# Eleyna Fugman Transcript

Jayne Guberman: This is Jayne Guberman. Today is Sunday, February 8, 2015. I'm here with Elena Fugman at the Meet Me at Sinai Day of Learning at B'nai Jeshurun in New York City. We're going to conduct an interview for the Jewish Women's Archives. So, Elena, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Elena Fugman: Yes, you do.

JG: Great. So as we were just mentioning, JWA is interested in the way that feminism has changed the Jewish community and the public and private lives of Jewish women over the past several decades. So I'm going to ask you to just start by telling us when and where you were born and where you grew up.

EF: Great. I was born in a small town called Willits, California. Northern California. I grew up in an even smaller town nearby called Covelo, California.

JG: Can you briefly tell me about your family? Describe them and also their attitude towards and involvement with Judaism and Jewish life when you were growing up.

EF:  Certainly.  My mother grew up in Hyde Park, Chicago.  It was part of the first movement of desegregation or living … [Interruption in the recording.] My mother was born and grew up in Hyde Park, Chicago.  My father is from Fresno, California.  My mother is Jewish, and my father was Protestant.

JG:  Okay.  So, there was an interfaith family.  What was that like for you growing up, and what was their involvement in Jewish life?  In any other faith?

EF:  My mother and my father were both of a generation that was sort of seeking a new life for themselves, different from their families in different ways.  So my mother did actively decide to – her family had been somewhat secular in Hyde Park.  They didn't daven.  They did belong to a shul.  My grandparents, with some other parents, helped start a sort of "secular Sunday school," they called it.  So they wanted to teach their children Jewish values, but they didn't believe in God, and they didn't want to teach their children that they needed to believe in God.  So my mother left her home and went West like a lot of people in the seventies did, or sixties.

JG:  When was your mother born?

EF:  She was born in '45.  She left and went with her Jewish husband at that time to the

West Coast.  They divorced pretty quickly, and she met my Protestant father, who had just returned from the Peace Corps in Bolivia.  They were both working for the city of Compton, and they worked in an office together.  My father was doing urban planning, and my mother was working in the office somehow.  They met and sort of convened and decided that they wanted what I call a "back to the land" sort of hippie movement.  They were part of that.  They traveled up the coast of the state of California, living on communes and meeting other people, and eventually settled in this small town where, with help from their parents, they bought property, and we built a house when I was four, and we grew our own vegetables and raised animals.

JG:  So what years were these?

EF:  So I was born in ’75.  They were together from probably from ’70 to ’75 in California doing this adventure and then decided to settle down and raise children together in the early seventies.  I was born in '75.  So in terms of my Jewish education, one of the things that occurred to me to say to you in this interview is I think that I was a feminist before I was Jewish.  I didn't know about my Judaism.  My mother wasn't interested in teaching me a lot.  She did have some feeling of responsibility and wanted to teach me a little.  Hanukkah was the most we could pull off, and that was if we had a calendar that year that actually had Jewish holidays on it.  Some sort of secular calendar, sometimes they add it.  So we weren't connected enough.  If we had had other Jewish people around, I think my mother would have engaged more; especially as I got older, she kind of grew more interested.  But, as a young person, it was really up to her.  She had to remember that it was the holiday and remember whatever she could from her childhood to teach

us.  But Hanukkah was something we did.

JG:  Was there any kind of Jewish community around you?

EF:  No, there was no synagogue.  What I like to say – I use this analogy because I feel like it's similar – in a gay community, we talk about people being out and not out.  There were actually several Jews in this small town I grew up in, but none of them were out.  None of them identified publicly as Jewish.  There was no organized Judaism.

JG:  Did you know each other?

EF:  Yes.  Yes.  Well, I didn't know other Jewish children.  My mother knew the other Jewish adults, but we were never connected and said, “You're a Jewish child, and this is a Jewish child.”  In fact, I was ostracized because even though my mother didn't identify as Jewish, people found out in this small town that she was, and so people would tell me they couldn't play with me.  It was a very Christian community; they couldn't play with me because I didn't believe in God, or I didn't believe in the right God, or I wasn't Christian.

JG: What about your father's religious background?

