Tobie Weisman Transcript

Sandy Gartner: This is Sandy Gartner and Ann Buffum meeting with Tobie Weisman to record a life history interview as part of the Vermont Jewish Women's History Project. Today is August 15, 2005, and we are at Tobie's home in Montpelier, Vermont. Tobie, do we have your permission to record this interview with you?

Tobie Weisman: Yes.

SG: Thank you very much. The first question I'm going to start with is what brought your grandparents to the United States and where did they come from?

TW: My grandmother came here in 1905 –

SG: Would you refer to –?

TW: Yes. My mother's grandmother came here in 1905 when she was five years old. All of my grandparents came here from Russia. When I asked my parents this the other day, they had to go home and refer to what they have written down. So they didn't remember exactly where, but I've heard of a few different places that my different grandparents came from – Minsk and Pinsk. [Telephone rings.] I can shut that phone off.

Ann Buffum: That's probably good.

[Recording paused.]

TW: All my grandparents came from Russia, the part of Russia that kept on being Poland and Russia, and Poland and Russia. As far as I know, it was all

in the Ukraine. The towns that I have heard – I can't tell you who came from where, but [inaudible], Minsk, and Pinsk, and that's all I know right now. I could look up more. But

my maternal grandmother, my maternal grandfather, and my paternal grandfather all came from the Ukraine. My paternal grandmother came from – was born in Baltimore. My paternal grandparents were from Baltimore, or my paternal grandfather came to Baltimore –my grandmother was already there. My maternal grandparents came to actually – my maternal grandfather came right to Baltimore, and my maternal grandmother came to the lower East Side.

SG: Do you have some stories you can tell us about your grandparents' early years in the United States and what it was like for them?

TW: That's a hard question. I don't know too much about their early years. I know much more of their adult years living on the Lower East Side a little bit, just what that was like. I know they lived in a tenement apartment. My grandmother on my mother's side had a brother Dave. Her name was Dora, and they had a few other siblings that I really didn't ever meet. But several children [were] living in a very crowded apartment. They all knew Yiddish and grew up in a very Jewish environment, but I don't think it was a religious environment. But it seemed like everybody kept kosher in that not religious environment. They all came over, keeping kosher, and that's what they did as children. But as they grew up, most of them – I know that my maternal grandmother's brother Dave just wanted to become American, and he became a very, very successful businessman and was pretty assimilated. But on the other hand, [he] lived in Lakewood, so that was a very Jewish area, Lakewood, New Jersey. But my grandmother's father was a very religious man, and he sent my grandmother at the age of sixteen to a Hebrew teacher's college. Actually, my mother just told me the story a few days ago. He wanted to, of course, send his son, Dave, to Yeshiva or somewhere to learn Judaism to become more observant, to become more knowledgeable, but Dave was not interested at all and [was] kind of a *vilde chaye* [wild person]. My grandmother was the one that seemed to be interested. So even though in those days, in the early 1900s – I guess it was about 1915 – it was not acceptable for a woman to be learning Jewish studies, he sent her to

this Jewish Women's Teachers College. It was a very radical idea back then, and she became a Hebrew teacher. I think at the age of about sixteen, she became a Hebrew teacher. Now, I think this college – I think the man who ran it was called Friedlander if I'm not mistaken, and he – the teachings, the studies that she learned were excellent because she would write me these postcards all the time in Hebrew, and she had the niqqud, which is the vowels, completely right. All the dots were in the right place, the dagesh, the [inaudible], all these things that I learned later in my life, which I never really learned the way she learned. I could not spell the way she could spell with every vowel in place. Her Hebrew was impeccable. So she took this love of the Hebrew language to heart, and she was a Hebraist. She was not a Yiddishist. Many of the cultural Jews who came to this country were interested in Yiddish as a spoken language or at least in the Yiddish culture. Well, she was not interested in that. So she became a Hebrew teacher for her whole life, and she taught Hebrew school from the age of sixteen to the age of maybe seventy. She ended up teaching many, many students who still remember her. This is maybe jumping a little bit.

SG: Go ahead.

TW: But I feel that I continued what she started.

SG: That’s very moving. That’s very moving.

TW: I can tell you a story about that.

SG: Please.

TW: Well, the funny thing is that I think I continued what she started, but my mother said the other day, "If Bubbe knew that you were going to become a Rabbi,” which she didn't know. She died before I probably even decided that that might be something I wanted to do. She said, “If Bubbe knew that you wanted to become a rabbi, she would have been very upset.”

SG: Really?

TW: Because she was a Hebraist interested in the culture and interested in Israel and Jewish culture and literature, but she was an intellectual. She was not religious. Even though she studied – she studied Talmud and I have a set of her *Mishnayot*, an old falling-apart set of these volumes of Mishnah. She studied until she was in her eighties. She would study Talmud. One time, I did a project when I was in Rabbinical school about – this is also jumping.

SG: That's okay.

TW: I did a project about chicken farmers because my grandfather – which I'll tell you about. Her husband decided to become a chicken farmer, and they lived in Toms River, New Jersey, on a chicken farm. Moved there from Brooklyn – so, moved there from the city to a place where my mother says, "was just a few sticks, just a few scrub pines." They didn't have a house. They just moved to this little, tiny plot of land and set up a chicken farm there. My grandfather was an idealist, and I can tell you more about him. But what I was going to say about my grandmother is that I did this paper on Jewish chicken farmers in America. I was at the Jewish Theological Seminary [JTS] getting my master's degree in Jewish studies. I went to the archives at the Jewish Theological Seminary and there was this box of treasures from the Toms River, New Jersey Synagogue. I just started going through it. There were these annual dinner journals that my grandmother's picture was in, and my Uncle Dave and Aunt Rose's pictures were in. It turned out that that year somehow at JTS, one of my teachers was the rabbi when my grandmother was teaching there. He was the rabbi of that synagogue. He was an older man, and he remembered her very well. So I was going through all these different incredible documents, and I called the synagogue, and I spoke to the rabbi there. Now, that rabbi was a younger man, not an old man, and he said, "Oh, yes, your grandmother was still teaching when I was here. In fact, when she would go to Florida in the winters"

– she would winter there – “what she would do would be to study Talmud." He said, "She took my Talmud classes." She would, in her late seventies, get on a bus in Miami and travel to listen to his Talmud classes. So the fact that she wasn't religious always baffled me because if you are studying Talmud you usually would be a religious person studying the sacred text of our people. But she did it much more for literature. She had a passion for teaching and teaching Judaism. My mother said just a few days ago that – I said, "What inspired you most about your mother?" She said, "When my mother was in the hospital dying, people would walk by the room and see her name, that (Devora Berlin?) was in here. And they would look in, and they would say, ‘(Devora Berlin?)? You were my best teacher I ever had.’” When I used to go to the chicken farm, my parents would take me to Toms River. My sister and I would go. It was a very, very small house. It was this little, tiny, tiny house where when my mother was a little girl she had to live in the attic because they only had two bedrooms and then an attic. She had a brother, and she has still a brother. So when we would go there, the attic didn't seem to be, I guess, conducive to a little girl – because I was about five or six when I can remember going there. My sister probably would sleep on the couch in the living room, and I would sleep with my grandmother. My parents would go to a motel. So I would wake up, and my grandmother would tell me stories, and most of them were these little anecdotes that she had written down into all these little, tiny notebooks she had all over, these little *machberets* – you know these little *machberets* that you get in Hebrew school? They are like these little, tiny notebooks, very thin. She had in them written down different jokes and stories that had gathered over the years, that she had saved, and that she would teach at Hebrew school. I got to hear her stories. When we would wake up in the morning, she would tell me these stories and jokes. Of course, she would tell me them over and over and over again. So I knew them by heart, but I would never say anything like, "I heard that one Grandma.” I can remember some of them still. Also, when Israel became a state, she traveled to Israel probably about twenty times in her life. She always was going to Israel. She loved it there. I think she sent a letter to Golda Meir – I

