay and lesbian concerns. And I do think, in fairness to the movement, that also particularly with Green out of the way, they have come a long way on this issue. I think that they really...they have suffered themselves, and I feel very much like...you know, I was part of the process, one of the things that had to get thrown by the wayside while that was happening.

INT: So you're at Temple. How were you received here, being openly a lesbian?

REBECCA: I was openly a rabbi and openly a lesbian here.

INT: A lot of hats.

REBECCA: A lot of hats. I found that particularly...well, nobody cares that I'm a lesbian. It's an academic environment. I'm sure that are people who don't like women's studies, but I don't have that much to do with them. I don't really have to deal with them. It's not my job. I deal with the people who do like women's studies, and I think I'm a pretty good example of somebody who gets along with people and likes to...I do a lot of committee work. I'm pretty deeply entrenched in the institution. And what I found is, as a rabbi, there are a lot of secular Jews who were in the Academy who really aren't that interested in being in the Jewish community but feel good about feeling Jewish, and sometimes they needed counseling and sometimes they needed funerals and sometimes they needed weddings and sometimes they need lots of things. I find that I do that. The president, Peter Liacouras, discovered that...I worked in his office for about a six-month period, and when he found out I was a rabbi he was very excited, and since then I've been doing the invocation for the graduation. It's nice. I do like functioning peripherally as a rabbi, and I like functioning as a rabbi in this kind of secular context. It sometimes sort of reads back into my history. I was always a marginal Jew, and I kind of liked being a marginal Jew. It's a pleasant place for me to stand. I feel comfortable on the edge, more so than I do right in the center.

INT: What is it about your Jewish history or past that you really love, that you're comfortable? What was it about?

REBECCA: I love the history. I'm very passionate about Jewish history and about being able to be part of people that really has a lot to offer in terms of how we see the world and what we do, how we live. It was very interesting also being a marginal people. Maybe I identify with that- we've lived in a lot of different places and a lot of different ways and made some really interesting adaptations in order to do that.

INT: Do you ever get other sort of factions or groups...do you ever run across other areas of the Jewish community that aren't marginal, that are more traditional?

REBECCA: You mean the people who won't talk to me.

INT: Federation, the broader...

REBECCA: I certainly have run across problems with Federation. I have a lot of respect for the people who organize the Jewish community. I will not be one of them, but I'm not that critical of them. I feel that they work...people inside the Jewish community work very, very hard to raise the kind of money that keep the kind of institutions that I believe-(end of tape 1, side 2)

INT: February 26, 1999. I'm Sally Benson Alsher with Rebecca Alpert. We were just talking about your relationship to the larger Jewish community-what that means to you, how you see yourself in that-

REBECCA: I do basically see myself as an outsider. There are a couple of people who work for the Jewish Exponent who are sympathetic to left-wing Jews at this point, political Jews, political ~~classes~~. You sort of find the pocket that works and make the connections where you can.
Class 3

INT: Who are some of your friends, your close people?

REBECCA: I used to only have friends who were rabbis, but that's not true anymore. Linda Holtzman, who works at the rabbinical college, is still my best friend and kind of sister, and I maintain a close relationship with Robin Goldberg, who I was close with in rabbinical school. They're divorced now, but she was the wife of a rabbi. I'm still friends with my ex-husband and find him a really good source of just kind of taking care of life type things.

INT: We haven't talked about him yet.

REBECCA: My partner is my best friend.

INT: You've been with her for how long?

REBECCA: We've been together, I guess, since '85, '86, something like that. And my kids. Actually, my kids are really people I feel very, very close to.

INT: We haven't gotten to them either.

REBECCA: Sheila Weinberg is also another...someone who graduated from RRC, who's now a rabbi in Amherst, Massachusetts and she's also a very close friend. And there are some folks here at Temple whose company I enjoy quite a bit.

INT: What would you consider to be your greatest challenge to date?

REBECCA: In all of life?

INT: Yes.