EF: My father was raised pretty secular himself. I think perhaps it was – you hear some stories. His parents would drop him off at Sunday school but not go to church, that sort of thing. So he never had a connection with his Protestant religion and wasn't interested in it at all. I think he would identify more as an agnostic than an atheist but definitely had no – and he was not interested in my mother's Judaism also, or in teaching us anything; even though we were Jewish children, he wasn't interested. He actually would sometimes leave the room for Hanukkah. He didn't want to be part of it.

JG: What about Christmas?

EF: Oh, we had Christmas. Yeah. [laughter]

JG: What did that mean?

EF: And my mother participated. It meant we had a Christmas tree. We'd go up to the mountains, and we'd cut our own tree, and we'd bring it down, and we'd decorate it, and

we'd have presents.  We did do Easter, too.  We had Christian friends.  My dad was a schoolteacher, and we had neighbors who were, and they liked Easter.  So we'd do an Easter egg hunt with them.  I'm trying to think if there are other Christian holidays.  I think those are the big ones, right?  [laughter]

JG:  Can you just tell me briefly?  I mean, you're here today, so tell me a little bit about your journey.

EF:  The reason I say I was a feminist, and I think this is important – before I was Jewish – I was always Jewish, of course.  But before that became important, is because I did have my Jewish grandmother, [who]was a feminist.  She wouldn't have necessarily said that but she went to college, and she believed in college education, and she always told me that I was strong and bold and that I could do anything, and she was very supportive.  She taught that to her daughter.  My mother taught that to me in different ways.  My mother modeled that for me; she decided to go into the mountains and built her own house.  Her sister, my aunt, was very active in the domestic violence movement in Chicago, and now she sits on many boards.  She sent me feminist fairy tales as a little girl and would talk to me about what it meant to be – she talked to me about feminism in a way.  So I learned from my Jewish mothers and grandmothers what feminism was, and it made sense to me, and I believed that women should have equality.  And I fought.  I fought for that in high school, and I fought with my dad some about it.  In this very rural community, there wasn't a women's organization I could join.  My connection, funny enough, is to a catalog.  It was called Northern Sun Merchandising.  They're based in Minnesota.  I somehow found this catalog, and it was just filled with buttons and bumper

stickers.  That's how I learned that I could think other ways or all these – they were just funny things.  So that's how I learned about – part of the way.  I learned from my family and then, and sort of got reinforced from whatever culture I could access.  Also, at the same time, I grew up next to an Indian reservation.  So all my friends were native.  I learned about racism from a very young age; although I didn't know that's what its name was, I learned that there was injustice.  I saw it very clearly in my community.  I was introduced, by another Jewish aunt, to a camp when I was sixteen; it was called the Encampment for Citizenship.  I went there for six weeks.  It was in California that year.  It was a very powerful experience because it was six weeks.  They had picked young people who were from all different classes and races and backgrounds and brought us together and explained to us about social injustice and about racism and classism.  Not about antisemitism, but about sexism, and we spent six weeks together.  So I believe – understanding that there was injustice –  Then all of that culminated in me going away to college on the East Coast, and my women's peer counselor, who is here, who is a rabbi now, was very sweet with me.  I was a feminist, and I would go to her to talk about my feminine concerns.  She would tell me I was Jewish, and I would say to her, “I don't know what that means,” or “I'm not sure.”  She would very kindly say that I was, and she'd invite me to come to events with her.

JG:  Why would she say you were?  By the way, which school is this at?

EF:  This was at Brown University.  She would say I was Jewish because I had a Jewish mother.  She would sort of help – I didn't claim that at all.  But she would say, “Simply by birth, you are Jewish.  And if you want to be part of this, you are welcome.”  She was

very clear about her Jewishness and her feminism. So it was very helpful for me. I came out as a lesbian during that year. There was an important thing happening. I think it was in the early nineties, where – I think it's happened for a long time, but in that moment, it looked like the way to be a feminist was actually to separate from men for a while. It was good. It was important to be with those women. I dropped out of school, and I went back to San Francisco, and there were people there that were gay and lesbian and bisexual – and not transgender so much at that point – organizing minyans and Shabbats. I had never been part of a minyan or to a Shabbat, but I felt welcomed here, even though I knew nothing. I felt these people were very welcoming to me. So that's how I started exploring my Judaism.