think this is right. She wrote her back, saying that she had impeccable Hebrew. She was very proud of that. But at the end of her life, she wanted to live in Israel and nobody supported her on that idea, of course, because nobody else wanted to live – the children didn't want to go there. But she really did, but she didn't get to do that. But she did transmit her love of Israel to me, and I'm trying to think if I was there when she was there, but I don't think I ever got to go when she was there. Anyway, so a few years ago – this is about eight years ago – I was visiting some friends in Lakewood. I have some friends in Lakewood, so my husband David and I decided to go visit her grave and my grandfather's grave. I called my parents and they said, "Well, it's right behind the synagogue. You have to go to the synagogue and ask where the graves are, and they will tell you." So we went on a Sunday morning, and when we got there, the parking lot was packed. I thought, “Well this is great.” It's packed on a Sunday morning, and it wasn't a holiday or anything. So I walk inside, and all of a sudden, I started getting really excited and nervous. There was a woman sitting at a table when you enter, and I said, "Hello, I'm (Devora Berlin's?) granddaughter.” She said, "(Devora Berlin's?) granddaughter. Oh, she was my teacher, and she was my children's teacher, and she was a wonderful teacher." She introduced me to all these people that were there. It was an Israel Bonds breakfast. So I just got lucky. I just walked into this huge room of hundreds of people. I kept on getting introduced to one after another. I'd say, "Well, I'm a Rabbi. I'm (Devora Berlin's?) granddaughter."

AB: Do you want to take a little break? Stop a second.

SG: Stop a second. It’s okay.

[Recording paused.]

TW: So I kept on being introduced to people and saying that I was (Devora Berlin's?) granddaughter and I was a rabbi. They said, "Of course, you are a Rabbi. She would have been a rabbi if she could have been."

SG: Do you think so? Do you think she would have?

TW: Yes, I do. I do think she would have been. Perhaps the reason she wasn't religious is because girls weren't given that chance to express themselves spiritually in the Jewish world when she was growing up, and even when she was an adult. I'll tell you just one little anecdote that's an aside, but it is really part of it is that she had an *aliyah* for the first time. That was in a Reform synagogue – not at my bat mitzvah because women still did not have *aliyot* in my day at a Conservative synagogue. But at my cousin's bat mitzvah at a Reform synagogue, she had an *aliyah*, and did she belt that *aliyah* out. She had been teaching this to children for maybe fifty years, and she never got to do it herself. When she had that chance, the whole world could hear her. So that is why I think if she maybe had the chance to express herself and there was this opportunity for women to become rabbis I do think she would have become one. Maybe that was part of her that she had closed off because there just wasn't any opportunity for her to even think about it. But she taught many, many rabbis, and she would say that often. She would say, "Oh, I taught all those rabbis. I taught them everything that they know." She was quite a strong woman, quite opinionated and didn't hold back when she wanted to say something. So, I think she was – some people were offended by her sometimes because she wasn't a polite little lady. She was just a very strong person who had her opinions, and she would just say them. So when I went there that day, people just kept on saying, "Of course you're a Rabbi. Of course that makes so much sense. You are her granddaughter – of course, you are a rabbi. She would have been a Rabbi." That completely validated me, even though maybe I had thought that all my life, that I was following her footsteps. When people said that to me, I really felt that I had done that, and I know that she is with me. She is really with me all the time. She really was a radical person in her time. I think at her funeral, my mother said, "She was a women's libber." Before there was women's lib [liberation], she was a women's libber. She just didn't take any kind of women's role that women were supposed to do. She didn't do that. I think probably, if she had her choice, she probably wouldn't even have gotten

married. Maybe she wouldn't have had children. She was a liberated woman, but in her time, there were restrictions on her. I think she enjoyed her single life. She didn't get married until she was old –quote, unquote, "old." She was probably in her late twenties, which was old. Maybe she was even thirty or something. She wasn't a stay-at-home mom kind of type.

SG: When you were growing up in your immediate family with your parents and siblings, what was it like for you as far as your affiliation and celebration of holidays, and that kind of thing?

TW: Well, I grew up in a Conservative home. We went to synagogue on Shabbat, every Shabbat, and we observed the holidays at home. We kept kosher, and we observed holidays in the Conservative manner, which is to go to synagogue, not to engage in any business or go to school on those days, not to buy anything. But we would drive to *shul* and cook on Shabbat. Those kinds of things were – I found out later, in a traditional home – or, in an Orthodox home, you wouldn't do them. But in my home, I thought that was as traditional as you could get. We kept Kosher, we had two sets of dishes, and we didn't eat non-kosher food out of the house. But we would go out to restaurants and eat fish; that was the Conservative policy, the Jewish law, the *Halakha*. My father is also a cantor, a *chazan,* so he would always have a job. Throughout my life, he had different jobs, but most of the time, he had a job on Shabbat maybe once, twice a month, so we would go to that synagogue, too. So we would go to our own synagogue and go to his synagogue.

SG: He was a cantor full time?

TW: Oh, not full time. Twice a month. Maybe just on the weekends – but just on Shabbat. He didn't do that during the week. During the week, he had a different job; he was a Jewish communal worker. He worked for JCC, Jewish Community Center, or the Federation, but always he was a *chazan*. That was really his passion and his love, and

that is really what gave him a lot of sustenance and nourishment. So I'd say a combination of my grandmother and my father from watching both of them in their lives – they both really inspired me to do what I am doing in my life. My father still – he is seventy-eight now, so he still has a job for the high holidays. I worked with him. For a few years, we worked together. That was very thrilling for me and, I think, for him. But he also really needed to have his own place. Being the cantor is always like the second place, so being my cantor wasn't – I think he needed to have his own space, so he has been doing that. But for many years, he was the cantor every single week. He was the cantor at the synagogue in Olney, Maryland until about three years ago, maybe. Now he just does the high holidays there, the second service. That still is his passion, and I guess my favorite thing to do with him is to sing.

SG: When you were growing up, what was your regular religious education? Youth groups, or anything [inaudible]?

TW: I think I had a strange upbringing. I asked my parents about that. "Why did you do this? Why did you do that?"

SG: You can still ask them. That's good.

TW: "Why didn't you send me to Jewish day school?" My father went to Jewish day school, but when I was growing up, I didn't go to Jewish day school. I went to public school and Hebrew school three times a week. That's a lot to go to Hebrew School. But not to send your child to Jewish day School when you live in a very Jewish area – we lived in Silver Spring, Maryland. Why didn't I go to Jewish day school? Well, the reason I didn't go to Jewish day school is because he said that basically, my mother didn't want me to go. I think it's because the Jewish day school that existed then for my age was Orthodox, and they really – especially my mother, I think, was very against me going to an Orthodox day school because she felt that the Orthodox looked down on the Conservative Jews. She feels that way. So now that I'm more observant, it's been

difficult for my mother, not really my father. Well, a little bit my father, too, because they feel like what I do may be putting them down. I keep more kosher than they do. I keep *Shabbos* more than they do. But they have gotten used to it, and they have been very accommodating to me. But I think that's why it was that they didn't want me to go to an Orthodox school because they didn't want me to come home and say, "You're not keeping Kosher like you should, or you're not keeping *Shabbos* like you should." That's probably why. But I also went to a Labor Zionist youth camp, Habonim camp, and that was a very non-religious – I would say even not anti-religious, but it was a non-religious camp even though they kept kosher there. They had a *Shabbos* kind of experience there. Everybody would wear white, and we'd sing songs, and we'd dance. Praying wasn't something you did at camp. But Hebrew was something that was very, very important there and the whole Israel culture and everything. I was educated with a lot [about] Israel and wanting to live in Israel and live on a *kibbutz* and learn Hebrew from that camp.