REBECCA: Actually, I think the process of coming out and feeling comfortable with myself was probably my greatest life challenge. That period of time when my marriage was breaking up and my whole life was kind of falling apart, and my father had died three years earlier and my mother was dying a pretty painful death, and I had kids that were two and four and I wasn't really quite sure what I was going to do with my life. That was a real challenge, to sort of live through that and kind of feel...you know, there are times when you feel like Job. I really felt like Job. I thought, "Well what else? What else can go on here?" I must have moved three times from house to house. But facing that and living through it was probably my greatest challenge.

INT: What's been your greatest accomplishment?

REBECCA: You know, it's terrible to say because I'm a strong feminist who believes that my accomplishments are really raising the kids, who are just delightful human beings, given an unusual set of circumstances. I share custody with my ex-husband and they spend half a week at his house and half a week at my house. They're absolutely wonderful, delightful human beings. I feel really good about that.

INT: What are you most proud of professionally?

REBECCA: I'm proud of my writing. I think that it's really intimidating to write. I think we're all brought up thinking, "Oh, I can't do that." I'm really proud that I've been able to publish a couple of books and I'm working on a couple more and I've got more ideas. I'm very proud to be able to do that whole process and really accomplish that.

INT: Let's talk about some other activities. Do you do grants, consultant, consortiums service?

REBECCA: I do a lot of work in the community. I run the Greater Philadelphia Women's Studies Consortium, and I enjoy that. As part of that, I run around to conferences, so I have to get

grants to run the conferences. I've done a conference on Puerto Rican women's issues because of the centennial of the occupation of Puerto Rico by the United States. We did a conference on welfare a couple of years ago, and sort of dealt with some of those issues as they were coming up. I'm planning a conference now with the Women's Law Project on women and the law for the fall. This is fun. This is really fun. I enjoy those things.

INT: So have you ever experienced any discrimination just by being a woman at Temple, in this professional-

REBECCA: Well, I think I've been very sheltered in that sense. I certainly...I chair the Sexual Harassment Oversight Committee here, and believe me, I've seen it. I see a fair amount in terms of things that people have to live through. I have been very blessed not to have to have suffered from those things. It's sort of being in the right place at the right time.

INT: But discrimination in terms of being lesbian?

REBECCA: I suffer not at the hands of individuals but I don't have a right to marry and I don't have a right to have a partner on my health insurance, which has been a problem. I don't own my own home now, because the transfer tax is expensive. It would cost me...even though the city now has a policy of domestic partnership, which I was very involved in getting fought for, what they didn't tell us was that there's also a state real estate transfer tax. There are all kinds of institutional blocks that say, "Well, you really don't have a real relationship and you're really not married and we really don't recognize you."

INT: How involved were you in the politics?

REBECCA: I was very involved in the city. I was co-chair of the mayor's commission on sexual minorities for a few years, when we were just starting the same-sex partner benefits. I've written a bunch of articles on these issues. I'm involved in Temple. Temple ~~School~~ does not have a domestic partner policy, so I'm in the process of working on that too.

INT: What organizations are you most closely related to at this point?

REBECCA: I'm very involved at the moment with the American Academy of Religion. I sit on their commission for the status of women and I sit on the program committee for the women in religion program and I attend national conferences. (Tape shuts)

INT: We were talking about organizations.

REBECCA: So I'm involved in the American Academy of Religion. I sit on the local boards of the women's law project and of the family planning council of Southeastern Pennsylvania. I'm very dedicated to those causes.

INT: You have no resistance to your political-

REBECCA: We lived in a very sheltered world. I'm telling you.

INT: Even with these organizations-

REBECCA: Oh no. I'm on the women's law project and the ^{family planning} ~~learning~~ council, and those things are part of my obligation, I feel, as the director of women's studies. And the American Academy of Religion has become quite open to issues of race and gender and very concerned about those things.

INT: What would you do differently in your life?

REBECCA: I can't actually think of anything. I'm one of those people that...people say if you could have any feature, what would you have? I like myself. I just like myself. I like my life. I sort of feel like I've stumbled into some things that are wonderful and some others are troubles, but that's life. Life is kind of an adventure.