JG: So when did you first become aware that gender mattered to you as a Jew?

EF: I wrote in my survey that I did read Letty's [Cottin Pogrebin] book during that time – *Deborah, Golda and Me*. It was not fresh off the presses. I don't know if I was introduced to it in a class, perhaps, or if I just heard about it, but she made a very interesting point. Someone who already identified as a feminist, I wasn't sure how that was going to work in terms of Judaism because one of the reasons my mom rejected Judaism was because of its patriarchal-ness. So seeing a Jewish woman make a bold statement that it was possible to be both and that she wanted – that was the first time it sort of came together for me. I struggle with it still, but I'm very committed to reclaiming my Judaism, and I am a feminist, so I'm going to have to figure it out, is the way I look at it.

JG:  Yeah.  Can you point to any specific moment or experience that sort of crystallized when you realized the importance of gender?  Because here you were exploring Jewish life as a young adult, essentially.  What was most striking about it as you were in those early experiences of going to minyans?

EF:  Well, I mean, it's a different experience than many, but my first Shabbat was called Dyke Shabbat.  I was celebrating Shabbat with other women who were really reclaiming what it was to be women in a women-only space.  They were leading; there were no men there.  So it was very easy for me to see that this was a space where I could be fully Jewish and fully female.  That made a big difference to me.  I was led into this by women, by Rabbi Cohen, who's here, and then by this group of women.  I was led into my Judaism that way.

JG:  So how would you say that feminism has really shaped your life and your sense of yourself Jewishly as you look back?

EF:  Well, because I grew up in the time that I was, I was taught about feminism as a young woman.  Even though I was raised in a very isolated place, I knew about feminism, and feminism, to me, is being pleased and proud of who you are regardless of how the society sees you.  So it fit very nicely that when I finally was able to understand that I was Jewish, I would be pleased and excited and want to claim that and be proud of it.

JG: How did you sort of respond to anything you understood about the patriarchal nature of Judaism historically?

EF: I skirted it. The Jews who brought me in, the Jewish practice that brought me in, was in California, and that was a Renewal movement. Once the Dyke Shabbat ended and that type of thing, I started getting interested in going to services, and I would go to Renewal services, and they changed the language, and all of it was – I grew up in an alternative culture, so, to me, it wasn't weird. I knew this wasn't traditional language, but it was familiar. It was the goddess-this and the Shekhinah. It was things that – I had grown up in a hippie culture, so it was actually the Renewal movement also that made Judaism accessible to me as a woman because they had already figured out that changing language is important. At this point, it's a little different. Now I'm very interested in – actually, I want to know traditional practices, which is why I'm in New York this year. I'm here for a year of learning.

JG: So tell me what you're doing, and also go back for a minute, though, and say, what brought you to that point? What got you to a point where you were more interested in the traditional Jewish practice and texts, et cetera?

EF: Well, just like feminism is reclaiming what it is to be a woman, I feel like reclaiming my Judaism is actually understanding the history and the practice from its deepest – from its base level. It’s been a very slow progression, but I've become more and more

interested.  My adult bat mitzvah really helped move me forward.  A friend and I decided maybe fifteen or eighteen years ago when we first met that we wanted to do that together.  It didn't quite happen that way.  I had moved to Oregon, and a program was starting at a Reconstructionist synagogue, and I had heard that the educator was wonderful.  She was a woman and a feminist.  So I decided to become a member of the synagogue just so that I could do the adult b'nai mitzvah program because it was for members only.

JG:  Tell us about that.  That sounds wonderful.

EF:  It was.  It was a two-and-a-half-year program.  There were eighteen of us to start, seventeen women and one man.  There were twelve of us at the end, eleven women and one man.  We studied weekly on Wednesday evenings together.  We started with a mixture of just learning the services.  So we studied shacharit for probably the first four or five months.  We did a Hebrew class, a very basic Hebrew class.  We continued studying prayers, but then we added leining.  We took a leining class [and] learned to read trope.  The culmination was that I had an amazing Shabbos morning, and I love leining; I just adore it.  I love singing.  I love the trope, the melodies; something feels very old about it, very deep.  I'm not a historian in a professional way, but I love history, and I love oral history also.  That's what I did my honors thesis on at Brown University, on community organizing, and I collected oral histories.  Actually, faith-based community organizing.  That's what I was interested in then.  I'm also interested in my grandmother's stories.  My grandfather was raised here in Queens and had considered the rabbinate, and I knew that he would have davened deeply.  So I think about him a lot when I'm davening now.