AB: Could you spell the name of that camp?

TW: Habonim.

AB: H-A-B-O-N-I-M.

TW: Yes, N-I-M. Habonim Camp Moshava.

AB: Maybe you'll spell it later.

TW: That was in Annapolis, Maryland, but there were a few different ones all over the United States. So they sent me there, and I went there every summer from when I was about ten to about sixteen, and eventually, I became a counselor. But I got turned off to it at the end. At the end, I became turned off to it because it was pretty anti-religious, and I was getting more religious. But it was a very incredible experience. It was interesting that my parents sent me there, but they really didn't want me to move to Israel or live in

Israel or live on a *kibbutz* or any of those things. They wanted to send me to this camp, where there was this infusion of love of Israel and Jewish culture and everything. But they didn't want me to follow what was the real message of that camp, [which] was to move to Israel. At a certain point, they didn't want me to continue. There was a summer where it was called MB, *Machaneh Bonim.* They didn't want me to go there because that was like preparation to go to Israel for the year. You would meet all the people that were going to Israel for the following year, and the next program was called a workshop, where you would go to Israel for a year and live on a *kibbutz*. They wouldn't let me do those things.

SG: How old were you then?

TW: When I wanted to go to the *Machaneh Bonim*, I was probably about sixteen or seventeen. And then, about at eighteen, instead of going to college, you go to this program, and they wouldn't let me go. I said, "Okay, if you don't let me go …" They said, "You have to go to college right away." I said, "Okay, then I'll go to Israel my junior year abroad."

SG: Did you?

TW: When it came to my junior year abroad, I said, "I'm going to Israel." My parents said, "No, you're not. You're going to finish college and continue there." I said, "No, that was our agreement. I'm going to Israel," and I did. So I did go to Israel for a whole year in my junior year abroad. I went again a few years later for another year.

SG: Can you talk about your spiritual journey and how you decided to become a rabbi? I know you talked a little bit about your background – and maybe a little more about your parents' feelings around this decision.

TW: Well, after college – what happened in college was that I didn't know what to major in. I kept on taking Hebrew classes. Luckily at my university, the University of

Wisconsin, which I'd never in my wildest dreams thought I would major in Hebrew and Jewish studies - never, ever thought about that. But when I got there – the reason I went to the University of Wisconsin [was] because I wanted to get away from this, I felt, materialistic Jewish environment. Not my parents – my parents weren't materialistic at all. But it was this feeling of growing up in Silver Spring, Maryland, where it seemed like being Jewish was just about money. I was not interested in that. I didn't want to go to an – I actually got into Brandeis. I thought, "I don't want to go there with a bunch of Jews, rich Jews." I wanted to get away from that. I was not interested in Judaism in that way. But then, when I went to college, there I was in the middle – I just felt in the middle of nowhere Jewishly. I was in the regular dorms. There was Hillel there on campus, but it took me a while to find it, and at first, I was completely lost. There were all these people from Wisconsin. Most of the girls had blond hair, blue eyes, [and had] never met a Jew before. I was so shocked. I had grown up in a pretty sheltered environment thinking most people were Jewish. [laughter] Then I find out these people had never met a Jew. My roommate had never met a Jew. She thought it was so incredible that I was Jewish. I didn't like that feeling. I felt like that – you know that Woody Allen movie, *Annie Hall*, where he is sitting at the table for Easter or something, and he feels like he's –

SG: He has the *payot*.

TW: He has the *payot* and the hat, and that's how I felt.

SG: It's a split-screen.

TW: That's how I felt. What do people do on Friday night? Well, in my family, we sat around at the table having *Shabbos*. My whole life, I never even wanted – it didn't even seem I wanted to go to parties on Friday night. I wanted to be home with my family. So what were people doing? They were drinking beer, getting drunk on Friday nights. I just ran as fast as I could to the Hillel to be with other Jews, and I ended up going there on Saturday mornings also because there was nothing Jewish happening either. So I would

go on Saturday mornings and ended up meeting some wonderful people, mostly graduate students, who would have the third meal of *Shabbat* in their dorm rooms. Then I started to do that with them and met a lot of very spiritual people and just loved that. Then I went to Israel for my junior year abroad, and I thought, “I didn't really need all that spirituality. I didn't really need that. I was in Israel, and I just got to be friends with Israelis, and I didn't really care about that too much.” So it wasn't a really spiritual year for me in the way – getting involved with going to synagogue or anything like that. In fact, on Passover, I went to Greece and ended up eating bread, and I thought, “It really doesn't matter.” I mean, I tried to keep kosher there, but sometimes I couldn't. I just thought, “It doesn't really matter.” But then I went back to Wisconsin for my last year – and it ended up only being half a year, half a semester because I got so many credits going to Israel that I could graduate early. So when I came back to Wisconsin again, I felt the same thing, and I became much more involved with the religious scene there. It was a very interesting scene. I always think about that because in the synagogue, in the services on Saturday morning were these egalitarian but separate services, where that’s something new that's happening now. When a woman was called up to the Torah, a woman would be reading from the Torah. When a man would be called up, a man would be reading from the Torah. So it was separate but equal. It was very interesting. Women sat separately from the men, but next to them, there wasn’t a *mechitza.* So it was really an interesting place. As I said before, I never thought I would major in Hebrew and Jewish studies, but that's all I wanted to take. So when I decided to go to Israel, I ended up deciding I'll major in Hebrew and Semitic studies, and then I'll do all my course work in Israel, and I'll definitely fulfill my major there. So that is what I did. My mother was very against it. She said, "What are you going to do, be a Hebrew teacher like your grandmother?” like that was a stupid thing to do. I thought, “Yeah, I don't want to be a Hebrew teacher.” I never thought of becoming a rabbi at that point, but I thought, “Gosh, I don't want to become a Hebrew teacher, yet, I have this passion for learning Jewish studies, so I'm just going to keep on doing it, and something will happen.” So the other

day, my parents and my husband were talking, and they were saying, "Oh, yes, Tobie got to meet [David] Ben-Gurion when she was thirteen years old." So what did Ben-Gurion say to me? He said, "All you have to do is learn Hebrew, and the rest will follow." So I said, “Yeah, well, that's what I did.” I guess I listened to him. I really listened to him. Yet, when I was at that place of deciding on my major, my parents were not at all supportive. When I went to Israel for my junior year abroad, it wasn't something they really wanted, but they gave in. Then when I came back from Israel, and I graduated early, I had no idea what I was going to do with that. I became a computer programmer. That's because my mother's friend had a job for me. In fact, I wasn't a computer programmer. I didn't know anything about computers to be a computer programmer, but I got a data entry job. That firm sent me to school at night, and I learned some computer languages, and I got to grow up in the world. So I did that for a few years. I lived in Washington, D.C., near my parents, but not with them, and got involved with the *Havurah* , a *Havurah* called *Farbrengen*. There, it was a wonderful place for me, where women wore *tallis*es and led services, and women were completely equal to the men. In college, I had experienced a little bit of that, but I don't think I led services at college – I'm not sure now. But they asked me to lead services because I knew the service by heart, and they asked me to lead high holiday services. "Would you like to lead part of the service?" I said, "Okay," but I didn't know how. So my father made me some tapes, and I just poured over those tapes, and I studied, and studied, and studied. Then I stood up, and I led services for hundreds of people for the first time. [laughter] I was so nervous, and I just felt like my father was singing with me. They said to me at the end, they said, "Oh, can you lead Yom Kippur, too?" I thought, “Wow.” So I got to lead Yom Kippur that year too. It wasn't that different. So I could do that. Then people started to say to me, "Why don't you go to rabbinical school?" I said, "Well, rabbinical school? Well, how could I do that? There is no Rabbinical school that I want to go to. I mean, there is the Reform and the Reconstructionist, but I'm not Reform or Reconstructionist.”