INT: So you got married and you had children. What was that like?

REBECCA: It was a challenge. I never actually...I never thought about getting married. I guess I just figured it was going to happen. I wasn't in love with Joel, because I didn't fall in love with men exactly in that way, but I really loved him very deeply and he was a very special person, and I knew I could spend time with him and be with him, and that would be a good sort of thing. We postponed having children when we first got married. We were married in '72. I said very clearly and both of us agreed that we shouldn't have kids while we were in school, and then I wanted to finish my dissertation. I said that's really my first child, that doctorate. And then immediately thereafter, we started trying to have children. I don't know if I weren't a rabbi whether I would have done that. That is to say, there is a lot of pressure, peer pressure, in the Jewish community. Not from my parents so much, but from the outside world. "Rabbis have children. Okay, I'm a rabbi. I'm going to have children." I didn't really want them especially. When I found out I was infertile I wanted them more. Damn, everybody else in the world can do this. Why can't I? It was delightful. I was amazed. I don't like children. I don't particularly like other people's children. I start liking them when they're about seventeen, which ^{this} is a good job for me, because I like them at college age. But at every point along the way, I've loved the cohort of my children. I've been fascinated by them. I think they're just amazing people. So it was a complete shock and surprise to me, and a very, very pleasant one. Maybe when you have high expectations, it's disappointment...I don't know. But I had no expectations and it was just great. Part of that too, honestly-joint custody is both a blessing and a curse. You miss half of their lives, but on the other hand, you have half the time to kind of do whatever it is you need to do without them, so when I'm with my kids, I am really with my kids. Still today, I don't go out on Friday night. I don't even go to shul on Friday night, because it's more important to me, most of the time-unless they're going to really be away. My son has to be picked up. My daughter has to be picked up

tonight, and there's got to be somebody home waiting for them. So I'll figure something out to do tonight. They're not around. But I feel very much like when I'm their parent, I am completely present to them.

INT: What was their religious upbringing like under your-

REBECCA: Joel was a rabbi at KI. That was the education that they got. I had some mixed feelings about it. I really don't like suburban reform Judaism. It's not my cup of tea. But there was no way. He was the education director, and there was no way that they would not go to that Hebrew school. It would have been a slap in the face to him, and I never would have done it. My daughter disliked it with great intensity. Finished her bat mitzvah and just got out. Did her bat mitzvah kicking the book. She didn't kick and scream because she doesn't kick and scream, but it was clearly disdainfully. She got very involved in Habonim and is a passionate socialist Zionist and I'm very entertained and proud of her for that. Synagogues are not for her. She doesn't believe in God. She thinks religion is mostly superstition. She sounds a lot like my Dad sometimes. My son is a committed family person. He's very engaged in intellectual engagements. He liked Hebrew school. He loved his bar mitzvah. He didn't want to stay at KI. It wasn't an appealing environment for him. But I'm sure he will raise his...my daughter-I don't know if she'll raise her kids as Jews. I don't know honestly. My son will raise his children as Jews and will be committed to getting them a Jewish education. He just has a feel for connection to family and he sees the connection to family and religion.

INT: Do you live close to KI?

REBECCA: It's a twelve-and-a-half minute drive, but who's counting. I live in Mount Airy.

INT: Did he remarry?

REBECCA: No. He lives with someone but they're not married.

INT: And holidays and stuff you spend together?

REBECCA: Actually, we spend American holidays together. I love his extended family and I'm still welcome back there, so we do Thanksgiving with his extended family and pseudo-Christmas, whatever it is, because some of them are Christian. Passover we do with friends, and he has them one night and I have them the other night. The kids-they come every year with us. Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur-it kind of depends on who's working where. They go either place.

INT: How old are the children now?

REBECCA: My son will be fifteen next month and my daughter is sixteen.

INT: Close together.

REBECCA: They were sixteen months apart. When they tell you you have an infertility problem, they tell you, "Don't bother to use birth control," and they're wrong. I believe in abortion, but there was no reason to give up that second child.