Where did that come from?  What was I talking about?

JG:  You were talking about your bat mitzvah.

EF:  Yeah.  So my bat mitzvah was lovely.  Doing it with women led by a feminist, I felt grounded.  I felt like I'd gained a certain amount of knowledge.  I was very pleased to be able to leyn in front of people, even though it was nerve-wracking.  That took me to just continue to want more Jewish education.  So I looked at local university – Oregon is a little (loveable?).

JG:  Where in Oregon?

EF:  I'm in Portland.  Yeah.  So it doesn't have a bounty of offerings, but whatever I could – I enrolled.  There's a Melton program there, so I enrolled in that.  I took a class at Portland State University on exegesis.  I studied online.  I started taking modern Hebrew so that I could – I considered going to rabbinical school because it's hard to find a way to really deeply immerse yourself in Jewish education.  It sounds funny, but rabbinical school – I visited Hebrew College; they have an amazing program, and I still think about it as a way if I want to continue.  This sounds a little offhanded, but I don't think a rabbi would be the worst job for me.  I think that I'm already a leader in my community in many

ways.  So it's something I consider still, but I'm here because I need a lot more basic education.  So I'm taking classes at Drisha [Institute for Jewish Education], studying at Hadar, and going to a local synagogue.  I've been here for one month in Manhattan.  I'm here for a year of study, self-directed learning.

JG:  So what does that mean, self-directed learning?

EF:  It means that I didn't enroll in an official program.  You can do a year at Hadar or a fellowship or something, but I wasn't able to make that work in my schedule.  So I'm literally self-directing my learning.  I'm taking some classes at Drisha.  I'm davening at Hadar.  I'll probably go to Rabbi Felicia's weekly Parshat talk, just things that are going on. I'm living right here on the Upper West Side.

JG:  What would you consider the most important accomplishments of Jewish feminism over the past several decades, as you understand it?

EF:  I think that if it weren't for Jewish feminists, my foremothers, the women who have done this work before me, I wouldn't have been able to access my Judaism.  I don't think without that language, the language change – as a young woman, who's a feminist trying to find out about Judaism, if I had walked in, if there hadn't been a Renewal movement, if

there hadn't been a Dyke Shabbat, all these things that feminists created – they had to have been feminists – that I couldn't have found a doorway in, so I wouldn't be here where I am right now without them.

JG: And do you think that's true for many people as you sort of experience the Jewish community?

EF: I do. I think that a lot of people, especially on the West Coast – Jews who have left the East Coast, looking for something different – that it's important that they have – there's a lot of feminist values that a lot of my women friends, the people I daven with now, or my havurah at home, that it's similar. They're alienated by the patriarchal-ness of Judaism. So without the work of feminists to rewrite language, to rethink, to challenge, to sit – without that going on, there wouldn't be space. There wouldn't even be the chance. I think the door is cracked because of the work that's been done and that women can think about it. I think reclaiming Judaism – there's so many Jews right now – the Pew Report of the amount of non-affiliated Jews. There's so many Jews who, I think, want connection, but it’s not accessible to feminist women, to women of my generation who grew up with this as our right. Without that, it was not possible.

JG: So tell us a little bit more about the issue of language – God language, liturgical language, et cetera – and how you have dealt with that and deal with it today.

EF:  It's hard for me.  It's complicated.  Like I said, I don't know that I would have been able to even start davening if I hadn't started with feminine language, that it was there, that it was the option.

JG:  So what is it when you say that?  Can you be a little bit more specific?

EF:  *Brucha at Ya Shechinah*.  That's how blessings – when I started davening as a twenty-one-year-old, they were printed out pages from Renewal.  I wasn't reading out of a siddur.  I was reading from – and there were pictures of women dancing, and there were olive branches, and it was in English.  I didn't know any Hebrew. [inaudible]

JG:  What do you mean?  It was in transliteration when you say it was in English, or it was in English or both?