SG: [inaudible]

TW: Conservative didn’t accept women then.

SG: What year was this again?

TW: Well, when I decided to start investigating, it was 1982. I didn't know because I don't think anyone could predict that in 1984 they would start accepting women to JTS, Jewish Theological Seminary. So I thought, “Okay.” A friend of mine suggested, “Why don't you go to Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem because you learn text there, and you see what that’s like.” I didn't even know what that was – Jewish text. I've heard of Talmud, but I didn't know – never opened up a Talmud to see what that was. I didn't know what that meant at all, even though my grandmother had studied Talmud. I had heard about it but didn't know what it meant. I thought, “Maybe I'll hate it. So maybe I shouldn't do that. Maybe I'll love it. Maybe I'll hate it. But if people keep on saying become a rabbi, why don’t you become a rabbi? I should explore that.” So, I did. I went there for a year. It was a very, very powerful experience for me and a very painful one because I saw that my tradition was exclusive [to] women. The traditional world was exclusive to women in becoming a rabbi and everything. But this place, Pardes, was a very interesting place.

SG: Where was it?

TW: In Jerusalem. It was a very interesting place, where the teachers were Orthodox. However, they were extremely open to questioning, to searching, to being who you are Jewishly. They weren’t trying to make you Orthodox. They were just setting an example – this is what it is like to be Orthodox – and they would invite people to their homes for meals. All the teachers did that. There was this Pardes community [of] people who had gone to Pardes had made *aliyah*, were living there, and would invite you for *Shabbos* meals. So there was a whole community there, and it was so beautiful. Really, it was painful because I couldn't really be a rabbi in this world of the tradition. But yet, it was so attractive because it was so beautiful. I had never experienced anything like it with so

many incredible people all around me. The teachers were just phenomenal in their outlook toward life, and everything was just so deep. Everything was just so incredible. Everything I learned – and I had some incredible teachers. I could ask anything, and I could say anything. That was the reason I wanted to keep on being in that world because, even though I felt shut out like I couldn't be a rabbi in that world, I felt so included that I could be myself. Learning was so encouraged and becoming very able to read text. That was all they really wanted to teach you: read the text, learn the text, and then make up your own mind about what your opinion was about those texts, but that you would be literate. They were giving you the keys to unlock this whole world that I had never seen. Of course, in Hebrew school, they never taught us any of that stuff. I hated Hebrew school, and I skipped Hebrew school; I'd go to the shopping center. I was not a good student at all. When my parents found that out – it took them a few years to find out. I don't know why. So, I had never learned this deep, rich tradition that we had. I had a lot of talks with people, and I came to the conclusion that I would apply to rabbinical school, and I did. I had so much flak from my parents. They really didn't want me to do it.

SG: Where were women accepted at that point?

TW: At that point, it was the Reconstructionist Rabbinical School.

SG: Is that where you applied?

TW: And I applied there, but I guess I was in no shape to do it at that point emotionally. I wasn't supported by my parents to do it, and it was a real struggle within myself because I felt like I really wasn't sure. So that came through. I was only twenty-four, so it wasn't like I really had that inner strength that I'm going to do it anyway. There was no one in my life supporting me to do it. But then I met this person who became my first husband, and he really supported me to do it.

SG: What was his name?

Tobie: Sammy Barth, and he was becoming a rabbi. He was in rabbinical school. I said to him – he's just somebody I met there. One day, we were talking. We had this long, long bus ride, so we were out in the middle of the desert. We were talking, and I told him, "I want to go to Rabbinical school, but I don't know. Should I do it?" He said, "I definitely think you should do it." So he became a really important person in my life because he was the first person who said, "I definitely think you should do it." He tried to be supportive of me applying to rabbinical school. I found out later that applying to rabbinical school was actually kind of a political thing. You had to say the right things, and at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, you had to say, "I'm a Reconstructionist. I believe that Judaism is a civilization and that it is a process." There's these lines that they were looking to hear. You know what I said? When they said, "Why do you want to go to a Reconstructionist College," I said, "I'm not a Reconstructionist. I'm really a Conservative Jew, but the Conservative movement doesn't accept women, and so I'm applying here." I was being totally honest. [laughter]

SG: And he said?

TW: Actually, you know what they said is, "You can have this interview again. But you have to go read this book called *Judaism as a Civilization*, and you really have to come back and say different things than you said." Because I had some good allies – Arthur Waskow was a good friend of mine, and he was involved in the Rabbinical College. I knew him from *Farbrengen*. So I had some good people supporting me – "she should become a rabbi." So what I did was I went to my father's shul, where he was the cantor, and I talked to that rabbi there, who was Reconstructionist. I said, "What do I say?" He said, "Okay. This is what you have to say: Judaism is a civilization. It's been an evolvingprocess," and all this stuff which I didn't believe. So I didn't go back. But then, I think it was the next year – it was probably the next year, and during that time, I had

gotten a master's degree in Jewish education for lack of anything – I didn't know what else to do, so I did that. I thought, “Well, at least I can use that. I can teach in the day school or something like that. Maybe I won't become a rabbi.” But the next year, I applied to rabbinical school and to JTS.

SG: Really?

TW: I was living at my parents’ house for a year, getting this master’s degree, and trying to figure out what I was going to do – apply to rabbinical school. I applied to rabbinical school, but still, I felt so unsupported [by] my family, and there I was living at home. My mother was incredible at writing and helping me to write essays all throughout high school and stuff, but she wouldn't help me; she was totally against it. I just remember trying to type on a regular typewriter, and it just didn’t come out right what I wanted to say. Anyway, I got the interview, so I went into the interview – this is at JTS.

AB: Conservative?

TW: Conservative. This was the biggest thing.

SG: What year was this?

TW: It was 1984.

SG: Just a couple of years.

TW: They just started accepting women. That year was the first year to apply, and I applied. They said, "Do you put on *tefillin*?" I said, "Well, no, whoever heard of that? For a woman to put on tefillin?” I said, "No, but I’d really like to, and I’d like to learn about it and see what that's all about. This is not how I was raised." So the same thing happened after that interview. I got a letter from Joel Roth that said, "We're not sure that you are really going to fit in here." I talked to my friend afterward, my friend who was at

JTS. They said, "Well, what did you say when they asked you that question? What did you say?" I said, "Well, I don't." They said, "You said you don't? You have to say you do. Women have to accept all the *mitzvah* upon themselves in order to become rabbis." In order to become a person who leads prayers, to be a *Shaliach Tzibur*, a man is already obligated, but a woman has to take the obligation on herself and do all the things that a man does, including putting on *tefillin* every day. Well, I didn't know that was supposed to be the answer. I didn't do it. I was totally honest. They said, "You can come here for the year, do all the studies that the first-year rabbinical students study, and apply again," implying that "you'll say the right things next year because you'll know." They said, "You'll be more part of the environment, and you'll understand us better." I thought, "I didn't want to do it." I didn't want to do it. So I ended up not doing it, and it was very, very painful for me. So I ended up marrying a rabbi, becoming a rabbi's wife. I was living in England.

SG: This is Sam?