INT: What about juggling, juggling marriage and all your different hats?

REBECCA: It's hideous, isn't it? It's hard on all of us. This is the generation of women that have figured out, I guess, how to do that. I think the whole society works much harder than it should, and in some sense, women maybe are lucky because they have to work at a lot of different...I live variety, so I like juggling. I find juggling...I'm an administrator. That's sort of how administrators work. So it's not the juggling that's disturbing to me. It's the amount of work that people are expected to do. They all say we do better than our parents, but I think we work harder for what we do than our parents did. I think it's just not quantified exactly in that way.

INT: Did you have help and stuff like that?

REBECCA: When the kids were little we did actually. We were both making decent salaries, and we had a woman. Her name was Pat Bodman. She came to the house and took care of the kids. That was the only way I could go back to work when my kids were so little was to have somebody. And she was like their third parent. Marvelous, marvelous person. Stayed with us through the divorce. Came to both houses. Worked actually when they went to nursery school. We got her a job at KI, working in the nursery school, so she was in a different class but she was with them and able to work part-time with them until they were in third and fourth grade, and then she found a full-time job. I credit her with a lot of their kindness, goodness and civility.

INT: How do they respond to your lifestyle and your husband's lifestyle? It's not traditional.

REBECCA: It's not traditional but their father was totally respectful of me. They never got a bad message about being gay. It was just always part of what they knew was reality. My son is more...he sees it intellectually and personally and harder with his peer group. It's hard with his peer group. But they both have the option. It's always been my belief that they have to come out themselves in whatever way they want to, to whomever they want to, and to whomever they don't want to they could be in the closet and that's their business. My son did not want us to be public at his bar mitzvah, and we weren't, because I felt like that was important to him. My daughter takes her friends to the bookstore to see my book, because she's proud of it. In her circles, she said her friends are more lefty and more cool. All of her friends' parents are divorced. They all kind of...Bohemian. She lives a more Bohemian lifestyle, and particularly at Camp Galil, at Habonim. I'm a prize.

INT: How religious would you say you are?

REBECCA: I have a funny way of defining that. I think that ethnically I am very...I'm 100% Jewish. Religiously, I'm not. I don't find Jewish religion to be meaningful to me, and believe me, I've spend a lot of angst and struggle over that. I am a deeply religious person, that is...I don't like the word spiritual. I feel a connection outside myself that I'm perfectly willing to call God. I feel like I can have conversations with God, but those conversations don't often take place in shul. They more often take place sitting in a park, watching a sunset, in the midst of a conversation with another human being. In that I'm Buberian. I feel very much like Martin Buber. He was a main influence on my religiosity. And over the last few years, and even when I was younger, I have found that there are certain like midnight mass, that is just with music and candles and stuff. It's a religious experience for me. I feel a sense of some power greater than myself and some connection to that. I've been doing Buddhist meditation in the last couple of years, and I also find that a very, very powerful way to connect to God. I love Friends meetings. I don't want to be any of those things, but I find that for my spiritual life, those are really important. For my identity, like who I really am as a human being in the world, I'm a Jew, but Judaism fails me religiously. I've never been able to figure out...I don't keep kosher. I don't find eating kosher food to be a meaningful religious experience. I don't find Jewish holidays religious. I find them culturally and historically relevant and resonant, but they're not religious in that sense.

INT: That must have been so interesting to go to rabbinical school, with all of this traditional doctrines, and yet you created your own sense of what you want to be, or what you-

REBECCA: What I want to be religiously. I certainly...I conduct Jewish prayer services and I feel like I can be a spiritual guide for other people who find that a religious experience. I could connect to it in that way. Again, I find it meaningful from a sense of group cohesion and a sense of connection. And I'll find sometimes that during the day I will find myself praying, but not the words in the prayer book. I sort of talk to God sometimes.

INT: Do you think that reconstructionism then addresses...is much more directed towards people who feel that way?