EF:  It would be transliterated in English, and sometimes there would be a little Hebrew. This is West Coast people attempting to make Judaism accessible to people like me, I guess, people who didn't have any Hebrew background.

JG: When you daven now, you basically are using that sort of thing?

EF: No, no. What I'm trying to do now is to read Hebrew. So I actually prefer – what is this? What's it called? The Koren Siddur is what they daven with at Hadar. So my challenge is to try to follow along with them in Hebrew because I've learned Hebrew. To me, right now, because my real goal is to learn to daven traditionally, I sort of just ignore the male language. It's not my focus right now. I want to learn how to daven traditionally, and that's my primary focus, so I'm going to figure this out later. Once I know how the traditional – once I can do the liturgy, then I'm going to have to – and I want to lead other people in doing it, which is eventually my goal, then I'm going to have to sit down and think about how do I do this as a feminist? How do I read, understand, and lead people in traditional liturgy, which is what I'm interested in right now? But I haven't figured it out yet. I'm not there.

JG: Are there role models out there that you can look to now?

EF: Well, this woman who just spoke – I've heard of her. I don't think I'll ever be part of the Orthodox movement. I don't think that's where I'm headed, but she's obviously thought about it, and I'd be interested in hearing from her. How do you do this? How do you lead as a feminist using God language, using –

JG:  Traditional?

EF: – patriarchal God language.  Yeah.

JG:  Yeah.  So what would you consider the most pressing unfinished business of Jewish feminism?

EF:  Well, we're not there yet.  There's not equality in all of our movements.  Even in Reconstructionism, which is the one I'm most affiliated with right now, I don't feel like the space has been fully reclaimed by women yet.  There are many women who are leading and leining and teaching, and I still feel like I am in a patriarchal world.  We're obviously on our way.  Obviously, it's so much different than – my mother was so alienated from her synagogue because I'm sure it was ten times worse than anything I've ever experienced.  [laughter] But we're not there yet.  I don't walk into my Reconstructionist shul, which is – there's a feminist educator – and feel like, yeah, this is my home, as a woman.

JG:  You don't feel that.

EF:  No.  And I don't walk into a Beit Midrash, which I'm new to, and feel like this is my home as a woman.  Not yet.  I don't walk into BJ for services.

JG:  What's the place that feels most home for you at this point?

EF:  Leading prayers in my home with my friends and family.  We have a new tradition in my havurah at home.  I have an informal havurah, where we daven the second day of Rosh Hashanah in the woods.  We all go up, and we lead this beautiful ceremony together in a clearing in the old-growth forest next to the Salmon River, and we watch the salmon spawn.  It's September; they're always spawning.  We take turns.  It's egalitarian, and we take turns leading.  It’s lovely.

JG:  Yeah.  Are there men in that group as well?

EF:  Yeah.  One of the people who started it [was] a man, a good friend of mine – a man and his wife, and then another woman.  So it was started by two women and a man, and I'm actively part of the leadership there too.

JG:  What would you say are the most important next steps in advancing gender equality, both in Judaism and in Jewish life?

EF:  I'm going to say men's work.  I think the work that's happening this afternoon at BJ. Men talking about what it will mean for them to actually make room.  What do they have to give up?  What do they have to look at?  What do they have to feel or experience?  I can imagine, if I was a man, I'd be very attached to this; it is their home.  So what do you have to face to open up your home and to have it be truly changed, truly reinvented?  To really have women at the core of this next to you?

JG:  What's the incentive for them, do you think, to do that?

EF:  It's Torah.  It's our laws that we have.  For justice, tzedakah, righteousness.  It's part of what we do.  What more incentive do you need?

JG:  How would you define the relationship between Jewish feminism and the broader feminist movement?

EF:  I think Jewish feminists have been at the forefront of the women's movement.  I think that they're completely intertwined in that.  I think there actually needs to be more gentile women who lead in the feminist – that there's a lot of people who let us kind of go out there and lead the fight and kind of sit at home and hope things change.  Jews have always done that.  We've always been on the forefront of movements, and I think it's time for – I think that it's our responsibility for gentile women to continue fighting for all of us.