TW: Yes, Sammy. It was a terrible experience for me because he was the rabbi that I wanted to be. People always asked him questions and expected him to be the one that would answer the questions the right way. I mean, I was living in a very parochial place in England on the southern coast called Brighton. People just expected me to be interested in setting up my house and picking out my curtains. They didn't expect me to work. I, in fact, did work. I worked as a computer programmer because I still knew how to do that because there was no way I wasn't going to work. But that was totally just not expected of a woman to have a profession. There was a rabbinical school in England that I could have gone to, but again, I had another bad experience doing that, trying to apply to that school. So it seemed everything was against me becoming a rabbi. I thought, "Okay. Maybe it's just not meant to be. Maybe I wouldn't be a good rabbi." I ended up just trying to – what's the word?

AB: Repress?

TW: Repress it.

SG: Your feelings on it.

TW: I was married to Sammy for about four years, and we came back to the States. We went to New York. He had a job in a Suburban New York Congregation. There I met –

SG: I'm going to go run to the bathroom. Let's take a break.

[Recording paused.]

TW: I forgot where I was.

SG: I know. I forgot a little bit, too. You were talking about being in –

TW: England?

SG: – how they expected you to be a certain way.

TW: Then I was in New York. So I was in New York at the Suburban Congregation.

SG: You guys had left England?

TW: We had left England, and my husband was Sammy still at the time. I think we had been married for about four years. I had worked in New York, in the city, in Midtown, as a computer consultant. I still was doing computers, trying to figure out how to do it in a way that was meaningful to me. I tried to become a teacher, but it just wasn't meaningful to me. I was in these big corporations and stuff as a consultant. It was totally not me. So, I finally decided, "Okay, I'm going to stop it," and I became a program director at the Jewish Community Center near where I lived. It was a disaster. I didn't really know what I was doing, and I had no supervision. I had a horrible, horrible experience there. That

was for one year. But then, I got a great job at JTS, where I had to commute to Harlem. I think I used to do that by train and then take a taxi or walk to JTS. That job was called Assistant Director of Student Life. What was I doing? Working with rabbinical students, counseling them, and setting up these spiritual programs for them called "Nash and Drash" – rabbinical and cantorial students. I'd also thought of becoming a cantor at the same time [as] becoming a rabbi and also had met with a lot of negative experiences. I realized how ironic this is. I'm working with rabbinical students and cantorial students, having wanted to be either one of them and counseling them. What am I doing? I don't want to do this. I'm setting up these spiritual programs. I'd get really great speakers to come and talk. They felt that they really needed that because what they were learning in rabbinical school wasn't that spiritual. So, I was setting up programs, and that was kind of cool and meeting interesting people. I just realized. "This is crazy. I'm going to apply to rabbinical school, and maybe I'll apply to JTS again." It was a long time later; it was about eight years later. I was almost thirty. I was in a much different place then.

SG: Were you still married to Sammy?

Tobie: I was still married to him, but it looked like we were getting divorced. The whole time I was married, it was basically, "Why are we married?" [laughter] That was the year that I was like, "I think we were getting divorced," and we decided to get divorced. At the same time we decided to get divorced, I decided I am going to Rabbinical school, and I applied. I decided I'm going if we get divorced or if we don't get divorced. There was a piece of me – something I said to myself was, "Why do we need two rabbis in the family? It would just mess things up even more." I just took this back seat like he's the rabbi, and it's okay. So, then I said, "No, I'm going to become a rabbi. I don't care. If we stay married, if we don't stay married, I don't care. I'm becoming a rabbi. That is the most important thing." He decided he is leaving this congregation and taking another job. It was a job at this new rabbinical school – or new to me – or maybe he already was doing that for a little while. I can't remember. But anyway, through somehow – maybe through

him, I met the head of this other rabbinical school, which is called the Academy for Jewish Religion. I became very good friends with this woman, Shohama Wiener. Now, I think, actually, I became friends with her, and then he got involved with that school. So he was involved with the school, and I can't remember what he did exactly, Dean of Students maybe. I don't know. Anyway, I met her, became very close with her, and we started doing things like these little Shabbat gatherings and little spiritual things like that. She was an incredible woman and just a very wonderful person. One day, we took this walk, and I said, "Shohama, what if I went to rabbinical school at your rabbinical school? Do you think I would get accepted there?" Because I had had such a horrible experience getting rejected from these other places, I thought maybe I just didn't see something about myself that was just like so apparent – I'd just make a horrible rabbi or whatever. She said, "Of course. That's a great idea. Apply. That's a wonderful idea." So I had to get this – this was really scary for me. I had to have a psychological interview to get in. So I had the psychological interview, went to a psychologist, and she asked me why I wanted to become a rabbi. I told her a little about my life and my story and everything. She said, "Oh, I think you would make a wonderful rabbi." Then I had my interview. They said, "Oh, we are so happy to have you." I thought, “Why apply to JTS? Why should I apply anywhere else?” [laughter] It was just a great experience, and they seemed to really value who I was as a person, not say, "You really have to say such and such to get in here," because that is a place that is a very unique rabbinical school. It was really the only one of its kind at the time – now there are three of them. But it's a non-denominational rabbinical school. You can go there if you are Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, or not affiliated and teach there if you are any denomination. So I thought, “This is the place for me” because I didn't feel like I was Conservative [or] Orthodox. I didn't really feel like I was one thing. I was just a combination of kind of who I was, which at that time was a little bit less traditional than I am now, but pretty traditional. So that didn't matter; I didn't have to say anything like, "Judaism is a civilization,” or “Yes, I put on tefillin every day,” or “I've accepted all the

obligations that a man has." I didn't have to be anyone but who I was. It was so liberating and so exciting for me that I found a place like this. It was a very small place.

SG: Where was that place?

TW: It was in New York City. It met at the SAJ, Society for the Advancement of Judaism Reconstructionist synagogue. Now it meets – the classrooms are at a Catholic college now in Riverdale. I met wonderful people there. It was very, very small. We sat around the table about this size, discussing texts, and had Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist teachers, and students all sitting around the table learning together. It was a wonderful experience. Because I had a lot of background, I had gone to Pardes for a year, I had gotten a master's degree in Jewish Studies, I got to have two years taken off my rabbinical school program, and I got to go in three years. So that was also a really big thing. None of the other rabbinical schools let you do that; you still have to go for the five years no matter who you are. No matter who you are – even a woman named Judith Hauptman had her PhD in Talmud from JTS; she still would have had to go for five years to JTS to get her rabbinical ordination, and she chose to go to the Academy for Jewish Religion. She went there – I spoke to her last year. She said it was an incredible experience. I said, "Well, the Academy for Jewish Religion was really lucky to have you, somebody with your caliber." She said, "No, I was very lucky to go there." So, it's become *en vogue* in a way. Now there is one in California, a rabbinical school like that, and there is one in Boston that's just started. So it's like an old-new idea.

SG: You put down that you currently describe yourself as a traditional egalitarian Jew. Can you explain what that means?