REBECCA: I think it used to be. I think that when I became a reconstructionist...I became a reconstructionist because of Kaplan's ideas, which were very much related to this idea that you're part of a people and that Judaism was a civilization and that religion was a dimension of that civilization, and I found over the years that reconstructionism has become a much, much more spiritual adventure. They have kind of gotten co-opted by the Jewish Renewal Movement. And this seems to be what people are interested in. Again, I'm marginal in a sense. I find that that's not...I'm much more comfortable being a rabbi to people who don't want rabbis full-time, people who meet on occasions that dip into Jewish life.

INT: Well, where would you suggest someone go though who feels the same way that you do?

REBECCA: See, I think that's what's curious, is that once you wind up wanting to go

someplace, you no longer feel... You may want to go someplace on occasion, but you don't really... Anybody that really wants to spend thousands of dollars on synagogue membership, they're already hooked into this system. They're willing to make a commitment to the system and they feel connected to it in that way. Most of the people I know who think like I do, they don't want a full-time connection to Judaism. They want to make sure it's there, but they don't need it as a service for their lives. Let me also say that I feel sometimes like I provide a path for people. Because I sit on the margin, I can provide an entryway, and if people want to go further, if they want to explore what I in my teens and twenties and early thirties really wanted to explore, I think that's great, but I don't want to go with them. I'm happy to open the door for them and show them where the resources are and let them go. I do think I'm good at the door.

INT: But you want to continue your journey, your own adventure, to figure out what more is going to be comforting to you. What other family members are you close to? Are you close to your cousins still?

REBECCA: I'm very close to Joel's family. There's a set of cousins. His first cousin, mother's sister's daughter, and her husband, who's Japanese. They're lovely people. I'm close to their children. They're really my family. I think of them as my family. I still see my last aunt and uncle, the ones who I went to Seder in their house as a child and was very close to them after my mother died. My aunt became a surrogate mother for me. They just both died at ninety, a year ago. I see their son. One of my claims to fame is that their son-not the one that I see but the one that I don't see, is the author of the Feminazi Cards that he created for Rush Limbaugh. So you can imagine that I'm close to my family. The cousin that I do see tells me stuff like, "I don't care about Monica Lewinsky having sex with the president, but why does he let her in his office where he has those documents that she's probably stealing for the Chinese?" So if we could keep out all politics, I get along fine with these guys. They're in their late sixties, and they're sort of different. I still see that cousin that I was close with as a child. Actually, we're going to see Cabaret next week. I see her a couple of times a year. I have no contact with my Dad's family at all, and all I have is these minimal contacts with my Mom's family. It's unfortunate.

INT: How did they all respond to your coming out?

REBECCA: The few cousins who know? My cousins are fine. They're just fine. This is your life, you like it... The two cousins that I see like Christie just fine. My aunt and uncle were just amazing. I didn't actually tell them. I didn't see any real need to tell them, but my aunt read about it in the newspaper, in the Jewish Week. She didn't say anything to me. She sort of accepted that Christie was coming along when we went up to visit them, and then one day she said to me, "I won this prize from the Lupus Foundation. It's a weekend at the Waldorf-Astoria. I'm too old to go. Maybe you and Christie would like to do that." It was just very... they were just very wonderful about it, so I've been also very lucky. I had told my mother before she died that I was thinking about leaving Joel and it was because I had these relationships as a child and this is where I was seeing myself going, and it wasn't the gay stuff that bothered her. She really had built in her mind wife, mother, kids, suburbs, house, success, upper middle class. It was very

hard for her to let go of that image. What I realized as she was dying was that that was what she wanted for me and I never really figured out what I wanted. I did what she wanted until she died and then I started doing what I wanted.

INT: Were you ever unhappy as a child by having these feelings?

REBECCA: Feelings never made me unhappy. Only children are lonely, and a lot of stuff went on inside my head. I had a couple of relationships in high school, one with a person with whom I'm also still friendly. She came out early on and I was a little uncomfortable with her in the late Sixties and said, "No, I'm not like that. I'm normal." It's delightful to fall in love, and I enjoyed that a lot.

INT: Did I ask you how you practice Judaism in your home today? Do you light Shabbat candles?