JG:  How would you say the broader feminist movement affected you personally, in terms of your involvement with Jewish feminism and with your own sense of identity and with Jewish life and Jewish identity?

EF:  Well, it's interesting for me when you say that because I realize that the broader feminist movement for me was Jewish feminists.  It was my grandmother and my mother and Letty and Gloria Steinem.  That's who taught me about feminism.  So I'm not really sure what you mean by the broader feminist movement.

JG:  Would you say the evolution of your sense of identity has had any sort of impact or influence on your mother and her sense of self?  Can you talk about that for a minute?

EF:  Yeah.  My interest in reclaiming my Judaism is interesting to my mother.  She had to

leave it for whatever reason.  She had a good reason that she had to go away, that it didn't make sense for her.  But the fact partly that I wasn't raised with any practice or that I didn't have to go to shul – I meet so many people who have left Judaism because they felt it was forced upon them.  My mother's decision to go away was good for me in some ways.  I could discover Judaism on my own.  I can lead her back; she's interested.  She wants to know what I'm studying, and she wants to celebrate holidays with me.  She calls me now; she called me on Tu Bishvat, and she wanted to talk about Tu Bishvat, and she never even knew what Tu Bishvat was.  Maybe she did.  Maybe their secular Sunday school, but it's been a long time since she thought about Tu Bishvat.  She wants to come to this Rosh Hashanah in the woods that I tell her about.  She was at my adult bat mitzvah, and it's meaningful for her.

JG:  Yeah.  She never had a bat mitzvah, I take it.

EF:  No.

JG:  What for you today, would you say, being a feminist means?  What is feminism for your generation?

EF:  Feminism has been hard for my generation, I think.  It looks like it's even getting

harder in some ways for the women who are in their twenties. I'm ending my thirties. But it's been tricky. I've been so interested in advancing racial justice in my life. You'll see on my – it's what I do not for a living, but I spend a lot of my time trying to advance racial justice. Now, trying to educate people about antisemitism – it's something I've become very interested in because I don't feel like I can fight against racism unless I'm also challenging antisemitism, but feminism loses; it goes into the background. My feminist values end up taking a back seat to these because there isn't a strident voice still that – I want to say I miss the second wave. I wasn't there for it, but I miss – what do you guys call them? The groups that you had – the consciousness-raising groups. I want that for women still. It's interesting. We did do something nice during Occupy Portland. I was part of that movement, and we organized a women's caucus, and we met every week. It was a great group of women, and it was a consciousness-raising group in a lot of ways. So, there've been moments where I've really been able to do that. I have an on and off Rosh Chodesh circle, which tries to bring to the forefront that we are women and that we are women doing this work together, but it's been hard for me to remember that I'm a feminist – I know I am – and to talk about that and to be publicly visible about that. I hope that my manner and that the way that I speak and that the way that I lead shows that, but to really take it on and talk to men about it – actually, it's not true. I talk to my husband a lot about what it means to support me as a woman. I know that he understands that, and I give him a lot of directions about "this is what you need to do," and "I need you to be part of a movement that ends male domination and patriarchy." I've sort of laid that out for him, and he's trying to figure out what that means. But the way that I'm committed to ending racism, I need you to be committed to ending patriarchy.

JG: Would you say your sense of self as a Jewish person, as a feminist, interfaces with

your life's sort of work of combating racism?

EF: Definitely.

JG: How so?

EF: Racism is, I think, the thing that's tearing us apart on our planet right now; it's the thing that's the most divisive, but it's just one of the dividers. Classism and antisemitism is tied up in classism for me. Ending patriarchy is an amazing goal in terms of bringing our planet back to where it needs to be. Racism is the place that I've decided to focus [on], but I know that they won't happen, that you can't end racism without ending patriarchy, [and] that they're tied together. I think I answered your question.

JG: I think you did too. Okay. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

EF: No, thank you.

JG: This was really wonderful.

EF: Yes, thank you.

JG: I really, really appreciate it.

EF: Yeah, it was great.

[END OF INTERVIEW]