TW: Well, I finally found a niche for myself. I heard a rabbi say that he is traditionally egalitarian, so I thought, “Okay, that's what I am, too.” Because I think what I say to people most of the time is, "I'm as traditional as you can be while I am a woman rabbi, because I just do not accept that women cannot count in a minyan, or lead services,

even though that is *halakha*. I can accept almost every other thing in *halakha*, but I can't accept that. That's probably because I grew up in the ’60s and ’70s, where I grew up in this culture. I didn't go to the Orthodox day school or anything to tell me that, and I never heard that message from my family. I think that I'm just waiting for the *halakha* to change, I guess. I just think that the *halakha* is really important to me to follow it as best I can because I feel that when I do, I'm much more connected to my own soul and my own spirituality. I think that really does connect me. But if I sit behind a *mechitza*, I feel totally disconnected. So that's where I stand now. It's a very difficult place to be in the Jewish world because, on the one hand, I feel like I'm just like everybody else as far as women are concerned; we all want to be equal, but I'm not because I feel I'm so committed to the *halakha*, the way of living Jewishly. I keep kosher very strictly, and I keep Shabbat very strictly. I find that when I do observe the *Mitzvot*, that's where I feel the most comfortable. That's where I feel the most connected. I feel disconnected if I'm not following. I guess wherever I feel disconnected, I've decided I'm not going to be there. I want to be connected, but yet, there is a disconnect there because there is almost nobody like me. There is almost nobody, I feel like, that is very, very traditional, yet egalitarian.

SG: [inaudible] because you said you are connected with Chabad of –

TW: Chabad of Vermont.

SG: So how does that [inaudible] –?

TW: Well, I'm connected in that I like to go to their events, and I feel connected to the people there. I don't feel connected when I go to the synagogue there. I don’t hardly ever do that.

SG: Is that in [inaudible]?

TW: Burlington.

SG: Burlington.

TW: I do feel very connected with the people, just in terms of – these are people who care so deeply about what I care deeply about, about learning, about Jewish teachings that I feel connected to, especially the Hasidic teachings because I find the Hasidic teachings are the ones that are much – they're the spiritual teachings about life and about connecting with people and connecting with God. These are the teachings that sustain me, that give me life. I don't know if I said anything in my preliminary interview about Reb Shlomo Carlebach. Did I?

SG: Yes, yes. I was going to ask you about that because you said he had written on the affiliations of Carlebach Shul. We were going to ask you a little bit about your affiliation with that as well as Beth Jacob.

TW: When I think of Reb Shlomo – there is just no way I can't mention him because – so there was this time in my life that I was going to rabbinical school and feeling very wonderful about it and very connected, that finally, I was doing something that I really wanted to do in my whole life it seemed. Even though I didn't even know I wanted to do it – I thought, "Well, of course, I always wanted to be a rabbi." That made total sense, even though I didn't know it. It just wasn't in my consciousness. Like in my grandmother's consciousness, it wasn't in mine either. So I was going along being happy about it, and I'd go to the services on the Upper West Side. There is a place called Anshei Chesed, and I was going there as a Conservative egalitarian; it was really boring to me. There was no life in it. I knew about Reb Shlomo Carlebach. I just knew about him, and I knew there was a synagogue, and I just started going once in a while. I heard he was there, and I started to go when he was there. When he was there, it was the most unbelievable experience to be there when he was davening. Because all of a sudden, it took me back to when I was five years old and watching my father daven. I remember this memory of when I was five, where I looked at my father and I said, "He is

really praying to God." That was just this moment that stays with me. Then, with Reb Shlomo, that's how I felt. He is really praying to God. He is so connected to God. God really exists. I know it because I'm watching him. It was just this incredible experience for me and being with all these people who were singing these melodies and his melodies. That was an authentic experience of people davening, connecting to God, praying to God. Even though I was sitting behind this *mechitza*, I didn't care. I just didn't care. People said to me, "Yeah, how can you be going there? That's Orthodox, and women aren't counted in minyan." My friends were saying this to me, and I'd say, "Right, yes. You're right. You're right." Then I'd go back to this Conservative Synagogue and say, "There is no life here." And then go back to the Carlebach Shul, and say, "This is where it's at." So, Reb Shlomo – people say that he really knew every person that he met; he would remember you. I never believed it. I thought, "How could he remember me? I mean, why would he remember me? How would he remember me?" He would see me, and he would say, "How are you doing, darling?" I thought, "He doesn't remember me, and he doesn't know who I am. Anyway, one day, I'm walking down the street – and I think I had told him that I had applied for rabbinical school. Maybe I told him that. So when he saw me, he was carrying these two shopping bags and wearing a trench coat. He just didn't look like this great Reb, like this great person that he was. He was just walking down Broadway, and I stopped at the corner, and we were crossing the street and facing each other. Then we'd go to the corner, and he said, "How are you doing, darling?" I said, "Oh, I'm just great. I'm going to rabbinical school and so happy." He thought for a moment, and he said, "Oh, that's wonderful." He really looks at me and says, "Are they teaching you what brings life?" I have thought about that ever since then. That was so long ago, maybe sixteen years ago or something like that. I thought, "What is he talking about? What brings life?" From that moment on, I think, "Ah, that's what I've been trying to do. I've been trying to learn what brings life, what's enlivening, what is nourishing to my life, and what can nourish other people in their lives." So I kept on going there even though the Carlebach Shul – I didn't have any friends there. It would

be just this lonely experience, in a way, with a group of people davening, but I didn't even know anyone. I eventually met people, and I eventually brought David, who was my boyfriend then and who became my husband. He was a very spiritual person, David. But at that time, when I met him, he was a hippie spiritual guy living in Vermont, not connected to Judaism. I said, "Do you want to come with me to this synagogue? It is really a wild place. I don't know if you will really like it there." He walked in, and then he got so turned on – he is still. He has gone on a really long journey. We are actually very similar in our practice now in Judaism which we weren't at the time. But because he met Reb Shlomo and a lot of the people there, he became transformed. Anyway, after I became a rabbi, I told Reb Shlomo that I became a rabbi. It never seemed to register. It didn't seem like people would say to him, "She is a rabbi now," and he'd say, "Ah, that's wonderful." But I just thought if he knew even who I was, what my name was, and that I was a rabbi. So one day, he came over to me after the services, and he said, "I have to introduce you to some of my holy victims." He meant holy victims were people that wanted to convert to Judaism, which was something that he said was preying on them in some way, but people came to him, of course. He wouldn't do that. Anyway, I didn't even know what he meant, and he introduces me to these women from South America. He said, "This is Rabbi Tobie Weisman. I want you to meet her. She is a rabbi, a woman rabbi." To me, that was like my real ordination. Reb Shlomo considered me a rabbi and called me "rabbi." Who in the Orthodox Jewish world called women rabbis? And still, it's very rare. I have a few people who are Orthodox that call me rabbi. So that has been so painful for me because, in the Orthodox world, where I think I feel more comfortable than in the Conservative world or any other Jewish world, I'm not really accepted as a rabbi in most of it. It's such a struggle for me, but I keep on being in this place because I say, "This is who I really am." I have to be authentic, and just to fit in somewhere would make me miserable. I can't just fit in so that I'll be part of a group; I just have to be who I am. I guess I get that from my grandmother. Going back to her, she was just who she was, and she didn't care what people said. I do care what people

think and say, but I just have to do it anyway.

SG: Can you talk a little about how you started the Yearning for Learning Center and who is part of that, and what you are doing with that?

TW: I brought three of my brochures. I first started something called Rabbinic Resources, and that was just doing freelance rabbinical work – weddings, bat mitzvahs, bar mitzvahs, baby namings, things like that. I was trying to figure out what I was going to do, how am I going to fit into Vermont, being a rabbi in Vermont.

SG: Maybe I should backtrack just a little bit then. How did you guys end up here in Vermont?