REBECCA: We do Friday nights, a little bit less regularly now that my kids are never home and I've got to go chasing them around the universe. But certainly until they were fourteen, they were with me on Shabbos, and every Friday night we did home ritual. In the early years we went to the synagogue too, until they got sort of tired of doing that, and then our home ritual became watching "Picket Fences" together and talking about it, which was delightful. I may go back. I don't know when they leave home, and they'll be leaving home in a few years. I may start becoming a synagogue-goer again.

INT: To which synagogue?

REBECCA: Mishkan Sholom.

INT: What have you discovered about yourself and the Jewish community in all this?

REBECCA: I think that I feel more comfortable on the margins than in the center.

INT: What special talents or qualities do you bring to your work in the community?

REBECCA: In the Jewish community? Well, I think part of it is my willingness just to say what's on my mind and to be provocative and to share other opinions that may not be that welcome, but to be comfortable putting them out there in the mix. And also, I'm actually a fairly talented liturgist. I have a good voice. I've done cantorial work. I sing. I get very good responses from the people I marry and bury and for whom I do services, that I create an environment that provides an opportunity for them to be present.

INT: Have you ever thought about having your own congregation, or does that kind of go against your...

REBECCA: Well, the people in Plantation desperately wanted me to come and be their rabbi, and actually, Joel said he wouldn't live in South Florida, and it was a good thing because I think my life would have unfolded in very, very different directions. But mostly I like working with them part-time and leading them to a place where they want to go off on their own.

INT: How do you do that? Someone just comes to you and says, "I need to talk to you"?

REBECCA: In terms of individuals? Yes. People just sort of show up out of the woodwork a lot. A lot of it is Temple itself. People sort of know I'm a rabbi and they know I'm not like other rabbis. They can talk to me.

INT: We talked about your "spirituality" and how you express that. How do you think you were able to advance over the years? I don't know if you asked me that.

REBECCA: You did that.

INT: Okay, we did talk about that. These are my female and Jewish questions. I think in the process of this you've kind of answered what you enjoy most about being Jewish-belonging to the group, kind of.

REBECCA: I think belonging to the group, a sense of history, a sense of past, present and future, a sense of being different in society as well. I think we have a real interesting ethic to offer people and a different way of being.

INT: And how has being a woman, Jewish, lesbian, helped or hindered some of your participation?

REBECCA: Well, I think it's opened doors for me. I think I've just been in the right place at the right time. There has been a lot of openness to finding out more about what it feels like to be a Jewish lesbian, to be a Jewish feminist. I've had a lot of avenues. In rabbinical school a lot, being one of the first women to be trained as a rabbi. People wanted to know what's it like, and it gave me opportunities to talk about the disadvantages of women and Judaism through our history and to really do some educating.

INT: What does it mean to you to be Jewish and female going into the 21st century?

REBECCA: I don't know. It seems to me that Jews shouldn't worry about the millennium and the 21st century and all that. We just keep going. You asked me about the 21st century and I'm going to tell you you got to figure out technology and figure out how to communicate in different ways with people. I'm a little leery...I do it, but I'm concerned about the kind of sound bites that you're forced to give. I hope...I can give you a very idealistic statement about how Jewish women can do better than that, but I'm afraid we're getting swept along with this.

INT: But I'm going to ask you some of the questions that I need to ask you. As women's role have evolved and continued to be identified and changed, what's your hope for the future of women's involvement with Jewish community? I want to preface it by saying that your answer is not going to be standard to someone who is involved in the Federation. You're talking about something that's marginal, using your word.

REBECCA: I think that the feminist movement, or the second wave of the feminist movement, had a real tension in it between-(end of tape 2, side 1)

Tape 2, side 2-blank

INT: Rebecca Alpert, February 26, 1999.

REBECCA: I was saying that it would be wonderful for women not have to choose between being equal and being different, but being able to have equality with men where it is possible, and that also to carve out a women's Judaism, which seems to be happening. When I look around the mainstream, it seems to me that there is more of an openness and an acceptance of that.

INT: How?

REBECCA: Women's issues get covered better. I think women are more aware of their possibilities and won't necessarily take a backseat if they don't want to. Some of the more exciting things that are happening are happening in orthodoxy. Orthodox women are demanding education and demanding the right to be able to change halacha.

INT: I would guess that feminism things, like now that women's studies are acceptable in universities, that all of these things have contributed to a greater...

REBECCA: I think so. I think there's also an enormous backlash, just reading. My e-mail today, about somebody who was talking one more time about PC. It seems to me that that has become just an absolute in society, to say anytime anybody tries to be culturally sensitive, you're being PC. There is a sense of, "Oh, couldn't we just get back to the way things were," but I don't think they'll ever really get back to the way things were, if they ever were that way.

INT: How do you see yourself in five or ten years from now?

REBECCA: In 2001, I hope that I will be celebrating my twenty-fifth year in the rabbinate. I hope to get tenure at that point, and my daughter will have graduated from high school. I feel like at that time I'm just going to think about...I'm in the process of thinking about what it's going to start looking like. It will be different. When my kids are away and I do have more time, I think about traveling. Temple has a program in Japan and I've thought about spending a year there. It may be about moving into Center City, and I kind of miss urban life. And having maybe more time to devote to some of the volunteer kind of work that I do on boards that I don't really have

the time now to devote to. Thinking of a new writing project. I have a couple of books in the hopper. One is called Voices of the Religious Left, and it's trying to show that there is a religious left during these past twenty years of the religious right. Another one is a volume called The First Generation of Lesbians in the Rabbinate, and I'm putting together a volume of essays. There are about fifty lesbians in the rabbinate right now, and about fifteen have written.

INT: Do men...

REBECCA: There are not as many gay men.

INT: Or maybe there are but they just haven't come out.

REBECCA: I don't think so. There aren't as many. I think that a lot of the women who are attracted to the rabbinate are attracted because they're feminists, and there are a fair percentage of feminists who are women-centered and there you have that. And I do think it's much more stigmatized. I think being gay is much, much more stigmatized in the Jewish community.

INT: It doesn't sound that you were attracted to rabbinical school because you were...

REBECCA: I don't think so. But I think that part of my...I was so grateful to the feminist movement for enabling me to become a rabbi. It made me very much aware. I really studied and learned about what that meant.

INT: It didn't seem like you did it to make a point or to be-

REBECCA: No, not at all. I don't think any of us actually do it to make a point, but it feels like religion is a comfortable place to try out and think about and question. People who like to ask ethical questions. People who like to help others. I don't know-a funny bunch of people. I don't know what my writing project is going to be after that. I think about religion and sports. It's a real interesting topic. So I don't know where I'm going.

INT: Do you have anything more to say about your hope for the future of American Jewry in the 21st century?

REBECCA: I hope we have a future as American Jews.

INT: Any advice or warning you would offer to other women as they became involved in the Jewish community, your daughter perhaps?

REBECCA: I think that people have to be aware, particularly in Philadelphia, it's a pretty closed circle and that you're getting into something that can be...for me, became very claustrophobic, but if you're looking for something that is small and intimate and maybe a barrage against the incredible impersonalness in the universe, it's a great place to settle down. My daughter has

actually found a place in Habonim, and it functions precisely that way for her.

INT: Are there any specific things that you see as main issues of being Jewish as being there in the 21st century?

REBECCA: I don't know. I'm not much of a predictor of the future. I find that having lived through the past and the present, it's completely surprised me, so I don't know why I would be able to figure out what the future is going to be like.

INT: Is there any message you'd like to end with?

REBECCA: I think it's important...I think this process is an important process, of being aware and just making sure that you know what's going on around you. There's a lot of information out there and not a lot of knowledge, and trying to figure out how to use information and how to turn it into knowledge I think is a real important thing that people have to do. That's the task of the 21st century.

INT: Is there anything else that you'd like to say today or that I haven't asked?

REBECCA: You did a good job. You're a good interviewer and I appreciate it. It was a pleasant conversation. Thank you.

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