TW: David, my husband, when I met him, he had already been living here for about ten years, and he had and has an organic food business. He was very, very grounded and settled here, and I didn't feel like I was too grounded and settled in New York. I hadn't been there very long – seven years, and only four years in the city, so it was okay. I could move, I thought, and I had moved my whole life very often as a child until I was about ten. So it seemed okay, no big deal. I'll move here. But it was a really big deal. At that point, when I moved here, there was a synagogue here, but [it was] not very interested in having a rabbi. Now they have one, but at that moment, nothing – not interested. So that wasn't an option. I could not think about that as far as my profession. So actually, before I moved here, I got my degree as a social worker, thinking that I'd work as a social worker, and I did that for a while. When I had a baby, which was in 1999, I took a break, and I thought, “Okay, I'm going to stay home, be a mother.” I was already forty. So, I'll just stay home and be a mother. I did that for a while, and it got me thinking about what I wanted to do. I definitely did not want to return to what I was doing [as] a social worker. The only reason I thought of doing that was because maybe I could become a spiritual counselor [or] therapist on spiritual issues. So I went to get my license to do that. But I didn't really want to do that as a mother because

I thought I really just want to be present with my daughter. There was very, very little happening at the synagogue, and we were bringing a rabbi up here about twice a year that I loved, whom I'm very good friends with (Sholom Brodt?), who was from Montreal but then he moved to Jerusalem. We were sitting in my living room dreaming one day – he would come here these two times a year, and we worked hard to bring him here. It was kind of a fight in a way because he was Orthodox, and our synagogue is not affiliated but not very supportive of Orthodox. So he would come here, and one day, we were sitting around, and I just said to him, "You know it would be so great if you could come here six times a year, and you could really nourish us spiritually." People really liked him as a teacher, so he had a following of people, and he said, "Well, maybe I will. I'm thinking about it." He was thinking about doing some kind of traveling rabbi thing even though he lived in Israel. I said, "Well, I said how much do you need for a commitment?" He said, "Ten thousand dollars," something like that. We can easily raise ten thousand dollars, and we said, "Okay, let's do it." Two days later, I got a phone call from these wonderful people who are just – they have been supporting all kinds of things in Vermont, the Conference and everything, the (Markles?). They said, "Well, what's happening with the rabbi?" They were really supportive of me being the rabbi of the Synagogue, but I knew it was always going to be a fight because I was very traditional. It was a non-traditional community in a big part. So he was always fighting for me – "Let her be the rabbi. Let Tobie be the Rabbi." The board was not ever interested in that, and that was hard for me because I knew I would be a great rabbi. I thought even though I was traditional, I would still be a great rabbi for the Synagogue because I've had all these experiences with all kinds of people. I don't feel like my way is the only way or anything like that. It's just for me. But I also didn't want to fight it. I'd had enough of fighting. Anyway, he said, "What's happening with the rabbi thing?" I said, "Well, I don't know what is happening with that, but (Sholom Brodt?) said he would come here six times a year, and he needs this much money." So he said, "Okay, we'll put up half of it, or we'll do a matching grant." So I said, "Okay." So that's how it started. We just started it. So

the Yearning for Learning Center started with (Sholom Brodt?) coming here six times a year. I went back to running programs at JTS – Nash and Drash – these spiritual programs. I had already done this a little bit, so I would put together these spiritual programs like "Mostly Matzah," these cute titles with spiritual pieces to it, like "Three Days," and I would make up these titles to whatever we were going to be teaching. We were learning real intensive Talmud in the morning, and in the evening, we would learn something much more spiritual [such as] Hasidic teachings or something like that. We started learning together over the phone and figuring out what we were going to teach, what he was going to teach. I taught some with him. So I did that for about four years, and I created a 501(c)(3). I have a Board of Directors, and I learned how to do all these things that I had never done before. So that is how the Yearning for Learning Center started. But then I got burned out. I couldn't do it anymore without taking a salary, without really having a professional status. It was like my own thing that I was doing, but I didn't feel like I had enough support to do it. So I went to an old friend of mine, Rabbi (Jaco Kalman?), who was a Shlomo Carlebach rabbi. He had [inaudible] from Schlomo Carlebach, and I knew him very peripherally from the Carlebach Shul. But he would come to Vermont sometimes and oversee the kashering process of some of the companies here so that it would have a *hechsher*, a kosher symbol on their food. So he would come here sometimes, and I would ask him some questions, call him up and ask him some questions, and we had this idea. Maybe this place or that place, this bakery or that bakery would become kosher. So I called him up last year, and I was the *mashgiach* – I was the person that oversaw the kashering process of the Conference on Judaism in rural New England for four years, five years. That year, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin from Israel was coming, [who is] Orthodox. I thought I really have to do this right. I have to *kasher* this kitchen so that he can eat there. I don't want anyone saying that he can't, that, “It's not really that kosher. You shouldn't eat there.” I wanted him to be able to eat there. Like (Sholom Brodt?), he went there every year, but he would bring a lot of his own food. I called (Jaco Kalman?) up and asked him could he just over the phone tell me what to

do, how to make the oven really, really kosher, and everything. After we talked for a while, he would give me hours of help on the phone. He was incredible because I didn't know him that well. Then he said, "Well, when is the conference again, and where is it?" I'd tell him, "This week." He says, "Okay, I'll come." So he came, and he brought – I have these pizza trays over there, and he purchased these different things that couldn't be *kashered* and brought all this kosher cheese. He and a few other people came, and we worked together. We saw that we could work well together. Then at midnight on Saturday night at the conference, I told him about my situation at the Learning Center. I said, "I really can't go on anymore. I just need some more support." So we started talking. We talked for about nine months, and we created this together, something called Spiritual JERNE [Jewish Educational Resources of the Northeast]. So this is what I'm doing now. I'm a Director of this Spiritual JERNE program, and it's a project within JERNE, which is Jewish Educational Resources of New York, and I'm bringing these spiritual mentors, including (Sholom Brodt?), but other ones, too, all over New England and the northeast. They mainly do a lot of Israel programming, promoting Israel education. That's how it started.

SG: Is it New England, the one you are head of?

TW: This is called Jewish Educational Resources of the Northeast because we didn't think Albany fit into New England. So I'm bringing these mentors around. We just chose five people. All five that I asked said they would come. We gave this brochure to a lot of different synagogues and asked them would they like to have these people come. So it became Yearning for Learning Center programs, not just at the Yearning for Learning Center but all over the northeast. That is how I am able to work now, doing what I already was doing, bringing these teachers to the Yearning for Learning Center – still called the Yearning for Learning Center. But I'm working with an organization now, and I'm getting paid. I'm working twenty hours a week. I'm getting benefits, all the things that I really needed to get in order to continue doing what I was doing because without really

having a professional status, without being recognized professionally, I felt I just couldn't go on. Not getting financial benefits was just not adequate anymore. I thought what I was doing was great, and I should be getting paid for it. So now I have a whole infrastructure. I have an administrative staff that works for me that does my fliers and does my mailings, and keeps track of all the administrative work. All I have to do is the programming.

SG: Is that here?

TW: I work here, but I work with an administrative staff in Albany. I don't have to go to Albany too often, but I'm very connected with them on a daily basis. So it really feels like I finally figured out something to do in Vermont as a Rabbi and get recognized for it professionally.

[Recording paused.]

SG: One thing that pops up for me is that I was wondering why your parents were not wanting you to choose to be a rabbi.

TW: I think I understand that. I'll just tell you the moment that I told them – I chose this moment to tell them where I had already applied; I had already gotten in. I didn't even really talk to them about applying that time. It's just like, “I'm going to get in, then I'm going to tell them I'm going.” There is no question here. I was thirty then; I didn't have to ask them. Actually, I was about to turn thirty-one. At that moment, I was still married, so they came to my house. I said, "I have something to tell you." I think they thought I was going to say something like, “I'm pregnant,” and they were excited. I said, "I'm going to rabbinical school." I think my mother just shrieked, "Oh, No." My father started crying. I have to tell you also that when I got rejected from JTS, my mother said, "Good." So I just felt like it was really weird coming from such a Jewish home and Conservative – I mean, why wouldn't a woman be a rabbi, especially women being accepted now. By then, it

was 1989, so women had been accepted there for five years. What I figured out was that my father really thought it would be a really, really difficult road for me, and so did my mother. My mother really wanted me to have an easy life. She really, really wanted me to marry a doctor and work part-time and just have an easy life. She really wanted that for me. One thing she wanted me to be was a physical therapist. I even took the physical therapy intro course. That was totally not what I wanted to do. You can work part-time; you can have your children, and to me, that was a dead life. It wasn't what I wanted to do at all. So she wanted me to have an easy life. For my father, it was also something that he thought would be very painful. Maybe both of them thought it would be very painful for me to charter those new waters. They both worked in the Jewish world – my mother and father were both working for Jewish organizations their whole life – especially my father, and my mother did for twenty-five years. She had a better experience, I think, professionally than he did. He wasn't treated very well in some of his places that he worked. They just felt that there was a lot of animosity towards women in the Jewish world and that as a woman rabbi, I'd have a lot of challenges and obstacles to overcome. They just didn't want to have that for me. They wanted me to have a good life, and they didn't want those difficulties. I think that is why – and now, being a rabbi of a congregation is a very hard thing to do, and I realize that I probably am not cut out for it. Well, what else could I have done? You don't really see the options, and at that point, when I applied and got it and got accepted, did I know what I was going to do? No, I had no idea. I just knew that I had to do it. I had to do it. No matter what I did in the future, I had to go to Rabbinical school. I didn't know anything else. I didn't know what was going to be next. I had no idea. I said, "I don't want to become a congregational rabbi." I didn't think that was what I wanted to do. It did turn out that I was good at it. I had a part-time job for four years being a rabbi of a congregation in Watertown, New York, and I loved it, but it was because it was part-time, I think, that it was a great job because I didn't really have to deal with the politics. Like the rabbi of this synagogue, I didn't end up applying when the possibility existed, and I was told, "You know, you could apply now." I didn't. I

thought about it, and every time I thought about it, I would get knots in my stomach. I thought, “These are my friends. This is my community. I don't want to get fired from my own community. I don't want to have animosity where I'm living here, so I'm not going anywhere.” It's not like it would be a job for me; it would be my whole life. So I decided, “Let somebody else do that, and I'll support them.” I feel like I am supporting the rabbi who is here now.

SG: As a mother of a young child, a Jewish child in Vermont, how does her education come about?

TW: It's really hard. I think mainly she gets educated from our home, and we are very, very joyous in our celebrations of all the holidays. She knows so much more than probably so many kids, even maybe that go to Jewish day school. On a deep level, she really knows a lot. What is very, very difficult for me here, having a young child in Vermont, a young Jewish child, is that her friends don't have that kind of upbringing that she has. Who of her friends is observing Shabbat in Montpelier? Nobody in the way that we do. Even not in the way that we do. It's just so few Jewish children having a Jewish upbringing that is connected to tradition at all. Going to Hebrew school, going to the synagogue – there's so few of them. It's very hard, and I think eventually of moving because of that. On the other hand, we have such a great life. It's a beautiful place to live and raise a child. So it's a tension that I think I feel much more than David. I'm thinking we have to go to a much more Jewish place. Sometimes, he thinks that too. But he is very rooted in his business. It's called Elmore Roots Nursery. He is very rooted here –unless he did something completely different. The only thing I think is the option for staying here would be creating more of a Jewish community here and encouraging other families who are more traditional to move here. It's an option. I don't know if that's really possible. I think it's an option, but I don't know if that is really realistic. That is my biggest fantasy, and thinking we could stay here if it was a little bit more Jewish. So, I am working on that now in a certain way. One is having the Learning Center and

creating much more opportunities for other communities throughout Vermont to be much more spiritually centered. So that if there is more Jewish life here, maybe it will be more attractive. We also just created an Israel Educational Center here in Vermont – Israel Center of Vermont.

SG: Where is that?

TW: Well, it's going to be in Burlington. But it is the Israel Culture Educational Center that I am involved with, and it just really started this past summer. That was inspired by the Jewish Educational Resources of New York; they have an Israel Center, so that was inspired by the Israel Center. I kind of brought the two together, the two groups together. There is just more happening that might be attractive to people. If I meet somebody who wants to have a more rural life that is a traditional Jew, I try to encourage them to move here. That almost happened this year. It almost happened that this one couple with two children and another single man almost moved here to start something with me – the Israel Center of Vermont and everything. That didn't happen, but I think, “Well, that is a possibility then.” They were so attracted to this life, and even though they were observant, they could see themselves living here – young people in their thirties. Well, maybe it's possible that would make me stay – just a few more families actually because I think it doesn't really matter the numbers of Jews in a community, but just the quality of Jewish life. If the quality is good, even if it's just us and our own little home having a really incredible Jewish life, where we would invite people for Shabbat all the time. So we have these big seders; we have big suit-coat celebrations right here in our home and in the Learning Center. I think that that might be enough for a child, [but] I'm not sure. It's just very hard to know, and I know that it's very attractive when you get to be older to be with your friends.

SG: Do you have a stepchild?

TW: Yes. Right now, she lives with us. She graduated from college, from Sarah Lawrence College a year ago and is trying to figure out what she wants to do next. Her mother is not Jewish. She was raised Jewish. It would be interesting to talk to her, maybe. She has a very interesting identity because even though she was raised Jewish – her mother is not Jewish –I think she feels she identifies as Jewish, but she is not observant at all. I think part of it was that her father became observant when she was already a teenager or started to when she was already getting to be a teenager. So, that's not her thing.

SG: Is there anything else that you might want to add that we haven't asked?

TW: Well, I didn't say too much about the Yearning for Learning Center and how amazing it was when I started it. All the teachers and all the classes that I have had – I'm still amazed at how many people show up. I started this for my own spiritual nourishment, and if other people came, that was great. But I just needed to do it for myself. At first, maybe we would have three people in the morning to study Talmud, but now we have ten people sitting around in the morning studying Talmud. Then, in the evening, maybe we would have six, eight people, but it has grown to about fifteen people to twenty people, sometimes even thirty-five people at night. If we have one speaker coming once for a day or an evening, we'll get thirty-five people. Over three days, we'll get seventy attendees. That means that maybe somebody came five times, but I count them each time. Over the course of three days, we'll have thirty-five individual people coming, which is an amazing number because if you count the number of people who go to services, many times we don't have a minyan. Often, [in] a Torah study class, you'll get two people. Most people turn out for cultural events, like a big Hanukkah celebration, or if there is a cultural event happening, some actress or speaker or something like that, that's cultural. A Yiddish actress came, and that brought a lot of people. But not a Jewish traditional study or Hasidic teachings. You wouldn't think that would go over, but it really goes over. People are searching for that, and I've had people come not only from

this community, members from the synagogue come, but then I have people who have never set foot in the synagogue come. Then I have people from this Montpelier, Central Vermont area, and then people from even Massachusetts will come and stay overnight – Maine, New Hampshire, Canada. That's where I came up with this idea that more people are hungrier than I thought and to increase the venues and increase the number of teachers. Really, the only reason I'm doing it is because I have gotten such incredible feedback from so many people who were not connected at all Jewishly or who were but didn't have any place to connect to. So, it's been wonderful for me to have this experience and to create something completely new. Go out into these unchartered waters that to me was just a dream, and to create something that was just unknown, unheard of. So instead of a Yeshiva, where you sit there, and you learn, this is much more like walking about a Jewish spirituality center. It's not sitting there, but it's on the move.

SG: Thank you so much. This has been wonderful. It's been very interesting and fascinating.

[END OF INTERVIEW]